



Dying to Learn: Wartime Lessons from the Western Front

by Michael A. Hunzeker.

Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2021. Pp. xi, 245. ISBN 978-1-5017-5845-4.

Review by Carl Cavanagh Hodge, University of British Columbia (carl.hodge@ubc.ca).

Why do some militaries learn faster than others? This is the central question of *Dying to Learn*, a comparative study of the adaptive capacities of the British, French, and German armies during World War I. Although political scientist Michael Hunzeker (George Mason Univ.) is concerned with the learning ability of military organizations in general, he concentrates here on the similarly equipped and organized armies on the Western Front. He argues that, once locked in a stalemate in autumn 1914, the war became a matter not of what each side brought to the struggle but *how* exactly it used it. The German Army adapted faster than the British or French, though not enough to avoid deadlock and defeat in 1918.

From his detailed case studies, Hunzeker develops a theory of wartime learning—assessment, command, and training (ACT)—that can jointly “play an outsized role in wartime learning” (7). Fighting effectively against a capable adversary depends on an army’s doctrinal assessment mechanism, its delegation of command on the battlefield, and its control over training.

Hunzeker specializes in conventional deterrence, war termination, military adaptation, and simulation design. His work has appeared in specialized scholarly journals as well as two previous books.¹ The thesis of *Dying to Learn* is that the German Army of 1914–18 met the ACT criteria better than its adversaries. Its speed of operations suited the circumstances of the opening phases of the war when nothing went as planned. On the Eastern Front, the Russian Army mobilized more quickly than anticipated, while the French Army in the West managed to avoid a collapse of its position before Britain could reinforce the Entente cause.

The German Army remained on the strategic defensive in the west for most of the next four years. Aside from offensives in Ypres (1915), undertaken to rationalize the army’s defensive lines, and Verdun (1916), the German Army sought to repel British and French attacks with as few men as possible. This reflected both manpower constraints and the decision to prioritize the war against Russia.

The Eastern Front consumed most of the German Army’s attention and resources. In August 1915, for example, only six divisions were available in reserve for the entire Western Front (66–67). Coping with adversaries of greater material strength, the Germans simply had to outfight them. It did so, Hunzeker explains, in a manner commensurate with ACT theory yet not wholly explained by it. Cultural traits, such as commanders’ willingness to listen to suggestions from below counted for something as well. This was especially true of the army’s work on assault tactics but also played out with combined arms and elastic defense in depth. The army rapidly transmitted its new tactical doctrines, however radical, through an efficient top-down approach to training (93).

1. Viz., with Alexander Lanoszka, *Conventional Deterrence and Landpower in Northeastern Europe* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2019) and, with Lanoszka et al., *Question of Time: Enhancing Taiwan’s Conventional Deterrence Posture* (Arlington: Ctr for Policy Studies, 2018).

Although British and French armies also mastered combined arms fighting, they were slow to adopt new assault tactics across all their units. The French rigid insistence that ground be held to the last man made it very costly to contain the Germans' new assault techniques—at least until German strength was exhausted (156–59). But Hunzeker argues that “even if it is true that Britain and France were content to sit back and grind the German Army out of existence, assault tactics, combined arms, and elastic defenses in depth were almost undoubtedly the best possible way to do it” (174–75).

The author addresses the pertinence of the British, French, and German experiences in World War I to the learning capacity of the US military in Vietnam and Iraq. He finds, quite correctly, that the application of military learning efforts in total war on the Western Front differed sharply from the experience of the US Army in a limited war in far different historical and strategic contexts decades later. For that reason, *Dying to Learn* should be read with care by today's military professionals.

Hunzeker notes only in passing that the Germans' learning experience of 1914–18 “went on to form the core of the German Army's blitzkrieg doctrine in the Second World War” (63). The radically altered way of war the Wehrmacht applied in the Battle of France in 1940, after all, accomplished in six weeks what its Great War predecessor failed to in four years. This was in part due to the inferior interwar learning efforts of its adversaries—the same adversaries. As a catalyst for learning, apparently, there is no substitute for catastrophe.