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A Forgotten Eastern Storm

On October 12, 1917, an amphibious German invasion force of some 25,000 troops, 350 ships and boats, and more than 80 aircraft began a complex, ambitious attack on a group of islands clustered in the eastern Baltic. Their location made the islands a tempting strategic prize. To the south lay the entrance to the Gulf of Riga, control over which was crucial for turning Germany’s northeastern European conquests into bases for drives further into Russia. On the north side of the islands, the entrance to the Gulf of Finland opened the sea route to St. Petersburg. The German high command also hoped that, in addition to control over this territory, the invasion would deliver a final, crushing blow to the Russians, whose government so plainly teetered on the edge of complete collapse. By October 16, the largest of the islands, Ösel, was in German hands; a few days after that, the Germans were the masters of the smaller Moon and Dagö as well. More than 20,000 Russians were taken prisoner.

This was Operation Albion, an audaciously named, almost entirely forgotten Russo-German clash whose story is told so well by Michael B. Barrett in this excellent new book. Barrett begins by giving a brief summary of both the Russian and German strategic situations in 1917. He then provides rather more extensive coverage of German planning for Albion and Russia’s defensive plans for the Baltic region before moving on, in chapter 6, to the main event, the battle itself. A brief but rather poignant epilogue, which sketches the postwar fate of the battle’s major figures, brings the narrative to a well-crafted close. Throughout the book, Barrett successfully sustains his initial commitment to covering both sides of Albion, which is a major achievement. He draws heavily on both German and Russian archival military records (with the latter collected and translated by a research assistant, Elizaveta Zheganina), as well as a novel, *Die Roten Streifen* (1938), and its excerpted and condensed version, *Unternehmen Ösel* (1940), written by a German participant, Captain Erich Otto Volkmann.

Barrett tells his story in the style of classic battlefield history, with generals, admirals, and colonels maneuvering their forces, reacting to unforeseen events, and thinking and arguing their way through tactical problems. As is often the case, this approach is both a strength and a weakness. Thanks largely to Barrett’s mastery of his sources and his clear, fluid writing, the narrative is absorbing and flows smoothly. It is complemented by good maps, which are indispensable in a book of this sort, as well as a number of well-chosen photographs. Barrett’s knowledge of the technicalities of warfare at this time is superb and extends to naval operations; his description of the terrifying process of sweeping for mines by means of a towed cable will not soon be forgotten by anyone who reads it. If one shortcoming affects his general organization of the book, it is that chapter 9, on the naval battle, while engagingly written (and enlivened by some truly extraordinary pictures), is poorly integrated with the rest of the book and somewhat awkwardly restarts the narrative.
The work is also slightly flawed by its focus on senior commanders. Officers below the rank of colonel rarely appear, while the opinions and impressions of common soldiers and sailors are almost entirely absent. As a result, the narrative can be a little too arid and bloodless; when a German shell causes a Russian fort to explode, for example, Barrett notes this fact and moves on without comment. The reader is left to imagine for himself what sort of horrific carnage such an event might have caused. On the few occasions when Barrett does work to imagine his way beyond the upper reaches of the command structure, the results are not entirely satisfying: "On board UC-58," he writes at the beginning of chapter 1, "every sailor held his breath" (p. 1). This is probably true, but it is the sort of sweeping, imaginative statement with which historians tend to be uncomfortable.

Nonetheless, *Operation Albion* is an enlightening book and well worth a read. Beyond its central contribution—what it tells us about the specifics of the operation—two subthemes that run throughout the narrative are worthy of close attention. The first concerns the Imperial German way of war (though Barrett himself does not put the matter this way). Historians have made numerous attempts to define just what, if anything, this might be. Some have emphasized the Germans' tactical flexibility and their officer corps' embrace of improvisation and innovation. Ample support for this view is found in Barrett's analysis. The German military, he points out, had neither a tradition of nor real experience in joint-service warfare or amphibious operations. With a nod to Gallipoli, Barrett points out the difficulty of such assaults. Yet, after about a month or so of preparation, the Germans carried off just such an attack. Their success was due, at least in part, to the abilities of people like Volkmann, a General Staff officer who, trying to figure out how German forces might beat the Russians to a strategically crucial causeway, hit upon the idea of landing troops mounted on bicycles closer to the causeway than the primary landing force, a plan that met with great success. At the same time, those who see something inherently pathological in the German way of war will find much here to support that view; the Germans, true to their strategic traditions, could not content themselves with figuring out how to ensure they beat the czar's forces: "We must give the Russians a crushing blow," Major General Ludwig von Estorff, Volkmann's superior, told him. "It will not suffice merely to drive them from the island" (p. 100). Thus this obscure Baltic assault takes its place as one of the operations intended to realize the ideal of the Vernichtungsschlacht, the annihilating battle that seeks to inflict a mortal wound on the enemy in a single crushing engagement.

German strategy, however, was really only part of the reason why Albion was a success. Perhaps the primary reason why the Germans carried the day, despite their inexperience in this kind of warfare, was the shocking state of the Imperial Russian armed forces on the eve of the Bolshevik seizure of power, the second compelling subtheme of this book. The czar's army and navy were nearly paralyzed by abysmal morale and poor officer-enlisted relations. "If you really want to, go and fight yourself," fleeing Russian soldiers on Moon told a Russian colonel (p. 171), while on Ösel, crew members of a strategically crucial shore battery mutinied and abandoned their posts. Exacerbating matters, the March Revolution had left the military with an awkward and unwieldy command structure that consisted of two parallel authority structures, one left from the old regime and one, a system of councils, created by the revolution. It did not bode well for the islands' defense that on October 12, the day the invasion began, Admiral Razvozov, the Russian Baltic Fleet's Commander-in-Chief, had to pay a visit to the Central Committee of the Baltic Fleet (Tsentrobalt) to ask if it would, perhaps, lend its support to the fight. It is not surprising that such a force fought badly. It is extraordinary, however, that it fought at all, which it did, occasionally with distinction. The crews of the czar's ships, Barrett notes, proved particularly reliable and managed to do their duty with skill and bravery.

Specialists in the history of the Great War and the operational history of any period, historians of Germany and of Russia, and anyone with a general interest in well-written military history will enjoy reading this book. In addition, those who labor to bring the struggles of the eastern front into the mainstream of Great War scholarship will have particular reason to feel grateful to Barrett for writing *Operation Albion*. In the end, it is difficult to assess just what Albion's larger significance was (though Barrett seems to say it encouraged the Bolsheviks in their schemes). It did not, and probably could not, change the course of the war. Barrett does, however, suggest at least one promising avenue for future research on Albion's importance. After the war, the study of Operation Albion was made a part of the curriculum of a few American military institutions that educated officers. Among their students: numerous commanders of American operations in the Second World War, including future Admiral "Bull" Halsey. What sort of ties bind this now-forgotten Baltic clash and the epic struggles of the next war is a richly promising topic. The historian who eventually investigates it will owe much to Michael Barrett's fine book.
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