

Cavalry: A Global History. By Jeremy Black. Philadelphia: Pen & Sword, 2023. ISBN 978-1-3990-6089-9. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii + 228. \$36.95 (hardback).

Those familiar with the books of Professor Jeremy Black will not be surprised that this work is, if the reader will excuse the pun, a gallop through the centuries. Beginning in the classical period (up to 350 AD), the author takes us through the periods 350-1150 AD, 1150-1500, then moves through the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; the final chapters cover the long nineteenth century, 1914-45, and the story since 1945. The opening chapter considers problems of periodization in military history, different types of horses, regions in which cavalry were most prevalent, the forage required, and the influence of different types of terrain.

The “global perspective” is especially useful in highlighting some important points of continuity. One of the most obvious, but nonetheless often ignored, is that of forage. One of the major challenges for cavalry was obtaining enough forage to sustain horses throughout a campaign. The lack of availability of forage during the winter months put an obvious limit on operations; not surprisingly, one obvious way of hindering cavalry armies was to adopt scorched-earth policies. While fodder could be carried, the pack animals also required supplying, rendering this approach extremely expensive. The reverse side of the coin was that cavalry often played a role in cutting off opposing armies from their supplies. Needless to say, climatic conditions have varied across the globe, with the campaigning season in northern India, for instance, being halted in the fall by monsoon rains, but then resuming in the winter.

Another obvious point, which has constantly influenced the employment of cavalry, has been the requirement for water supplies. As Black puts it: “Unlike with grass, this need posed a potential conflict with human requirements.” (20) The necessity of water dogged cavalry forces as a major source of vulnerability. Still, as in the case of forage, light cavalry was often employed in an attempt to deny the enemy access to this essential requirement. Furthermore, provision did not always come from above: not only did rainfall render roads impassable, it could damage feed.

The author’s scholarly approach leads him to warn of the dangers of inadequate source material or, at least, the importance of consulting sources from both sides when analyzing a battle. Most notably in the case of clashes in antiquity and the medieval periods, the causes of victory and defeat could be quite complex. Surviving participants could either deliberately or inadvertently ascribe an outcome to the role of cavalry when there were multiple factors at play. Black also reminds us that many accounts of cavalry action end up underestimating their critical role in reconnaissance.

Another feature of this account is the consideration of the evolution of cavalry forces in terms of their equipment. A significant development was the introduction of the stirrup, the first evidence of which was in Central Asia in the first century AD which, in turn, led to the employment of couched lances, as well as the introduction of wrap-around saddles, and straps to fix heavier saddles to the horse, followed by chainmail and armor for knights. By the sixteenth century in Europe, cavalry were

wielding firearms. But, as Professor Black points out, technological developments did not advance evenly, and their significance could vary greatly, depending on the region and the circumstances.

With this sweeping account of the subject, inevitably some aspects are only touched on in passing. One of these is what might be described as the “cavalry spirit,” a phenomenon subject to considerable change across the medieval and modern periods. But detailed source investigation for specific periods is not the author’s aim. What he achieves is cautioning against Eurocentric views by highlighting that, for example, within a global context, non-Western forces were not usually employed against Western forces in Africa and Asia, lending cavalry a different significance. In short: “Military progress... was certainly not a monopoly of Western states nor uni-directional.” (134)

So, given the publication of several recent histories of cavalry, does this work offer anything new? At first glance, the brevity of the treatment of what is a vast subject might suggest that little originality might be expected. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Black, utilizing a range of primary and secondary sources, offers stimulating insights and a genuinely global coverage. In short, this is not a mere “overview” of the subject. It would provide an excellent starting point for any doctoral student considering delving deeper into individual aspects of this significant topic. Through its integration into the analysis of major debates such as the Military Revolution, awareness of the changing meanings of terminology, and balance between different geographical regions, it is a thought-provoking study which demonstrates some of the possibilities of a global approach to military history.

ALARIC SEARLE

Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften  
der Bundeswehr, Potsdam