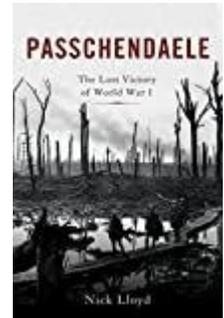




Nick Lloyd. *Passchendaele: The Lost Victory of World War I.* New York: Basic Books, 2017. Illustrations. 464 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-09477-6.



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Mud. The dominating image of the Battle of Passchendaele in Englishlanguage popular culture is that of mud. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in a 2018 feature on the battle, titled their online exhibition of archival material related to the battle “The Murderous Mud of One First World War Battlefield.”[1] Historian Nick Lloyd, the author of the new book *Passchendaele: The Lost Victory of World War One* also reinforces this image of overwhelming mud, quoting soldiers writing about mud that “dropped off ... boots into another fellow's tea” and mud so deep that “horses sank in it right up to their necks” (p. 279). However, as the subtitle of Lloyd's work indicates, he aims to do much more than simply describe the horrors that soldiers from Britain and its allies faced during the months of May through November 1917 in, as it is officially referred to by the British army, the Third Battle of Ypres.

In his recent monograph Lloyd successfully argues for a reassessment of the battle that goes beyond the established historiographical debates around British action in Flanders during 1917.

Specifically, he argues that “by raising the tempo of operations and inflicting an increasingly unacceptable casualty rate on the German Army, British forces opened up a window of opportunity for significant political and strategic results—maybe even some kind of compromise peace.... Major success was with Britain's grasp in the summer and autumn of 1917” (p. 9). Such an argument is a controversial one, because, as Lloyd highlights at the beginning of his work, over one hundred years after the battle was fought, “the questions over Passchendaele, why and how it was fought and what it meant, remain to be answered, or at least considered afresh” (p. 2). As the author outlines, the vast majority of the existing scholarship is driven by the question of who should shoulder the blame for the perceived failure of Third Ypres. Stemming from the postwar dispute between the supporters, both academic and political, of David Lloyd George, the British prime minister, and Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander in chief field marshal, most historians until the 1990s either defended or attacked Haig and the British High Com-

mand over how they conducted the fighting around Ypres. More recent scholarship has shifted to a "pox on both your houses" attitude, blaming Britain's military and political leadership for Passchendaele. However, the overall assessment of the battle as a failure of strategy, tactics, and even morality has remained. It is this perception that Lloyd challenges throughout his work.

One of the most impressive aspects of Lloyd's work is his attention to expanding the focus of scholarship on Passchendaele. Most recent works on the battle focus on the imperial aspects of it, documenting the experience of Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian forces who fought in Flanders. While acknowledging the key role of imperial troops in the battle, evidenced by his extensive research in Commonwealth Archives, Lloyd also analyzes the battle as a whole and incorporates the experience of all participants. Focusing on the whole engagement also means engaging with German sources and incorporating them into the narrative, which the author does excellently. His extensive analysis of the German experience during the battle, both from the perspective of the German High Command and regular soldiers, makes Lloyd's book a valuable contribution to the literature on the battle and the western front in general.

Beyond incorporating German sources into the overall narrative, which substantially strengthens his argument, the nuanced nature of Lloyd's analysis serves both his argument and the reader well. As highlighted above, much earlier work was driven by a desire to defend or condemn a particular British military or political figure. The author avoids picking a side in the broader Lloyd George versus Haig debate and similarly also avoids condemning all involved. Certainly Lloyd George and Haig both are subjects of deserved criticism, as are some of the theater commanders, most notably the commander of the British Fifth Army, General Sir Hubert Gough. Importantly though, other British and imperial com-

manders are praised for their strategic planning, command ability, and concern for their troops. In particular Lloyd singles out the commander of the British Second Army, General Sir Herbert Plumber, and commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Arthur Currie.

Plumber especially serves as the linchpin of Lloyd's argument that British offensive actions in late summer 1917 created "a window of opportunity for significant political and strategic results" (p. 9). It was Plumber's effective use of "Bite and Hold" tactics to secure limited objectives and then hold them against German counterattacks that created a crisis for the German army in late summer and forced them to reevaluate their defensive doctrine. The panic in the German army, all the way up to high command is clearly demonstrated in Lloyd's use of German sources. Ultimately, Lloyd demonstrates that the only effective response that Germans were able to muster was to hold their initial defensive line with a greater number of troops, depleting their reserves and resulting in a higher, and ultimately unsustainable, casualty count. It was only the combination of the return of wet weather and Haig's insistence on continuing the offensive to take the high ground of the Passchendaele Ridge that undermined the British and turned a clear victory into a quagmire.

While Lloyd's use of a large source base makes for an engaging military history, his examination of the political situation in Britain throughout the course of 1917 is less compelling. One example comes when assessing whether the prime minister could have been more assertive in demanding an end to the Flanders offensive. While Lloyd cautions that such a stance could have resulted in cabinet resignations or even the fall of the government, this argument is not supported by the evidence provided in the text. Certainly, given Lloyd George's tenuous political position at the head of a multiparty cabinet such a contention may certainly be correct, but prior to

this discussion in the conclusion, Lloyd had spent very little time examining the internal working of the British War Cabinet and its partisan divisions. To properly assess Lloyd George's ability to act regarding the Flanders offensive, this is valuable context a reader needs. In comparison to his detailed research regarding the military side of the battle, his analysis of the political situation remains superficial.

Overall, Lloyd has made a valuable and entertaining contribution to the military historiography of the British army and of operations of the western front during World War I. In both recognizing the suffering of the men at the front in the mud and highlighting how during August and Septem-

ber 1917 the British succeeded in inflicting heavy defeats on the German army causing concern all the way up the chain of command, Lloyd presents a nuanced yet clear argument about the importance of the Third Battle of Ypres and its lasting impact. While the image of mud will never recede, this work represents another valuable perspective that historians and general readers will enjoy.

Note

[1]. CBC Archives, "The Murderous Mud of One First World War Battlefield," *CBC Archives*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/archives/the-murderous-mud-of-one-first-world-war-battlefield-1.4793731>.

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