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Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army. The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915*. Burlington, VT and Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. xiv + 180 pp. Maps, pictures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$124.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781409455004; £65.00. (eb-PDF). ISBN 9781409455011; £65.00. (eb-ePUB). ISBN 9781409474678.

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The Great War centenary has prodded a hornet's nest of controversy, not least in France where *le suicide d'Europe* will be fêted in tandem with the seventieth anniversary of D-Day and the Liberation of France. This *confusion mémorielle* is in fact a reprise of 1964 when de Gaulle short-circuited the fiftieth anniversary of an event of conflicted memory and pain with the *panthéonisation* of Jean Moulin as the centerpiece of a narrative of liberation from the dead hand of a Great War generation symbolized by Philippe Pétain and national rebirth under Free France.[1]

A similar row is underway in the UK, where the anti-EU partisans complain that Prime Minister David Cameron's plans to commemorate "a dirty and complex bloodbath...that recruited young men to be destroyed at Ypres and the Somme" focuses "too much on British defeats and the carnage and futility of the war" in an attempt to appease present-day German sensibilities.[2] In a mood reflective of the current state of British civil-military relations, this group seeks a focus on tactics in battle, rather than on the army in society. This instrumentalization of history conveys the domestic political benefit of transforming the centenary into a commemoration of triumph to counter the popular "*O What A Lovely War*" narrative of a British high command proliferating versions of Blackadder's General Melchett like chandeliers in a chateau, or the somber mood of sacrifice conveyed by Owen, Sassoon and Graves.[3]

Of course, the Great War, which J-J Becker demonstrated forty years ago to have been launched in a spirit of popular resignation and terminated "by any reckoning a human catastrophe," has forever been a source of controversy.[4] Contemporaries and historians have not only conjectured about how the war might have been fought more efficiently, but also whether it should have been fought at all.

Jonathan Krause's *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army*, is custom-made for a revisionist centenary ambiance. It claims inspiration from the half-forgotten "Military Effectiveness" movement in the wake of the Vietnam War which sought to trace "the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power." [5] Inspired by the historicist military revival in the U.S. Army made famous by Harry Summers [6], the impresarios of this approach to military history, Allan Millett and Williamson Murray, sought to assess the effectiveness of military activity on the overlapping political, strategic, operational and tactical levels of war, while retaining "some sense of proportional cost and organizational process." However, they also warned that, "Many officers believe that military effectiveness is synonymous with tactical effectiveness." [7]

Tactics lifted to grand strategy is precisely what happened when "learning curve" Jominians, inspired by a business school reapplication of lean sigma six principles to the battlefield, emerged in the 1990s. Their revisionist goal was to demonstrate that the Vietnam War might have been won had the U.S. Army cared to "learn" counterinsurgency tactics rather than cling to a "Big Battle" organizational

culture. By studying the “learning” process of inter-war military organizations like the Reichwehr/Wehrmacht and the RAF, often at the behest of Andrew Marshall’s Office of Net Assessment in the Pentagon, “learning-curve” advocates sought to lay the intellectual groundwork for the Revolution in Military Affairs, the 1990s restructuring of the U.S. Armed Forces that imploded so spectacularly in Iraq after 2003.

In a World War I context, Canadian historian Carl Pépin explains that, “Le *learning curve* offre une vision linéaire de la guerre, dont les erreurs fournissent des éléments d’apprentissage qui doivent permettre d’en arriver à une conclusion victorieuse.” This primarily “Anglo-Saxon” approach to the study of the First World War is rejected by Continental historians who tend to emphasize the cultural and political dimensions of World War I, not to mention Australians, who rightly see it as an artifice to challenge Erich Ludendorff’s “lions led by donkeys” description of the British army, and to vindicate catastrophic losses “pour une avancée de quelques kilomètres.”[8] In short, *la courbe d’apprentissage*, like some visions of the centenary festivities, is all about shoring up “esteem” (p. 15) for the generals in today’s civil-military relations. In the interest of full disclosure, Krause believes that, in so many ways, both Anthony Clayton and especially this reviewer flunk the learning curve test.

Krause seeks to correct the record of an inept French high command through an archival-based analysis of what he believes to be the understudied (at least compared to Verdun and the Somme) Second Battle of Artois fought in May-June 1915.[9] His purpose is to demonstrate that, rather than “a year of crass errors and blind alleys,” 1915 showcased “great intellectual fertility” in the French high command that laid the groundwork for “most of the improvements” of 1916 and beyond (p. 168). The fact that these “improvements” were “ultimately unsustainable” (p. 140) because they were acquired at the staggering costs of dead 350,000 *poilus* in 1915, the highest yearly tally of the war for the French, strikes Krause as a regrettable but necessary price of “learning.” “Such experience,” after all, “could not be gained by tactical inactivity.” The alternative in Krause’s view is that denied a chance of carrying out suicidal offensives, “[the soldiers] will quickly despair and conclude, as modern interpretation seems to have done, that the many attacks he is being asked to carry out, and perhaps the entire war itself, are ultimately pointless.” By sending French soldiers to their deaths in the tens of thousands, with half-baked tactical and operational schemes anchored in vague aspirations of breakthrough, “French officers, almost universally,” showed that they “cared very deeply about the lives and well-being of their men” (pp. 164-165).

The crux of Krause’s argument is that the Second Battle of Artois demonstrates that, in early 1915, a savvy French high command was ahead of the Germans in the three signature tactical innovations of the war--the rolling barrage, infiltration tactics, and the coordination of infantry-artillery operations. These tactics were constantly revised “in a process by which lessons learned at the front were collected, collated, processed and then distributed throughout the army...[in] a much more organic, living system by which the French army evolved and improved as the war progressed” (p. 165).

There are problems with Krause’s arguments: first, there is nothing new here and, second, Krause’s evidence actually contradicts the revisionist thrust of his arguments. Indeed, Krause’s belated consideration of the political and strategic consequences of the tactics he describes makes for confusing, even contradictory statements that leave one wondering exactly what his argument is. Third, he ignores memoirs and secondary sources that could have offered a more expanded “view from below” of the Artois hecatomb.

To take each of these points in turn: first, no one has accused the French army of lacking fruitful tactical ideas. Krause notes that the rolling (or creeping) barrage, a “moving wall of fire” which allowed following infantry to pounce upon German defenders, evolved from pre-war French artillery doctrine of *tir progressif*, and formed part of the tactical experimentation of the Artois battle, and became standard artillery practice at Verdun in 1916. Unfortunately, the technology trailed the concept in 1915, as

Krause recognizes, while the rolling barrage, like the artillery generally, never proved a solution to the trench deadlock because, no matter how well coordinated and sited, the German response was simply to thin out their front lines, deepen their defenses and strengthen their bunkers in the spirit of mobile defense. In fact, the rolling barrage elevated to an operational concept proved disastrous in 1917 on the Chemin des Dames, yet another failed battle that sparked the French army mutinies of that year.

As for infiltration tactics, Bruce Gudmundsson's 1989 book traced the evolution of *Stosstrupptaktik* as a "wedge tactic" in which elite infantrymen, supported by mobile artillery, "infiltrated" enemy lines, avoiding strongpoints in a race to the rear to disrupt enemy command and control, not to mention his artillery batteries. This tactic was perfected by the Germans at Riga and Caporetto in 1917 before the Michael offensives of 1918 broke the trench deadlock and restored mobility to Western Front.[10] Krause faults Gudmundsson for giving the impression that the French were always playing trench tactical catch-up, but the point was that opponents borrowed tactical concepts from their enemies: indeed the idea of infiltration tactics is usually traced to André Laffargue, an artilleryman who fought in the Second Battle of Artois.[11] The Germans operationalized their ideas better than the French especially from 1916 when, as Michael Geyer writes, Ludendorff famously shook up the German general staff to integrate "force, tactics and organization" in new ways. "The battle itself had to be rebuilt" through a bottom-up review.[12] German tactical superiority over the French in two world wars came from the fact that its army boasted Europe's best educated officer corps with a tradition of *Auftragstaktik*, a "leading through mission" command philosophy that originated with Scharnhorst and Gneisenau and that was institutionalized by Moltke to foster great initiative among subordinate commanders. This, combined with a more efficient command structure, translated into an organization whose training and operational flexibility knew no peer.[13]

Without an *Auftragstaktik* tradition and with the French high command seriously at odds in 1915 about how to approach the trench stalemate, the French army gradually refined a "controlled battle" concept, where operations came increasingly to be choreographed to fit the requirements of infantry-artillery coordination. Maybe this was for the best; Geyer opines that brilliant German command modernization led ultimately to "recklessness of leadership...defeat and revolution as a result of their innovative measures." [14] Krause concedes that innovation and adaptation was difficult to develop and implement in part because the French army had no coherent doctrine at the war's outset. Krause sees this as a strength because, had doctrine existed, the French would have been forced to amend it in any case. However, more importantly, the lack of a doctrine spoke to an absence of agreement which Krause acknowledges in the highest echelons of the French army about how to fight a modern war, and the lack of an institutional and intellectual context and a command consensus to evolve one, both essential conditions for "learning" to occur.

What the French command did develop in 1915 as Krause points out was Note 5779, a short compendium of "lessons learned" to guide offensive operations. Because "lessons learned" are invariably self-serving and inward-looking, Krause admits that Note 5779 was naïve in that it maintained that breakthrough was possible, demonstrated the "inexperience and indecisiveness" of the planning staff, and their refusal to recognize the likely costs in casualties. In the end, he acknowledges that the French "lacked a doctrine that could be easily communicated to all ranks, and which contained effective methodology that was not in need of much alteration by commanders in the field" (p. 142).

What Krause concedes is a high command that in 1915 was only beginning to come to grips with how to attack the trench deadlock, either through d'Urbal's ruinous "continuous battle" or a siege approach focused on limited objectives towards which Foch and Pétain were inching. Significant problems remained: Franco-British cooperation was non-existent, corps commanders exercised little oversight, divisions were often poorly disciplined and trained, soldiers did not know their chain of command, and so on (p. 155). Without consensus at the top and with all these organizational problems that Krause freely admits, all the ideas were simply that--suggestions floating about division and corps commands.

Indeed, Krause admits that “wishful thinking in terms of operational goals” so characterized the approach of Foch and d’Urbal in 1915 that, had more lucid commanders been in charge, the Second Battle of Artois would not have been fought at all (p. 17).

Which leads to the second problem with Krause’s work—the confused and contradictory nature of his argument discussed above becomes all too apparent when he considers the strategic consequences of the Artois. While he faults Clayton’s conclusion that 1915 was a year “of fruitless attacks...at heavy costs” as evidence of “condemn[ing] an entire years’ worth of effort in a single throwaway sentence,” (p. 14) he then agrees that “1915 cannot, in any reasonable way, be painted as a successful year for the Allies...” (p. 164). He admits that Pétain believed that the French lacked the ability in 1915 to seize Vimy Ridge, the main objective of the Second Battle of Artois (p. 160). And what difference would it have made in any case? The crumbling of the Eastern Front, beginning with the German attack of 2 May 1915, was not prevented by the sacrifice of the Second Battle of Artois. Vimy’s value to the Germans, as a lure to slaughter Allied troops trying to storm it, laid the foundation for Eric von Falkenhayn’s plans for a battle of attrition at Verdun in 1916. Vimy was only captured in April 1917 by the Canadians at horrific costs. The Germans never tried to recapture it—even in 1918 when manoeuver returned to the front, the battle swirled elsewhere.

In the wake of the Second Battle of Artois, the first complaints from both politicians and soldiers about Joffre’s leadership began to be heard. The Artois failed fully to settle debates in the French high command about tactical and operational approaches to trench warfare. Repeatedly Krause seems eager to launch a revisionist attack on “arm chair generals” (p. 167) and in particular this author who “casts down blame as if from a pulpit” (p. 2) who fail to “esteem” (p. 15) the French army—with every line, a reputation dies—only later to agree with them, simply fail to make a convincing case, or become bogged down in arcane disputes about tactics.

Finally, had Krause expanded his material beyond command documents to include some of the memoirs of fighting men who participated in the Second Battle of Artois, as well as a broad memoir and secondary literature on trench life, he might have better appreciated the difficulties, if not the impossibilities, of actually trying to execute the ill-conceived plans of the high command. To take out but one example: he lavishes much praise on Pétain for working out details of trench networks to facilitate attacks, but reading the actual descriptions of the confusing maze of shallow, water-filled ditches whose sides were collapsed by rain or artillery barrages provided by Blaise Cendrars, Louis Barthas and others demonstrates graphically how imperfectly command designs translated as practical combat prescriptions for success.[15]

Krause notes that the Artois massacre began the transition from d’Urbal’s “continuous battle” to Foch’s “siege” approach to the Western Front. This was certainly a recognition that “learning” at too high a price in casualties serves only to waste precious human and political, not to mention moral, capital. The “siege” concept was also imposed in part from below, as French soldiers increasingly asserted control over their “savior generals” even as the politicians dithered, by limiting their willingness to follow impossible, when not insane, orders.[16] This was the conclusion of Len Smith’s study of the 5th Infantry Regiment, another important book which Krause omits from his canon. Taking his cue from Jean Norton Cru’s observation that had French soldiers obeyed every command, the army would have ceased to exist by August 1915, Smith chronicles the increasing unwillingness of French soldiers based on the Artois butchery to offer themselves up as battle fodder for command tactical experiments in which they had no faith. Authority in the French army became a “negotiated power relationship” between officers and soldiers, citizens of a republic with a firm civic identity.[17]

In short, *Early Trench Tactics in the French army* offers some interesting detail about French tactics and operations at this transitional point of the war. However, the Second Battle of Artois, even by Krause’s account, can only be categorized as institutional confusion and a muddle on a tragic scale. In the

process, he simply reinforces the traditional view of a divided, when not clueless, French high command whose “learning curve” was purchased at an unacceptably high human and moral price.

NOTES

[1] Thomas Rabino, “2014, les artifices d’une polémique,” *Marianne*, December 5, 2012; http://www.marianne.net/2014-les-artifices-d-une-polemique_a224700.html.

[2] Hew Strachan and AL Kennedy, “Should the country spend £55 to Commemorate the First World War?” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/may/25/first-world-war-commemorations-debate>.

[3] Jasper Copping, “Historians Complain Government’s WW1 Commemoration ‘Focuses on British Defeats,’” *Daily Telegraph*, May 5, 2013. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/britain-at-war/10037507/Historians-complain-Governments-WW1-commemoration-focuses-on-British-defeats.html>.

The centenary in fact revives a longstanding debate over the quality of British generalship. See Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, The Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), pp. xvii-xxi.

[4] Seumas Milne, “The First War War: the Real Lessons of this Savage Imperial Bloodbath,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2012.

[5] Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, vol. I: *The First World War* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), p.2.

[6] Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy. Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle, Penn.: U.S. Army War College, 1982).

[7] Millett and Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, vol. I: *The First World War*, pp. 2, 3, 26.

[8] Carl Pépin, “La Première guerre mondiale: essai sur l’état de la recherche,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporaine* (11 January 2011): 10-11. <http://carlpepin.com/2011/01/11/la-premiere-guerre-mondiale-essai-sur-letat-de-la-recherche/>.

[9] This reviewer did write a brief article about the Second Battle of Artois, which the author does not cite. See Douglas Porch, “Artois, 1915,” *MHQ. The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 5/3(Spring 1993): 40-51.

[10] Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1989).

[11] Millett and Murray, *Military Effectiveness*, p. 21. Indeed, even the idea of elastic defense that the Germans applied so effectively was a French one. Holger Herwig, *The First World War. Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997), p. 165.

[12] Michael Geyer, “German Strategy, 1914-1945,” in Peter Paret, ed., *The Makers of Modern Strategy. From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 536-537. It is true that in early 1915, the German high command also lacked a “central agency where different military-political strategies could be debated,” but their concerns were principally on which front to focus. Herwig, *The First World War*, p. 131.

[13] Karl-Heinz Friese, *The Blitzkrieg Legend. The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 336-338; Dirk W. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik--Geschichte und Gegenwart einer Führungskonzeption* (Berlin: Report Verlag, 1993).

[14] Geyer, "German Strategy, 1914-1945," p. 537.

[15] Blaise Cendrars, *La main coupée* (Paris: Gaillimard, 1975); Louis Barthas, *Les carnets de guerre de Louis Barthas, Tonnelier, 1914-1918* (Paris: Editions la découverte, 1978); Alan Seeger, *Letters and Diary of Alan Seeger* (New York: Scribner's, 1917); Paul Ayres Rockwell, *American Fighters in the Foreign Legion (1914-1918)* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1930); V. Lebedev, *Souvenirs d'un volontaire Russe dans l'Armée française* (Paris: Librairie académique, 1917); Alphonse Marolf, *Gustave Marolf: Capitaine mitrailleur au 1er étranger, 1884-1916. Létres, récits, souvenirs* (Geneva: Imprimerie Central, 1943); Jean Reybaz, *Le 1er Mystérieux: souvenirs de guerre d'un légionnaire suisse* (Paris: André Barry, 1932).

[16] Indeed, Krause fails to mention that mutinies erupted in the final phases of the battle in the Foreign Legion. See Porch, *The French Foreign Legion* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), pp. 358-362.

[17] Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience. The Case of the Fifth Infantry Division in World War I* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 99-100, 258.

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