

**WAR ON THE EASTERN FRONT 1941-1945.** By James Lucas. Bonanza Books, New York, 1982, 207pp. \$15.00. (Member \$13.50).

reviewed by David R. Smith

It must be said at the outset that this book is not a history of the Russo-German front in World War II. It takes up where the histories leave off. It is really a collection of essays on the war. The first of these is an introduction dealing with the scope of the war, which continues to leave even people who have studied the conflict breathless.

Mr. Lucas follows his introduction with chapters telling about important aspects of the war. The big picture is there, but slotted into it are the bits and pieces that bring the war home to the reader.

For example, the opening chapter describes Operation Barbarossa and the dispositions of the two armies. Then follows a chapter dealing with the German army as a whole. You get a look at the composition of the German army; at its beliefs, weapons, and methods. This is followed by chapters on the Waffen SS and the fate of a tank destruction unit.

In this general manner Mr. Lucas also discusses the Soviet army, the terrain, the weather, the weapons, and the tactics of the war.

One very interesting chapter deals with the use of animals. Though the Germans flaunted their mechanization, 80 percent of their transport remained horse drawn. There were also a number of cavalry divisions in the German army. The Soviets, of course, relied even more heavily on the horse and also developed a way to use dogs as antitank mines. Mr. Lucas even comments on the effect of mice on the war.

Another interesting aspect of the war is the people. Everyone knows about Guderian, von Manstein, and Zhukov. But Mr. Lucas introduces you to Hugo Primozic, Hyazinth von Strachwitz, and dozens of others, frontline soldiers whose acts of desperation and courage show the face of total war far more vividly than any "standard" or "typical" history.

Perhaps the most astonishing thing about the book is that it deals fairly with the infantry. One of the great developments of the war was armored combat, but historians dwell so strongly on it they sometimes forget there was anything else. It is not uncommon for the infantry to be dismissed with a phrase such as: "Leaving the strong points to be dealt with by the slower infantry columns. . . ."

It is to be remembered, and Mr. Lucas

does, that those strong points, in turn, left a lot of infantrymen, German and Russians, dead. If the armored units were more spectacular, they were certainly no braver, nor their actions any bloodier.

All in all, *War on the Eastern Front*, is the most fascinating book I have read in a long time, for three reasons. First, it is well written and holds interest. So many times historians feel that because their work is true people should read it regardless of the labor involved. Mr. Lucas is a writer as well as a historian.

And as a historian Mr. Lucas set an example others should follow. All too often history is simply a restatement of what others have already said. Mr. Lucas finds a whole new, refreshing way of looking at the war.

Finally there is its humanity. If for nothing else, this book is exceptional for its description of what war does to people. Here is comradeship, triumph, fear, and death.

The final assessment of *War on the Eastern Front* must be that it is an excellently written book. It will be a welcome addition to any military library and to the library of anyone interested in gripping human drama.

**MUSSOLINI UNLEASHED 1939-1941, Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War.** By MacGregor Knox. Cambridge University Press, New York, 1982, 385pp., \$29.50. (Member \$26.55)

reviewed by Williamson Murray

While success has often intrigued historians, disaster and incompetence in military, diplomatic, and political institutions have received less attention except in those cases where historians have bent their efforts to explain away or excuse the inexcusable. Unlike many of his colleagues, MacGregor Knox in *Mussolini Unleashed 1939-1941* is willing to examine this topic in the harsh light of historical research. Knox studies in great detail Italy's diplomatic, political, and military performance in the last months of peace before World War II and in the first months of her "parallel war" from June 1940 into February 1941. This is one of the most important historical monographs to appear in the last 20 years, and in it we meet a historian who is willing to call things by their proper name.

To begin with, Knox buries under an avalanche of documentation the legend that somehow Mussolini trick-

ed an unwilling Italian military and nation into participating in the war at the side of Nazi Germany. Unfortunately, the crowds that cheered Mussolini's declaration of war in June 1940 reflected a widespread acceptance throughout the body politic of the Duce's goals and aspirations of Italian domination over the entire Mediterranean basin. While Mussolini did not aim at "biological world revolution" in the fashion of Hitler, et al., he was certainly aiming at a "nationalist utopia"—a utopia of which most Italians, including the military, were heartily in favor. Knox's work underlines that this dream did not collapse through an unwillingness to act in a ruthless and unprincipled fashion. The tens of thousands of Arabs murdered in Libya in the 1920s (a major contributing factor to Quaddafi's presence on the world stage today), the use of mustard gas against



defenseless tribesmen in Ethiopia, and the widespread atrocities and massacres throughout the Italian occupied zones of Yugoslavia and Greece hardly suggest a regime with much squeamishness.

The Fascist regime and its supporting state bureaucracy did not fail, moreover, because of an unwillingness to spend Italy's financial and economic life blood to prepare for the coming struggle. Knox presents persuasive figures and documentation indicating that in the period from 1935-1938 Italy outspent the French and nearly the British in preparing for war. The causes of the 1940 disasters lie deeper and suggest that spending on defense can in some cases be irrelevant to performance in combat. (One must note that Knox's evidence shows that, entirely contrary to theories of a "blitzkrieg strategy," the Germans outspent everyone by an enormous margin in the same period.)

The real roots of the national disaster, Knox suggests, resulted from a level of dilettantism and incompetence that is astonishing even by the normal standards of human misbehavior. The heart of Italian military failures lay in an "Italian

general staff tradition: Custozza, Lisa, Adua, and Caporetto." As Knox points out:

On those occasions the military, as yet uncontaminated by contact with Fascism, distinguished itself by the absence of the study, planning, and attention to detail that characterized the Germans, and by a tendency to intrigue and confusion of responsibilities among senior officers.

The disasters did not, Knox emphasizes, result from a lack of bravery on the part of Italian enlisted men—after all, nearly a half million of them died in World War I.

Mussolini's ignorance of, and—unlike his colleague to the north—lack of interest in, things military ensured that the failings of 1915-1918 would only recur on a grander stage and with greater suddenness, since this time the Italians were up against serious military organizations, rather than the Austrians. Deaf to the lessons of the past, the Italian military embarked on its "parallel war" adventure with the hope, as Marshal Graziani commented in early June 1940, that "when the cannon sound[ed] everything [would] fall into place." Marshal Badoglio, commander in chief of the armed forces in summer 1940, noted on an intelligence report on the German armored tactics that had overwhelmed the French that "We'll study it when the war is over." But it was left to Gen Ubaldo Soddu to enunciate an attitude shared by many members of the officer corps when he remarked on the advantages of a career in the Italian army: ". . . when you have a fine plate of pasta guaranteed for life, and a little music, you don't need anything more." True to his words, Soddu spent his evenings in the fall of 1940 composing "sound-track music for films," while his troops died and his army fell apart. Led by such officers, it is not surprising that many Italians chose to surrender.

One should not, however, be misled. *Mussolini Unleashed* is not a study of comic opera buffoonery. It is a thorough, serious work on a state and its military that thought in the most grandiose and mendacious terms. Knox understands and underlines the terrible consequences for the Italian soldier and people of the military and political leadership's casual incompetence. He has, moreover, managed to place the events of 1939-1940 in the widest possible perspective—one that connects military, political, and diplomatic

factors into a coherent whole rather than isolating and thereby distorting one particular theme.

This then is a book worthy of attention by anyone with the slightest interest in history. For officers interested in questions as diverse as military incompetence and the formation of national strategy, this work will repay many times over the hours spent in reading it. *Mussolini Unleashed* is real history.

† *Williamson Murray is director of the Military History and Strategic Studies Program at Ohio State University.*

**RICKOVER: A BIOGRAPHY.** By Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen. Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982, 744pp., \$20.75 (Member \$18.50)

reviewed by Brian M. Linn

How valuable is any one person to a military organization? This is the essential question asked by Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen in *Rickover*. No organization can afford to stifle an individual who is innovative and can get things done. At the same time no organization can tolerate an individual who pursues his own goals exclusively and who sabotages all policies but those he personally designs or favors. All professions have self-regulating institutions that ideally can strike a balance between individual genius and the needs of the profession. But what happens when an individual genius can utilize other sources of influence to thwart his profession's wishes? What happens when one man can create a service within his Service that is accountable only to him? What happens when the once-brilliant innovator becomes a block to innovation? These are some of the problems posed by the career of Hyman G. Rickover.

According to Polmar and Allen, Rickover never fit into the Navy. As a young engineering officer, he was known both for his insistence on excellence and his abrasive personality. From the first, Rickover saw himself as a crusader against the small minds who ran the "traditional" Navy. Unlike most career officers who rise, Rickover never mellowed. His contempt and abuse seems to have gotten more intense the longer he stayed in power. Assigned to work on a nuclear power plant, Rickover was ruthless in the advancement of both a nuclear

Navy and his control over what form this nuclear Navy would take. By a skillful combination of public relations and bureaucratic in-fighting he created a virtually unassailable position outside the established naval hierarchy. Many officers, including his superiors, felt that Rickover was a danger to the professional unity of the Navy. There were constant attempts to either remove him or cut back his influence. These efforts were conspicuous failures; Rickover seemed to grow more powerful with each succeeding challenge. His career is a fascinating account of a man who consistently beat the system.

Despite the great amount of research that went into the writing of *Rickover*, the authors will have trouble establishing their claim to having written the "definitive" study. The authors, for example, believe that Rickover's longevity outlasted his contributions to naval defense. Indeed, they strongly suggest the anti-organization admiral became increasingly reactionary and capricious, insistent on conformity and intolerant of dissent. These conclusions alone will surely provoke a rebuttal for the admiral's supporters. Moreover, the picture of Rickover that emerges from these pages—a cross between a Machiavellian prince and a spoiled infant—is not altogether convincing. The marriage between Polmar the naval analyst and Allen the author often reveals the contrasting aims of the scholar and the storyteller. At times the book slips into the David Halberstam school of history in which every facet of a personality quirk is illustrated with numerous colorful incidents. This leads to a great deal of needless repetition and often confuses what could have been a more precise analysis of Rickover's personal motivation.

Despite these weaknesses, *Rickover* is a book that is well worth reading. It sheds a great deal of light on an aspect of naval policymaking that is often ignored. It is a study of a fascinating career in the military profession. It should provoke a lively and perhaps acrimonious debate among naval officers. It may lead some readers to wonder if the Navy's strange bureaucratic system doesn't encourage the rise and continuation of individuals and factions. One may disagree with the authors' assessment of Hyman G. Rickover, but the issues raised by their book are important and deserve more study.