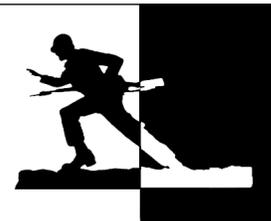


Book Reviews



The Last Drop: Operation Varsity, March 24-25, 1945

By Stephen L. Wright
Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008, 336 pages

Reviewed by Chapel Collins

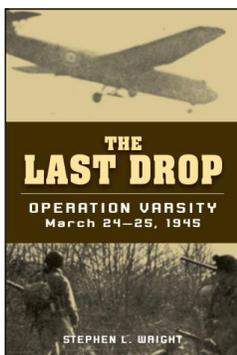
In *The Last Drop*, Stephen L. Wright has collected an immense amount of firsthand accounts from the men who carried out the remarkable, yet oft-overlooked Operation Varsity.

Varsity was the final major airborne offensive of World War II and the largest single-drop airborne operation in history. The drop was made in broad daylight by American, British, and Canadian forces while the Germans waited below. What followed was unprecedented resistance to an airborne operation — into the homeland of the enemy, no less — and the beginning of the end to the war.

Wright takes a backseat throughout the book, wisely and graciously allowing his primary sources to speak for themselves, and do they ever speak. The dozens of accounts from the men who were there, from different nations and divisions, paint a wide, comprehensive, and endlessly colorful picture of the entire operation. The book begins long before the operation and details everything from the histories of the participating regiments, to the planning of the drop, to the training, and finally to the operation itself. Even though it is written very academically and objectively, the personalities of the men going into battle come through their own words in a powerful way, and the tension before the battle is palpable.

When the battle does arrive, it arrives spectacularly. The accounts of the landings are all at once riveting, tragic, heroic, and awe-inspiring. Varsity was an operation fraught with tragedy and loss, but more than that, bravery in the face of it. Wright's permanent residency in the backseat of the story really allows these stories to shine on their own, but also tends to allow the structure of the book to become a bit chaotic. Darting back and forth between points of view does indeed make for a comprehensive account of the operation, but it can sometimes also trip up the pacing and even a little of the humanity of the story. Everything is clear enough to follow, but shifting gears so frequently and starkly puts a little wear and tear on the book's transmission, and spending so little time with so many different people can put a temporary stop on the investment into the personalities of the story.

Yet, at the same time, this shotgun blast of different accounts leads to a genuine capture of and appreciation for



the enormous scope of the operation. The book holds stories from infantrymen, pilots, medics, engineers, and everything in between. It provides a clear image of how many different and equally important roles were necessary to accomplish the goals of the operation. It also provides accounts of light-hearted or mysterious battlefield happenings, stories that the soldiers would tell each other, which rounds the book out and keeps it from ever becoming overly clinical.

Despite the fact that each of these accounts is equally valid and worthy, some of them are exceedingly similar. At the risk of sounding hard-hearted, many of the soldiers' stories are so similar that they don't contribute very much to the flow of the book. On the other hand, I suspect that was the point; by showing all of these stories, no matter how similar, it shows how each and every man on the field was equally brave and equally exposed to unrelenting danger.

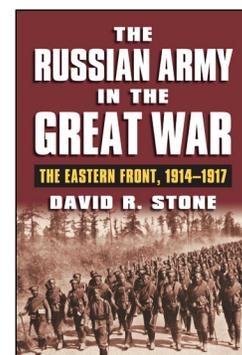
The Last Drop is successful in providing a comprehensive boots-on-the-ground — or in the air — story of one of the most important operations of World War II. What it lacks in readability, it more than makes up for in authenticity. Wright's method of primary source compilation ensures that this book is and will remain among the ranks of the most pertinent books on the subject.

The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917

By David R. Stone
Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2015, 368 pages

Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck,
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

David R. Stone's *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* is a masterful survey and synthesis of an understudied and misunderstood combatant of the First World War. Long overshadowed by events on the Western Front or in tragic sideshows like Gallipoli, Stone's treatment of the Imperial Russian Army is well researched and well written, challenging its readers to view Russian participation as more than just a prelude to the Russian Revolution. Perhaps most valuable for the soldier, instead of static warfare and large attacks with limited gains as on the Somme or at Verdun, Stone recounts how armies advanced and retreated with surprising mobility, often going hundreds



of miles in a campaign. As our current discussion continues to focus on the potential for near-peer conflict with Russia, the places and battlefields Stone discusses are ripe for further study and battlefield staff rides.

The Russian army, Stone argues, was not that much different than her Western European allies and enemies. Russia's army was comparable to other continental powers: large-scale conscription, limited service time, reserve obligations. Similarly, all four major powers attempted decisive blows against their enemies during the opening of the war and all four failed. Furthermore, in combat, the Russian army frequently failed to turn operational successes into strategic victories. In other ways, though, the Imperial Russian Army was fundamentally different than the other combatants. First, it emphasized cavalry units over line infantry units. Secondly, it was significantly larger than its opponents or allies. Furthermore, it faced language and cultural issues as troops were drawn from across a polyglot empire. Stone's explanations of these similarities and contrasts set the stage for analysis of the war itself.

The book heavily weights the opening 18 months of the war, with only three chapters covering from 1916 on, including the Brusilov Offensive of 1916. These opening months were "marked by an almost uninterrupted sequence of campaigns" as both sides sought to gain the advantage in the east. The first six months of warfare saw multiple large-scale combat operations by all sides. As Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia battled, it became clear Russia was tactically and operationally unable to match the Germans, though "it performed quite respectably against Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire." Russia was similar to her allies and enemies as a vanguard of capable officers quickly rose through attrition and the removal of incompetent leaders. Similarly, the Russian Stavka also struggled with the new demands of industrialized warfare, frequently "failing to impose clear priorities on Russia's commanders and thereby splitting resources."

Stone's emphasis on the operational level of war allows him to focus on campaigns, the Stavka, and senior commanders. He deepens this analysis through discussions of society, politics, economics, and diplomacy in order to better explain the context for military decisions and operational events, including the eventual collapse of Imperial Russia. *The Russian Army in the Great War* is an excellent introductory work to combat in Eastern Europe. Stone picks up the mantle laid by works like Norman Stone (no relation) in 1975's *The Eastern Front* or W. Bruce Lincoln's *Passage Through Armageddon* and synthesizes more recent scholarship and understanding for his readers. This book should find a place on the shelves of commanders in Europe and their staffs, as well as those interested in World War I who are looking to expand beyond the traditional narratives of the Western Front.



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