

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **Hubris: the tragedy of war in the twentieth century**

by Alistair Horne

*Weidenfeld and Nicholson: London; 2015; 336 pp.; ISBN 9780297867623 (hardcover); RRP \$28.99*

Sir Alistair Horne has been a military historian for more than 50 years and at 91 is generally considered a wise master of his field. In a short 5-page prologue in *Hubris* – his 25<sup>th</sup> book – he asserts that “wars have generally been won or lost through excessive hubris on one side or the other”. Horne then proceeds to argue this thesis by examining five selected 20<sup>th</sup>-century military actions; his area and period of expertise.

The ancient Greeks used the word ‘hubris’ to describe a particular aspect of human frailty – the arrogant belief that man could challenge the gods and survive. Hubris was always followed by the gods’ revenge: the overreaching mortals suffered their just deserts, a fall as precipitous as their giddy rise. Horne uses the term for the combination of human ambition and arrogance – often brought about from complacency or racial prejudice.

The five military actions are: the 1905 Battle of the Tsushima Straits in the Russo-Japanese War; the 1939 Battle of Nomonhan between the Russian and Japanese armies in Manchuria; Hitler’s 1941 bid to capture Moscow; MacArthur’s advance in Korea; and the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

Horne’s historical account of these five actions is comprehensive and interesting, as some are quite obscure, and he considers the role that hubris might have played as a *deciding* factor. He does not, however, come close to proving his thesis. Instead, he seems to have used ‘hubris’ as a thin thread to tie together these five accounts. He fails to offer any useful lessons beyond the point “that we humans find it difficult to resist infection by hubris”.

The idea that hubris is the ‘source of all failure’ is enticing, but false. It is an idea that some might find neat and enticing, but reality is more complex. Hubris may serve as a broad description of the expectations of the attacker, but as an historical tool, it does not get much further than that. Hubris runs like an unbroken thread through thousands of years of human warfare, but the conditions under which it is generated and expressed are what matter.

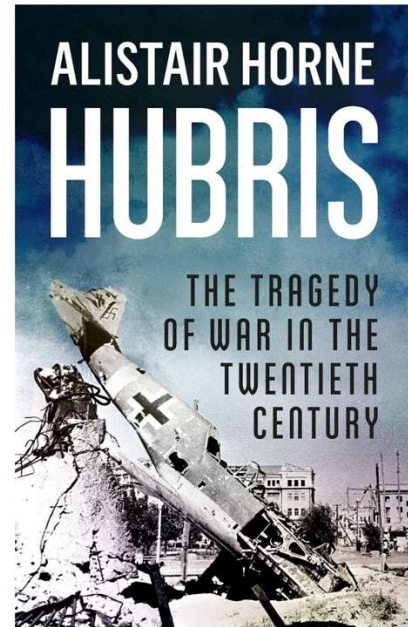
Historical circumstances of all kinds determined the choices made and the final outcome. Calculations were not made as simple expressions of human folly. Will, resources, self-awareness, capability, strategy, political direction, constraints and limitations all play a part in military campaigns. Napoleon Bonaparte once queried “I know he’s a good general, but is he lucky?”, and in doing so recognised that chance plays a large part in war.

Horne was educated at Le Rosey, Switzerland, and Jesus College, Cambridge. He ended his World War II service with the rank of Captain in the Coldstream Guards attached to MI5 in the Middle East. From 1952 to 1955 he worked as a foreign correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*. In 1969, he founded the Alistair Horne research fellowship in modern history at St Antony’s, Oxford. His numerous books on history and politics have been translated into over ten languages. He was awarded the Hawthornden prize (for *The Price of Glory*) and the Wolfson prize (for *A Savage War of Peace*). In 1992, he was appointed a Commander of the Order of the British Empire; in 1993, he received the

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Page 1



French Legion d'Honneur for his work on French history, and a Litt.D. from Cambridge University. He was knighted in 2003 for services to Franco-British relations.

*Hubris* includes a number of excellent maps, several black and white illustrations as well as a select bibliography and an index.

As an historical account of **five** distinct military actions, *Hubris* is of value; but as an explanation of military failures in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is disappointingly simplistic and unconvincing.

**Marcus Fielding**