



The French Army and the First World War by Elizabeth Greenhalgh.

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Which French Army does this book's title refer to? The army of August 1914, which surged to attack the Germans following the blueprint of Plan XVII and suffered breathtaking casualties at the Battle of the Frontiers? The army of the "Miracle of the Marne," which kept the Germans from flanking Paris and prolonged the war for another four years? The army of 1915, which manned the Western Front at high cost while the British readied their expeditionary force? The army of 1916, which survived decimation to win the Battle of Verdun? The army of 1917, with its mutinies during the wastefully inept and demoralizing Nivelle Offensive? Or the army that drove back the Ludendorff Spring Offensives and won the war beside its Allies and colonial troops in November 1918?

In truth, the French Army evolved and changed under unprecedented pressures as it fought the bulk of the German Army with vigor and bravery. The image of that heroic, much suffering army has, however, been tarnished by the devastating defeat of its successor in 1940, during World War II. And, too, popular culture depictions of the war like Stanley Kubrick's film *Paths of Glory* (1957), have depicted a criminally negligent and callous French senior officer corps that squandered the lives of its men.

Casual students of the history of war too often forget that, like the Red Army in World War II, the French Army in World War I faced the most formidable German military forces. And like the United States, the "arsenal of democracy" in World War II, the French provided much of the arms, ammunition, and other matériel used to defeat the Germans in World War I. Furthermore, the French Army's innovation of infantry tactics based on dispersion and disruption in the First World War anticipated the Germans' often celebrated "Stormtroop" tactics in the Second.¹

Historian Elizabeth Greenhalgh² (Univ. of New South Wales) has written a perceptive, deeply researched, corrective study of an army that, more than any other, "won" the Great War, however costly and short-lived that victory proved to be.³ She begins by briefly surveying the prewar tensions in French society regarding the military, the Dreyfus Affair, the required length of service for conscripts, and the best strategy to adopt in an anticipated war with Germany.⁴ She then turns to the opening weeks of the war, when France paid such a high price for its commitment to the offensive. French élan, she points out, was no match for German heavy artillery and superior numbers of machine guns. French forces nevertheless rallied under the phlegmatic General (later Marshal) Joseph Joffre to stop the German advance on Paris. When neither side could outflank the other in a "race to the sea," they dug in along a front extending from the English Channel to Switzerland. The war would indeed be "over by Christmas"—Christmas 1918.

1. See Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (NY: Praeger, 1989).

2. She is the author of *Foch in Command* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2011) and *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2009).

3. See Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005).

4. The standard study remains Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army 1871-1914* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1981).

In 1915, the French took the offensive, attacking a skilled opponent on mostly unfavorable ground, but, Greenhalgh concludes, they lacked the resources needed to achieve a decisive victory. Insufficient heavy artillery, defective shells, retrograde tactics, ill-organized (bunched-up) troops posed fatal problems. Besides the major offensives in Champagne and Artois, Greenhalgh details minor operations as well, many of them simply “food for the communiqués.” Joffre “wanted to keep the troops busy, but the cost in human lives was huge. Not surprisingly, there were some minor revolts. The number of voluntary [self-]mutilations increased” (82). Commanders, fearing to lose control of their men, resorted to death sentences (increasingly commuted over the course of the war) for such acts. As the author documents, generals Philippe Pétain and Ferdinand Foch approved their share of executions for cowardice or desertion.

Greenhalgh skillfully clarifies the larger context of the war, including political machinations and plans for economic mobilization. She notes the growing disconnect between the troops’ perceptions of the war and those of the civilians who cheered at the home front.

In 1916, the Germans nearly bled the French Army white at the Battle of Verdun. Greenhalgh describes the sacrifices made to win that horrendous battle and to contribute to the Allied cause during the four-month Battle of the Somme, where the French, having learned the lessons of 1915, outperformed their British counterparts. Their innovative infantry tactics and better coordination with artillery and other combat arms inflicted a heavy toll on the German Army, which would look elsewhere for victory in 1917.

The German strategic withdrawal to the prepared defenses of the Hindenburg Line doomed Gen. Robert Nivelle’s offensives even before they were launched in April 1917.⁵ Detailing the backbiting and doubt that preceded Nivelle’s attacks, Greenhalgh concludes that he was promoted too quickly and beyond his capabilities:

Nothing had caused Nivelle to change his mind about the offensive, neither the German [strategic] withdrawal, nor the delays to the start of his offensive (the original date had been 15 February), nor the difficulties with [Field Marshal Sir Douglas] Haig. Nivelle took no account of the news that no coordinated attacks were to be made on other fronts, such as Joffre had planned.... Despite all these new circumstances, surprise and speed, brutality and violence remained the watchwords.... Nivelle’s stubbornness was to contribute to a great disaster.... He had allowed himself to be used by [Prime Minister David] Lloyd George; and he had been unable to impose his authority on his subordinates.... [He launched much-delayed attacks even after] a copy of operational orders had disappeared from the body of a French soldier.... Although Nivelle [was] sacked ..., it was the pauvres cons du front, the poor bloody infantry, who paid the greatest price. (183–84, 198–99)

Nivelle’s disastrous offensive caused some in that poor bloody infantry to mutiny, or, as Greenhalgh puts it, display “collective indiscipline.” Recognizing his troops had been driven beyond endurance, General Pétain acted to restore morale. Here Greenhalgh asks a pregnant question: “Did the men accept to continue [their service in the line] because Pétain promised no more costly offensives ... or were there no more costly offensives because the men refused to undertake them?” (213). Likely it was both: Pétain accurately gauged the spirit of his men and the average poilu (grunt), despite threats of execution, rightly protested the folly of extreme offensives against withering German fire.

In her most original chapter, entitled “Restoring the Army,” Greenhalgh assesses Pétain’s reforms in the aftermath of the mutinies, detailing changes in training, tactics, and weaponry, as well as his commitment to “limited-objective offensives, well supported by artillery and costing as few losses to

5. William Astore and Dennis Showalter, *Hindenburg: Icon of German Militarism* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005) chap. 3.

the infantry as possible.... [T]hanks to Pétain's actions, the French Army was rested, better trained, and better equipped" in 1918, Greenhalgh concludes, for the German onslaught that all knew to be forthcoming (270).

The Ludendorff Offensives pushed the British back in March and early April 1918. As Pétain had been the architect of restoration in 1917, Foch emerged as the architect of victory in 1918. At long last the French and British, bolstered by fresh American troops, recognized the need for an overall commander in chief to coordinate their operations against the Germans. Foch was the offensive yin to Pétain's defensive yang. Gen. Émile Fayolle believed France needed "to combine them to make one single man, a true complete leader" (286). Unfortunately, for the time being, France and its allies had to deal with two men who, Greenhalgh notes, "were in complete disagreement over strategy" (291).

The German breakthrough on the Chemin des Dames (Operation Blücher) at the end of May further strained relations between the two commanders. But Foch kept his head and the crisis passed. The French knew more German offensives were coming and successfully blunted them, but at a cost of some 400,000 casualties, including nearly 200,000 killed or missing in action. "It was time," Greenhalgh writes, "to take back the initiative" (311).

Foch's famous counterattack began on 18 July 1918. The French enjoyed the advantages of complete surprise, careful planning, and excellent morale. "As well as being an inter-allied battle, Foch's July counter-offensive was notable as the first large-scale combined arms battle" (316), what became known as Blitzkrieg a generation later. At the Second Battle of the Marne (15 July–9 August), the French integrated tanks, aircraft, artillery, and infantry in successive attacks that once and for all put the Germans on the defensive.⁶ The Battle of Amiens (8 August), "the black day of the German Army," in Gen. Erich Ludendorff's phrase, opened the Hundred Days campaign that sealed the fate of a tired, diseased, and dispirited German Army.

The book's second to last chapter concerns armistices and demobilization. Having expected the war to last well into 1919, the French were pleasantly surprised to be negotiating an armistice with a prostrate Germany in the fall of 1918. Greenhalgh credits in particular the French First and Fourth Armies for keeping the pressure on. As she notes, over 2.5 million French soldiers were fighting on the Western Front in the closing stages of the war, the largest Allied contingent; yet, she adds, "The French contribution during the last months of the war ... is generally overlooked in English-language accounts" (343).

Foch's order of the day on 12 November 1918 is worth quoting in full:

To All Ranks of the Allied Armies: After having halted the enemy resolutely, you attacked him for months with unwearied faith and energy, and without respite. You have won the greatest battle in History and saved the most sacred cause: the liberty of the world. Be proud. You have covered your standards with immortal glory. May posterity be always grateful. (368)

The final chapter strikes an elegiac note. Greenhalgh writes that not only, or even chiefly, Foch and Pétain—the "sword and buckler"—but an "immense national citizens' army" won the war for France. The price of that victory "almost defies belief" (377)—some 1.4 million dead and missing. By war's end, "600,000 widows, 760,000 orphans and 650,000 elderly ... had lost their breadwinner" (397). In 1922, the government was paying disability pensions to 1,117,874 veterans. Sadly, the prestige France had gained during the war quickly waned in the changing political conditions of the 1920s. And much

6. See Michael S. Neiberg, *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 2008).

worse was to come. But in 1919, the French people rightly celebrated their victory and mourned their dead.⁷

The French Army and the First World War is a tour de force and will remain the single best book on its subject for the foreseeable future. Enhanced by well chosen photographs, detailed tables, and a helpful, concise bibliographic essay, it is essential reading for all students of the French military, World War I, and military history in general.

7. For a well-illustrated and fascinating study of French war memorials and their meanings, see Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1999).