

The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict, by DILIP HIRO. xxiv+323 Pages, glossary, maps, illustrations, notes, chronology, documentary appendixes, selected bibliography, index. Routledge, New York 1990. \$49.95/\$16.95.

Khomeini's Forgotten Sons: The Story of Iran's Boy Soldiers, by IAN BROWN. viii+190 pages, illustrations, index Grey Seal, London 1990. 12.95 British Pound.

Dilip Hiro, a Pakistani born journalist and writer living in London, has written a very comprehensive overview of the Iran-Iraq war which he correctly characterizes as the longest conventional warfare of the twentieth century. Based on an exhaustive study of Iranian, Iraqi, European and American sources the author provides an analytical account of the war and its numerous military and political intricacies. In a judicious narrative, the goals and actions of the two belligerent states as well as various international actors involved in the conflict are analyzed. The non-specialist reader is provided with massive quantities of detailed data concerning every launched military campaign including the Iranian "human wave" attacks, the "Tanker War", the "War of the Cities" as well as such events as the Irangate affair and the U.S. embracement of Iraq.

Hiro argues that the Iran-Iraq war was a violent manifestation of an ideological war between secular Arab nationalism and Iranian revolutionary Islam rather than a war about territory (p. xxii). He also argues that the war provided both Iraq and Iran with an opportunity to consolidate their governments. In the case of the latter, Hiro contends, Iranian "pragmatic, even cautious" leaders were able to use the war to consolidate the revolution as well (p. 4). His overall conclusion is that while the war ended in a draw (p. 255), and produced a "no war, no peace" situation, the arms race between these two states is bound to continue (p. 271).

A number of criticisms can be raised about the book. Having been written too quickly after the war (it was first published in London in 1989) the book suffers from a lack of historical hindsight. For example the two conclusions referred to above perhaps need to be modified in light of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the aftermath of that conflict. The same holds true for the following prophecy that "...Baghdad now belongs to the same column of moderate pro-Western capitals as Amman and Cairo when it comes to taking a position on the Israeli-Palestinian problem" (p. 265). Secondly, Hiro does not justify his endorsement of the Iranian government's claim that it only suffered 200,000 civilian and military casualties during eight years of ferocious warfare. Considering the haphazard nature of the process of identification and retrieval of corpses in the battlefields and the government's obvious political considerations about revealing the full extent of bloodshed one has to treat these numbers with skepticism. Finally, the author is factually mistaken in claiming that the outbreak of the war resulted in the doubling of the conscription period in Iran from one to two years and thereby helped to alleviate joblessness (p. 55).

If Hiro's book is a detached account of the war's evolution and the *realpolitik* behind it, the second book under review here is devoted to a passionate micro examination of a group of individuals who fell victim to it. *Khomeini's Forgotten Sons* compliments the previous book by providing the first inclusive factual account of life inside an Iraqi prisoner-of-war camp. The author, Ian Brown, was the last educational representative of *Terre des hommes*, a Swiss charity organization dedicated to children's rights around the world. He spent two and a half years (from 1987 to 1989) with Iranian prisoners living at the Ramadi POW camp (Baghdad's showcase internment center) before being expelled by the Iraqi government for his repeated

protests over the mistreatment and exploitation of child prisoners.

Brown begins his book with a fitting dedication to "all the children who fight in grown-up's wars." He proceeds to demonstrate how contrary to all international conventions and protocols, children on both sides were recruited to the armed forces and were sent to the fronts to serve as cannon fodder. In an eloquent narration based on the first-person experiences of the prisoners, the author introduces his audience to the brutal and humane sides of the POWs' life. We are told of how "the boys" saw the war as a game to prove to their friends that they had grown up. We are saddened with accounts of fights between pro- and anti-Khomeini POWs, and the way prisoners treat Jasim, a twenty-year-old illiterate villager who becomes the target of jokes and shuns away from all others in self-protection (p. 157). Finally, we are outraged to learn that the guards steal the prisoners belongings, rape them, force them to weave carpets of Saddam, and parade them before visiting journalists to denounce the Iranian regime in return for a pack of cigarettes (p. 115).

Yet the book also depicts stories of human dignity. We are made cognizant of the Iraqi teachers who gradually take pride in their pupils, of the private citizens who donate books for the POWs' classes and of the flautist guard, Mohammed, who entertains his captives. Similarly, the reader can not come away from this book without being touched by tales of comradeship among the prisoners.

More importantly, Brown shows the fallacious nature of the predominant image of Iranian war volunteers as a bunch of illiterate, peasant and fanatical Muslims. Quite to the contrary, he informs the audience that a majority of these young combatants had at least a primary education, came from urban centers and were motivated more by a sense of patriotism than religious fundamentalism (p. 88). Brown provides ample evidence to demonstrate that incarceration did not dampen the boys interest for learning. Through persistence and ingenuity the POWs manage to set up typing, calligraphy, carpet-weaving, theater, watch repair, shoe-making, table tennis and music classes as well as educate themselves in such languages as English, French, Spanish, Italian, Farsi, Arabic and even Hindi.

The young POWs' indomitable desire to "live" far outweighs their sense of despair and bitterness. They impress the author with their craving for news from the outside world and show a special liking for Western music and sports as demonstrated by their frequent inquiries about Gary Lineker (an English soccer star), Cat Stevens, Beatles, Paul McCartney, Michel Jackson and expatriate Iranian singers. The case of Shirzad and his twenty-one man drama group who work tirelessly for five months against all odds to stage a play ironically called "How Bitter Life Is" serves as a testament to the boys' fortitude.

The tragic saga of these young prisoners whose "childhood has been ripped from them" and whose "innocence has been obliterated" has not yet come to an end. More than three years have passed since the August 1988 cease-fire yet many of these boys still remain in captivity. The innocent question of one prisoner lingers in my mind. He asked: "when the war was on, we did not think about going home. Now the war has ended and we are still here. Why?" (p. 146). Indeed, why?

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