

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

March 22, 2016

Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, trans. Nicholas Elliott, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015, 640 pp., \$39.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674088634.

This is very much a book on military history. It is written by a military expert, at a military college, for a military audience, focusing on the military dimension of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War—the campaigns, the battles, on land, air, and sea, the hardware, the troop line-ups, the casualties, as well as the overall strategy and day-to-day tactics pursued by both sides. Readers will obtain all—plus more—of what they would ever want to know about this highly destructive war which has dropped out of Western consciousness but has left a deep imprint on the two combatants—especially on Iran. The West now labels the US-led 1991 “liberation of Kuwait” as the First Gulf War overlooking the previous eight-year catastrophe which some equate with World War I.

Making full use of a wide range of primary sources—unpublished French archives, mostly from L’Ecole Militaire, oral histories, interviews with government officials especially from Iran, the famous “Saddam audio-tapes,” as well as access to foreign policy decision-makers in America, Russia, France, Britain, Turkey, and Israel—Pierre Razoux has produced the most comprehensive work on the subject. It supersedes the many previous books on the topic—Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner’s *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War*,<sup>1</sup> Shahram Cubin and Charles Tripp’s *Iran and Iraq at War*,<sup>2</sup> Steven Ward’s *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces*,<sup>3</sup> and Tom Cooper and Farzad Bishop’s *Iran-Iraq war in the Air, 1980-1988*.<sup>4</sup>

Razoux’s book begins with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of the province of Khuzestan in September 1980 heading primarily for Khorramshahr—an oil port only ten miles across from the Iraqi border. It continues through the long eight-years plowing meticulously through all the major and minor battles. It provides ample battle maps and details on the hardware and manpower mustered by each side. It also highlights Khomeini’s fateful decision to continue the war into Iraq after the heavily destroyed Khorramshahr had been recaptured after months of hand-to-hand street fighting. The city was dubbed the Iranian Stalingrad and renamed *Khoyinshahr* (City of Blood). Khomeini pursued the war into Iraq

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Shahram Cubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Steven Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Tom Cooper and Farzad Bishop, *Iran-Iraq war in the Air, 1980-1988* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2002).

with the slogans “War, War, Until Victory” and “Baghdad is on the Road to Jerusalem.” The war lasted a total of 95 months, 75 of which came after the recapture of Khorramshahr.

The book ends in Iran’s utter exhaustion—with the failure to capture Basra, with the humiliating defeat at Faw, with oil prices plummeting, with the government finances in dire straits, with mounting desertions and casualties, with Saddam Hussein’s increasing resort to gas warfare, with the Iraqi forces mobilizing for a new offensive, and with the mounting presence of the US navy in the Gulf. In July 1988 Khomeini accepted a UN brokered cease-fire describing it as a “poison chalice.” The UN terms were similar to what had been available seven years earlier immediately after the liberation of Khorramshahr. The actual demarcation line in the Shatt al-Arab River remained up in the air—as it remains to the very present day even though Iran is supposed to be a major player within Iraqi politics.

In meticulously narrating the whole war, the book is especially valuable in detailing the constant conflicts not only between Saddam Hussein and his generals, but also among the Iranian armed forces—notably between the *pasdars* (revolutionary guards) and the *artesh* (regular army). Since the clerical power structure distrusted the latter, it gave preferential treatment to the former, crediting it for victories, absolving it of defeats, equipping it with available weapons, glorifying it as the main bulwark against the foreign invaders, and bolstering it with its own navy.

Razoux calculates the overall damage to be almost compatible to other “total wars.” The overall dead topped 680,000; Iraq suffered 180,000 dead, 520,000 injured and maimed; Iran suffered 500,000 dead, over 1,300,000 injured and maimed—many as a result of human wave assaults on trenches and heavy fortifications defended with gas and chemical weapons. The financial cost for both topped \$1,100 billion, including \$90 billion in infrastructure destruction, \$80 billion in war equipment, and \$160 billion in oil revenue losses. Each side lost over 2,000 tanks—some tank battles were reminiscent of World War II. Iraq also lost over 300 combat aircraft, 150 helicopters, and 15 warships. Iran lost 180 combat aircraft, 250 helicopters, and 15 warships. Not surprisingly, many in Iran compared the war and its battles to World War I, and described the youth that fought in it as the “lost generation.” In Iraq, the catastrophe was soon overshadowed by the war over Kuwait, the American invasion, and the subsequent internal chaos.

Although the book is predominantly on military matters, it also has much on the political aspects of the war—such as the two adversaries’ relations with the major powers, the constant shopping for military hardware, the famous Iran-Contra Affair, and the myth that the catastrophe was an “imposed war” by the superpowers. It is especially good on Saddam Hussein’s initial decision to launch the invasion. It implicitly questions the conventional notion that the decision was driven by his megalomaniacal design to take over Iran. Instead, it stresses his calculated—but still mistaken—gamble that he could exploit the chaos of revolutionary Iran to rectify the humiliating 1975 Algiers Accord, which had forced Iraq to give major concessions to Iran over the crucial Shatt al-Arab estuary. Thus the core motive for the war was to regain sovereignty over an area deemed crucial for national security. If this was megalomania then most wars between nation-states can be deemed as mad and irrational. His miscalculation can be traced back to his claim that he could end the war whenever he wanted. It turned out that Khomeini had other ideas. Some knowledge of history—especially of the French and Russian Revolutions—would have made Saddam Hussein aware that foreign invasions invariably strengthen rather than weaken revolutionary regimes. But then, Saddam Hussein was not unlike many other contemporary leaders who are utterly contemptuous of history.

The book, however, contains some questionable generalizations—invariably based on self-serving claims made by partisan politicians. For example, the street clashes of 1979-80 in Tabriz caused by serious differences over the drafting of the constitution are attributed to “Azeri” separatists. The Shah, born in 1919, is described as “aged” in 1978. Mohammad-Ali Rajai, a schoolteacher and the first prime minister of the Islamic Republic, is described as an “academic” carrying out a purge of “academia.” Khamenei’s father, a local preacher, is elevated to the exalted rank of an ayatollah. The Shah’s “assets,” too well hidden to be located, are described as being “returned” to Iran. The crackdown on the communist Tudeh Party is attributed to revelations made by a defecting Soviet diplomat. In actual fact, the crackdown was prompted by the party’s open criticism of the decision to continue the war after the liberation of Khorramshahr.

Even though Razoux provides a definitive narrative of the military dimension of the war, he has little on social history, especially the deep impact of this “total war” on the civilian society—on the “home front” particularly on ideology, culture, class, and gender relations as well as state relations with the larger society. We still need from the Middle East works such as Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European History*,<sup>5</sup> Eric Leed’s *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I*,<sup>6</sup> and Drew Faust’s *Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*.<sup>7</sup> But before we get such rich social histories we first need honest firsthand accounts like those of Robert Graves’s *Goodbye to All That*<sup>8</sup> and Erich Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>9</sup> Hopefully, they will eventually come.

Ervand Abrahamian  
Distinguished Professor of History  
City University of New York

---

<sup>5</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Eric Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Drew Faust, *Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Erich Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1956).

© 2016: Ervand Abrahamian

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Abrahamian, Ervand, Review of *The Iran-Iraq War*, *SCTIW Review*, March 22, 2016.  
<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1045>.

ISSN: 2374-9288