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Robin Prior, Trevor Wilson. *The Somme.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. viii + 358 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10694-7.

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On July 1, 1916, Britain launched the Somme offensive, the bloodiest campaign in the history of the British army. In four and a half months of fighting, fifty-two divisions engaged the German army in northern France, achieving negligible gains and suffering horrendous losses. 432,000 British soldiers are estimated to have been casualties of this endeavor, of whom 150,000 are said to have been killed and 100,000 seriously injured. German casualties during the campaign are estimated to have been around 230,000. On the first day of the Somme alone, the British army suffered 57,000 casualties, including 20,000 killed. The Somme offensive constitutes perhaps the greatest trauma in twentieth-century British history, symbolizing for many the horrors of World War I trench warfare. In this carefully argued book of military history, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson successfully challenge many of the oft-repeated clichés about the Somme campaign.

Through careful analysis of archival material, the authors demonstrate that the British infantry seldom advanced shoulder-to-shoulder in a slow pace and rarely were ordered to do so by their army command. Contrary to legend, some British infantry units were even entrusted with complex movement and it was up to battalion commanders to decide on the most appropriate way to approach enemy lines. Moreover, the authors show that the most successful units were the ones that did in fact advance slowly behind a "creeping barrage" that protected them. The failure to provide soldiers with effective means of artillery support was the main reason for the collapse of the offensive, not the method chosen to cross no man's land.

Following previous scholars, Prior and Wilson emphasize the significance of artillery fire, or lack thereof, in dooming the Somme offensive. Although the British artillery unleashed the heaviest Entente bombardment of the war in the days leading to the attack on July 1, it failed nonetheless to accomplish its goals. Shells and howitzers were not of sufficient quality, spotter planes could not report with accuracy because of inclement weather, artillerists lacked basic skills and the area designated for bombardment was inappropriately large. All of these conditions resulted in

the artillery's failure to complete the following essential tasks: cutting the German barbed-wire in front of trenches, destroying the trench system and overwhelming German artillery batteries. Prior and Wilson conclude glumly that "when guns proved insufficient or were employed inappropriately the infantry also failed, with great slaughter" (p. 118). They thus conclude that "[a]s long as most German machine-gunners and artillerymen survived the British bombardment, the slaughter of the attacking infantry would occur *whatever* infantry tactics were adopted" (p. 115, emphasis in the original).

Artillery accounted more than any other factor for the shockingly high casualty rate on the Somme. The killing zone extended thousands of yards behind both front lines and soldiers were at risk even before crossing into no man's land. The authors estimate that 30 percent of all British casualties on July 1 were hit behind their own front line. The image of rows and rows of infantrymen being mowed down by machine guns in no man's land is very powerful, but needs to be rectified. The experiences of the rank-and-file on the Somme were indeed horrific, but the shell rather than the machine gun probably caused the greatest trauma.

The authors have little patience with British civilian leaders, especially contemporary Minister of Munitions David Lloyd George, who after the war attempted to shift all responsibility for the Somme debacle to military leaders. Prior and Wilson argue that the decision to launch the Somme campaign in the summer of 1916 emanated from British commitments to her allies, and because all other strategic alternatives, such as Gallipoli, Salonika and Mesopotamia, had been tried and proven unsuccessful. The decision to launch an offensive on the western front had been made in December 1915 in a joint conference in Chantilly between representatives of Russia, France, Italy and Britain. It was not designed to relieve the pressure on the French army in Verdun. In fact "only in May did Britain's leaders seem to wake up to the fact that the Germans for the last three months ... were not only bent on wearing out the French forces at Verdun but were succeeding in doing so" (p. 29).

The only British civilian leader whose reputation emerges favorably in this book is Winston Churchill, who had joined the army for a few months in the winter of 1915-1916 and had some personal experience on the western front. Serving as a back-bencher in the summer of 1916, Churchill submitted a memorandum on August 1, 1916, analyzing the performance of the British on the Somme and calling the campaign a "great failure" (p. 196). He suggested that the offensive should be halted and hinted that the top military men should be dismissed. The authors also stress that the British War Committee had another good opportunity to stop the offensive in early October 1916 when the commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force, Field Marshal Douglas Haig, explicitly requested re-authorization for the offensive. The War Committee chose not to revoke its original endorsement despite the staggering number of casualties and failure of the offensive to achieve any breakthrough. Thus, argue Prior and Wilson, "the civilian leadership ... failed the men for whom they claimed to be trustees. The soldiers who became casualties in their hundreds of thousands ... deserved a plan and competent leadership as well as a cause" (p. 309).

Prior and Wilson reserve their most scathing critique for British military leaders, especially Douglas Haig and Field Marshal William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Long condemned in the historiography of the Great War as the person most responsible for the Somme catastrophe, Haig receives in this book a few additional marks of censure. Although he is not portrayed as an unimaginative "troglodyte" or as a "technophobe" as sometimes depicted, Haig still appears as incompetent and insensitive, with an inadequate grasp of the realities of trench warfare. Set-

ting unrealistic objectives and thinking in terms of Napoleonic victories, Haig managed, according to Prior and Wilson, to squander even modest opportunities for success. William Robertson does not appear frequently in the book, but he is nonetheless charged with providing British civilian leaders with false data regarding the actual losses of the German army. In August 1916 he claimed that the German losses during the campaign reached already 1.25 million soldiers, of whom 600,000 were presumed dead. Robertson did not explain how he reached these fantastic figures and did not directly counter Churchill's claim that the Germans were managing to hold off the British offensive with a force less than half the size of that of the attackers. The authors stop short of accusing Robertson of knowingly misleading the British government, but imply that this may very well have been the case. They emphasize that civilian leaders had a choice whether to believe Robertson or Churchill and chose the former. The only British commander presented in a favorable light is the commander of the Fourth Army, General Henry Rawlinson. Prior and Wilson describe Rawlinson as a leader who had a better grasp of what could have been achieved on the Somme, but who deferred timidly to Haig's ambitious and unrealistic goals.

The Somme is a lucid top-down military history. Prior and Wilson systematically survey and coherently explain the actions of different British units throughout the campaign. The authors' vast knowledge of the western front enables them to challenge some of the more enduring myths in Great War historiography. Non-military historians may find the detailed description of the military matters too specialized and at times too technical. Prior and Wilson do, however, provide three "reflection" chapters (11, 17, 27) within the book to recapitulate their main points. Regrettably, the authors have little to say about the German side of the campaign, an obvious shortcoming for H-German readers and for anyone interested in the perspective of the defending soldiers. Beyond providing casualty figures, the book has little to say about the impact of the campaign on the rank-and-file and on the civilian perception of the war. The authors also opt not to engage the vast literature written in the past decades about the experience of trench warfare and its remembrance.

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