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How CNN Fought the War: A View from the Inside

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Britain might have prevented war in August 1914 by giving an earlier warning (before that of 29 July) to Germany, which in turn might have checked Austria. Such action, however, might have emboldened Russia. Because these matters elude resolution even today, one might sympathize not only with the diplomats who failed to prevent the war but also with scholars today who believe that war simply found a way.

Professor Showalter's study of the war suffers from a different deficiency—one he intended. Because “one of the major reasons for undertaking this study was a desire to evaluate the kaiser's fighting men as they made the transition from peace to war,” Showalter has paid considerably less attention to Russian operations. This becomes apparent when reading his account of the Russian victory at Gumbinnen. The moderate success of flanking attacks by the German generals Francois and Below, as well as the dismal frontal assault by General Mackensen, are portrayed in detail. On the other side, however, one finds little about the intentions or reactions of Rennenkampf's corps commanders, Generals Smirnov, Yepantschin, and Aliuev. Consequently, one keeps looking for evidence which would support Showalter's conclusion that Rennenkampf's “delay gave the Germans a golden chance to disengage and move south. In their dream of decisive victory, the Russians set the stage for their crushing defeat.”

Showalter's perspective, however, also has its benefits. His focus upon German operations facilitates an examination of mistakes (e.g., German artillery far too often shelled its own men) as well as an appreciation of the responsiveness and initiative of German officers. The case of often-insubordinate General Francois is particularly illuminating as an example of “how to win battles the wrong way while his superiors were losing them the right way.” Nevertheless, the German encirclement of Samsonov's 2nd Army was as much a consequence of the latter's “commitment to a strategy of maneuver” (characterized by Showalter as an attempt to use a “broadsword”—i.e., the Russian army—as a “rapier”) as of German initiative. Professor Showalter is at his incisive best when examining the role played by “friction” in such monumental victories.

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Smith, Perry M. *How CNN Fought the War: A View from the Inside*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991. 223pp. \$18.95

Television news coverage during the Gulf War, with Cable Network News (CNN) in the lead, has drastically changed the nature of war. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin L. Powell, stated in a recent *New York Times* interview, “If a commander in Desert Shield [Storm] sat around his tent and mused with a few CNN guys and [media]

pool guys, it's in 105 capitals a minute later." *How CNN Fought the War* is Perry Smith's attempt "to explain from a first-hand perspective how CNN dealt with this war." Smith is a retired air force major general familiar to Gulf War television viewers as one of CNN's principal military analysts, which makes him uniquely qualified to describe the network's operations.

The author's discussion of how CNN beat its competitors in the race for timely and accurate coverage of the Gulf War is based on his experience with the network during that conflict. Covering organizational as well as the technical aspects of its operations, he provides keen insights into why CNN was successful in its mission. Between chapters dealing directly with the network, Smith effectively uses his military expertise to develop several underlying themes beyond the workings of CNN. The foremost of these are military-media relations, the controversial role of military analysts working for the networks, and analysis of Operation Desert Storm and its air campaign.

Smith's description of CNN's success sounds like the operations of a well trained military unit. He begins with the first night of the war: "CNN was ready. It was accomplished in providing twenty-four hour coverage....It had a leadership team which understood, before the war broke out, that this was going to be a story of giant proportions." Portrayal of the CNN staff as a highly professional, energetic team led by decisive, flexible producers willing

to take risks to win the war of the networks results in a very interesting and entertaining account.

Smith has integrated his observations on the operations in the Gulf into his description of CNN's leadership. His commentary is generally insightful. Especially informative is Smith's depiction of the Air Staff's role in planning the air campaign, along with his analysis of the effect of high-technology weaponry on future conflicts.

At times, Smith's work appears to have been written in haste. He does admit to rushing his research in an effort to capture his experiences while they were still fresh. Unfortunately, this approach has resulted in a lack of continuity between chapters. Another weakness is Smith's tendency to overrate the significance of air power during the Gulf War while depreciating the value of the ground operations, which he describes as a "mopping up exercise." Although Smith's military background is critical to his work, he displays service parochialism.

Smith provides an enlightening account of CNN's operations which will appeal to anyone who followed the war on television. The book's main value, however, is in its description of the changes in the nature of warfare caused by the war in the Gulf. In this regard, students of modern warfare will find Smith's observations valuable.

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