

of *Humanity*, is a quotation from Kant: “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.” Berlin takes this as an admonition against rationalism, dogmatism, and utopianism. But it also applies to philosophy, and not only Kantian philosophy but the philosophical enterprise itself, which is always engaged in trying to straighten out “the crooked timber of humanity.” This quotation, together with

that from Archilochus, should put us on guard against any attempt to “translate and improve” Berlin. We should be content to read and appreciate him as the fox he is, and not try to make of him any sort of hedgehog.

> GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB’S most recent book, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, has just been issued in paperback by Vintage.

Victory Under Scrutiny

WHY THE ALLIES WON

By Richard Overy. W. W. Norton. 416 pp. \$29.95

by Charles Townshend

Did the Allies win World War II, or did Germany and Japan lose it? That is the question animating Richard Overy’s striking reconsideration of the Allied war effort. Overy, a professor of modern history at King’s College, London, confronts the conventional wisdom that the war’s outcome was practically inevitable. In his view, too many people, including respected historians, succumb to the temptation to let “the figures speak for themselves.” Accordingly, they conclude that the Allied preponderance in population and industrial production doomed the Axis powers to defeat. Overy finds this assumption crude even at the material level, since more is not necessarily better. Further, he holds that it disguises the real story: that the Allies could not sit back and wait, that they had to reinvent their war-fighting skills in order to achieve victory over enemies who were astonishingly tough, especially the Germans.

In seeking a more sophisticated explanation of the war’s outcome, Overy has set himself a daunting task. Not least, it calls for mastery of a phenomenal mass of detail. The key clashes of this global conflict were not just dramatic encounters such as the Battle of Midway and the landing at Omaha Beach, but prolonged struggles of attrition: in the middle of the Atlantic, in the skies over the Ruhr and

Berlin, amid the ruins of Stalingrad. Moreover, this was a “total war,” in which the beliefs and actions of entire peoples weighed in the balance. To dissect and scrutinize such a vast conflict requires all the skills demonstrated in Overy’s earlier studies: *The Air War* (1980) and *The Nazi Economic Recovery* (1982). The result may not be flawless, but few other historians could even attempt it.

Giving some credence to the traditional idea of the “decisive battle,” Overy offers terse, vivid accounts of five crucial campaigns—the Pacific war from the Coral Sea to Midway, the Battle of the Atlantic, the Allied strategic bombing campaign, the battles of Stalingrad and Kursk, and the Normandy invasion—that are as good as any available. Then he shifts focus to four structural dimensions—economic strength, military technology, decision making, and (more awkwardly) morality—making it clear that the Allies won all the decisive battles, achieved awesome economic preponderance, chose better weapons, made fewer strategic mistakes, and had right on their side. Yet even so, Overy asks, could it all still have gone wrong?

At the heart of his reply is a lucid discussion of war economies and technology. Here the numbers speak eloquently—but not of a simple gap in crude resources,

much less in technological capacity. Rather they show that Germany, all but a superpower by 1942, failed to derive full military value from its economic and demographic resources. Consider just one astonishing statistic: in 1943, Germany produced 340 million tons of coal and 30 million tons of steel, as compared with the Soviet Union's 90 million of coal and 8 million of steel. Yet while Germany made 17,000 tanks and 27,000 heavy guns, the Soviet Union built no fewer than 24,000 tanks and 48,000 big guns. The results of Germany's productive failure were clear. During its titanic eastern front campaign, the German army suffered a steady "demodernization." At the start of the invasion of Russia, German industry's provision of up-to-date tanks, aircraft, and motor transport was scarcely adequate. By late summer 1942, even this provision was exhausted. In the wry caption to one of the book's well-chosen illustrations—German horse transport deep in Soviet territory—Overy notes, "This could almost be a scene from the American Civil War." By 1944, motorization was a distant memory for all but a few elite divisions.

Overy warns against a simple explanation. Much of the discrepancy between the two sides depended on the adaptive skills of the Allies. By 1942, the Soviet Union had lost over half its industrial base. Yet that year it produced not only more weapons than it had in 1941 but more than Germany—a staggering achievement that almost defies rational explanation. The resilience of the Soviet people, Overy says, would need a Tolstoy to do it justice. Also stupendous were the accomplishments of American industry. The production of two million trucks could almost be seen as decisive in itself. Henry Ford's Willow Run factory, new in 1942, nearly reached its 1944 target of building one B-24 bomber per hour (a phenomenally complex assembly involving a total of 1,550,000 parts).

Yet Overy is not persuaded by his own compelling examples that the war was indeed decided by Allied resources. Instead, he reminds us that these productive feats might well have been matched by Germany, if not Japan. Of course, some

of Germany's failure resulted from external pressures, notably the Allied bomber offensive. Overy credits this effort with having sharply limited the expansion of Germany's wartime production. But he does not quite grant that this check was decisive. Repeatedly, he gives more space to German failures than to Allied successes, finding in those failures a rich variety of explanations. Chiefly, he finds that Hitler never got a grip on economic organization because at heart he believed that it was less important than willpower. While the Allies went for simplicity in weapons specifications, the Germans imposed debilitating complications—the worst example being Luftwaffe procurement chief General Ernst Udet's requirement that even heavy bombers retain a dive-bombing capacity. A thicket of competing agencies made administration a bureaucratic nightmare. Complained the engineers at one research center: "Nobody would believe that so much inadequacy, bungling, confusion, misplaced power, failure to recognize the truth, and deviation from reason could really exist."

The key to both German and Japanese failure was the subordination of efficiency to ideology. In Japan, the supremacy of a traditional military ethos distorted rational planning. In Germany, Nazi ideas spread throughout the system, leading to such absurdities as the virtual elimination of the country's largest and most modern motor manufacturer, Opel, because it was owned by General Motors. Hitler's misguided passion for building rockets drained enough resources for nearly a year's production of conventional aircraft. This was a systemic failure, not a collection of individual mistakes—though, to be sure, the system was abnormally dependent upon one individual, Adolf Hitler. As Overy's earlier biography of Hermann Goering shows, the baroque, chaotic nature of all Nazi decision making bore Hitler's stamp; Udet and Goering were his choices, too.

In the end, Overy does not quite overcome the conventional view that Allied victory was inevitable. Axis mistakes loom large in his telling. Acknowledging that

decisive battles such as Midway and Stalingrad hinged on a mixture of skill, courage, and sheer luck, he also affirms that they were decisive because they accelerated what was already a steepening decline in Axis material strength. He does not suggest that the Germans could have “won” at Stalingrad, even if they had reached the Volga. While this is not to say they were doomed, it comes rather close. Even the straw man of material determinism creeps into his description of the overwhelming supply backup for American combat troops, whose “fighting power” did

not always impress their opponents (and has been doubted by some modern analysts). Likewise, his assertion that the Allies won not least because their cause was just looks fairly conventional. But even if Overy does not resolve all the puzzles and paradoxes he raises, his incisive, persistent interrogation of the inner structures of this immense war makes this a uniquely challenging and rewarding account.

> CHARLES TOWNSEND is professor of history at the University of Keele. He is the author, most recently, of *Britain's Civil Wars* (1986).

Keepsakes of a Satirist

*THE DIARIES OF DAWN POWELL
1931–1965*

By Dawn Powell. Edited and with a introduction by Tim Page.
Steerforth. 513 pp. \$32

by Richard Selzer

Other than the ledger of a business, a diary is the only book that is *kept*. The word implies faithfulness to the task, as in keeping at it, even as it conveys a sense of privacy, as in keeping a secret. It also suggests the tending and marshaling of thoughts that might wander away and be lost, as sheep would be, were it not for the shepherd who keeps them. The keep is also the deepest part of a castle, where the prisoners—in this instance, preferences, prejudices, urges, obsessions, and humiliations—are locked up at the same time they are given voice.

Private though the diarist's announced intention may be, it is likely that she does not keep the diary for herself alone, but in the still, small hope of making contact with others, the way an astronomer keeps his great electronic ear cocked at the void, palpitating for faint evidence that we are not alone in the universe. What is this incessant keeping if not a hankering for companionship, for that one dearest reader who will give you license, without let or hindrance, to “unpack your heart with words”? There is pathos in this diary

keeping, as if to stop would mean to die. And who knows? Maybe it would.

Call it prying, or prurience, but I confess my favorite literary genre is the diary. It is the most direct route to an author, and should that author be Dawn Powell, the entries are certain to be witty, acerbic, and touching. Only two years ago,

