H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brooke C. Stoddard. *World in the Balance: The Perilous Months of June-October 1940.* Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2010. 244 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59797-516-2.

Reviewed by Corbin Williamson (Texas Tech University)
Published on H-War (October, 2012)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Britain's Dark Hour

World in the Balance tells the story of World War II in Europe during the critical summer and fall months of 1940. Similar to John Lukac in *The Duel: The Eighty-Day Struggle between Churchill and Hitler* (1990), Brooke C. Stoddard focuses on uncertain survival of the United Kingdom after the German conquest of France. Weaving together diplomacy, military operations, public attitudes, intelligence, and technology, the author demonstrates the constant interaction between these various elements. In one example, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov shares an air raid bunker with German Foreign Minister Joachim Ribbentrop to avoid British bombers sent to Berlin specifically because British intelligence knew of Molotov's visit to the German capital. Stoddard effectively moves from war rooms to aircraft cockpits to scientific laboratories to pubs, advancing the story on multiple fronts in each chapter. This approach also has the benefit of encouraging readers to hold multiple narrative threads in their minds simultaneously, similar to the mental juggling required of political and military leaders of the time.

Stoddard begins in 1918 and moves quickly through the interwar period with a European focus before slowing down during the invasion of France. Prime Minister Winston Churchill's role in the Dunkirk evacuation receives particular attention as does the fate of the French fleet in French armistice negotiations. A chapter on codes and radio intelligence provides a clear description of ciphers and German Enigma operating practice while covering the well-known role of Polish equipment and expertise in aiding British code-breaking efforts at Bletchley Park. Stoddard credits part of the British success in code breaking to the centralization of intelligence efforts at Bletchley Park, a conclusion shared by intelligence scholars in such recent works as *Delusions of Intelligence: Enigma, Ultra, and the End of Secure Ciphers* (2006) by R. A. Ratcliff.

After a discussion of the French surrender, the author describes expanding British efforts to prepare for a German invasion. For Stoddard, the significance of the British attack on the French fleet in early July was the attack's clear demonstration of British resolve, a reasonable if unoriginal conclusion. The technical history of radar's development receives good coverage, especially prewar Royal Air Force training in integrating radar information into fighter operations. The treatment of the August air battles over Britain begins with a summary of the structure, leadership, and equipment of the British and German air forces. The work then covers many of the air actions day by day, describing tactics and personal experiences on both sides. In conjunction with the aerial struggle, the work describes German propaganda efforts in Britain as well as British efforts to draw the United States further into the conflict.

World in the Balance concludes with clear summaries of diplomatic developments in the fall of 1940. The British worked (unsuccessfully) to build relations with the Soviet Union while Adolf Hitler also failed to bring Spain into the war. Growing support from the United States in combination with Britain's worsening financial situation laid the foundation for Lend-Lease in the spring of 1941. Stoddard ends his narrative in November, when the threat of German invasion had passed, while noting that the worst of the Blitz was still to come.

This work effectively draws on the vast literature on this period and uses selected quotations from Churchill to advance the narrative throughout. Stoddard's great success is combining material from previous works in multiple fields into a coherent, multilayered story. Written in an engaging style, this work would serve well in both graduate and undergraduate classes.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Corbin Williamson. Review of Stoddard, Brooke C., *World in the Balance: The Perilous Months of June-October 1940.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36381

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.