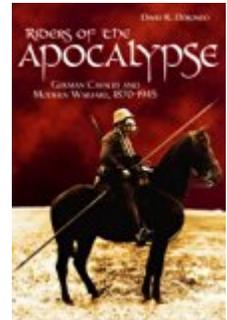


**David R. Dorondo.** *Riders of the Apocalypse: German Cavalry and Modern Warfare, 1870-1945.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 352 pp. \$36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-086-6.



**Reviewed by** Kelly McFall

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David Dorondo, the author of the new book *Riders of the Apocalypse*, is quite right to suggest that historians who study twentieth-century military history often ignore the cavalry. Moreover, he is also quite right to claim the horse played a critical role in twentieth-century European warfare. He attempts to redress one of these failures in his book. In doing so he writes with verve, demonstrates an obvious knowledge about his subject, and displays a clear sympathy toward his main character, the horse. The result will greatly interest casual historians or those who like their history narrative. Experts in the field, or historians looking for an analytical account of the decline of the cavalry, will want to look elsewhere.

Dorondo is well equipped to address the story of horses in warfare. Professionally, he earned a D. Phil from the University of Oxford and is currently an associate professor at Western Carolina University. He has also written an earlier book on Bavaria in the Weimar period. Personally, it's clear both from his introduction and the most basic Web search that he is an experienced rider

and loves both horse riding and horses. This last is not unimportant, as he is able to offer insights based on his experience with animals that non-specialists would miss.

Dorondo focuses on tracing the decline of the cavalry as an essential arm in the German military. This decline, he argues, was more gradual than many historians imagine. The cavalry continued to play an important role throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To be sure, one of cavalry's traditional roles, a massed charge to scatter the opposing infantry or rescue a threatened position, quickly disappeared in the decades around the turn of the century in the face of increasingly effective infantry weaponry. This did not, however, doom the horse to immediate obsolescence. Instead, cavalry continued to pursue the second of its traditional tasks, that of intelligence gathering (and denial), especially along the flanks of the main army or in space in front of it. In World War I the density of forces on the western front generally limited cavalry's action to the eastern front. But there, even in this

stereotypically modern war, cavalry remained important.

In the same way, he suggests we have underestimated the ability of cavalry to adopt new weapons, tactics, and institutional structures while overemphasizing the speed with which cavalry were pushed out by mechanized and motorized forces in the interwar period. Tracing the evolution of cavalry from fighting primarily on horseback to being essentially mounted infantrymen, he suggests cavalry officers were surprisingly willing to adapt to new conditions. Similarly, the German army recognized the need to retain cavalry as part of a balanced force structure in the interwar army. Throughout the 1920s, he reminds us, the German army continued to plan to employ cavalry alongside bicycle and motorized troops. Only in the 1930s did German military planners begin to deemphasize the cavalry.

World War II finally saw predictions of the elimination of the cavalry largely come true. Dorondo spends about half the book looking in detail at the operations of the small number of German cavalry divisions. His conclusions are unsurprising but still important. In parts of the Soviet Union, where the force to space ratio was lower and the road and railroad network almost nonexistent, cavalry remained relevant. But where there was less open space and better infrastructure, modern technology rendered cavalry largely useless. As a result, the German cavalry units served a useful role in anti-partisan operations, especially in the region of the Pripet marshes. With little to offer elsewhere, the army chose to eliminate most cavalry units. The mounted formations that did exist often fought dismounted as regular infantry.

Historians unfamiliar with Dorondo's story, or those with a particular interest in cavalry or horses will enjoy his book. Dorondo moves quickly with an eye toward good storytelling. It's clear he is thoroughly familiar with the secondary sources about the German army and its cavalry.

Sprinkled throughout are interesting observations drawn from his knowledge of horses that shed valuable light on the way cavalry functions and its special strengths and needs. Reading the book gives the reader a sense of admiration for the devotion of the troops to their horses and to the courage these animals showed.

The book will be less useful to historians with an expertise in the period or the subject. The core of the book is a series of chapters on specific formations in the Second World War and their activities. Here, Dorondo utilizes primary sources and tells the story well. The remainder of the book, however, is largely based on secondary sources, many of them a bit outdated. Moreover, Dorondo's style, well suited for telling the story of battles, is not as conducive as one would like in creating an analytical understanding of doctrinal or technological changes. One wishes, for instance, for a lengthier examination of the role of ideology in the cavalry, or of the influence of class on the debates over tactics and armament.

What Dorondo's book does do, however, is remind historians how much we don't know about horses and warfare in the twentieth century. A transnational examination of the way in which armies tried to understand the impact of changing technology through the lens of the cavalry would be quite interesting, especially one that gave equal weight to lessons learned in Europe and those in imperial colonies. In particular, armies that had to plan both for modern, industrial warfare and the less technological warfare of imperial frontiers faced important challenges, about which we know too little. Moreover, Dorondo, limited by his narrow focus on the cavalry formations of the German army, merely alludes to the much broader impact had by the horse. As he points out repeatedly, we far overestimate the degree to which European armies were mechanized and motorized at the beginning of the Second World War. But his chosen topic means he quickly moves away from this back towards the cavalry

itself. His understanding of horses as animals would allow him to shed a great deal of light on the performance of horses (and other animals) in logistical and other roles.

For now, Dorondo concentrates on his selected case study. In doing so, he fills a need for a well-written narrative of the decline of the German cavalry. Hopefully, his book will inspire a more extensive study that will cast further light on the horse and the cavalry in the twentieth century.

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