

A Report on “The Concept of “Decisive  
Battles” in World History” by Harari  
(2007)

Reviewer 2

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I am wiser than this person; for it is likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something when he does not know it, whereas I, just as I do not know, do not think I know, either. I seem, then, to be wiser than him in this small way, at least: that what I do not know, I do not think I know, either.

Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d

To err is human. All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between truth and certainty. That to err is human means not only that we must constantly struggle against error, but also that, even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.

Karl Popper, 'Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality'

## Overview

**Citation:** Harari, Y. N. (2007). The Concept of “Decisive Battles” in World History. *Journal of World History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 251–266.

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**Abstract Summary:** This paper explains the historical utility and recent abandonment of the concept of “decisive battles” in world history, evaluating its continued relevance using the Battle of Antioch as a case study.

**Key Methodology:** Historical analysis and counterfactual history, focusing on the Battle of Antioch.

**Research Question:** Why was the concept of “decisive battles” useful, why was it abandoned, and is it still useful for world history?

## Summary

### Is It Credible?

In this article, Yuval Noah Harari seeks to rehabilitate the concept of the “decisive battle,” a notion that had largely fallen out of favor among professional historians by the late 20th century. Harari argues that while battles should not be viewed merely as “cultural advertisements”—a critique he levels at the “landmark battle” approach of historians like Victor Davis Hanson—they remain crucial as mechanisms of chaos. He posits that battles act as “independent historical factors” capable of “annulling or at least diminishing the impact of long-term structural factors” (p. 266). By concentrating immense material and cultural resources into a compressed timeframe, battles allow “accidental conditions,” such as weather or leadership decisions, to destroy years of accumulated capital in mere hours (p. 254). The article uses the First Crusade’s Battle of Antioch (1098) as a primary case study, arguing that a Crusader defeat would likely have ended the entire movement due to the fragility of their geopolitical and theological position.

The credibility of Harari’s central thesis—that battles function as chaotic interrupters of structural trends—is high, particularly regarding the “annulment” of resources. The argument that a “*faris*” or knight represents an “immense material and cultural iceberg” effectively demonstrates how a short tactical engagement can disproportionately impact long-term societal trajectories (p. 255). However, the article exhibits a significant tension regarding the role of culture. Harari explicitly rejects the idea that battles prove cultural superiority, yet his explanation for the decisiveness of Antioch relies heavily on cultural determinism. He argues that a loss at Antioch would have been decisive because, lacking any “overriding long-term structural conditions” to force a conquest of Syria, medieval Europeans would have interpreted defeat as a sign that “God simply did not will it” (p. 258). This suggests that the “decisiveness”

of the event is not inherent to the chaotic mechanism of the battle itself, but is rather dictated by the pre-existing cultural framework of the participants. If the impact of the battle depends entirely on how a culture interprets defeat, the distinction between the battle as an “independent factor” and culture as a structural determinant becomes blurred.

Furthermore, the article’s categorization of causal factors invites scrutiny. Harari lists the “qualities of a military leader” alongside weather and terrain as “accidental conditions” (p. 254). This classification is debatable; military competence is often a product of structural factors, such as a society’s education system or meritocratic institutions, rather than pure chance. Additionally, the author limits the applicability of his theory primarily to the pre-1914 era, arguing that when modern engagements drag on for months, “chance becomes statistics” (p. 264). While this distinction preserves the theory’s internal logic by linking the role of chance to duration, it relies on a restrictive definition of “battle” that excludes modern, protracted engagements, potentially creating a tautology where “decisive battles” are defined by their brevity and pre-modern context. Despite these theoretical ambiguities, the article successfully challenges the strict structuralist view that military events are merely the foam on the waves of history.

## **The Bottom Line**

Harari presents a compelling theoretical argument that rehabilitates the “decisive battle” by reframing it as a mechanism of chaos rather than a verdict on cultural superiority. The claim that short-term tactical accidents can override long-term material advantages is well-supported by the medieval case study provided. However, the theory is less robust when applied to modern warfare, and the distinction between “accidental” battle outcomes and “structural” cultural reactions is not always clearly maintained.

## Potential Issues

**Ambiguity in the central concept of battle:** The article's argument for the literary and historical appeal of battles rests on the premise that they are "abnormally dichotomous affairs" (p. 262), which simplifies complex historical realities. However, the article presents this core concept in a potentially contradictory manner. In the conclusion, this dichotomous nature is described as "not a mere literary device, but rather a real characteristic of battle" (p. 266). Yet, a few sentences later, this reality is framed as a simplification that can be deconstructed through research: "Theoretically, painstaking historical research could uncover the discontinuities within battles... one can point out all the divisions in the Muslim and Crusader armies at Antioch" (p. 266). The attempt to resolve this tension by stating that "nuances are inevitably swamped by the overall impression of battle" shifts the argument from the ontological nature of the event to its perception (p. 266). This leaves a central ambiguity as to whether the dichotomous nature of battle is a genuine feature of the event itself or a simplification imposed upon it, a distinction that is fundamental to the article's thesis.

**The causal role of culture in a chaos-driven model:** The article's argument distinguishes between battles as chaotic, contingent events and deterministic views where culture dictates the outcome. However, the causal mechanism proposed for the decisiveness of the Battle of Antioch appears to rely on the very cultural determinism it critiques. The author argues that if the Crusaders had lost, the movement would have ended because they would have "concluded that they had made a mistake and that God simply did not will it" (p. 258). This makes the battle's long-term impact entirely dependent on the specific theological framework of the participants. The "decisiveness" of the chaotic event is therefore determined by the culture that interprets its outcome. This raises the question of whether the battle is truly an "independent historical factor" or if its impact is so thoroughly mediated by pre-existing cul-

tural structures that the distinction between a chaotic trigger and a structural cause becomes blurred.

**Classification of military leadership as a contingent factor:** The article categorizes the “qualities of a military leader” as one of the “accidental conditions,” alongside weather and terrain, that can decide a battle (p. 254). This framing is debatable, as it treats leadership as a random variable rather than a potential product of structural forces. An alternative view, not fully explored, is that a society’s capacity to produce effective military commanders is itself a structural feature. For instance, the political and social systems of one polity might be more conducive to fostering military talent than those of its rivals. The article notes the “internal dissension within Kerbogah’s army” but presents this as a contingent factor, rather than considering whether it reflects a systemic weakness in the command-and-control structures of such coalitions (p. 257). By classifying leadership as chance, the argument may overlook a significant structural explanation for the battle’s outcome.

**The generalizability of the theory to modern warfare:** The article establishes a boundary at 1914, claiming that afterward “there were no more battles, at least on land” in the classical sense, and that in modern, protracted engagements “chance becomes statistics” (p. 264). This chronological boundary, while justified by the changing nature of warfare (specifically duration), may limit the theory’s applicability by excluding a century of relevant evidence. The argument that contingency is dampened by duration is compelling for attritional conflicts like the Somme, but it is less clear how it applies to shorter, pivotal modern engagements where chance played a significant role. By defining “battle” in a way that largely excludes post-1914 conflicts, the article’s claims about the role of chaos in history are not fully tested against the complexities of modern warfare, raising questions about the theory’s robustness.

**Potentially circular reasoning in the “death of battle” argument:** The article’s explanation for the decline of the “decisive battle” concept after 1914 relies partly on circular logic regarding definitions. While Harari offers other reasons for the

concept's decline—such as the rise of structuralist historiography and literary deconstruction—his argument regarding the nature of warfare itself is tautological. He defines “battles” in a restrictive sense as short, classical encounters like Austerlitz. He then observes that modern engagements like the Somme are protracted and concludes they are “something entirely different” and thus not true “battles” (p. 264). This reasoning risks becoming circular: if a “battle” is defined as a short event, then by definition long modern engagements cannot be “battles.” While the author provides a functional reason for this distinction—that duration changes the role of chance—the argument's structure relies heavily on a narrow initial definition, which may simply re-label modern warfare rather than fully explain the changing nature of its decisiveness.

## Future Research

**Testing the structural origins of leadership:** Future research could challenge the classification of military leadership as an “accidental condition” by conducting comparative analyses of officer corps in different polities. By examining whether specific social or educational structures consistently produce superior tactical commanders, researchers could determine if leadership quality is a structural variable rather than a chaotic one, thereby refining the boundary between accident and structure in military history.

**Applicability to post-1914 conflicts:** To address the article’s chronological limitation, scholars could apply Harari’s “chaos and annulment” framework to short-duration modern engagements, such as the Battle of Midway or the Six-Day War. Investigating whether “chance” remained a decisive factor in these industrialized contexts—or if the “statistics” of attrition truly took over—would test the robustness of the theory beyond the author’s self-imposed 1914 boundary.

**Comparative analysis of resilience to defeat:** Research could focus on the “cultural filter” of defeat to resolve the tension between chaotic events and cultural determinism. By comparing instances where a “decisive” tactical defeat ended a movement (like the proposed counterfactual for Antioch) against instances where a polity absorbed a massive defeat and continued (such as Rome after Cannae), historians could isolate the specific cultural or structural conditions that render a society vulnerable to the “decisive” nature of battle.

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