

Dennis E. Showalter, Joseph P. Robinson, Janet A. Robinson. *The German Failure in Belgium, August 1914: How Faulty Reconnaissance Exposed the Weakness of the Schlieffen Plan.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2019. 225 pp. \$39.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4766-7462-9.

Reviewed by Nicholas Sambaluk (Air University)

Published on H-War (April, 2023)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

While the book acknowledges that a great deal of past (and simplistic) critique of the German 1914 campaign in the West could be summarized as accusing Helmuth von Moltke the Younger of simply failing to perform Alfred von Schlieffen's brilliant prewar concept, the authors close with an assertion that at first blush might seem to resemble the hoary criticisms: "Had Schlieffen's allocation of cavalry divisions been implemented, opportunities would have been enhanced to surprise and confuse [Belgian and Entente forces] in those first weeks" (p. 188). In fact, however, the analysis is much more thoughtful than simply being another rehash of the oldest aspersions against Germany's first wartime commander.

For the authors, the hopes of Germany's campaign plan hinged on allocating a strong cavalry force onto the German right wing and having it concentrate on the task of reconnaissance. German intentions could only be fulfilled if the Belgian and British forces could be found and neutralized so that the French left wing could quickly be located, fixed, and enveloped. However, several factors mitigated against this. One involved intrinsic limitations on cavalry at the outbreak of war; practicing large-scale reconnaissance actions in peacetime had been infeasible, so the tasks were unfamiliar. Logistical and shortcomings

raised further problems, as wartime corps-sized cavalry formations were not provided any logistical or staff apparatus above the level of their component divisions. The unreliability, small number, and poor distribution of radio technology contributed a communications element to the problem. Faulty allocation of forces was another, with Germany's already limited cavalry resource distributed in a way that expected just three divisions to accomplish a host of formidable and sometimes contradictory tasks. In a doctrinal sense, there was also the problem of fully acknowledging that the cavalry could still serve a crucial reconnaissance role but that its combat functionality was curtailed by modern weapons. A well-known drubbing at Halen on August 12 and a more obscure clash at Waremmé on August 6 badly mauled the already overstretched German cavalry forces on the right flank.

Despite all these problems, the book alleges that, had German cavalry "swung around into the rear area of the BEF near Mons, World War I might very well have taken a completely different course. Indeed, that result might have been certain" (p. 184). The authors blame a pattern of inadequate staff work and of plans founded on hope for that momentous failure.

In the course of making its case about the cavalry's reconnaissance role and failure, the book does an impressive job of describing the outset of the campaign and of introducing and contextualizing facts for the reader. This includes discussions of the last-moment alterations in Belgian defensive dispositions (and communication gaps on the German side that allowed Berlin to notice these but the field commands to be surprised by them), the implications and second-order effects of Moltke's decision to avoid violating Dutch sovereignty by marching through Maastricht, a clearer understanding of the central role of 21-centimeter mortars in reducing Belgian forts and the truly marginal role of the vaunted 42-centimeter weapons, the training and preparation of Belgium's grades of the Civil Guard, and German units' reaction to supposed free-shooters while crossing Belgium. The discussion of German aviation, its utilization, and how it too largely failed as an instrument of reconnaissance is a small but interesting aspect of the book. The description of the reallocation (eighteen days into the campaign) of another corps-sized cavalry force to help reinforce the right wing illustrates Moltke's belated recognition of the troop-to-task imbalance on the advancing right wing.

The book is presented as a collaboration between the eminent late Denis Showalter, Colonel (ret.) Janet A. Robinson who also has experience as a scholar of Germany and World War I, and Colonel (ret.) Joseph P. Robinson, whose US Army service included work in operations and plans for wartime organizations. The book makes its mark by translating a command of secondary literature into a coherent picture of the campaign and by interrogating the events through the perspective of a campaign planner. *The German Failure in Belgium, August 1914* is a valuable addition to the literature.

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

Citation: Nicholas Sambaluk. Review of Showalter, Dennis E.; Robinson, Joseph P.; Robinson, Janet A, *The German Failure in Belgium, August 1914: How Faulty Reconnaissance Exposed the Weakness of the Schlieffen Plan*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57927>



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