

***Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda,  
and Literary Aesthetics During World War II.***

**Melissa Dinsman. New York: Bloomsbury  
Academic, 2015, \$89.99, hardback, 247 pp.**

**Reviewed by Emily C. Bloom, Columbia University**

Radio was an essential weapon in the war of words between the Allied and Axis powers during World War II; and yet, even if this fact has been firmly established, wartime broadcasting still remains poorly understood. Recently, scholars have taken up broadcasting as a subject of literary, rather than exclusively historical, analysis. Melissa Dinsman's *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics During World War II* offers a recent example of such work, applying literary approaches to texts that have seemed fundamentally "unliterary"—propaganda broadcasts.

Although some propaganda broadcasts are explicit in their political content, extolling patriotism and national commitments and vilifying the enemy, others are subtler in their approach. Examples of this less overt propaganda include literary broadcasts by prominent writers; radio plays, literary reviews, and readings that seem distant from military struggle, and yet, represent another front in the battle for the hearts and minds of listeners. Dinsman agrees with George Orwell's claim that, "All writing nowadays is propaganda," but follows this insight with important questions about the relationship between propaganda and wartime aesthetics (qtd in 97). Surveying a range of writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Bertolt Brecht, Theodor Adorno, Orson Welles, Dorothy L. Sayers, Louis MacNeice,

Orwell, Ezra Pound, Archibald MacLeish, Thomas Mann, and P.G. Wodehouse, Dinsman identifies the reasons writers flocked to the microphone, their diverse range of techniques, and their often-conflicting conceptions of audience. One of the tensions running through this work is whether radio broadcasting was inherently autocratic and disposed towards “black” propaganda meant to mislead and obscure, or conversely, whether broadcasting could be a democratic medium, encouraging critical thinking, and thereby amenable to “white” propaganda presenting information and allowing listeners to choose for themselves. In Germany, for instance, the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels wrote unambiguously about the power of radio to foster conformity and blind allegiance, while the playwright Bertolt Brecht believed that radio writing could promote active listening and independent thought.

The radio wars that Dinsman describes were often fought over American airwaves. The neutrality of the United States during the early years of the war was a catalyst for propaganda emanating from the United Kingdom and Germany alike. With the exception of a chapter on Orwell’s BBC broadcasts to India, every other chapter circles back to broadcasting directed towards listeners in the U.S. or broadcast from U.S. stations. Dinsman begins with Orson Welles’ famous *The War of the Worlds* (1938) radio adaptation of the H.G. Wells novel. Listeners who panicked in response to Welles’ representation of a Martian invasion, according to Dinsman, were not simply naïve listeners who fell for a fantastical narrative, but rather, responded to Welles’ correlation of radio with war information and his warnings about the threat of fascism. Many listeners believed that they were hearing news of a German invasion—not a Martian invasion. In this respect, Welles’ play sounds a similar note to another play that Dinsman discusses later in the book, Archibald MacLeish’s *The Fall of the City* (1937), which likewise warns American audiences about the threat of fascism and uses a mock-reporting format to make this threat feel imminent to the listening public.

Although Welles’ broadcast may be well-trod territory for some readers, the book moves on to explore two British radio plays that also reached out to American listeners about the threat of fascism but that have received far less critical attention. These, Dorothy L. Sayers’ *The Man Born to Be King* (1941-1942) and Louis MacNeice’s *Christopher Columbus* (1942), both created strong affective links between Britain and America in an attempt to emphasize the “special relationship” between the two nations. These two chapters offer examples of the high literary quality and huge scale of British propaganda. Sayers’ play is a modern re-telling of the crucifixion of Christ as a year-long radio series. According to Dinsman, Sayers

attempt at “militarizing the Messiah” through her allegorical treatment of the story of Christ served two purposes—to emphasize the importance of Christianity as a unifying force in the fight against fascism and “to court U.S. support of Britain’s war effort and show Americans that they were, in the words of radio broadcaster J.B. Priestley, ‘like us’” (56). These tactics were not without controversy, however. Protestant groups in Britain were particularly scandalized by the use of slang and the voicing of Christ in modern vernacular.

Just as Sayers’ radio play promoted U.S.-U.K. relations, Louis MacNeice’s wartime radio writing also aimed to bridge cultural divisions. MacNeice was hired by the BBC shortly after returning from the United States and much of his early work involved cultural translation between the two nations. His radio play *Christopher Columbus* drew upon the story of Columbus to convey transatlantic solidarity in the face of fascism. This monumental two-hour long radio play commemorated the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s “discovery” of America and starred Laurence Olivier as Columbus. Dinsman’s readings tend to focus more on the authorial aims of the text than on the performance itself. What this means is a privileging of the author and political context, with less attention paid to the producers, sound engineers, actors, and institutional structures that contribute to the making of a radio play and its reception. This is a common problem in literary approaches to radio studies, often stemming from a lack of recordings that force many scholars to focus on the textual record. This is not the case for either *The Man Born to Be King* or *Christopher Columbus*, which can both be accessed in the BBC Sound Archives at the British Library. That said, Dinsman’s analyses of these plays offers an important step in shedding light on works that have been curiously under-studied considering their magnitude and their important historical context.

Chapters on Thomas Mann’s Allied propaganda broadcasts to Germany from the U.S. and Ezra Pound’s Axis propaganda to the U.S. from Italy, show the circuitous and fraught networks that carried information across the globe, sometimes reaching intended audiences and sometimes failing to reach their goal. While Dinsman tends to focus on Allied propaganda, she also includes discussions of the treasonous radio propaganda of Pound and P.G. Wodehouse: in the case of Pound, attacking Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Jews for leading the U.S. to war and, in the case of Wodehouse, downplaying the German treatment of prisoners of war.

Less convincingly argued is the case for the *modernism* of wartime radio propaganda. Here is one example of Dinsman’s treatment of modernist aesthetics in propaganda: she writes, “modern and late-modern authors living in Britain and the

U.S. were able to translate high modernist modes and aesthetic principles—artistic autonomy and individualism, the cosmopolitan and trans-historical imagination, exile and alienation, eclecticism—for distribution to a mass audience during 1940s wartime radio” (6). Focusing on “aesthetic principles”—a broad set of values and social positions that are not exclusively modernist—rather than particular modernist formal techniques (such as collage or stream of consciousness) weakens the claim about the *modernism* of wartime propaganda. In *Modernism and World War II*, Marina MacKay has convincingly argued for including the literature of World War II in discussions of modernism and shown how modernist writers took an increasingly public turn in response to the exigencies of wartime. However, the labelling of various propaganda works, many of which are not distinctively modernist in style, under an over-simplified banner of “late modernism” may actually do a disservice to this classification, rendering it less useful by asking it to accommodate too many disparate literary forms and aesthetic styles.

Radio propaganda represented a critical front in World War II and one that specifically demanded the participation of writers. Through this participation, modern writers came to redefine propaganda itself, creating new forms and approaches to reach increasingly far-flung listeners. Four decades before the start of the war, Joseph Conrad wrote his major statement for a nascent modernism: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*” (“Preface” 1897). The compulsory nature of this statement—those imperative commands to “make” the reader hear, feel, and see—links modernism from its earliest stages to the coercions of propaganda. And yet, Dinsman’s analysis of wartime radio suggests that in the context of World War II, the modern writer reverses the order of these commands, desiring, above all, “to make you hear” more clearly amidst the noise of war.

***Battle Rattle*. Brandon Davis Jennings.  
Kindle Single, 2016, 85 pages. *Waiting  
for the Enemy*. Brandon Davis Jennings.  
Kindle Single, 2014, 44 pages.**

Reviewed by Frank Fucile, College of William & Mary

As Tim O'Brien has reminded us so frequently, war literature written by those who actually experience war often feels more truthful as meta-fiction than as non-fiction. Though the meta-fictional war story obviously became more popular from the 1960s onward, it is an American tradition that goes back at least as far as Ambrose Bierce. Because civilians who read such stories can only hope to catch a glimpse of what war might be like, and because veterans themselves recall a time when they too could only try to comprehend war through stories, a good deal of war fiction questions itself in a cyclical and recursive fashion. It is a genre in which each work not only builds upon the work of its predecessors but also is forced to grapple with its reason for existing in the first place.

In his novella *Battle Rattle*, Brandon Davis Jennings inevitably positions himself as the descendant of postmodernists such as Joseph Heller and Tim O'Brien while standing alongside other twenty-first-century veteran fiction writers such as Kevin Powers and Phil Klay. What separates Jennings from these better-known authors is his unwillingness to entertain the notion that his writing might actually illuminate something about the experience of war. In comparison to the gleefully dark meaninglessness of *Battle Rattle*, the horror and absurdity of Heller's gags or the compulsive amorality of O'Brien's reiterations of events seem nearly as quaint as the moral formulations those writers sought to overturn.

When annoyed by the presence of a fellow airman who, idiotically enough, actually *believes* in what he is doing and is excited about it, the novel's narrator, Vez, and his "best friend," Rake, taunt the FNG (named Cammack) by riffing on an anti-joke consisting of a riddle that never gets answered: The set-up, "Your mom is like a [piece of military gear]," provokes the FNG to ask why every time, and every time, he is shut down with, "Cause fuck you!" The bit invokes the heritage of Heller's mad humor and O'Brien's unanswerable riddles, but this is a riddle that nobody ever expected would be answered—a joke that only exists to ridicule someone stupid enough to expect a punch line.

*Battle Rattle* is something of a sequel to Jennings's chapbook-cum-Kindle-debut *Waiting for the Enemy*—and the way that material from those earlier short stories is revisited in the novella illustrates the stakes of Jennings's project. Cammack's story appears in at least four versions in these two short e-books: In "Bosnian Roulette," the first story of *Waiting for the Enemy*, Cammack is a lucky idiot; despite ignoring his Sergeant's order not to leave the Humvee and despite the children madly throwing rocks at the giant naval mine that kills him in all three other iterations of the scenario, Cammack makes it back to the vehicle after his pointless excursion to a random civilian's house, and the mine never detonates. In "Boots," the immediate follow-up, Vez and Rake obsess over polishing their boots, recalling how shiny Cammack's were—and the fact that they were the most identifiable piece of him remaining after that mine exploded.

Even in "Boots," Jennings's narrator adamantly insists that he and Rake do not polish their boots as some expression of grief; in none of the versions of the story do they miss or even particularly like Cammack. Yet, these two stories from *Waiting for the Enemy* (both originally published in highly-regarded literary journals) are undoubtedly the more O'Brien-esque iterations of the concept. When Jennings and his narrator, Vez, return to the story in the first chapter of *Battle Rattle*, we are presented with something far darker and more open-ended, for Vez is attempting to cope with Rake's death and realizes that his buddy's amusing madness was probably a sign of trauma all along. In arguably the best single chapter of (post)war fiction since *The Things They Carried*, Jennings returns to several of the stories from *Waiting for the Enemy* but treats the events more subtly and circuitously—almost assuming we have already been through them once before.

The story of that foolishly helpful airman who gets blown to smithereens now centers on Rake's shell-shocked reaction to the situation and his desperate attempt to find some kind of meaning in Cammack's pristinely polished boots. Obviously there is no meaning or moral to be found—just the haunting materiality of those boots. Later in the novella, Vez recalls his deployment to Bosnia again, reorienting this fourth version of the narrative around the way Cammack's fellow airmen tease him in the hours before his death. By this point, Jennings has decided to do away with even the *search* for meaning. We can almost hear the two versions of Rake arguing with each other:

"His boots are still shining...That's gotta mean something."

"Yeah. It means fuck you."

This worldview defines Rake's and Vez's experience, and in *Battle Rattle*, it develops into something like an organizing principle. It is an intensification of the

anti-chronological, meta-fictional approach evident in the great postmodern war fiction of the twentieth century, but unlike books such as *Catch-22*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or *The Things They Carried*, *Battle Rattle* refuses to allow its disparate narrative elements to coalesce into any kind of statement by the end of its trajectory—even a statement against making a statement. Part of this seems to be the purpose of its design, but still the novella feels too short, and it is likely that Amazon insisted on only publishing half of the original manuscript.

However, I doubt that even the “full version” of *Battle Rattle* would look much like *Catch-22* or even *Slaughterhouse-Five* in its structure. Part of the novel’s point is that the Global War on Terror is *not* a linear narrative (or even a looping meta-narrative) but an interminable cycle of one deployment after the next. Vonnegut’s time-travel conceit and Heller’s bit about the constantly escalating number of missions are no longer cruel existential jokes or narrative devices but instead are the nightmarishly literal conditions of service. Because of this, *Battle Rattle* is both a war novel and a post-war novel, detailing the provisional life its characters live between deployments and their inability to even find the opportunity to move past their wartime experiences. This historical context changes the way Jennings’s characters think of narrative.

In *Battle Rattle*’s final chapter, when a detestable male civilian points out the similarity between Vez’s and Rake’s predicament and that of Yossarian, Rake feigns ignorance of *Catch-22*, exclaiming, “Fiction’s a bunch of bullshit.” The line is partly funny because Rake himself is practically a Joseph Heller character (even singing, “Oh well. What the hell!” in his loopy reaction to Cammack’s death), partly funny because we know Rake is the kind of guy who says things just to get a rise out of people, and partly funny because Jennings is, in one simple sentence, mercilessly outdoing Tim O’Brien’s whole career of carefully constructed meta-narrative and anti-narrative with a turn of phrase Rat Kiley might use. If there is a little bit of Orr in Rake, there is also quite a bit of Rat, but whereas O’Brien’s character was a compulsive storyteller who desperately filled in (and even invented) millions of details, Jennings’s Rake is merely obsessive; he can often barely remember the point he was trying to make, and his stories frequently are reduced to a single image—like how shiny Cammack’s boots were or the way a cloud of smoke looked.

Jennings’s characters enlist to follow family traditions, to prove their manliness, or to get away from the boredom and idiocy of life in their backwoods towns, but only the fools among them ever confuse their patriotism with idealism. Having gone to war carrying their fathers’ stories from Vietnam, they began with very

few illusions, so while war may have changed them or even broken them, they never, strictly speaking, had the opportunity to become disillusioned. Thus, the temptation to compare *Battle Rattle* to Heller's and O'Brien's work somewhat misses the mark. Furthermore, while these airmen certainly are fascinating characters, none of them are "good" people; they never had that luxury. In fact, the most detestable characters in the novel are the ones who seem like they might be genuinely "nice"—the FNG Cammack and the emasculated civilian Ed; they are not even aware of what world they are living in.

In this sense, *Battle Rattle* draws a good deal of its tone and worldview from the post-World-War-II hardboiled crime novel. Whereas a typical war novel would harp on the difference between life during and after the war, there is some continuity between the two worlds in Jennings's depiction, perhaps in part because there is no "after." Certainly, *Battle Rattle* includes the obligatory moments where the narrator scoffs at idiot civilians or indulges in hours of drunken shoegazing, but there are also moments where violence intrudes into the domestic sphere of the homeland in this space between the interminable wars. Vez and Rake are far from evil, but they are unthinkingly brutal, and even the novel's women are inured to violence as part of their world. Jennings's plainspoken narrative style, occasional metaphorical flourishes, inappropriate laugh-out-loud moments, and punchy dialogue also have distinctly noir-ish flavors. Beyond all this, suspicion and mystery run through every detail of the home-front narrative—though the temptation to assume that narrative will hinge on Vez's efforts to solve the mystery of his friends' deaths or on his own guilt is frustrated on both accounts.

In a story like this, we should know that our anti-hero will never find any reason that he has lost his friends nor will he find any redemption for himself. He will never even know whether he should consider his comrades friends at all. If Vez can come to no conclusions, perhaps we were fools to think that he might ever have been able to. In this sense, Jennings is working on something a bit more sophisticated—more radical and more abstract—than what we have seen from Kevin Powers or Phil Klay.

Brandon Davis Jennings offers no grand statements about the GWOT, PTSD, American society, healing from trauma, or anything else. While *Battle Rattle* lacks the gravitas of a novel like *The Yellow Birds* or the refinement of a collection like *Redeployment*, its characters are so vivid and raw and its world is so dark that it is hard not to see Jennings's vision as somehow more accurate and more appropriate. The novella does not over-reach in an attempt to *say something* about the war(s) because it is written with the painful and genuine awareness that there is nothing



to be said. Thus rather than being a war novel, it is free to simply be a novel. It is only regrettable that the brevity of the Kindle Single format necessitated cutting the text down to its bare essentials. I see *Battle Rattle* and *Waiting for the Enemy* as stepping stones to a more substantial and coherent work of fiction that Brandon Davis Jennings will put out in the next few years, and I look forward to seeing these characters again when that larger novel is published by a more ambitious press.

***Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy.* Eri Hotta. New York: Vintage Books, 2014, \$16.95, paper, 323 pp.**

**Reviewed by John M. Jennings,  
United States Air Force Academy**

The Imperial Japanese Government's decision to initiate hostilities with the United States and its allies has remained a source of historical puzzlement since the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. How could Japan's military and civilian leaders have taken such a monumentally reckless step of launching a war against a vastly more powerful enemy at the same time that the empire was already bogged down in an inconclusive and costly conflict in China? According to the verdict of the postwar Tokyo War Crimes Trial, this decision was the product of a conspiracy to launch a war of aggression in order to conquer an empire in Asia and the Pacific. Yet another narrative that emerged in postwar Japan (with the encouragement of surviving wartime leaders) was that war with the United States became inevitable when the Imperial Japanese Government was backed into a corner by US sanctions, which offered increasingly desperate decision-makers with the stark choice of abjectly surrendering to American demands or risking war. In her riveting account of the fateful year leading up to the war, *1941: Countdown to Infamy*, Eri Hotta convincingly refutes both of these explanations. Far from being a well-oiled conspiracy, the Japanese government's decision-making structure was a tangle of competing bureaucratic centers of power. At the same time, rather than being inevitable, the war was very much a war of choice on the part of Japan's rulers.

Technically, Japan in 1941 was an autocracy headed by the emperor, who was the living embodiment of the state. However, Hotta describes Hirohito, the emperor at the time, as being anything but an absolute ruler. Constrained by custom and by his self-definition as a limited constitutional monarch, Hirohito viewed his role as rubber-stamping decisions once they were presented to him by the government. Consequently, he felt compelled to sanction the decision for war, despite his grave misgivings. As Hotta deftly illustrates, Hirohito expressed these misgivings as he

repeatedly and vainly sought his military advisers' assurance of Japan's victory on the eve of the war.

That decision for war presented to the Emperor for sanction was, as Hotta shows, the product of a chaotic patchwork of bureaucratic fiefdoms. Both the army and navy were essentially independent institutions due to the lack of civil control over the military. The Foreign Ministry also tended to pursue its own agenda without necessarily gaining sanction or coordinating, especially under the mercurial Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke, whose advice to take a hard line in negotiations with United States proved especially disastrous. Moreover, decision-making within each of these organizations was frequently blurry. Even the formal chain of command in the military did not prevent the army and navy from being dominated by cliques of aggressive and insubordinate field grade officers, who then forced flag officers to support their policies or else a total breakdown of discipline.

Nor were Japanese major civilian and military leaders able or willing to rise above the chaos. Konoe Fumimaro, the most significant and longest-serving prime minister during the period from the outbreak of the war in China in 1937 to 1941, was a political chameleon whose admiration of the Nazi totalitarian system played a not insignificant role in Japan's attaching itself to the Axis alliance in 1940, which further antagonized the United States. Hotta's vivid portrayal of Konoe, who craved the absolute power of Hitler but lacked the will to seize similar power for himself, is especially impressive as it is much more challenging to flesh out a historical figure who was essentially a cipher than one with a more dynamic personality.

In the absence of strong leadership at the top to gainsay them, Japan's major decision-makers essentially talked themselves into the idea that with the United States and its allies war was inevitable, consequently missing several openings for further negotiations that might have averted war. Hotta reveals that, in contrast to the common view that the military, and especially the army, was responsible for browbeating the government into war, both military and civilian leaders were shared the blame for blundering into the decision to start the conflict. Indeed, Hotta indicates that although army leaders were predictably bellicose in their attitude, they were much less of a driving force for war with the United States due to their preoccupation with prosecuting the ongoing conflict with China. On the contrary, the navy, obsessed with parochial bureaucratic turf protection, was seemingly more culpable in this regard. Although naval leaders clearly understood and rightly feared the risk of disaster in any conflict with the materially-superior United States, they more feared that anything less than advocacy of conflict with

their number one hypothetical enemy would cause the government to question the navy's *raison d'être* and cut its budget.

1941: *Countdown to Infamy* is not only a well-researched, skillfully-written and highly-absorbing account of a tension-filled year, but also, in shedding much-welcome light on the frequently opaque nature of decision-making in Japan, it is a cautionary tale of how a multitude of political and personal failings led Japan into a disastrous war of choice. While Hotta is to be commended for her persuasive depictions of leading Japanese military and political figures, she is less critical of Hirohito than she could have been. While the role of the Emperor in government decision-making was indeed limited by custom and by Hirohito's own narrow definition of his political position, as Hotta herself notes, he could and indeed did intervene forcefully to put down an army mutiny in 1936. What Hotta fails to mention is that he directly intervened a second time in August 1945 to break the government's deadlock accept the Allies' surrender terms. By that time, of course, it was far too late for Japan, and indeed the world.

***It is Easy to be Dead.* Written by Neil McPherson. Directed by Max Key. Finborough Theatre, London, England, June 15 – July 9, 2016, premier. Part of the “Great War 100 Series” established by the theater in commemoration of the First World War centenary. The series is dedicated to staging plays written about the Great War. [www.finboroughtheatre.co.uk](http://www.finboroughtheatre.co.uk)**

Reviewed by Matthew Stewart, Boston University

*It is Easy to be Dead* treats the adolescent and young adult years of the Scottish soldier poet Charles Hamilton Sorley, one of the many casualties of the Great War who represents artistic talent nipped in the bud. Sorley is played by Alexander Knox, whose intelligent and spirited performance is, suitably, the outstanding feature of this biographically focused play.

Even for audience members who know nothing of Sorley, there is no question of suspense, for the play opens with Sorley’s parents receiving the most dreaded of wartime telegraphs. Shortly thereafter his effects are returned from the front. Mother and Father find writings, including the draft of the sonnet “When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead,” the poem that furnishes the title line for the play, and which must be taken as a riposte to Rupert Brooke’s more famous sonnets. Janet Sorley (Jenny Lee) urges her reluctant husband William (a chaired professor of philosophy at Cambridge, played here by Tom Marshall) to publish their son’s poems and letters, remarking that other families have done so with the work of their dead sons as commemoration and as a comfort for others similarly bereaved.

As the parents read aloud from “Charlie’s” letters and poems stage left, Knox brings the character to life center stage, segueing his lines with the material that has been started by his mother or father. The majority of the lines that the character Charlie utters, then, are taken from the works of real-life Charles Hamilton Sorley, who reveals himself to be spirited, independent of mind, mildly iconoclastic, affectionate and Germanophilic. The structure of the play thus allows for the

discovery of schoolboy Sorley, while simultaneously illustrating the theme of the lost generation, of promise destroyed. The latter theme is reinforced by the appearance of back-curtain slides every time one of Charlie's letters mentions an old school friend. The slides designate the date when these young men were--invariably, it seems--killed in action, a reminder of the war's astronomical casualty rate for Marlborough boys and Oxbridge sorts, the young, lower-level officers who lead from the front.

Sorley was living in Germany as a student abroad at the outbreak of the war; he was detained there briefly at the outset before being deported. Once back in England, Oxford matriculation plans were put on hold as Sorley enlisted in the Army out of a quiet sense of duty, rather than a mood of white hot patriotism. Indeed his only heartfelt, purely emotional expression of patriotism is elicited by a group of German soldiers singing, "something glorious and senseless about the fatherland." "When I got home," Sorley wrote his parents, "I felt I was a German, and ...perhaps I could die for Deutschland." While one doesn't want to make too much of this charged moment of the heart, it is noteworthy that one of Sorley's wartime poems is addressed "To Germany" and characterizes the war as the blind fighting the blind. It ends by positing a post-war brotherhood between the two nations:

Grown more loving-kind and warm  
We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain.

Sorley's attractive personal qualities emerge clearly: a quick wit, the conventional unconventionality of the skeptical school boy, an open-minded desire to master another language and explore another culture, a talent with words. How important a poet he may have become is open to speculation, of course. He is well represented in anthologies of war poetry and has received due attention from scholars of war literature. His contemporary Robert Graves counted him as "One of the three poets of importance killed during the war." John Masefield stated that he was "potentially the greatest poet lost to us in that war." The poems he did write show an unsentimental view of the war, including a strong desire to deflate and deheroize, with the intentionally shocking line to be found here and there. On the other hand, the poetry often evinces the traditionally "poetic" and uses conventional forms such as the sonnet with dexterity.

Of the boy and the the poet, then, the play contains much. Of his world? Less, but much backstory and period mood is supplied in the letters, is implied by the interactions of mother and father, and is fleshed out emotionally by the era's songs

which frequent the production and feature the tenor of Hugh Benson, who remains onstage with pianist Elizabeth Rossiter throughout the play.

The play is the second in a series of *The Great War 100* being staged at the Finborough Theatre in Kensington. The first, also written by Neil McPherson, was entitled *I Wish to Die Singing*, a documentary stage play about the Armenian genocide, not seen by the present author, but widely and positively reviewed by the London press in the spring of 2015. The series is planned for the duration of the Great War Centenary, and is set to end in 2018. It is to be hoped that the play will be given runs in other venues.

***Stalingrad: The City that Defeated the Third Reich.***  
**Jochen Hellbeck. Trans. Christopher Tauchen**  
**and Dominici Bonfiglio. New York: Public**  
**Affairs, 2015, \$29.99, hardcover, 500 pp.**

Reviewed by Lt Col(Ret) Kristine Swain,  
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As the Germans approached the city of Stalingrad in August of 1942, both the military and the political leadership confidently assumed a rapid victory. Unfortunately for the Germans, the steely Soviet resolve to hold the city defied all their assessments of the Soviet military and human endurance. Dr. Jochen Hellbeck's new book *Stalingrad* is a story of that battle told through previously unpublished, personal accounts of those who fought in this horrific conflagration. Previous publications by Dr. Hellbeck, a professor at Rutgers University, particularly his book *Revolution on My Mind* (2006), delve into themes reflected in his newest work on Stalingrad. Extensive use of autobiographical material and examination of the expression of self in a greater historical context are themes that permeate his previously published works as well as his course offerings at Rutgers University. His prolific work in this field clearly provided the framework and lens with which he approaches his analysis and presentation of the newly available transcripts. Although the book focuses on the Battle of Stalingrad itself, Hellbeck's extensive historical work on 20th century Russia helps provide context and depth to his book. Despite the plentiful works available on the battle, Hellbeck provides new material for those already familiar with the topic while also providing a riveting series of narratives for those new to the subject.

*Stalingrad* is truly an essential read for scholars of the Battle of Stalingrad, World War II on the Eastern Front, and 20th century Soviet history. Access to the relatively candid, first-hand accounts from the variety of individuals found in this book, presents a treasure trove of material to those who wish to deepen their understanding of the Soviet experience. Hellbeck's book is centered on the work of



a delegation from the Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War who arrived from Moscow in late December 1942, conducted interviews until 9 January and then returned in late February to complete the interviews. By the time they finished, the delegation had conducted 215 interviews with generals, staff officers, troop commanders, foot soldiers, commissars, sailors, female nurses and a number of civilians who worked and lived in the city. Isaak Mints, a professor at Moscow State University, had founded the Commission and led the team of historians. The historians focused their work on the following topics; how had the Red Army been able to prevail against an enemy considered to be superior, which resources had the Soviets brought to bear to achieve victory and what motivations drove the soldiers', sailors' and civilians' willingness to fight and die to defend the city and the homeland.

The first chapter of the book leads the reader through the relevant historical frame of reference, setting the stage for the interviews themselves. Clearly indispensable for those unfamiliar with the battle, it is also useful for those knowledgeable with the battle as it places these interviews in both a historical context and makes clear Hellbeck's approach to the interviews. The first chapter also addresses the Historical Commission itself along with its aims and mission. The second and third chapters contain the interviews themselves. Not all 215 are included, since this would be unwieldy as the book is already 500 pages long, but the author points out in the footnotes that he hopes in the future to publish them all online. The fourth chapter of the book contains accounts from German soldiers including transcripts from their POW interrogations as well as a diary of a German soldier written at the very end prior to surrender. The fifth and final chapter of the book addresses the aftermath of the battle and the fate of the Commission and its work.

To facilitate the flow and transition among the accounts, the author selects groups of interviews which discuss the same event and weaves them into a narrative. He also presents several interviews in their entirety. Throughout the interviews, he includes summaries and commentaries. Hellbeck characterizes the interviews as a "finely woven, multifaceted picture of soldiers in battle"(5) and states his key purpose to provide readers the opportunity to view the defenders of Stalingrad as "thinking and feeling"(6) individuals with emotions and nuanced motives for their actions. He bemoans the current scholarship that he feels presents the Red Army as a depersonalized machine and that largely views the conflict through the many German accounts of the battle (which have long been accessible to the public). Hellbeck argues throughout his commentary that these personal accounts taken together illuminate how Soviet citizens both made sense of the battle and their role

and place within the struggle. He concludes that Soviet ideology had a mobilizing function even more powerful than the violence and threat of violence that was widely applied in the Red Army. He points out that despite their initial military shortcomings, the Soviets were far more effective in shaping and inculcating their political *sine qua non*s thereby ingraining in the mind of the Red Army soldier that every sacrifice served a higher purpose. The strength of this conviction served as a force multiplier in the Battle for Stalingrad, fueling hatred of the Germans. As the Germans began to surrender and the Red Army got its first look at the desperate state of the Germans left trapped in the city, their political education only strengthened their perception of moral superiority. Several of the interviewees expressed disgust at the loathsome state of the Germans POWs. During his interview, one Soviet major made the point, "There were times when the Germans shot better than us, but we never made latrines out of our living quarters"(251). Another criticized the lack of fortitude among Germans stating that "Eating is their priority. Their entire brain is filled with chow"(428).

For those who have worked their way through David Glantz's Stalingrad Trilogy along with other works such as Anthony Beevor's *Stalingrad*, this book is a thought provoking addition to the existing narrative. However, taken by itself, the book does have shortcomings if one is attempting to understand the Soviet experience at Stalingrad in the greater context of war itself and the early Soviet era. Hellbeck's effort to summarize and contextualize the accounts is extremely helpful in organizing the flow and cohesiveness of the book. It is clear from the author's organization, though, that he seeks to guide and inform the reader rather than leave the interviews to stand on their own. This is a strength of the book for those who agree with his thesis and want a more narrative read. Conversely, this is a weakness of the book for those who want the interviews to stand on their own and derive their own conclusions. From the accounts presented in the book, the author concludes that the Communist party had enthusiastic adherents and true believers whose work in educating, exhorting and inspiring the troops was so interwoven into the very fiber of life in the Red Army that it served as the most powerful mobilizing force for individual soldiers. Indeed the many accounts from both the political officers and soldiers themselves did speak to the importance of serving one's country by destroying the German invaders. In one of the interviews, Guards Captain Aksyonov echoes a common theme expressed by multiple interviewees, "every soldier and officer in Stalingrad was itching to kill as many Germans as possible. In Stalingrad, people felt a particularly intense hatred for the Germans"(338). Despite their hardships, the interviewees often extolled the

virtues of their government. “All of comrade Stalin’s documents and orders made a great impression on us. When things were at their worst, we knew we weren’t alone”(353). One soldier applying for membership in the Communist party wrote the following, “I will not disgrace the lofty rank of a Bolshevik warrior in the fight for the motherland”(37).

However, some of Hellbeck’s assessments are difficult to justify given the narratives that follow. The key argument of his book is that the Soviet soldier did not blindly throw himself on the enemy driven by fear of the blocking units behind ready to shoot anyone retreating. Instead, the soldiers were driven by an intellectually and emotionally inspired ideology. He is particularly critical of western historians who have presented the image of the Soviet population as “enslaved by the system”(18). Hellbeck indeed criticizes Beevor’s work for presenting the view that only fear drove the Soviet soldier’s ferocious defense of the homeland. Given the accounts that Hellbeck presents in the book, which often mention the use of summary executions, assignment to death squads and other such negative motivations to fight, it is difficult to fully embrace his argument that the Red Army’s political education had transformed the common soldier. The ideal of a nation made up of a new and better breed of humans whose ability to rise above normal human frailty to become a hero who served the greater good of the collective was clearly on the minds of the political officers interviewed but most soldiers’ interviews focused on supporting, defending and avenging their comrades. Also, given that these accounts are not personal diaries but rather interviews by an official commission, clearly does affect the potential candor of the subjects. That being said; however, his thesis when taken in conjunction with other relevant factors provides a far deeper and more complete view of Soviet motivations and reason for success in the battle and the war.

As Dr. Hellbeck describes in the final section of this book, the extensive and painstaking work of the Commission failed to be published by the very same Soviet system which it was intended to aggrandize. The two major problems as the author points out were that individual accounts, no matter how beautifully they justified the Soviet system, were still extolling others and that was not acceptable given the cult of Stalin which emerged from the war. Also, Isaak Mints, the chairman of the Commission, was Jewish and thus unfairly targeted and driven from a position of prominence. In the end, he had to hide the work deep in an archive to prevent it being destroyed. As Hellbeck wistfully describes, the very individuals to whom Mints wanted to give a voice, to highlight their amazing contributions to victory and to the justification of a Soviet system whose ideology produced men and women

whose heroics defied all outside expectations, turned on him. All this led to his demotion, marginalization and humiliation. In this work, Hellback walks the fine line between admiration of an ideology that so inspired its adherents and disgust at the many ways that system used manipulation and fear to ensure compliance. Indeed, this book presents the reader with a more nuanced approach to the Battle of Stalingrad. The men and women who fought on both sides of this battle were thinking and feeling individuals who found themselves in the midst of an almost unspeakable horror and had to decide for themselves how to make sense of it.