



## *Thunder in the Argonne: A New History of America's Greatest Battle*

by Douglas V. Mastriano.

Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2018. Pp. xii, 441. ISBN 978-0-8131-7555-3.

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In the fall of 1918, the US Army faced one of the greatest challenges in its history: the Meuse-Argonne campaign. When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, its Army contained just 130,000 men and lacked any experience of modern warfare. The first installment of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) arrived in France in June 1917 and immediately began a long period of training. Conscription eventually swelled the Army to ca. 4 million men, nearly 2 million of whom joined the AEF. The conscripts' lack of readiness would not have mattered, but in spring 1918 the Germans began a series of massive offensives intended to end the war before the Americans could complete their training. They almost succeeded.

General John Pershing, the American Commander in Chief, was under severe pressure to deploy AEF troops to help defeat the German attacks, and French and British leaders wanted to merge American units with their own forces. Pershing did allow a few AEF divisions, under *American* command, to fight at places like Cantigny and Belleau Wood. But he and his government insisted on an American field army occupying its own section of the Western Front and fighting an independent campaign: hence the US First Army, formed in August 1918, launched a massive attack in the Meuse-Argonne sector in late September as part of Marshal Ferdinand Foch's warring Hundred Days Offensive.

Could the AEF live up to the aspirations of Pershing, President Woodrow Wilson, and the American people? Could it win? In *Thunder in the Argonne*, historian and US Army colonel Douglas Mastriano argues convincingly that it did, but that the operation was not easy, pretty, or sparing of human lives.

Mastriano focuses on both American doughboys and, to a much lesser extent, their German opponents during the forty-seven days of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. He enriches his narrative with an assortment of personal stories, highlighting "feats of heroism and sacrifice on both sides" during "desperate and intense" fighting (257-58). He also supplements his text with an impressive collection of photographs depicting soldiers, rather than generals, trenches, and technology. His command of the sources enriches the book throughout.

The argument of *Thunder in the Argonne* is that the steadfast character of individual American soldiers was decisive in the Meuse-Argonne. The men of the First Army drove home their attacks in appalling conditions, "the worst terrain along the active Western front" (8), made more lethal by years of German fortification efforts. The cold autumnal rains compounded their misery. Since Pershing had already deployed his best divisions against the St. Mihiel salient in early September, more than half of the troops that attacked in the Meuse-Argonne were untested. Some green replacements had not even learned to fire weapons (50, 77). Officers and men consequently paid a high price in blood: casualties numbered 26,300 dead, 96,000 wounded.

It took "the personal initiative of soldiers in the AEF to break the German grip on the region" (169). Success—even survival—depended, Mastriano writes, on "seizing the initiative to accom-

plish the mission.... As is the case in many battles ... small actions have strategic effects” (112, 304). He notes that the characters of the neophyte soldiers were shaped by their Christian faith, citing well-known figures such as Francis Duffy and Alvin York, but also little known men like Lt. Michael Hayes, who was “unmatched in physical stamina and Christian humility,” a man of “unimpeachable” character, who kept a copy of the New Testament in his pocket “and spent most of his spare time reading it” (74, 224–25, 234–35, 258, 265), a model of the “type of soldier that the modern U.S. Army seeks to develop” (112).<sup>1</sup>

While deeply impressed by American (and German) soldiers, the author is no fan of General Pershing. (One senses that his own experience as a soldier informs his analysis of the First World War battlefield.) He notes that the general was “inexperienced in leading an army” and was served by any equally unproven staff (51). As for tactics, Pershing arrived in France determined to overcome the stultifying impact of the trenches with superior *élan*: aggressive, open warfare would prove the virtues of American fighting men. The rifle and the bayonet would master the artillery, machine guns, and gas of European industrial warfare. This theory, redolent of French *naïveté* in 1914, was never fully tested in the AEF, few of whose men were trained in any tactical system; those with some knowledge had acquired it from British and French instructors who, by 1918, were painfully familiar with battlefield realities. The author aptly quotes Georges Clemenceau, “death defying courage was not enough to win a strategic success,” and Marshall Foch, “the Americans had to learn in just a few months or even a few weeks what had taken us several years” (38). Fortunately, by the time the Meuse-Argonne campaign reached its culmination, many Americans had been retrained in modern tactics.

Mastriano’s catalog of the AEF’s professional weaknesses and failures does not end with tactics. Ambiguous orders and lack of coordination and liaison were still glaring problems in the final days of the campaign (137–39, 195, 203, 320). Pershing showed poor “situational awareness” when he ordered his commanders to the front, where they lacked communications and perspective on the battle, as well as the ability to control their units (97). Mastriano argues persuasively that Pershing’s “draconian” and “merciless” policy of removing division commanders created dysfunction and impeded progress; in short, the “command climate” was poor (108, 117). Pershing “seemed not to understand that loyalty works both ways and that it is built on trust not fear” (177).

The author believes the general squandered soldier’s lives by pressing the battle and prolonging the killing to the very last second, even though he knew the war was about to end; eleven thousand men were killed or wounded in the last eleven hours of the war (324, 333). Finally, Pershing was “preoccupied with the immediate fight, the day-to-day, instead of thinking forward in time and space about what needed to be done to maintain the army’s momentum” (148). Mastriano agrees with Foch that Pershing “could not handle the task at hand and ... his lack of experience threatened the entire advance of the Western Front” (174). These judgments challenge Pershing’s iconic status in some of the existing scholarship.

The book has its flaws. The abundance of individual stories (however compelling) sometimes obscures the larger picture; there are an awful lot of units, places, and participants to keep track of. Sometimes Mastriano himself seems a bit confused: was the 82nd Infantry Division nicknamed the “Reserve” or the “All American”? (207). A less dense account might have been more appealing

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1. Mastriano is one of the few contemporary military historians who thank organizations like the Bill Ridge Ministry of Living Truth and the Pond Bank Community Church (355, 357–58) for inspiration.

to some readers.<sup>2</sup> Poor copyediting has failed to winnow out awkward phrases (lead “poured into the earth”), odd military-sounding expressions (“wall of fires”), repetitions (“brilliant” in four consecutive paragraphs), some lengthy digressions (soldiers from Wurttemberg) (152, 247, 34–35, 55), and occasional colloquialisms. Readers might want more about soldiers’ lives in rest areas behind the front, the effects of the Spanish influenza, and Americans’ relations with French civilians and soldiers. Typically, logistics gets short shrift: how exactly, for instance, did 45,000 tons of supplies reach the fighting men each day?<sup>3</sup>

These critiques aside, Mastriano’s book makes its case: American doughboys in the Meuse-Argonne campaign “fought their first truly modern [battle]” (xi), which, bloody as it was, drew in the German reserve divisions and thus “made a significant contribution to ending the war” (5). Marshal Paul von Hindenburg’s verdict was surely right: “American power made itself manifest on the battlefield in the form of an independent army ... and validated itself there decisively” (93). Ironically, most Americans would soon see the Meuse-Argonne in a very different light—as an emblem of the futility and waste of the First World War.

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2. See, e.g., Michell Yockelson (thanked in Mastriano’s acknowledgments!), *Forty-Seven Days: How Pershing’s Warriors Came of Age to Defeat the German Army* (NY: New American Library, 2016), in which Pershing’s mistress Micheline Resco gets a part.

3. For these topics, consult Richard Faulkner, *Pershing’s Crusaders: The American Soldier in World War I* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2017).