



The Western Front: A History of the Great War, 1914–1918 by Nick Lloyd.

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Given the overwhelming literature on the First World War, how can a reviewer hope to rank a new volume in its proper place? Perhaps the best question is not whether the book is unique, but whether its perspective and analysis add to our understanding of that “bubbling, fermenting experiment in killing that changed the world” (xix). Nick Lloyd’s history of the Western Front certainly meets that criterion.

Lloyd (King’s College London) has written acclaimed works on Passchendaele and Loos and the hundred days that ended the war. In *The Western Front*, volume 1 of an intended trilogy,¹ he stakes out a middle ground between narrow scrutiny of discrete battles, tactics, and weapon systems² on the one hand, and broader accounts of the entire war on the other.³ Lloyd concentrates on military leaders, their decision making, and their operational results, leavening his narrative with vivid descriptions of engagements and first-person accounts by ordinary soldiers of both sides. The narrative centers on key battles that illustrate changes in strategic perspective, operational concepts, and tactics over three phases of the war: Liege to the second battle of Champagne (Aug. 1914–Nov. 1915), Verdun to the second battle of the Aisne (Jun. 1917–Nov. 1918), and Messines Ridge to Compiègne (Dec. 1915–May 1917). Lloyd explains:

My aim throughout has been to write a narrative history of those four and a half years; to tell the story as closely as possible, without burdening the text with abstract theorizing or lengthy commentaries on differing interpretations (of which there are many). Instead, I have tried to bring readers closer in so that they might see the war, sit beside the main characters, and form their own judgement. It has been written primarily through the lens of those senior commanders who fought the war at what modern militaries refer to as the “operational level.” Politics clearly intruded on this domain, and the struggle on the home front to manage resources and maintain domestic content was crucial to the war effort, but my main focus has been on those fighting generals who were faced with the reality of modern warfare in all its horror and complexity. How they tried to deal with it, how they succeeded or (more likely) failed to do so, is at the heart of this book. (xx)

The story is told “from the perspective of all the main protagonists,” namely Germany, France, Britain, and the United States. Particularly fascinating is the author’s account of the fraught relations among the military commanders, which often undermined planning and operational effectiveness.

1. Vol. 2, on the Eastern Front, will appear in 2024 and vol. 3, on Africa and the Middle East, in 2027.

2. E.g., Lyn Macdonald, *Somme* (London: M. Joseph, 1983) and Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914–1918* (NY: Praeger, 1995), as well as Lloyd’s own books on Passchendaele and Loos.

3. E.g., John Keegan, *The First World War* (NY: Knopf, 1999); David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (NY: Basic Books, 2004); Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (NY: Penguin, 2003), or Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2018).

Lloyd supports his analysis with in-depth research encompassing government archives, personal memoirs, letters, and biographies; he also taps secondary sources from 1918 to the recent outpouring occasioned by the war's centenary. He synthesizes his research to clarify the pendulum swings between offense and defense, technological and tactical innovations and countermeasures, and the continual quest by all the armies to restore mobility to the battlefield. His focus on the operational level could easily have devolved into an extended description of "attacking arrows on the map." But he achieves a well rounded and gripping narrative by his attention to strategic context, political and home front matters, and the effects of operations on everyone from commanders to common soldiers.

Three of the book's features stand out. First is the quality of the writing. Evidence and analysis are woven together in lucid and concise prose. Second is Lloyd's attention to the French Army, which he feels has been "consistently overlooked in much of the writing on this period,"⁴ when it had in fact taken on "the lion's share of the fighting, often leading the way with many of the technological and tactical developments [of a recognizably] 'modern style of warfare'" (xxii). Third, Lloyd attacks the "lions led by donkeys" trope without excusing or minimizing the failures of senior commanders.⁵ He is not the first to do so.⁶ But he is especially adept at identifying external constraints, factors within the control of commanders, the ability (or lack thereof) to learn from battlefield experiences, and the impact of improved or novel technologies. For example, in describing the first massed tank assault at Cambrai (20 Nov. 1917) he highlights the plan of attack and the changes in artillery techniques that allowed "pre-registration" of the guns leading to tactical surprise based on the actions of both tanks and artillery. He also shows that General Haig⁷ and his subordinates had planned a breakthrough of the German defenses without having reserves available to hold the advanced positions to be seized, let alone exploit such a breakthrough. Further, Haig was complacent about German reserves and the possibility of a counterattack. When it came on 30 November, it "hit the British hard, like a blow to the kidneys" (371).

In terms of weaknesses, I would offer a small complaint about the maps. When publishers are so often reluctant to devote page space and editorial effort to maps, any at all are welcome—and this book includes fourteen, which are clear and easily to read. But they depict only an overview of terrain and the front lines, with no details of unit positions below numbered army level and no indications of troop movements beyond, in some, dates showing successive positions of the front lines. Given the battle descriptions that typically reference the actions of corps and divisions, it would have been useful in at least some cases to see those units on the maps. While not a major flaw, readers who want more detail about unit locations and movements related to the battles described will have to consult a separate atlas.

Overall, I highly recommend this book. It is the best kind of scholarly work, using deep research and careful analysis to refine our understanding of the operational dilemmas and decisions

4. Lloyd acknowledges Robert Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U Pr, 2005) and Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Univ Pr, 2014) as a foundation for his analysis.

5. The indictment of WW I commanders, especially British, as incompetent "donkeys" who sent their men to slaughter in battle after battle was popularized by Alan Clark in *The Donkeys* (London: Pimlico, 1961). Subsequent scholarship has debunked the stereotype of uncaring stupidity and unwillingness to adapt, but it remains common in popular culture.

6. See, among many others, J.P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Univ. Pr, 2009); Peter Simpkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front, 1916–1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014); and John Terraine, *White Heat: The New Warfare, 1914–1918* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1982).

7. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force since December 1915.

faced by commanders, all in a coherent narrative that makes nuance and detail not only accessible but a pleasure to read. It would be a useful addition to the libraries of serious students of the war and of interest to more general readers as well. Assuming they meet the high bar set by this work, I look forward to the second and third volumes of Nick Lloyd's trilogy.