

The Warriors and the War

by Neal F. Freeman

The Long Gray Line: The American Journey of West Point's Class of 1966

by Rick Atkinson

Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin; 576 pp., \$24.95

In the spring of 1962, the great Irish wit John F. Kennedy journeyed to New Haven to accept an honorary degree. He was in good form. "I now feel that I have the best of both worlds," he told the graduating class. "A Harvard education and a Yale degree." With the audience crawling into the palm of his hand, the President went on to describe his world view and to summon the young men to a life of service along the nation's new frontier. One new graduate in the front row, answering the call preemptively, reached across the back of his chair and shook hands with a friend in the second row, sealing their pact to join the Peace Corps. The atavistic, oxymoronic Peace Corps. Pure Kennedy, the Ivy League imperialist.

In that same spring, the President spoke to another graduating class, this one at the United States Military Academy at West Point. For this audience, he put aside the suave circumlocutions that had served him well in New Haven, Cambridge, Georgetown, and other capitals of the New Class. For, as he looked out over the serried ranks of freshly-minted second lieutenants, he did not see just another class of campaign aides and briefcase toters. No, these men would bear any burden and fight any foe. He saw something *special*, and to them he vouchsafed his ideas on how to fight a new kind of war. As he saw it, this new war would involve not just military convention, but diplomacy, maneuver, counterinsurgency—*nation building*. To pick and win these wars would require a new kind of military leader, and to

produce this new breed the Commander in Chief enjoined the academy to design "a new and wholly different kind of military training." The President's words were addressed to the West Point class of 1962, but their impact would fall on another group of young men—the plebes who would be inducted just a few weeks later into the hellhole known as Beast Barracks, the class of 1966. The Vietnam class.

So begins Rick Atkinson's story, *The Long Gray Line*. It is the story of their lives, these bright young men, and the story of our times. For these cadets, more even than for the rest of us, the dilemma of youth carried into middle years: how to push aside the shade of Douglas MacArthur and find a substitute, any substitute, for victory.

For the reporters among you, prepare to have your professional jealousies aroused. Atkinson is a fine writer. (It's also a pleasure to note that the copyediting is respectfully fastidious.) He introduces to us, with studied casualness, a cast of characters who engage us in their lives and, finally, make us care about what happens to them:

*The Reverend James D. Ford, the civilian chaplain, is not a fussy cleric, but a man whose life is one long moment of truth—when he counsels the nerve-stricken plebe to hang on, when he marries the second lieutenant in a turnstile ceremony under crossed swords, and when he buries the dead in the West Point cemetery high above the Hudson River. More than 50 members of the class of '66 would die in Vietnam.

*Buck Thompson, the cadet who more than any other fired the imagination of his classmates. One of the first members of the class killed in Vietnam, Thompson's name brings a cheer almost two decades later when, in the recitation of names at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a classmate intones, "Richard W. 'the Immortal Buck' Thompson."

*Marcia Bonifas. Unlike most authors of books about war and the men who make it, Atkinson is equally inter-

ested in the quirky heroism of military wives. And in Marcia Bonifas, whose husband, Art, having survived combat in Vietnam, is axed to death by jumpy North Koreans at "demilitarized" Panmunjom, Atkinson finds his heroine. Left grief-ridden with three small children and \$500 per month, she sets out for Colorado to start all over again. (You will remember the Bonifas incident. The newsphotos were horrifying: Kim Il Sung's crazies hacking the fallen American to pieces. For a moment, the world seemed to teeter on the edge of war. Then the U.S. responded boldly . . . by cutting down a tree blocking South Korea's view of the DMZ.)

And then there are the three principal figures through which Atkinson tells the story of West Point hazing, Vietnam battles, career crises, and personal journeys:

*George Crocker. At the bottom of his class at the Point, he becomes the consummate professional soldier, the man you would pick first to share your foxhole.

*Tom Carhart, the charismatic maverick—yes, even West Point has them—suffers from a terrible auto crash, grievous wounds in Vietnam, and a self-destructive streak in what will doubtless be a lifelong search for informing principles.

*Jack Wheeler, son and grandson of professional soldiers, bounces from divinity studies to business to law to government, trying to find a place to stand so as to move the earth.

In the end we see Crocker, having put down the resistance on Grenada: "George watched the helicopters lift the students, cheering and waving, into the overcast sky. His soldiers waved back, some with tears in their eyes. Things have sure changed, he thought. The war was over. And this time he wasn't thinking about Grenada."

And we see classmates Carhart and Wheeler, the one a decorated veteran and uncertain citizen, the other a smooth technocrat who had avoided combat command, battling furiously

with each other over the design of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, exorcising demons, pummeling each other in the national media, praying for respect.

Atkinson's tale is epic, and his telling of it is a masterpiece, the great book on the Vietnam era. Throughout, he does his reader the great service of separating the warrior from the war, allowing us to hear the words that still ring in the ears of West Pointers: "through all of this welter of change, your mission remains fixed, determined, inviolable—it is to win wars. Only the dead have seen the end of war."

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The Civil War and Perestroika

by Michael Warder

Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War
by W. Bruce Lincoln
New York: Simon and Schuster;
637 pp., \$24.95

To calculate where a cannonball will land, it is necessary to know its initial angle of trajectory and the amount of force that propels it. It is the persuasive thesis of W. Bruce Lincoln that the Russian Civil War was the historic explosion that ever since has determined the direction and velocity of the Soviet system. As the formative experience in the creation of the Soviet state, the civil war is now especially useful in understanding the dynamics involved in the current dissolution of the Soviet Empire. While traditional Soviet historians and other scholars have emphasized the October Revolution of 1917 as the key to Soviet history, Lincoln—whose latest book successfully completes the masterly trilogy which began with *In War's Dark Shadow: The Russians Before the Great War* and was followed by *Passage Through Armageddon: The Russians in War & Revolution 1914-1918*—makes a compelling case for his revisionist view.

While the October Revolution constituted the "Ten Days That Shook the World," it was the Provisional Government of Kerensky that replaced, in March 1917, the three-hundred-year-old Romanov Dynasty: this event, which occurred during the devastation of World War I, changed the basis of Russian sovereignty for the first time since the 12th century. In contrast, the Leninist *putsch* eight months later simply brought down the Kerensky government in a conflict that involved less than 10,000 combatants and resulted in little loss of life. An estimated ten million people died in the Russian Civil War, including those dead from combat, starvation, and disease. (This figure does not include the four to five million people who died from disease and starvation following the last major battle of the civil war, the heroic and bloody Kronstadt revolt of the Petrograd sailors in March 1921.)

While body counts may be an accurate indicator of the level of importance, it cannot capture the essence of civil war, whether Spanish, American, or Russian. Civil wars are struggles over the fundamental nature and structure of a nation. They are blood feuds writ large that pit father against son and brother against brother. Or as Felix Dzerzhinskii, founder of what became

the KGB, put it during the war, "We don't want justice. We want to settle accounts." General Lavr Kornilov, former commander in chief of the Russian Army in 1917 and commander of the Civil War White Army in South Russia, said it this way: "We must save Russia even if we have to set fire to half of it and shed the blood of three-fourths of all the Russians!" Only in that frame of mind could combatants cut off the arms and legs of the enemy, slit his abdomen, and then bury him alive.

In scale, the Russian Civil War has no historical parallel. It spread over one-sixth of the earth's land mass, through 11 time zones, and involved one hundred non-Russian national groups within what was formerly the Russian Empire. By August 1918, there were 30 different governments within the Empire's boundaries, 29 of them opposed to the Bolsheviks. The Communists controlled about the same territory as did the Muscovite state in 1550—perhaps one-tenth of the Empire of 1914. The Provisional Government of Autonomous Siberia and the Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly were but two examples of temporary governments that controlled millions of square miles of territory. Over 200,000 soldiers



From the Lenin Library, Moscow