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Tim Gale, *The French Army's Tank Force and Armoured Warfare in the Great War: The Artillerie Spéciale*. Farnham UK, Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2013. xvi + 263 pp. Maps, tables, photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$124.95 (cl). ISBN 1409466612.

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Once one has the title, the foreword materials, and the eleven-page introduction to Tim Gale's new book, there are few surprises to come. At least for those with advance knowledge that the French tank experience in the four year "Great War" can be compressed to 1917-1918. And if the subject is crystal clear from the outset, so is the book's interpretive direction. It is found in the opening abstract, in the foreword provided by the editor of the Ashgate *Studies in First World War History* and on at least eight occasions in Gale's introduction.

No one could possibly miss the intent. This is *not* going to fall into an older interpretive tradition of finding fault with the French army, mocking the alleged dull-wittedness of its commanders, and pillorying their alleged scorn of one of the most recent--and deadly--instruments of modern war. No, this belongs to a newer interpretive wave closely associated with the Department of War Studies, King's College, London.

Simply put, and here singularly, French decision-makers deserve more respect than was often accorded them by many earlier scholars. Having begun the war with no tanks, the Army and War Ministry soon grasped the potential of this mobile "artillery," acquired some important tactical lessons from costly battle experiences in 1917, and learned how to produce many more and much better tanks in the last two years of the war. One should note that these men were not exclusively of the military caste. True, the rapid adjustments required in a time of sustained military crisis depended on the foresight and flexibility of a high command and senior officer corps drawn principally from Artillery and Infantry. But they, in turn, drew upon the political authority of various cabinet ministers, upon the technical expertise of armourers, automotive and munitions experts from great firms like Renault and Schneider, and inevitably upon the cooperation of bureaucrats in sundry ministries to expedite passage from conception to implementation.

There are nine chapters subsequent to the introduction, all directly or indirectly inspired by a resolve "to examine the French tanks' battlefield performance in detail..." (p. 8). The three non-battlefield exceptions are the shortest of the collection. The first, entitled "French Material and Technological Responses to the Western Front," covers the genesis of their armoured, tracked vehicles from conception in the course of 1916 to application in the costly Nivelle offensive in the spring of 1917--the latter being the subject of a considerably longer chapter two. The third, entitled "Battle Behind the Lines," concentrates on the lessons learned that spring and then, remarkably, implemented with considerable success only six months later during the October battle of Malmaison--the subject of a lengthier chapter four. The fifth, addressed to the complex debates over the relative merits of the newer and lighter Renault tanks and the older and heavier Schneider and St. Chamond models, serves as the prologue to the final four chapters: the sixth on the battle at Chaudun in May 1918; the seventh and eighth on battles in June-July at Cutry, Antheuil and Soissons; and the ninth on the Somme-Puy battle

in Champagne in September and October. All told, and excluding the introduction, conclusion, photographs, maps and tables, those closing chapters on engagements between May and October 1918 represent well over 40 percent of Gale's entire text. No question but that the promise of battlefield performance "in detail" is amply fulfilled, the more so if one includes the earlier and meticulous accounts of the Nivelles and Malmaison offensives.

Those details, Gale argues, are essential to an understanding of the French tank experience in World War One and who could disagree? With a temporal dimension pretty much confined to 1917-1918, it is possible for him to explore in unprecedented depth the evolution of French armour theory and tactical practice, a remarkably rapid evolution spurred by desperation. That depth and attendant detail involve several closely related and serial components. One of them is armoured tactics, both theoretical and practical, both arising from hard-won experience as the early tanks confirmed not only their own destructive potential but also their vulnerabilities. In the face of well-entrenched fire from field guns, trench mortars and land mines, it became obvious from the Nivelles experience onward that these armoured tractors needed protective cover from their own heavy artillery, and assistance from infantry units trained to exploit armour-achieved gaps in enemy defences.

Another evolving and clearly related component was tank construction: their requisite firepower, thickness of armour, size of fuel tank, engine horsepower, and tread width all contributed to their weight, operating range, speed, and vulnerability on entrenched, muddy, sloped, and obstacle-strewn terrain. So it was that conclusions drawn from an extended chain of battlefield experiences in 1917-1918 came to be applied to the evolving construction of later tank models. This kind of detail, from door hinges to exhaust systems, Gale argues, is essential to understanding the hard-core battlefield deployment of French armour in 1917-1918.

A third essential is familiarity with the bureaucratic machine that could either facilitate or impede progress from battlefield experience to requisite technology. If it takes a certain kind of reader to be fascinated by small-scale tactical operations, and another by the nuts and bolts of tank construction, the same is true for a subject like bureaucracies. And only a naïf would think such a subject less intricate than that of calculating the thickness of armour. However quickly soldiers believed they were learning from successive field engagements, they could not move faster than the processes of functionaries, committees, and consultative bodies in the War Ministry and the Armaments Ministry would allow. Indeed, even that one-sentence-characterization of process suggests simplicity itself unless one adds to it a reference to the various bureaucracies involved in the acquisition of material resources—for instance coal, iron and petrol—all essential to tank production, or to those within a Finance Ministry besieged by an ongoing torrent of competing demands.

Thus summarized, when one reflects on this collection of interrelated complexities and the desperate need to defend against an advancing enemy or pursue a retreating one, it is difficult to contest Gale's opening and concluding argument. The indelible picture we have of World War One, of senseless infantry assaults against machine guns, as appalling as it is—and should remain—is not a complete picture of battlefield experience and not, in its very simplicity, a fair characterization of all commanders, French or other. Indeed, the French high command, bureaucrats and industry proved more imaginative and flexible in their responses to armoured technology than is sometimes allowed.

This, predictably, is the central point of Gale's formal conclusion, a point made and— as in the introduction— remade to ensure no one is misled. Relying heavily upon early postwar accounts by tank veterans, [1] Gale agrees that it is doubtful whether their wartime tactical operations "could have been conducted more successfully" (p. 219). This *Artillerie Spéciale* proved itself "remarkably effective, particularly considering the primitive material it had to work with" (p. 220). Indeed, "the French tank effort was both effective and intelligently handled" and "the evidence ... suggests" that the French Republic "adapted to the rigours of modern warfare, particularly in relation to armour, remarkably

effectively as the war went on” (pp. 226, 230). With respect to the French army, broadly speaking, “it is very hard to see,” therefore, “how its performance could reasonably be considered unintelligent, particularly in reference to the performance of the officers and men of the A[rtillerie] S[péciale]” (p. 231). I have no quarrel with this argument, although I would feel more confident if I knew that similar conclusions had been drawn by some of France’s top commanders and their lieutenants, people like Joseph Joffre for starters, and others like Charles Bugnet, Marie Emile Fayolle, Louis Franchet d’Esperey, Maurice Gamelin, Henri Gouraud, Bernard Serrigny, Maurice Weygand— none of whose memoirs or postwar accounts appear in the bibliography.

There is another element that is faintly unsettling. While Gale is determined to defend the army against charges of sloth-like adjustments to armoured warfare, he sometimes prefers to defend by prosecuting someone else—namely civilians whose prescience about the potential of tanks he deems less acute than that of the soldiers. Although tank production steadily increased under their aegis, Armaments ministers Albert Thomas and Louis Loucheur “occasionally interfered...well beyond their responsibilities and competence...” as a result of which, Gale suggests, the soldiers were “let down” (p. 225). Moreover, between March and September 1917, when Thomas was Minister and Loucheur his Under-Secretary for *Fabrications de guerre*, their respective staffs engaged in internecine “bureaucratic in-fighting” that predictably “did nothing to help the French war effort” (p. 226).

It is here that I consciously succumb to that familiar condition known as reviewer’s malady, an ailment that encourages one to confuse works completed with works still in progress. What follows is a series of suggestions, offered post facto, that might have benefited Tim Gale’s first book.

The first picks up on his periodic references to the braking effect bureaucracies can have on decision-making. That seems compelling enough, but the provision of organizational charts for the High Command, the War and the Armaments ministries would have strengthened the point. Without such devices, only the most engrossed reader will stay on top of those complex inter- and intra-ministerial exchanges. For instance, on a single page there are references to a *sous-secrétariat des inventions*, which had been moved from the *Ministère de l’Armement* to the *Ministère de la Guerre*, a *sous-direction d’Artillerie d’assaut*, which reported to the *direction d’artillerie*, and a *section technique de l’artillerie d’assaut* (p. 75). Even allowing for the fact that bureaucracies are not static, a few organigrams strategically placed would have been helpful.

The second, related, is more daunting. As complex as two ministries and their respective under-secretariats are, if one is going to attribute some degree of blame to bureaucrats, one could have been more inclusive. By November 1917, Georges Clemenceau was not only Premier, but War minister, with six *sous-secrétariats* under his survey. Finance had two; Commerce and Industry, two; Navy, one; Transport, one; Agriculture and Supply, one. If war had complicated and visibly stressed the lives of soldiers, so had it those of politicians, civil servants and industries charged with national defence. By concentrating almost exclusively on War and Armaments, if anything Gale *under-estimates* the wartime achievement of producing a lot of tanks in a short period of time— tanks, like ships and airplanes, that required armour, firepower, fuel, and money. [2]

If the first two complaints implicitly urge Gale to take us to a higher perch so that we can appreciate the systemic complexity, a third is of a similar nature. There are four maps in this book, each understandably localized to serve a text concentrating on detailed tactical operations, but none offering that higher perch from which a reader might locate the French capital or the Belgian border. True, the Ashgate series is explicitly aimed “at a post-graduate academic audience,” an expression apparently intended as a warning: “This is not meant for tyros.” Neither is it meant for readers much interested in people. As one might imagine, there are plenty of names to go around, but almost none that betray personalities. Even General Jean-Baptiste Estienne, the best known pioneer of the French tank and the most prominent name in the index, remains a bloodless figure.

Speaking of names, those of France's British allies are rarely to be seen. Such is Gale's single-minded pursuit of the French armour experience that little is said of the British army's earlier experience with the tank. That, we are told early on, is a subject that has been "well chronicled", a claim that may explain why the French experience related here is essentially free of British input, as is the index.[3]

This second invocation of the index prompts me to raise my own perch so that I can see beyond Tim Gale to Ashgate and the series editor, John Bourne. This book appeared within two years of Gale's doctoral dissertation; and I think it shows. A little more distance might have opened a somewhat broader shutter, as well as a text more reader-friendly. Someone should have taken on the admittedly challenging task of liberating ideas from the heavy foot of acronyms, of the following sort: "At the beginning of 1917, the DSA had made a maintenance section (SP 54) and a transport section (for material) (TM 687) temporarily available to the AS at Champlieu. The problem was that the AS was simply not a priority for the DSA but, unfortunately the DSA was equally determined..." (p. 73). Someone should have noticed the following: "...the St. Chamond would have been formidable had its mobility had been addressed (p. 28). "Or "These faults were simply unworkable with: if the tanks were to be used..." (p. 66). Or "The argument continued until the end of August 1917, when the *ministère de l'Armement* agreed the principle of a *section technique de l'AS*, distinct from that of the DSA, although still under the direction of a *directeur* from the DSA" (p. 73). Someone should have noticed other instances of incoherence, repetitiveness, and faulty punctuation. Someone should have noticed apparent inconsistencies of the sort that credit Foch with sufficient insight to see that tanks "would be a crucial component of the Allied armies in 1919," and yet attributes to him in late 1918 the view that only "amateurs thought tanks and aircraft could win a war" (pp. 220, 226). Someone should have noticed that Estienne appears four times in the text before being recognized by the index, that seven of the eleven members of the *Comité consultative de l'artillerie d'assaut* (p. 30) do not appear in that Index, that Jean de Pierrefeu [sic] made the chapter notes but not the bibliography, that Percin's book is spelled correctly in the bibliography but not in the notes.

Counted one by one, such solecisms are trivial, and uncomfortably familiar to every author. But weighed together, they suggest too many measures of haste or carelessness that do not serve well the interests of our younger and undeniably able colleagues. The lifting of a reviewer's malady is invariably signalled by the foregone conclusion that the work under study could have been better still, had all sorts of belated advice been heeded. This is no exception. I think Tim Gale's book could have been better, and I think Ashgate should give a little more consideration to the important formative role it is playing in the careers of young academics.

NOTES

[1] Two articles by Commandant Balland in *La Revue d'infanterie* (1931, 1935); Maurice Constantin-Weyer, *La Salamandre* (1930); Commandant Deygas, *Les Chars d'Assaut* (1937); Capitaine Léon Dutil, *Les Chars d'Assaut* (1919); and three articles and a book by General Jean Perré (1936, 1937).

[2] While deeply rooted in the war ministry's archives for the *Artillerie spéciale*, this work might have benefited from the 10N series for the *Ministère de l'Armement*.

[3] Abstract, np.

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