

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 6 (April 2006), No. 49

**Robert A. Doughty**, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. xiii + 587pp. Maps, notes, essay on sources, index. ISBN 0-674-01880-X. \$39.95 (hb).

Review by Elizabeth Greenhalgh, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

---

The River Marne rises in eastern France and flows northwards before it turns to run more or less due west towards Paris, joining the River Seine just east of the capital. During the First World War France fought two battles along that east-west stretch of the River Marne, first in 1914 and again in 1918. In September 1914 French troops had marched many kilometres in retreat after the earlier, unsuccessful engagements of the war. They wore the distinctive red trousers that made them visible on the battlefield, and they fixed bayonets to make frontal assaults. They lacked heavy artillery and their famous artillery piece, the 75 mm gun, was out-ranged by German guns. They turned around after reaching a line south of the Marne and, with a few British divisions alongside, attacked the advancing enemy when the opportunity presented. The “miracle of the Marne” was the result. It stopped the German advance and meant that Germany’s Schlieffen Plan had failed in its purpose: to knock out the French Army before moving to the East to deal with the Russian. The Marne also signaled the start of deadlock, with the enemy occupying significant portions of French territory from which they could not be driven until the war’s last few weeks.

Matters were very different in 1918 at the second Battle of the Marne. French troops no longer marched; they were transported from railheads in motor lorries. They were better fed and cared for; they had vastly better weapons and equipment. They were supported by thousands of artillery pieces and machineguns, by a swarm of light Renault tanks and by observer aircraft.[1] Although the Russians were no longer in the war, the French now had fresh American divisions alongside, as well as some British and Italian units. Despite their many losses and disappointments over nearly four years of war, on 18 July 1918 they stopped the last of the German Spring offensives and set in motion the series of victorious battles that led to the Armistice. The contrast between conditions in the two battles could not be more pronounced.

Yet France rarely receives credit for the massive transformations that this contrast exemplifies. As Robert A. Doughty puts it, French efforts have been dismissed as “irrational and impulsive” and criticized as “mindless assaults and senseless blunders” (p. 2). Some critics have even gone so far as to state that France has lost all the wars it fought since Napoleon’s day, forgetting (or preferring to ignore) that French premier Georges Clemenceau played just as significant role in preparing the Versailles Treaty as did British prime minister David Lloyd George or American President Woodrow Wilson.

There are several reasons why France’s enormous effort between 1914 and 1918 has been either disparaged or ignored. The Second World War and, in particular, the events of 1940 have cast a very long backward shadow over the earlier conflict. A search of the Bibliothèque Nationale’s online catalogue reveals a preponderance of “Grande Guerre” or “Guerre de ‘14-’18” in book titles, rather than “première guerre.” It also reveals a total of far fewer titles than would be the case in the British Library catalogue. The First World War is the usual phrase chosen by British and Commonwealth historians (or World War I for the Americans). A library search amongst English-language histories of 1914–18

---

conflict reveals another discrepancy. Nationalism is alive and well, and the story is told from the British or American or Commonwealth perspective. Until as recently as 2003 little was written in English about the French experience of the war. Some of the Carnegie Foundation's volumes on the economic and social aspects of France's war were translated into English in the 1920s and 30s, but, apart from Verdun, France's military effort has been little studied by English-speaking historians. Recent general histories of the war, however, supply an exception. Hew Strachan and David Stevenson take a world-wide view, thus including France; and the latter's study of French war aims remains the standard work.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 2003, however, two English-language works appeared: Cambridge University Press published in their "new approaches to European history" series a transatlantic work: *France and the Great War 1914–1918* by Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker; and Cassell published Anthony Clayton's *Paths of Glory: The French Army 1914–18*. The first concentrates on the experience of the war; neither "strategy" nor "tactics" appears in the index. Indeed, military operations are described only briefly. The second focuses much more closely on the military operations of the "sorely tried, glorious" French Army, with chapters on developments in manpower, weaponry and morale in between those dealing with the main battles. Clayton also has useful appendices on the organization of the French Army at various levels and times. It constitutes a mine of practical information that would require much hunting in French-language works with their notoriously poor indexes to unearth for oneself. It makes no claim, however, to be based on archival research, and it has no footnotes.

In the following year Michel Goya published his university research as *La Chair et l'acier: L'armée française et l'invention de la guerre moderne (1914-1918)* (Paris: Editions Tallandier, 2004). His theme is the successful evolution of French tactics to cope with battlefield conditions, despite the initial disasters that resulted from failures to understand changing doctrine and from lack of training. He concludes that it was "une grande force morale" (p. 415) that allowed the French Army to adapt and so to win victory. This argument accords well with Doughty's admiration for the *poilus'* courage and determination. Indeed he dedicates the book to them: "May their sacrifices and devotion to duty never be forgotten."

The deep research and balanced narrative of *Pyrrhic Victory* fills an enormous gap in the historiography. There is little overlap with the three books just described, none of which Doughty cites (although he mentions Clayton in his "Essay on Sources"), perhaps reflecting the amount of time that a book of this length and density takes to produce. His ten chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion) analyse the changes in French strategy, in strictly chronological terms, from the prewar transformation of the French Army following the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) through to victory. The solid backbone of the book is provided by the documents reproduced in the many volumes of annexes to the French official history of the war.<sup>[3]</sup> These annexes constitute an invaluable, but chronically under-utilised, source. They range from ministerial letters and statements of doctrine from the high command to intelligence assessments and after-action reports from small units. They are always (in my experience, at least) cited in full and with any marginalia noted. Doughty's official history skeleton is extended with other documents from the French Army archives in the Service historique de la défense in Vincennes, private papers of ministers and of the Republic's president, Raymond Poincaré, and a select number of published works, most notably the memoirs of generals, especially those of Marshal Joseph Joffre, the French Army's first commander-in-chief.

Chapters two through six cover the years of Joffre's command, that is, from the beginning of the war until the end of 1916. Thus they cover this period at slightly greater length than is the case for 1917 (two chapters) and for 1918 (two chapters). Under Joffre's leadership the 1914 war of movement becomes a siege war over the winter, then the offensive strategy of the latter half of 1915 gives way to a search for strategic alternatives (that is to say, the Dardanelles and Salonika expeditions) and to 1916's

---

strategy of attrition. Doughty's sub-title is *French Strategy and Operations in the Great War*, and this sums up his dual approach in each chapter. The French aim was relatively simple in these first two years of war: expel the invader and obtain compensation for the devastation wrought. The move from siege to the offensive and then to attrition indicates how Joffre sought the right strategy to achieve that aim. It is the operations that are less simple.

Doughty has to tread a narrow line between giving enough detail to make the individual battles comprehensible, yet not overloading the reader when the French were fighting more or less continuously in one sector of the front or another during these years. On the one hand, Doughty is meticulous in informing the reader about geography: First Army's objectives in its opening operations of August 1914, for example, were Sarrebourg, identified as being "sixty kilometers east of Nancy", and Donon, "twenty-five kilometers south of Sarrebourg" (p. 59)—but there is no reference in the text to the page number of the relevant map. In general, the reader probably needs more of the excellent clear maps (there are fifteen in all). On the other hand, the listings of numbers and calibers of artillery available sometimes makes for heavy going (crucial as this information is to the outcome of any battle), as do the pages where the author names the corps making up the armies involved. Since corps are conventionally numbered using Roman numerals, this can occasionally make for a page full of XXXs and IIIs (see, for example, p. 80). As army units do not figure in the index, neither armies nor corps, one wonders whether this level of detail was necessary. The general reader risks getting lost and the military historian probably requires more detail still.

The book has little to say on two important matters. The casualty rate in 1914 was the highest of the war, yet this is given little prominence. Despite commenting that "many of the casualties suffered in the attacks from August 14 to 23 were unnecessary and came from foolish bayonet charges against an entrenched enemy" (p. 75), Doughty is not critical of Joffre's command. The reader is told that after the opening campaign of the war Joffre had "achieved success" and "prevented the Germans from winning a decisive victory" with "some 400,000 French soldiers already dead" (p. 104). The repeated battles of 1915 would add many more to this total. More than half the wartime total number of French casualties was suffered between August 1914 and October 1915. Joffre's role in all this receives little criticism.

Nor do the politicians in 1917 receive much criticism. France's political leaders appointed an inexperienced general, Robert Nivelle, to replace Joffre who was eased out of command; they acquiesced in Lloyd George's underhand methods in subordinating the British commander-in-chief to Nivelle; they demonstrated little confidence in the man they had appointed by interviewing subordinate commanders about his plan of campaign; and finally they sacked him in May 1917 after a "sense of failure swept over the army and the government" (p. 354). Once again, Doughty does not make a judgement.

Nivelle's successor was Philippe Pétain. The French Army's third and final commander-in-chief is the subject of two studies by French historian Professor Guy Pedroncini.<sup>[4]</sup> Wisely, Doughty does not attempt to summarise Pedroncini's analysis of Pétain's handling of the mutinies or his account of the resistance to the German attacks in 1918 and the counter-attacks that led to the Armistice. Although in his 'Essay on Sources' he praises Pedroncini's work as giving the best detail and insight, Doughty prefers to cite the original documents in his chapters on Pétain's command. This provides a real service to the reader, because Pedroncini's work was written before the French Army archives staff finished cataloguing their holdings. Thus it is very difficult to track a particular document using Pedroncini's references.

One of the most illuminating aspects of the book concerns the difficult relationship between Pétain and his chief of the army general staff, then allied commander-in-chief, General Ferdinand Foch. This relationship had important consequences for the interwar years. Clemenceau imposed the positive "can-

do” Foch on the French Army by removing Petain’s right of appeal against the former’s orders, a right that the other allied commanders retained. However Foch’s very public disagreements with Clemenceau over the clauses of the peace treaty and his death in 1929 gave the defensive-minded Pétain the significant voice in interwar defence policy. Thus Doughty brings the story up to the point where his 1985 work, *Seeds of Disaster*, begins.

Although the influence of France’s “great war” on the French in 1940 is not in doubt, is it effective to view it through the prism of 1940, rather than on its own terms? The choice of “pyrrhic” for the main title seems to refer obliquely to later events. King Pyrrhus (c. 318-272 BC) ruled Epirus in northern Greece. He seems to have spent a large part of his time in fighting minor wars. When the Greek city of Tarentum in southern Italy concluded a treaty with Pyrrhus for support in its struggle with the Rome that now controlled most of Italy, Pyrrhus fought and won a victory over the Romans near the sea in the Gulf of Taranto. The cost of this victory, however, was so great that Pyrrhus is reputed to have said: “One more such victory and Pyrrhus is undone.” After more “victories” in Sicily and southern Italy he returned to his Epirote kingdom six years later, but continued his fighting career in Macedonia and Sparta, and was killed in action. Doughty’s title, *Pyrrhic Victory*, thus comes freighted with the implication that victory for the French in 1918 came at a ruinous cost. The choice of this oblique reference to the Second World War surely adds weight to the very charges of ‘mindless assaults’ which Doughty seeks to refute. The two marshals, Foch and Joffre, led the 1919 victory parade on July 14. Joffre wore his red trousers, but Foch wore the drab *horizon bleu* that a modern industrial war dictated. However, the procession began with a thousand *mutilés de guerre*, the blind, the limbless and the *gueules cassées*. Although Doughty does not go beyond the Armistice, the parade provides a striking illustration of his theme. His final sentence (p. 516) refers to the “disastrous defeat of 1940”, even though he has stated earlier in the paragraph (p. 515) that the French military leaders were “not bound for defeat in 1940 because they succeeded in 1918.”

The Belknap Press of Harvard University has done a splendid production job. The book is printed on good paper, and is properly bound. It has an excellent index, with intelligently sub-divided entries. It is not even expensive, given its length and authority. It is free of typographical errors, and the references are given as endnotes keyed to the page numbers of the text. It should stand for many years as an indispensable account of French strategy during the war years, especially for those historians and general readers who cannot get to the French archives or who lack the language skills to read French accounts.

---

## NOTES

[1] On the revolution in logistics and technology that occurred during the war, see the chapters by Martin van Creveld, “World War I and the Revolution in Logistics,” and Dennis E. Showalter, “Mass Warfare and the Impact of Technology,” in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: German Historical Institute, Washington DC, and Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 57-72 and 73-93.

[2] The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published fifty-four titles in its French series on the economic and social history of the war, forty-two in its British series, seven in its American series and thirty-one in its German series. They were published in collaboration with Yale University Press or Oxford University Press. They have been under-utilized by historians. David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: the First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), published in London by Allen Lane as *1914-1918: The History of the First World War*; David Stevenson, *French War Aims Against Germany*,

---

1914-1919 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. I, *To Arms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[3] France. Ministère de la Guerre. Service Historique, *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, 11 tomes (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1922-38). By way of example, tome 4 has three volumes. The first of these covers the period from the planning of the 1916 campaign at the end of 1915 to 1 May 1916. This volume has three volumes of annexed documents, 2318 in all, occupying 2739 quarto pages of text plus chronological lists.

[4] Guy Pedroncini, *Les Mutineries de 1917* (Paris: PUF, 1967), and *Pétain Général en Chef 1917-1918* (Paris: PUF, 1974).

Elizabeth Greenhalgh  
University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy  
e.greenhalgh@adfa.ed.au

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172