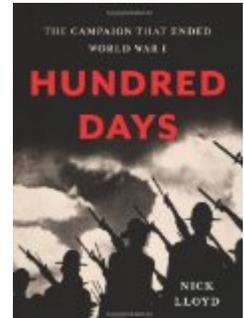




Nick Lloyd. *Hundred Days: The Campaign That Ended World War I.* New York: Basic Books, 2014. Illustrations. xxxiii + 350 pp. \$29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-07492-1.



Reviewed by Jason Szilagyi

Published on H-USA (August, 2016)

Commissioned by Donna Sinclair (Central Michigan University)

Thousands of monographs, articles, and documentaries have been produced about the First World War. These cover such varied subjects as royal families, famous generals and field marshals, individual battles, grand strategy, and peace treaties, yet few cover the events of the last one hundred days of the war. Nick Lloyd has a personal reason for writing this monograph for this particular time period: his great uncle George Thomas Cotterill was killed in action on September 27, 1918. Private Cotterill was cut down within sight of the very armistice that ended the brutal slaughter of four years of war. The Hundred Days, the final series of Allied attacks that broke the back of the German army, were some of the bloodiest engagements of the entire war.

Lloyd states: “when I began researching this period, the lack of a really satisfactory account of the final battles ... became immediately apparent” (p. xxxi). The book revolves around two main questions: “firstly, to what extent had the Allies improved their so-called tactical ‘learning curve’ on the battlefield; and, secondly, was the German

Army really defeated in 1918?” (p. xxxiii). The first question is important as the author makes the argument that most of the Allied forces, excluding the newly minted American Expeditionary Force (AEF), had at this point abandoned their tactics from earlier in the war. Neither the British nor the French could afford to lose countless thousands of men in futile attacks that would pay no dividends. Only the Americans sought straightforward and brutal tactics that had been exercised throughout the years of 1914 to 1917. The second question is even more important to address since so much of the internal tension inside Germany after the war was directed against the “home front” for betraying the imperial German army. Lloyd comprehensively proves through the skillful use of German primary sources the extent of the German army’s collapse in the last four months of the war.

Lloyd lays out his book as a narrative history in which he blends together individual diaries, journals, official unit histories, and various archival documents into a very readable mono-

graph. The author gives a chronological explanation of how the last four months of World War I played out for the British, French, American, Canadian, Australian, and German soldiers and generals. The blending of personal and official sources gives the reader a window into the murky world of Allied commanders and their feelings about the fighting capabilities of their own troops as well as those of their allies. Lloyd also deals with some of the more unpleasant subjects of political pressure to maintain momentum during combat operations while ensuring a reduction of possible casualties. The author makes a good argument for the tremendous strain placed on General John "Black Jack" Pershing by his British and French allies.

The monograph opens by describing the beginning of the Second Battle of the Marne (July 18, 1918), during which a massive Allied counterattack drove in the German defensive line in France. The German army had previously launched a massive offensive against the British and French in the spring of 1918, hoping to end the war favorably for their country. The newly arriving AEF had been slowly building up strength since 1917 and had not made a significant impression with either their allies or the Germans. The German Spring Offensive had petered out and the Allies felt confident enough to launch a massive counterattack that would push the Germans out of France and Belgium and back toward their own homeland. Once the Second Battle of the Marne began, the next four months would change the entire balance of the war: the Germans would be on the defensive, constantly reacting to, and retreating from, a massive series of blows to their army.

A central theme to one of Lloyd's questions is touched up immediately: the morale and fighting capability of the German army. "The morale of the Army remained steady, but it was increasingly fragile. Hope in victory was now being replaced by disillusion and weariness" (p. 9). Defeat on multiple areas of the western front had sapped

the imperial German army of its ability to achieve a victory. The tens of thousands of soldiers killed, wounded, and captured during the failed Spring Offensive had bled the German army dry, and there was little hope of stopping the massive Allied attacks that rained down on the front lines. Lloyd aptly points to the terrible truth that faced the German High Command: "the heavy fighting had used up Germany's dwindling reserves of manpower and squandered her best troops" (p. 14). A military solution was no longer an option for Germany; only a political settlement could end the war, and the prospects of mercy from the Allies were not encouraging.

The despair of common German soldiers, as well as officers and commanding generals, is heavily emphasized by the author. Whether discussing the multiple mental breakdowns of General Erich Ludendorff during the last months of the war or the worry expressed by German officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) on the front line, Lloyd shows that the dreadful business of continuous, brutal war had taken its toll. A German officer, Lieutenant Richard Schütt, and his brother Willy, also in the German army, exchanged letters during the last months of the war, and the strain placed on them and their men is evident in their correspondence: "we have had very difficult days and have had to retreat further each day, on the first day of the offensive [Allied], I was almost captured. Our division has suffered a terrible number of losses from all this." Schütt also predicted that there would be a general collapse of the German army and German society as the war was no longer winnable. Lloyd also illustrates the quickly collapsing state of fighting spirit inside the German army from the accounts of an army censor: "the morale of the men had "changed drastically" from the confident tone that been reported before the great offensives earlier in the year" (p. 91). This sense of the war as lost is repeatedly discussed in the memoirs of German soldiers and officers as the last months of the war

rapidly eroded the strength and morale of the German army.

Lloyd next alternates to the Allied point of view as the withdrawal of the German army opened new options for the possible ending of the war. The author describes the dire position of both the French and British armies at this point of the war: they had been savaged by the last four years of fighting, with few possibilities of further reinforcement and dwindling support. The heavy fighting along the western front had crushed morale of the French army and caused them to mutiny only months before due to crippling casualty rates. To push them too hard in the coming offensives may have caused the French army to collapse. The British army, too, had been ravaged and the regular British divisions had in some cases their entire complements of soldiers replaced two or three times. The true fighting strength of the British army was now the Dominion formations from Canada and Australia. They would be the shock troops of the British Empire but they had to be handled with care lest those experienced men be sacrificed for nothing. The AEF had its own major issues as General Pershing attempted to keep his army from being dismantled by his allies. The desire for new American units to be integrated into the French and British armies was a source of major tension.

This situation was well understood by the overall Allied commander, General Ferdinand Foch, as he prepared his soldiers for a series of war-winning offensives. Foch had to balance the military and political desires of every major player on the Allied stage. He had to maintain good relations with all of his subordinates, despite the issues that plagued their portions of the Allied army. Foch also had to balance the fears of his civilian political masters, both domestic and foreign. He had to find the right formula to keep casualties low, momentum high, and pressure on the Germans crushing in order to end the war favorably for the Allies. Lloyd makes eloquent argu-

ments throughout the monograph about the strains placed on Foch by Allied governments: the Dominion corps, Canadians, and Australians “were also semi-independent formations with powerful political support back home” (p. 31).

Lloyd’s first theme about the Allies adapting to their “learning curve” is touched on in the chapters that focus on the Allied viewpoint. New tactics, techniques, and weapons allowed the Allies to push the Germans off one strong point after another. Though casualties were very high during the Hundred Days, the gains in territory and prospect of victory allowed the Allied commanders and politicians to continue the bloody pushes. The in-depth discussion of the Canadian (Arthur Currie) and Australian (Sir John Monash) commanders, and the soldiers themselves, shows the absolute value placed on them by the British High Command. “Both men possessed fierce, inquisitive minds, eagerly devouring military knowledge because they knew the lives of their men depended on it” (p. 31). Lloyd also discusses the “learning curve” American soldiers faced when entering the First World War. They lacked the basic skill set that would ensure survival, either individually or collectively, against a battle-hardened German army. Training by British and French veteran officers became one of the first encounters the Americans had with their new allies. According to Lloyd, for many American soldiers, the training did not leave a good impression: “the shock of this period—days of repetitive bayonet drill, exhausting gas training and exposure to bawling, sometimes brutal NCOs—left bad memories that never went away” (p. 122). This period of toughening up, though enraging to the American soldier, doubtlessly saved many as they entered a landscape transformed into a killing field over the previous four years. After this intense training, and the constant demand by General Pershing for their own part on the front line, American soldiers could practice their newly acquired skills

against the German army as an independent element of the larger western front.

Lloyd concludes the monograph with a description of the German General Staff making the decision that the war could not possibly end in victory; it could only end in defeat. Lloyd eloquently discusses the fact that Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and Ludendorff, as well as the majority of the German General Staff, knew that the German army could not hold the territory it had wrested from France and Belgium while the Allied attacks hammered their retreating forces. The most promising option was to call into effect a short-term armistice, or cease fire, in order for the German army to reorganize and be reinforced. But the newly organized German government refused to carry on a war that had strangled and starved the German civilian population. Ludendorff, in a rage, resigned his position as quartermaster general of the German army on November 26, 1918. As had happened so many times in the past, Ludendorff had expected the kaiser to cave in to pressure and allow Ludendorff to fight the war on his terms, but the kaiser this time accepted his resignation. With the final obstacle out of the way of German diplomats, the armistice was signed at Compiègne on November 11, 1918; the First World War had effectively come to an end.

Lloyd's *Hundred Days* is an effective and eloquent piece that describes the final months of World War I in a humanized manner. Too often monographs about wars are written from a viewpoint that seems to ignore the fact that the people who fought in them were human. The massive lists of casualty rates are present in nearly every account, and yet the voice of the common soldier is usually lost within the stories of grand strategies and the great leaders who led them. Lloyd reminds the audience that stress, terror, frustration, and personal loss were permanent features in these men's lives. The author forces us to look at the actual effects of warfare on the people on the

ground and those who commanded them hundreds of miles away. It reminds us of the disconnect that can happen between a commander and the commanded as events overtake the most diligent officers, forcing them to accept the reality of a lost cause. Lloyd has done what he set out to do when he visited his great uncle's cemetery on a lonely cold spring day: "Tom is buried in plot C30, alongside 200 other soldiers, all killed in the last year of the war. As I stood there I was filled with a powerful urge to write a history of those final days; to do all I could to bring him home" (p. xxxi-ii).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

Citation: Jason Szilagyi. Review of Lloyd, Nick. *Hundred Days: The Campaign That Ended World War I*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. August, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43069>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.