

## Hubris: The Tragedy of War in the Twentieth Century

By Alistair Horne  
HarperCollins, 2015  
\$28.99, 400 pp.  
ISBN: 978-0062397805

Reviewed by Ryan A. Sanford

Hubris, or excessive pride, comprises one part of a tragic dyad. The other part of the dyad is *peripeteia*, or a sudden reversal of fortune. For historian Alistair Horne, the hubris-peripeteia dyad comes to the fore in the decisions and actions of some of history's best-known leaders and commanders, whose arrogant overreach led to rapid reversal, defeat, and shame. In *Hubris: The Tragedy of War in the Twentieth Century*, Alistair Horne examines six 20<sup>th</sup>-century battles to show how an inability to assess the strategic context properly, an overestimation of one's ability, and, potentially most significant, an ignorance of history's lessons, preceded many inglorious failures on the battlefield. Much like a Baroque composer, Horne establishes the hubris and peripeteia theme of his fugue using the Russo-Japanese War as the exposition, and then presents

the theme in new ways using different battles and their actors.

Regarding the Russo-Japanese War, Horne explains that while neither the Russian nor the Japanese army performed spectacularly, the Japanese navy surprised the Western world with its overwhelming victory against the Second Pacific Squadron at the Battle of Tsushima, thereby establishing fertile soil for hubris to take root. To wit, according to Horne, the Japanese naval victory coupled with their Pyrrhic victory in Manchuria not only forced the Russians to the negotiating table at Portsmouth in autumn 1905, but it also sowed the seeds of the "myth of Japanese invincibility."

Belief in this myth stoked the fires of militarism in Japan during the interwar years. Those flames blinded Japan to its strategic reality, thereby leading to its overreach in Mongolia, a crippling defeat at Midway, and its eventual surrender in August 1945. For Horne, pride caused Japanese leaders to misappropriate historical analogy and attempt to view their battles with the Soviets and Americans as nearly identical to their struggle against Tsar Nicholas II's Russia in 1905. According to Horne, an earlier generation's victory paved the way for its successor's defeat. Excessive pride made brittle the strategic decisionmaking process where, in fact, elasticity was needed to account for and adapt to changes in the strategic environment.

Using the Nazis' perilous foray into the Soviet heartland as a new subject, Horne further develops the hubris-peripeteia theme. Here, he argues that German arrogance, exemplified by its ideology and selective ignoring of history, set the foundation for eventual Nazi defeat. Whether discounting the Russian army's resurgence in Mongolia or holding in high, but uncritical, regard the Wehrmacht's performance in Western Europe, Horne asserts that Adolf Hitler never examined the strategic context, and how it had changed, before Operation *Barbarossa*. Hitler's *geopolitik* and belief in the superiority of ethnic Germans blinded him to reality, which led to the Nazi reversal of fortune. That said, Horne acknowledges that the Allied

victory resulted as much from Allied effort as it did from Nazi mistakes. Still, Horne ponders, counterfactually, what history would have recorded had hubris, to include ignorance of history and an ideological and racial fanaticism, not occluded Hitler's vision when he decided upon the perilous thrust into Russia.

The Axis powers did not have a monopoly on the proclivity to believe in one's infallibility. Indeed, examining General Douglas MacArthur's leadership during the Korean War and France's inglorious surrender at Dien Bien Phu, Horne writes a fitting recapitulation and coda for the theme of hubris and peripeteia. In the case of MacArthur, Horne juxtaposes his demigod status with the shame that followed his dismissal from command. Horne argues that MacArthur's belief that "generals are never given adequate directives," coupled with his performance leading to the Chinese intervention in autumn 1950, stoked his hubris and caused him to act in ways that undermined his civilian leaders' policy aims. In turn, a tragic reversal of fortune followed as exemplified by the humiliating "bug out" by United Nations forces and President Harry Truman's decision to replace the general in April 1951.

Overall, Horne's thesis and argument are compelling. There are, however, some weaknesses worth noting. While many will appreciate Horne's masterful grasp of history and his ability to tie together events that seemingly do not cohere, his habit of ascribing many of the decisions, actions, and outcomes in his examples to hubris ignores the reality that war is inherently complex. In other words, the path from hubris to disaster is not always straight. Nor does every case hinge on individual or institutional hubris. Given the same conditions and actors, small perturbations in seemingly insignificant components of the larger battle could result in different outcomes. Such is the nature of nonlinearity inherent in human endeavor.

Still, Horne's argument that hubris was the sufficient condition for the reversals of fortune in his examples might have been more convincing had he used the methodology of process tracing. Even in failing to follow such a methodology, Horne could have provided the reader

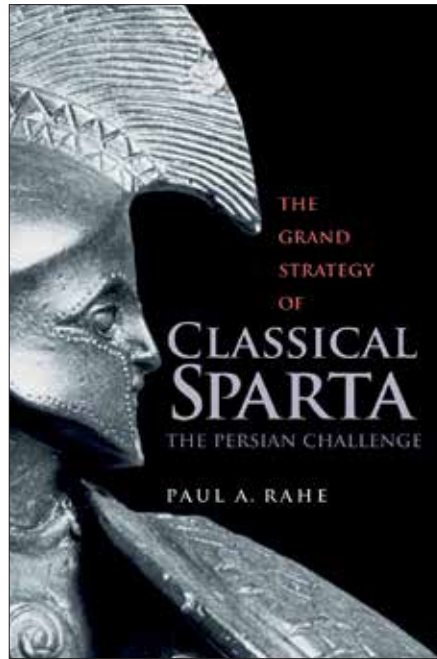
with the tools to conduct such an inquiry. With only a limited bibliography and a paucity of notes, however, such an inquiry would prove daunting.

Despite these minor issues, Horne's work is instructive, especially because of the author's consistent reminder of the fate awaiting those who ignore the past. In fact, such a theme could have easily taken pride of place in this work. Horne's explanation of how the Battle of Tsushima, the 1940 Blitzkrieg, and the Battle of Verdun persisted as analogies for the Japanese at Midway, for Hitler during Barbarossa, and for the French in Indochina, respectively, shows the power analogies wield within the mind of the decisionmaker. In fact, Horne's examples provide additional evidence of the power of historical analogy, much as Yuen Foong Khong described in *Analogies at War*. For Horne, the arrogant not only tend to ignore history, but they also are heavily inclined to extend beyond their abilities. Indeed, Horne's six examples demonstrate the validity of Clausewitz's concept of a culminating point and the importance of reading the strategic context correctly to assess when such overreach will prove detrimental. Given the complexity of the strategic environment in the Pacific and ongoing operations in the Middle East, such reminders are helpful.

Finally, some may find Horne's lack of any prescriptive counters to the influence of hubris to be a detriment. Yet this, too, is a strength. With a prescription, one can easily fall prey to "checking the box," all while treading the path of hubris. Instead, Horne cautions that hubris is insidious. While one is most vulnerable to its effects during triumphant moments, the pathogen lingers. Thus, an awareness of its presence is, for Horne, the best medicine of all. The knowledge of hubris's infectiousness and the willingness to admit one's fallibility may prove the closest thing to an inoculation against hubris and its most dangerous manifestation, peripeteia. JFQ

---

Lieutenant Colonel Ryan Sanford, USAF, is currently an Operations Officer and is a graduate of the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies and the Test Pilot School.



### The Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta: The Persian Challenge

By Paul A. Rahe  
Yale University Press, 2015  
\$34.95, 424 pp.  
ISBN: 978-0300116427

Reviewed by Williamson Murray

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Americans and their military leaders have had all too little sense of the importance of history and too little grasp of literature on thinking about strategy and the role of military power in the world. In fact, in the massive assault by the literati of the intellectual world, America's elites have come to regard the dead men of ancient Greece as thoroughly suspect and not worthy of serious study. In that regard, the *stèle* (tombstone) that marked the grave of the great Greek dramatist Aeschylus identifies him as a veteran of the pitched battle between the Persians and the Athenians at Marathon in 490 BCE, with no mention of his dramatic triumphs. His memorial reads:

*Beneath this stone lies Aeschylus, son of Euphorion, the Athenian,*

*who perished in the wheat-bearing land of Gela;*

*of his noble prowess the grove of Marathon can speak,*

*and the long-haired Persian knows it well.*

It serves as one more reminder of why the past appears to be of little use to Americans who look forward to a brave new world.

Professor Paul Rahe has directly challenged those assumptions that history is bunk. His *Grand Strategy of Classical Sparta* is a brilliant study of Spartan strategy during the Persian Wars (500 to 479 BCE) that deserves to be read by those few still interested in the conduct of grand strategy and the choices, good and bad, made by leaders under the pressures of war. He has laid out the obvious as well as the underlying factors that eventually led to victory on the part of the Spartans and their Greek allies against the great empire of Persia. The victory of the Greek states was by no means inevitable. Their opponents not only had an immense superiority in numbers, but from the beginning also possessed an advantage in the general disunity of the Greek city-states. Thus, it took extraordinary political and strategic skill for a few Greek leaders to hold their fragile alliance together.

For Sparta, its leaders, and their strategy, the problem was both internal and external. On one side, they confronted a deeply hostile population of helots, whom they ruled with a ruthlessness that still echoes through the ages. Those helots were essential to Sparta's military power because they provided the sustenance on which the economy and warrior polis depended, since the Spartans forbade any kind of industry or trade to its warrior citizens, whose sole business was preparation for war. Not surprisingly, the Spartans confronted the potential of massive revolt among the helots, revolts that their neighbors were more than willing to support. Thus, they were deeply conscious of the importance of balancing their internal dangers with the external threats in the Peloponnese. Against Sparta's ancient opponent,