



David T. Zabecki. *The Generals' War: Operational Level Command on the Western Front in 1918.*

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Reviewed by Perry Colvin (Auburn University)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

When discussing generalship during the First World War, commentary vacillates between castigation of and apology for the strategic or tactical ineptitude of the general officers on all sides who are characterized as callously out of touch with the technological innovations endemic to the conflict. With a few exceptions, like Robert Doughty's *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (2005) and Tim Traver's *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917-1918* (1992), scholars have tended to focus on the cultural impact of the war and the evolution of national strategy at the elite political level, rather than the operational level strategy of the militaries on both sides. David T. Zabecki's *The Generals' War: Operational Level Command on the Western Front in 1918* is a masterful examination of this often overlooked aspect of the last year of the war. Through his comparative examination of the operational command of the various military leaders involved, he shows how their decision-making was a reflection of their interactions with each other, perception of the strategic environment, and evolving understanding of the importance of new technologies on the battlefield.

After an initial series of chapters laying out the strategic and diplomatic landscape of early 1918,

as well as the personalities and positions of the major military leaders, Zabecki structures his work chronologically. His account focuses almost exclusively on Ferdinand Foch, Philippe Petain, Douglas Haig, John J. Pershing, Erich Ludendorff, and Paul von Hindenburg. He oscillates between narrative and analysis in his examination of the various set-piece battles that defined the last nine months of the war, often in great detail, in an effort to show how the biases and assumptions of the individual general officers he profiles influenced their operational planning and execution. He stresses that despite the presence of a centralized Allied military command authority in Foch, "they still had far from a unified command structure," because "Foch commanded through personal intervention, but his staff did little detailed planning" (p. 170). What emerges from Zabecki's narrative is the impression that Allied leaders succeeded as much through the incompetence and misjudgment of Ludendorff's command decisions as through their own growing operational acumen and the enhanced capabilities of their forces. These are hardly new revelations, but his engaging style and ability to weave together the wide array of secondary sources he relies on makes this a very useful work for understanding the military

complexities underlying the armistice of November 1918.

Zabecki's focus on recounting set-piece battles does not easily lend itself to comparative analysis of the command decision-making process of the various national military systems, which leads to an occasionally disjointed narrative. Additionally, his efforts to explain the often rivalrous or reactionary interactions between Allied leaders sometimes inhibits a more thorough analysis of the intellectual or ideological frameworks that they individually inhabited. Yet these minor shortcomings are likely the product of the grand historical narrative that Zabecki's work represents, something that is sorely needed to understand the complex historiographic strands that have emerged from scrutiny of the First World War during the last two decades. His work is an excellent synthesis of these often complex and diverse arguments, and his analysis is also aided by his background as a major general. This experience with high command often shines through in his astute and insightful criticism of the operational decision-making and biases of his subjects. Consequently, Zabecki's work offers useful insights for both scholars of the First World War and more casual military history enthusiasts alike.

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