

2019

## Hell on Earth

Timothy J. Demy

Avigdor Hameiri

Peter C. Appelbaum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Demy, Timothy J.; Hameiri, Avigdor; and Appelbaum, Peter C. (2019) "Hell on Earth," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 72 : No. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol72/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

In practice, American political leaders use the national grand strategy, be it primacy or something else, as a shorthand way of explaining the complex security environment to the public and its elected representatives, and as a very broad and pliable set of historically derived best practices and aspirations. No policy maker ever made a decision and no military leader ever crafted a theater strategy or operational plan because it was what the grand strategy demanded. As John Gaddis phrased it in *On Grand Strategy* (Penguin Random House, 2018), grand strategy is simply “the alignment of potentially unlimited aspirations with necessarily limited capabilities” (p. 21). It is a constantly shifting web of patterns and habits blending both aspirations and predilections, a creed, even a myth, and not something prescriptive, such as a legal code. Outright dissonance between its theory and its practice would be worrisome, but some level of incongruity is normal, even inevitable. While theorists of grand strategy talk of primacy, in reality the United States is focused more on maintaining the system it created rather than trying to dominate it. Thus the configuration of the U.S. military, which is derived from a practice of reasonably being prepared for low-probability/high-risk threats such as major war, while devoting most of its effort to system-maintenance missions, makes sense. Ultimately, Reich and Dombrowski’s contention that the United States is at the end of grand strategy does not stand up if grand strategy is conceptualized as a set of if/then statements or rules of thumb, as a shorthand way of communicating and building consensus rather than official writ.

That said, *The End of Grand Strategy* is a challenging, erudite, and worthwhile read. It is unusual in its use of sea

power to illustrate its points. It is right about the enduring centrality of American naval power. It is right that a “new” grand strategy is not the solution to America’s security problems. However, to borrow from Mark Twain, the authors’ report of the death of grand strategy may be an exaggeration.

STEVEN METZ



*Hell on Earth*, by Avigdor Hameiri, trans. Peter C. Appelbaum. Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2017. 478 pages. \$39.99.

War memoirs and war literature frequently intersect. Because of the traumas and tragedies of war and the impact they have on individuals, it is not uncommon for authors to write of their experiences of war using fiction to give voice to both literary creativity and personal experience. Karl Marlantes’s powerful novel *Matterhorn* (Grove, 2010) is one example, written about his experience of the Vietnam War as a Marine officer. So also are the writings of Israeli author Avigdor Hameiri (1890–1970) a reflection of the author’s experience of an earlier war.

Born in the village of Odavidhaza, in Carpathian Ruthenia in Austria-Hungary (near present-day Mukacheve, western Ukraine), Hameiri fought in World War I as a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army and recounted his experiences in two fictionalized memoirs, *The Great Madness* (1929; translation published by Vantage, 1952) and *Hell on Earth* (original-language publication, 1932). The former recounts experiences of a Jewish soldier on the eastern front, while the latter, the translation of which is the subject of this

review, recounts a soldier's (Hameiri's) experiences as a Russian prisoner of war. Interestingly, Hameiri does not write of bearing a grudge or resentment toward his captors. He writes candidly of cruelty and deprivation, but the cruelty is more often on the part of other prisoners with different nationalities or ethnicities than of his Russian captors.

Published in Hebrew in 1932, *Hell on Earth* was not translated into English until military historian and translator Peter C. Appelbaum did so in the present volume. Much of Appelbaum's research and writings focus on the experience of Jewish soldiers during the First World War, and, that being the case, he chose an excellent project and provided an exceptional result. *Hell on Earth* presents a vivid and memorable account of the experiences of soldiers taken captive on the eastern front during the war. When readers think of the literature of World War I, it is often the British war poets or novels from other nationalities such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) or Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1927), and, perhaps, memoirs such as Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) and Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* (1920). Writings from the war in the east are often overlooked, as are writings about prisoners of war. Yet World War I created eight million prisoners of war. In fifty-four chapters (and each could be read separately with benefit), Hameiri brings the reader into a world of uncertainty and survival. His narrative presents conversations, thoughts, and reflections on the mundane and the profound. Set far from the western front, Gallipoli and the Dardanelles campaign, the siege of Al Kut, or the battle of Jutland, Hameiri's work is a reminder of the war in a locale often overlooked.

From the first words—"A rainy, filthy, muddy morning" (p. 27)—readers are drawn into the world of the soldier who would soon become a prisoner of war. The author is descriptive, detailed, haunting, and humane. Remarkably, the author ends the work on a note of humanity and forgiveness. In so doing, he provides readers with hope in the midst of a broken world and a reminder that ultimately, every prisoner (and person) must confront the limits of what others can do to them and wrestle with what is within the prisoner's power and what is beyond the prisoner's power. Such a reckoning is exactly what Vietnam prisoner of war and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale, USN, wrote of frequently with respect to his captivity (as have many others, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Viktor Frankl).

A translator's preface and a map set the stage for the work and give prescient insight into the challenge of translating such a linguistically rich book. A remarkable introduction, written by Avner Holtzman, a professor of Hebrew literature at Tel Aviv University, provides extensive contextualization of the work in Jewish literature of the era and war literature of World War I. *Hell on Earth* is filled with drawings of captivity made by Hameiri, including one of his escape from the camp in Irkutsk. Each drawing adds a dimension to the work that is powerful and thought provoking.

The volume contains helpful endnotes illuminating geography, history, and historical characters, as well as biblical and Talmudic citations the author used. Appelbaum's translation flows smoothly, such that the writing readily engages the reader, drawing the reader quickly into a world of the warrior often forgotten in war literature. What strikes the reader

frequently throughout the book is the almost prophetic foreshadowing of the experience of millions of people of the Holocaust—pointless cruelty, medical experiments, starvation, disease, louse infestation. Although this deprivation was not true of all Russian prison camps during the war, it was of Hameiri's.

The book is important as war literature and as prisoner-of-war literature and deserves a wide reading. The writing is graphic and the horrors of war are presented in a manner that few will forget. *Hell on Earth* is a vivid reminder that the tragedy of war never should be forgotten or minimized. It is a book to read and on which to reflect. Those who do so will not be disappointed.

TIMOTHY J. DEMY



*Brutality in an Age of Human Rights: Activism and Counterinsurgency at the End of the British Empire*, by Brian Drohan. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2018. 256 pages. \$45.

During its late-twentieth-century wars of decolonization, Great Britain employed counterinsurgency methods, such as indefinite detention and coercive interrogations, that human rights activists challenged. Initially in Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States employed the same counterinsurgency policies and tactics the British had used decades earlier, and, not surprisingly, the United States faced the same legal challenges in the first decade of this century that the British faced from the 1950s through the 1970s. The U.S. legal battles have been well documented over the past decade, and now *Brutality in an Age of Human Rights* exposes the controversial colonial policies and tactics sanctioned by British civilian and military authorities from 1955 to 1975.

When the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan began, U.S. leaders studying past counterinsurgencies had relatively few scholarly works to consult. Then, as the focus on international human rights law grew, so too did the number of books that exposed contentious wartime policies and methods. Brian Drohan's book is a valuable resource for lawyers, planners, and policy writers studying the history of human rights and its effect on counterinsurgency warfare.

*Brutality in an Age of Human Rights* unequivocally dispels the myth that the British were anything but brutal in their counterinsurgency methods while maintaining a public façade of rule of law adherence during the Cyprus emergency (1955–59), the Aden emergency in Yemen (1963–67), and the Northern Ireland Troubles (during the 1970s). Drohan, a U.S. Army officer, West Point history professor, and historian of modern Britain, expanded his University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill dissertation into this scholarly work that includes 847 endnotes and a detailed bibliography documenting the author's extensive research.

Drohan uncovers what others largely have ignored: the role of human rights activists in shaping wartime policies and practices. Backed by colonial-era records, Drohan persuasively argues that lawyers, local and international societies, and political groups actively challenged British civilian and military leaders—shaping the strategic debates on human rights that affected operational- and tactical-level counterinsurgency methods. Relying on documented incidents, Drohan exposes Britain's harsh tactics and counters the British narrative that mythologized its image of colonial rule through minimal force.