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Storia Militare Contemporanea



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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The banner, shown courtesy of the Schwind Collection to Pēteris Cedrinš, is the personal banner of prince Avalov, commander of the West Volunteer Army (Западная добровольческая армия), a White Russian anti-Bolshevik and pro-German force created by Germany Gen. von der Goltz in August 1919 merging the rest of German Freikorps in the Baltic States and some Russian POWs with the Special Russian Corps raised in November 1918 by Gen. Graf Fëdor Arturovič Keller and by Cossack Gen. Pavel Bermond, later Prince Avalov, both Knights of the Russian Branch of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (SOSJJ). The Corps lent allegiance to Kolchak's white government and later to a Latvian puppet government supported by Berlin, and fought against both the Bolshevik and the Latvian democratic government supported by the Entente, being disbanded in December 1919. The Banner front shows the imperial coat of arms. On the reverse, the Black Maltese Cross with Crown of Thorns memorializes General Graf Keller, murdered by the Bolsheviks

<http://www.theknightsofsaintjohn.com/History-After-Malta.htm>;

<http://www.vexillographia.ru/russia/beloe.htm>;

<http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2007/11/bear-slayers-day.html> (Pēteris Cedrinš, *Bear Slayer's Day*, 11 November 2007). Cedrinš posted the image of the Flag's recto on wikipedia commons.

BRENDAN SIMMS & CHARLIE LADERMAN,

*Hitler's American Gamble:
Pearl Harbor and Germany's March
to Global War*

New York, Basic Books, 2023, pp. xvi + 510.

ISBN 978-1-5416-1910-4. Endnotes. US \$23.99 (paperback).



In this striking piece of international and strategic history, the authors argue that previous assumptions about the inevitability of American and German entry into the war are not borne out by the five days of diplomatic and political activity immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. A first glance at the subject matter raises the question as to whether the authors might have been a little too late in publishing their study, given the appearance of Klaus Schmider's study in 2021 of the German declaration of war on the United

States.¹ According to their central argument, though, many of the studies which have been conducted presume that American entry into the war was a foregone conclusion once the first Japanese bombs had hit American ships on 7 December 1941. They note that many authors ignore the five days immediately following the Japanese attack, that the decision was anything but a foregone conclusion, and that too many historians have believed Churchill's version of events.

What is emphasized strongly in the opening chapter, entitled 'The Worlds of December 6, 1941', is the connection in the minds of the Nazi leadership between the defeat of the Soviet Union as a means of defeating Britain and the need to deter Roosevelt from entering the war. In the world of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, the Jewish influence on American policy was self-evident and played an important part in Hitler's assessment of the strategic situation prior to Pearl Harbor. As military events progressed on the muddy roads leading to Moscow, and in the Western Desert, the strategic tension began to mount. Each of the main war parties had, in the run up to Pearl Harbor, their own fears and points of paranoia. Towards the end of November 1941, as Simms/Laderman put it: 'Across the globe, informed observers sensed that the world was on the brink.' (65) But against the background of rising tension as to the overall strategic direction of the war, the America First Committee continued to work actively against the United States of America entering the war.

Following this stimulating opening 'scene-setting' chapter, the remainder of the book follows a simple structure: the remaining six chapters deal with one day at a time, beginning with 7 December 1941. The exception is the final chapter, 'The World of December 12, 1941' which, like the first chapter, is of a more sweeping, general nature, drawing together the various threads which run through the book. The basis for the analysis is an impressive range of British, American and German primary sources, as well as a mastery of the extensive secondary literature on the subject. Newspaper reports, contemporary public opinion studies and war diaries complete the overall impression of first-rate scholarship.

In the hours following the Japanese attack on 7 December 1941, the British were delighted, as was Hitler. The Führer had expected the attack to take place,

1 Klaus H. SCHMIDER, *Hitler's Fatal Miscalculation: Why Germany Declared War on the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also the review in this journal by Jeremy Black, NAM, 4 (2023), pp. 795-797.

but had been worried that his ally might back out at the last moment. When he finally received the news, from an intercepted enemy radio broadcast rather than the Japanese leadership, he was reported to have been both surprised and ecstatic. His assumption was that the action would tie down British and American resources in the Far East, thus giving him an advantage in the East. As such, then, the approach throughout is to examine how, hour-by-hour, the various participants – military, political, as well as observers (such as journalists) – reacted to unfolding events. In essence, the book blends diplomatic and strategic elements into a gripping narrative that throws much light on how the war became a world war, and how decision-making is coloured and influenced from hour-to-hour by unfolding events.

In the final chapter the authors explain fully their central hypothesis. Contrary to many accounts, the United States did not enter the war on 7 December 1941, they first became embroiled in a separate struggle with Japan: ‘America did not truly join the war until December 11, 1941, and unlike the First World War, the United States did not take the initiative.’ (357) The real significance of Pearl Harbor was thus on December 11, 1941, the day of Germany’s declaration of war against the United States, not on the day of the actual attack. Hitler was convinced that it was ‘the Jews’ who had manipulated Roosevelt, while the latter believed that the Japanese had been manipulated by the Germans. According to Simms/Lademan, no evidence exists as to whether Roosevelt thought American entry into the war was inevitable. There were, indeed, many pressing domestic political factors which may have pushed Roosevelt towards attempting to avoid involvement in the war in Europe. Needless to say, once war had been declared there were immediate consequences: American journalists were quickly banished from Berlin; the mistreatment of the Jews in Germany and Central Europe was accelerated; Japanese anti-colonial propaganda was intensified; and, in the Soviet Union, there was a sense that Hitler’s declaration of 11 December would tip the scales against the Germans.

The decision of Hitler to wage war against the United States, one which propelled Germany towards total defeat, and the United States towards global dominance, was not a foregone conclusion even on December 8, 1941. According to the authors, there were alternative scenarios: Japan could have attacked the Soviet Union, or Britain, but not the United States; or, the United States might have declared war on Japan only. Yet, while these may have been possibilities

at various moments, they were also less likely than what did come to pass. The authors might be criticized for hair-splitting over denying the ‘inevitability’ of an American entry into war on 7 December 1941 when, given everything we now know, it was after all highly likely. Their contribution is, however, that they have successfully illuminated the ‘fog of war’ at the grand strategic level over a period of five days. Anyone wishing to understand global war as it unfolded in late 1941 will profit from reading this well written and engaging piece of history.

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