



Elizabeth Greenhalgh. *The French Army and the First World War.* Armies of the Great War Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xv + 469 pp. \$30.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-107-60568-8.

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Published on H-War (May, 2018)

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Elizabeth Greenhalgh has written an indispensable book on France in the Great War. In fact, the book is indispensable more broadly to the history of the First World War, and to the history of modern France. One of the author's primary arguments is that English-language historiography all too often underplays the critical importance of the French army to all aspects of the fighting, from the war's beginning to its very end. After all, "France provided moral leadership" to the Allied coalition "by supplying the largest army of the belligerent democracies" (p. 2), and the decisive western front lay almost entirely in France. But beyond this argument about the war, Greenhalgh shows just how important the French army's experience in the war was in shaping the nation and argues that by 1919 "the relationship between France and its Army could not have been closer" (p. 401). Since 1870, France had slowly made its army republican, but the war accelerated and finished the job, and joined the institution to the nation of citizens ever more closely. Both of these arguments—about the French role in the Allied victory and about the republic and its army—are part of the author's determination to avoid a teleological reading of 1914-18. All too often, observers have attributed the weaknesses and capitulation of 1940 and the role of the army and its Great War hero Philippe Pétain in the republic's demise to France's tribula-

tions over two decades earlier. Reducing these earlier experiences to a mere prelude to the debacle of 1940, the author shows, distorts the nature and importance of the First World War.

Greenhalgh pursues this larger agenda through a careful and detailed examination of how the French army fought the First World War and how it grew and learned as it confronted the unprecedented scope and intensity of the first modern industrialized war. She wants to "evaluate how well it performed" and to explain "how France did indeed emerge victorious" (p. 1). The answer is simple and straightforward: the "citizen army had learned, by hard experience and at great cost, how to fight" (p. 3). France did not merely withstand and endure four years of bludgeoning on the western front, before its more vigorous British and American allies could turn the tide. The French army developed into an effective fighting machine, adapted to the new realities of war, and fought to the end, albeit to the point of total exhaustion. The author develops this argument through operational history, a history of "command," particularly at higher levels. But she also weaves into this story a well-rounded portrait of an integrated nation at war, with attention to politics, relations with civilians on the home front, industrial mobilization, and interallied relations, as well as command at lower levels, individual ex-

periences, and developments in technology, military medicine, and justice. Greenhalgh's handling of operational military history is masterful, but her efforts to link this history with the broader context within which it took place make the book far more important and impossible to ignore for historians of the First World War and of modern France.[1]

The story the book tells is long and complex, but its heart is a history of how the army's leaders created and wielded the army as an effective instrument in the kind of war that developed after 1914. There are heroes in this story. The author describes in detail Pétain's achievements in rebuilding the army after poor leadership and bad decisions had damaged, exhausted, and demoralized it to the point of indiscipline by spring 1917. But by 1918, Ferdinand Foch had emerged decisively as the leader not only of the French army and war effort but also of the entire Allied military endeavor, appointed to the post of commander in chief. These two men achieved what others could not, and repaired damage done by others, because they understood clearly the nature of the war and the only way to fight it: through careful preparation, overwhelming material force, and the pursuit of modest and realistic goals. Joseph Joffre had led the army through the first two and a half years of the war, making mistakes and failing to accept responsibility for them, wasting lives in futile assaults in 1915, and "resisting what was obvious on the ground. Rapid and vigorous attacks in winter weather and with inadequate artillery support could not be otherwise than costly" (p. 87). He clung to the idea of a decisive breakthrough long after that sort of outcome was revealed to be a pipedream, and his stubbornness over the defenses of Verdun cost the army dearly in 1916 and only increased civil-military friction that had been simmering since the previous year. Robert Nivelle's leadership of the army was, of course, even more ill-starred. He was unequal to the hour, regarded his personality and leadership as the only missing ingredients to a successful pursuit of de-

cisive breakthrough, and, worse, revealed himself to be incautious and an inveterate braggart. The spring 1917 offensive that bears his name failed spectacularly, particularly in the light of the promises he had made on behalf of it, and served most famously as the prelude to large-scale indiscipline in the ranks.

After Nivelle's fall, Pétain quickly restored the army's fighting effectiveness. Greenhalgh demonstrates this with a detailed operational account of how the French army won two major battles later in 1917 (at Verdun and, significantly, on the same Chemin des Dames that was the site of Nivelle's failure) and provided important assistance to the British army at Third Ypres and Cambrai. Pétain was a front commander, visiting his men and inspiring their confidence with his personal presence, in addition to undertaking a raft of administrative, command, and operational reforms that improved conditions and decreased the lethality of life at the front. But Pétain could be prickly with his colleagues and allies alike, and his caution and organization could not yield decisive victory. Foch, too, had realized as early as the Somme in 1916 (Greenhalgh's account rightly stresses the oft-ignored French contribution to that battle, which was to account for more than half the total territory gained at a cost of less than half the casualties the British suffered[2]) that fighting a war of attrition called for a more methodical approach with greater reliance on heavy firepower, but he still recognized the need for aggressive, decisive action to achieve meaningful victory. Greenhalgh is certainly the leading expert on Foch, and her argument that only he, not Pétain, could have delivered victory in 1918 is convincing.[3]

A short review such as this is insufficient to do justice to all the virtues of the book. But it is worth noting that the author is fair and judicious in evaluating even those who do not emerge as heroes in her narrative. Though Joffre ultimately failed to understand the true nature of the war, and his approach was wasteful of soldiers' lives, he did

maintain control of himself and of the situation in 1914, when failure to do so would have doomed the army and the nation. And Greenhalgh undertakes a balanced and sober analysis even of Nivelle, whose command she acknowledges was disastrous (she calls his ideas “cloud-cuckoo-land” and “wishful rather than realistic thinking” [p. 179]) but who does not fully deserve the blame for every single problem that emerged in the wake of his offensive. The author’s treatment of the “mutinies” of 1917, which she instead correctly calls “collective indiscipline” (p. 201), is as thorough and judicious as readers are likely to encounter anywhere. Also effective is her use of smaller-scale and individual stories, such as the particularly poignant tale of Corporal Gaston Lefèvre, one of the men executed for indiscipline in 1917, and the diaristic and epistolary reportage of, respectively, Louis Barthas and Paul Pireaud.[4]

The book is not without weaknesses, to be sure. The author sometimes makes curious factual errors, such as partly attributing Russian soldiers’ mutinous behavior in summer 1917 to the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family, when in fact this execution took place fully a year later, in July 1918 (p. 257). She also confuses the Germans’ long-range “Paris Gun,” which bombarded the capital from some eighty miles away, with “Big Bertha,” the nickname for Krupp’s 420mm howitzer, most famous for destroying Belgian fortresses at the beginning of the war (p. 298). More serious, and puzzling, is the author’s flawed attempt to integrate the contribution of the French Empire to the fighting. Greenhalgh implies several times that North African soldiers were known as “tirailleurs sénégalais,” when it was West African troops who were labeled with this name derived from a West African colony. She also repeatedly refers to indigenous Algerians as “citizens,” when of course they were not, and the distinction between colonial subject and French citizen was one of the most important facts of empire. She repeatedly calls soldiers from the colonies fighting in France “natives,” which is archaic and inaccur-

ate, since soldiers “native” to the western front regions were the metropolitan French. The number of battalions of Moroccan soldiers sent to France in 1914 was not thirty-eight (which would represent more than the total number of Moroccans recruited during the entire war) but five (p. 32). Colonial subjects’ customary term of service was for the duration of the war plus six months, not the duration plus two years (p. 406). Curiously, the author mentions a battalion of men recruited from France’s Pacific possessions as an example of the colonial manpower available to Pétain in 1917, when it would make more sense to mention the several hundred battalions of North African, West African, Madagascan, and Indochinese soldiers serving in France during the war (p. 251). Finally, Greenhalgh claims that colonial contingents saved France from having to “give up the fight” for lack of manpower (p. 10). The claim is unprovable and doubtful. France suffered a severe manpower crisis during the war, to be sure, but colonial subjects constituted a small proportion of the over eight million men in the French army during the war (perhaps some 5 percent). And most who were recruited in 1918, when France was running out of men, never left the colonies.

Yet if a full integration of the imperial contribution to the French army’s war effort into the story is ultimately unsuccessful, that is really the only area in which the book falls short of its stated ambitions. In the end, the work stands as a truly valuable contribution to the history of the Great War and of modern France. Greenhalgh successfully avoids telling the story through the prism of France’s experiences in the Second World War, making clear that the trials and damage of 1914-18 were quite enough to be evaluated on their own merits. The number killed speaks eloquently, if not sufficiently, about the impact and meaning of the war. The official toll of 1,383,000 is of course approximate, but, as the author points out, “its magnitude almost defies belief” (p. 377). This is all the more true if one takes, as does Greenhalgh, an appropriately expansive view of the war’s casualties,

to include widows, orphans, the elderly left alone, and the wounded. Another telling statistic: the number of war wounded in need of pensions dropped by over 40 percent between 1919 and 1922, or by almost 800,000 (p. 397). The war kept on killing, long after the Armistice. Yes, the republic and its army were closer than ever, symbolized by the number of parliamentary deputies who served in the army, who lost sons, or who lost their own lives in the fighting. But strife and difficulty at the July 14, 1919, victory parade, when the common citizens who invaded the seating reserved for dignitaries had to be expelled with the help of cavalry, and when the cenotaph central to the events became stuck under the Arc de Triomphe and had to be moved with great effort by army engineers, might also stand as symbols of a nation and army that had been stretched right to the breaking point.

Notes

[1]. Greenhalgh acknowledges her debt to predecessors Anthony Clayton (*Paths of Glory: The French Army, 1914-1918* [London: Cassell, 2003]) and Robert A. Doughty (*Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005]), but seeks to weave into her story a broader national and international context.

[2]. For a more sustained corrective to the view of the Somme as a purely British affair, see William Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage, 2009).

[3]. See Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command: The Forging of a First World War General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[4]. See also Louis Barthas, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelmaker, 1914-1918* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); and Martha Hannah, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

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Citation: Richard Fogarty. Review of Greenhalgh, Elizabeth. *The French Army and the First World War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2018.

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