

H-Net Reviews

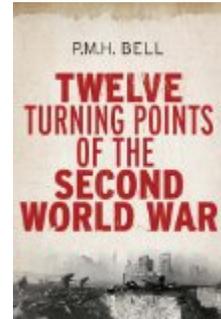
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

P. M. H. Bell. *Twelve Turning Points of the Second World War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-18770-0.

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In research on World War II, an accepted basic assumption claims that at various stages and in different theaters of the war, Germany and Japan lost their offensive initiative, which transferred to the Allies until their final victory, first in Europe and then in the Pacific. It is commonly stated in this context that there were three turning point battles, following which the Allies gained the offensive: Midway, El-Alamein, and Stalingrad.[1] This, however, is only a partially correct view. First, other battles can be identified as bringing about a turning point; second, Stalingrad should not be identified as a battle leading to a significant change in the strategic-military reality on the eastern front. I will attempt to prove this argument in the review of P. M. H. Bell's book that follows.

As the book's title proclaims, Bell examines twelve events that, in his opinion, were turning points in World War II. From the occupation of France and the Battle of Britain through the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to Japan's surrender after the dropping of the two atomic bombs. Bell combines military turning points (Midway, Stalingrad) with turning points stemming in his view from the conferences at which Allied leaders met. He concentrates on Teheran and Yalta. In other words, the book examines almost the entire history of World War II chronologically from May 1940 (the invasion of France) to Emperor Hirohito's announcement of Japan's unconditional surrender (August 1945). It is difficult to understand from these chronological bounds, however, why the list of events that Bell examines constitutes turning points. For example, chapter 8 deals with the war against Germany's and Japan's industrial infrastructure. This was a long and intensive war that had begun back in the summer

of 1940 and continued almost until the surrender of the Axis powers. Furthermore, even today, historians are conducting a profound historical debate over the question of whether the strategic bombing conducted by the United States and Britain did, indeed, lead to deciding the war. Again, though, if we avoid that debate, it is difficult to see the strategic bombing campaign, which continued for five years, as a kind of turning point.

Another problem concerns the discussion of the two conferences, Teheran and Yalta. There is no doubt of the importance of these conferences, which saw the leaders of the Allies sitting around one table. However, their importance is rooted in their discussions, which dealt principally with the shape of the world after the war; this is especially so of Yalta. It is true that strategic decisions were taken for the various war arenas, but these were very general decisions that, in effect, were required as a result of the dramatic changes that were being generated in the course of the battles of 1943. Generally speaking, the conferences of Allied leaders did not set clear military goals; rather, these objectives may be defined more as guidelines. For example, General Dwight D. Eisenhower was told that he had to plan for the invasion of northwest Europe in the summer of 1944. But there was no definition of where, when in the summer, or with what scope of forces. The political level did not intervene in the operational-strategic considerations of the military ranks. This general guideline was translated after very careful, protracted planning into Operation Neptune, the invasion of Normandy, which itself was within the framework of a broad offensive for the final conquest of Germany, Operation Overlord.

The turning points in the war, in my opinion, should

be sought at the military level: battles in the wake of which the military initiative of the Axis countries was canceled, and the initiative gradually passed to the Allied armies. Bell himself defines a turning point as “a point at which a decisive or important change takes place.” Then he states that in the course of World War II, “the main turning points ... are mostly battles lost and won” (p. xiii). If, therefore, we accept the assumption that the political levels concentrated on shaping the postwar world and left the military defeat of Germany and Japan to the generals (and this was true of Joseph Stalin, too), then we have to reemphasize the military role. Bell deals with a number of battles that constitute turning point battles, such as Midway, the victory in May 1943 over German submarines in the Atlantic, and the Normandy invasion. Similarly he discusses Stalingrad; but were that all-out battles actually a turning point battles?

Bell's list, though, is only partial and lacks direction, for there is no detailed discussion of battles that brought about a strategic turning point in the North African arena: El-Alamein and Operation Torch, both in November 1942. Although this was a secondary arena so far as the United States, the Soviet Union, and Germany were concerned, it was important for the British. Pushing back the Afrikakorps, led by Erwin Rommel, removed the fear of Germany's conquest of Egypt and control over the Suez Canal. Like Stalingrad, however, as will be made clear, the victory at El-Alamein was also of psychological and consciousness importance, which possibly was more important than the military achievement. Several days after he was notified of the victory, Winston Churchill instructed that church bells be rung throughout England to mark the victory. This came after two years of defeats in Europe and Asia. In a speech to Parliament on November 10, Churchill declared: “this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”^[2] It should be noted that in Palestine, too, the British victory at El-Alamein was considered very important; for in the months preceding November 1942 there was fear that the Germans would conquer Palestine and that the Jewish community there would be wiped out. The Arab population of Palestine supported the Nazis, and had even set up two branches of the Nazi Party. That population's leader, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, was a senior SS officer, with the rank of Gruppenführer (lieutenant general), which he exploited to set up Muslim volunteer units (Legion Freies Arabien) in the framework of the Wehrmacht. The territories of Syria and Lebanon were under the control of Vichy France, which was cooperating with the

Nazis; the outbreak of rebellion in Iraq was also pro-Nazi. The Yishuv, as the Jewish population in pre-State Israel is called, felt surrounded and began preparing plans for the evacuation of settlements to create space for defensive actions, which were to be based on guerrilla warfare on the Carmel Mountain range and in the Galilee (the Masada on the Carmel plan). The British victory removed this existential threat.

As for the Pacific theater, a discussion only of Midway as a turning point is insufficient. This battle did indeed cause mortal injury to Japanese sea power, from which the emperor's fleet never managed to recover. But the Battle of Midway derived from a broader assault by Japan that focused on occupying Australia. The battles of the Coral Sea (May 1942) and Guadalcanal should be seen as two events following which the Japanese abandoned their intention to conquer Australia. After Guadalcanal, which ended in early 1943, US General Douglas MacArthur began his hopping strategy for the conquest of Southeast Asia and the liberation of the Philippines.

Defining Stalingrad as a turning point battle is also problematic as suggested earlier. As a military objective, the city had no special strategic significance. It may have been an important industrial city, but the plants in the city were removed far eastward in the course of the war as part of an attempt to prevent the loss of the Russian industrial infrastructure. Somewhat cynically, it may be said that the city's importance stemmed from its name, Stalin's city.^[3] Thus, its conquest (or the prevention of its occupation) had more propaganda-psychological effect than military value both for Adolf Hitler and for Stalin. It is important to note that the Battle of Stalingrad had an indirect influence on Germany's war on the eastern front. The German Sixth Army's turn to Stalingrad prevented Army Group A, under the command of Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist, from concentrating a decisive force for the conquest of the Caucasus and the oil fields of the Caspian Sea. Had von Kleist been able to reach these oil fields, the Soviet Union may possibly have been defeated, since it was in the midst of difficult economic distress.^[4]

The victory over the Sixth Army proved the ability of the Red Army to organize large-scale campaigns (Operation Uranus) against one of the most efficient armies in the world at that time (the Japanese army may possibly have been another efficient force). But the results of the Stalingrad battle did not have any decisive influence on the military-strategic reality on the eastern front, without belittling the psychological importance of the Russian victory there. The surrender of the Sixth Army did

not end the German assault on that front nor the German attacks around Kharkov in March 1943, testimony to the fact that the German army may have lost a battle but the war was not won.[5] The loss of the German initiative on the eastern front may possibly be identified in a series of battles that were conducted in southern Russia. However, complete loss of this initiative occurred in a battle around the Kursk bulge (July 4-August 23, 1943).

In the spring of 1943, the German army began a large-scale attack on Kursk (Operation Citadel), located 450 kilometers south of Moscow. The attack, which began on July 4 and was the largest armor battle in history, was meant to encircle and destroy the Red Army forces on this territory through parallel offensives from north and south against the flanks of the bulge. Afterward, the plan was for the German forces to move toward Moscow. Despite the Germans' concentration on a large part of their armored forces on the Soviet front for the attack, the offensive (July 4-16) failed to achieve its objectives; it did not succeed in driving a wedge through the deep Soviet defense, which was supported by an armored reserve of great strength. This was the first significant defeat for the German maneuver war, and the German forces were constrained in the end to retreat to their jumping-off point after absorbing heavy losses. In effect, the Battle of Kursk was the last large offensive that the Germans conducted on the eastern front, and the German army lost, once and for all, the strategic initiative on this front.[6] Moreover, the results of the Soviet victory at Kursk were felt almost immediately. The Red Army counterattack at Kursk (Operation Kutuzov) combined a series of counterattacks, one of the first of these (August 3-23) being Operation Rummyantsev, whose objective was the reconquest of Kharkov. Toward the end of August, the German forces began to retreat almost totally to defensive lines along the Dnieper River.

The invasion of Sicily and Italy should also be viewed as turning points. The Allied victories there led to control of the Mediterranean, but an important factor was Italy's exit from the war. It should be remembered that Hitler ordered the cessation of Operation Citadel following the Anglo-American invasion of Sicily and feared that Italy would surrender and that the Allies would cross the English Channel. Hitler, therefore, ordered forces to be transferred to the West. We can therefore point to the month of July 1943 as the first time in the war when the Allied powers of the East and the West met to deliver a blow against the strength of the German forces. Thus, the eighteen months approximately from the Battle of the Coral Sea to the invasion of Italy may be determined as

constituting the chronological bounds in which a gradual strategic military reversal began to take place in the various arenas of World War II. To this may be added the Battle of Normandy, from the invasion of France to Operation Cobra, when American forces broke through from Normandy to begin the liberation of France. Richard Overy argues that the Allies were at a sorry starting point in 1942 and that they elevated their position until they were able to block and then defeat the Axis powers.[7] But the process from blocking to counterattacking lasted, as mentioned, a year and a half.

Bell does not deal with the turning point battles surveyed above. But this does not mar his book. His discussion combines political, military, and economic events that had a cumulative effect on the development and conduct of World War II. In that way, the book is similar to Overy's *Why the Allies Won* (1996), which analyzes the whole gamut of causes that, in his opinion, led to the defeat of the Axis powers. At the end of Bell's book, there is a list of subjects for further reading to enable a broader reading of the subjects discussed in his book. This is an updated list and it also includes the most important works on these subjects. The book is clearly written, making the reading flow, and it can serve as an introductory work for undergraduate students and for those interested in the central events of World War II.

Notes

[1]. For example, Jeremy Black, *World War Two: A Military History* (London: Routledge, 2003), 109-124; and Bradley Lightbody, *The Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2004), 135-154.

[2]. For the full version of the speech, see <http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/EndoBegn.html>.

[3]. Its former name was Tsaritsyn, which was changed to Stalingrad in 1925. In 1961, the name was changed to Volgograd, the city of the Volga River.

[4]. Robert Harris's novel *Fatherland* (New York: Random House, 1992) takes place twenty years after a German victory in the war. He attributes the German victory to the failure of the Normandy invasion and to the German army's conquest of the oil fields of the Caspian Sea.

[5]. Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 186-187.

[6]. David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When*

Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler [7]. Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1995), 175. Pimlico, 1996), 15.

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