Book Review: Armies in Retreat: Chaos, Cohesion, and Consequences

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This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Parameters and Associated Collections at USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Parameters Bookshelf – Online Book Reviews by an authorized administrator of USAWC Press.
Editors Timothy G. Heck and Walker D. Mills have done a great service in compiling this informative volume examining an under-studied topic in the US military: retreat. As the editors explain in their introduction, *Armies in Retreat* is meant to correct what they regard as the prevailing “vaguely (or expressly) triumphant narrative” of recent studies of major wars, particularly the 12-volume Large-Scale Combat Operations series produced by Army University Press (3). The neglect of the subject, however, goes beyond such history-based instructional materials. As several of the contributors note, the topic receives scant attention even in military doctrine. Western militaries have overlooked or avoided the discussion of retreat for some time and continue to do so. It is telling, as the editors noted in a 2022 Army Heritage Center Foundation Zoom lecture available online, that no senior military leader was willing to write a foreword for this volume.

*Armies in Retreat* contains 18 chapter-length case studies organized into three parts. Seventeen of these studies are drawn from history, ranging from antiquity to the Korean War. These historical cases are nicely balanced between ones that will be familiar to most readers—the Battle of Chancellorsville, the Gallipoli Campaign, and the inevitable Battle of the Chosin Reservoir—and others that will probably be new, such as the British expedition to Holland in 1809, a subsidiary campaign of the Seven Years’ War, or the experience of an International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. Particularly for these lesser-known campaigns, the volume’s generally excellent maps are invaluable, thanks to cartographic support provided to the contributors by Army University Press. The case study authors are of a consistently high quality and are academically qualified to write on their specific subjects. Nonetheless, there is the ever-present variation in approach and emphasis endemic to edited volumes. Many of the contributors have ties to professional military education, and so some chapters are quite didactic and tied closely
to existing doctrine or military theory (for example, Carl von Clausewitz’s concept of friction), while others are more conventional historical accounts.

In the introduction, Heck and Mills confess to struggling with how to organize the volume. Their three parts—“Chaos,” “Cohesion,” and “Consequences”—provide a superior structure to a simple chronological approach but also reflect some of the conceptual ambiguities within this work. The first two parts, “Chaos” and “Cohesion,” juxtapose poorly conducted retreats with ones in which the units maintained good order, though this distinction is not always observed. For instance, several of the units in Marcin Wilczek’s chapter, “Polish Horsemen in the Chaotic Withdrawal of 1939,” maintained cohesion and even offensive spirit in the midst of a larger defeat—but is the relative internal order of the units conducting the withdrawal the most meaningful measure of any given action? Mills’s concluding chapter offers poignant reflections on the recent retreat from Afghanistan but suffers from a conflation of retreat with defeat. Although often paired, the two are not the same. Offensive actions can also fail, while not all retreats are losses. Alexander S. Burn’s chapter, “Hülsen’s Retreat: The Campaign in Saxony, August-October 1760,” describes a skillful, economy-of-force delaying action allowing the main army to prevail.

The category of “Consequences,” the third part of the volume, is somewhat muddled; all the cases in the first two parts had consequences as well. The brief explanation offered in the introduction suggests this part focuses primarily on the longer-term implications of retreats, though in practice it also seems to be a catchall for chapters that do not neatly fit elsewhere. The end result is a good one, as the last two case chapters in the section are two of the most originally provocative and informative. Aimee Fox examines Gallipoli from an intriguing angle: the interplay between military leaders (both in theater and in London) and civilian officials weighing the inevitable—but politically and strategically painful—decision to withdraw. J. D. Work explores the idea of retreat in cyberspace in a tantalizing chapter that is at once enlightening and frustrating, in that it relies on generic technical descriptions (for example, “payloads” and “infrastructure elements”) of which most readers will have some basic understanding but will likely struggle to envision precisely. Nonetheless, Work’s chapter offers a profitable glimpse into a new sphere of conflict. As with this volume as a whole, it is well worth readers’ time. This volume will undoubtedly stimulate thought and provide grist for professional reflection on a neglected topic.