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Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. x + 301 pp. Maps, pictures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$70.00 U.S. ISBN 0521841933.

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Of all the bureaucracies created in modern western history, few so small have had a more fateful impact on so many as Prussia's General Staff. Its origins were prosaic enough; it was founded to train professional officers to serve as advisers, chiefs of staff, to Prussian aristocrats, who held command billets only because of their pedigree, and were as likely as not to be blue-blooded blockheads when it came to the difficult job of leadership in battle. Begun during the Napoleonic wars, the marriage of staff professionals and aristocratic senior commanders proved so successful that it was institutionalized in the nineteenth century. Over the middle part of that period, these narrow, dedicated and utterly professional soldiers became the heart and soul of Prussia's army and initiated important reforms that modernized and industrialized war. It was their leadership in the wars of German unification that earned their chief, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, and his subordinates the nickname "the demi-gods."<sup>[1]</sup> As the drafter and custodian of Germany's military plans, the Great General Staff, as it became known, bears a heavy responsibility for launching the two greatest wars in human history, a veritable "Second Thirty Years' War" that came close to wrecking western civilization.<sup>[2]</sup>

As the centennial of World War I looms, it is increasingly obvious that this "Great War" was by far the more important of the twentieth century's two global conflagrations. It was a catastrophe, the *ur*-nightmare in a century of nightmares. Most of the pathologies of the century were spawned, or revived, in its horrific mix of nationalism, technology, and great power ambitions. Its massive "love battles" on the Western Front have not lost their power to perplex and horrify a century later.<sup>[3]</sup> Perhaps the most famous and the least studied of these battles in the Anglo-Saxon world is Verdun, a battle in which German methodical planning and technology were trumped by, in the word that Jean-Baptiste Duroselle uses to characterize the entire French war effort, the "incomprehensible": the heroic stand of the *poilus* in their dugouts and shattered trenches.

Verdun is undeniably the longest--ten months--and arguably the worst--in terms of sheer human carnage, the almost hopeless stand of men against machines, all in a tiny area where it is said that if the dead suddenly arose they would not all have room to stand--battle in all history, an ordeal that did much to shape the character of modern France. Yet for such a massive human undertaking, accounts of the battle are relatively few in number.<sup>[4]</sup> The modern historiography of Verdun does, however, make up in quality what it lacks in numbers. Pride of place here must go to Alistair Horne's brooding and brilliant *Price of Glory*.<sup>[5]</sup> Published in 1962, it remains in print to this day, and a strong case can be made that it is the best single account of the battle in any language. Horne succeeds in assembling a coherent and sweeping narrative that presents an unforgettable portrait of hell wrought "in a very small place," France's ancient citadel on the Meuse.<sup>[6]</sup> It remains the essential starting point for any study of the battle.<sup>[7]</sup>

Perhaps the least understood aspect of the battle, however, is its origins. Verdun was the one major offensive the Germans launched on the Western Front between the *Kindermoerde* (the famous "massacre of the innocents") in October 1914 and Ludendorff's *Kaiserschlacht* in 1918. Horne provides a single chapter to detail its planning by Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the Great General Staff. From its

inception, Verdun was to be the quintessential battle of attrition. Indeed, Falkenhayn's intent was not to capture the city, but to lure the French Army into a vast "kill zone" where it could be pounded and cut to pieces, principally by German artillery, tactics designed to limit German casualties as well. The grisly phrase always attributed to the German commander is that he intended to "bleed France white" (p. 193). But just why Falkenhayn should have opted for such a strategy in 1916 has never been completely explained. Horne suggests that Verdun was produced by Falkenhayn's own cautious, yet peripatetic mind, constantly shifting focus from one problem to another. In truth he remains the most shadowy figure of the Great War's German warlords, a cipher compared to the nervous, emotional Moltke the Younger who launched the war, and the high-strung Teutonic technocrat Ludendorff, who lost it.

It is the great strength of Robert T. Foley's *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun* that he manages to place both Falkenhayn and his ideas, including "Operation Gericht," (code name of the Verdun operation) into their context, providing perhaps the first comprehensive study of the origins of this battle. Foley, who teaches at King's College, London, has mined materials from some forty tons of German Army archives, once thought destroyed during World War II, but returned to Germany in 1988 from the (then) Soviet Union, to produce an important military-intellectual history (if my readers will accept what to some might seem an oxymoronic phrase). [8]

The heart of *German Strategy* is a detailed look at a fight over doctrine inside the German Army between 1871 and 1916. The question that provoked the debate was this: how could Germany fight and win future wars against mass armies mobilized from the "nation-in-arms?" Begun by the Terror government during the French Revolution, the mobilization of an entire nation to sustain a war had prolonged the duration of hostilities and intensified combat operations during the years of Napoleon. Although the western world had drawn back from this expensive and less manageable form of warfare during the decades of the Restoration, the American Civil War and, from the German side at least, Bismarck's wars for unification, had seen a return to mass mobilization, a tendency seemingly validated by the German victory over France in 1871 and thus rapidly emulated by all the powers. Even before the Franco-Prussian (actually German) War ended, the French, with their brilliant but small professional army either captured at Sedan or encircled in Metz, had prolonged the war and seriously worried both Moltke (the Elder and much greater field-marshal, not to be confused with his "Gloomy Gus" nephew who rolled the dice in 1914) and Bismarck by decreeing a *levée-en-masse*. German strategists were almost unanimously convinced that future wars would indeed feature the nation-in-arms. Thus the question: how should Germany fight such wars?

German strategists debated—often quite openly in various books and military journals—two conflicting responses. From their experiences at the hands of Napoleon, especially as interpreted by the Prussian Karl von Clausewitz, as well as their own glorious victories in the wars of German unification, German strategic thinkers derived a doctrine of *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, sometimes expressed as *Vernichtungsstrategie*. Both meant the same thing—a strategy of annihilation or complete destruction: the army's task was to fix the enemy and force him to fight a "decisive battle," where it was taken for granted that German training, technology, and command would produce complete victory. Spokesman for these strategists was Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the Great General Staff from 1891 to 1906, and putative author of the celebrated plan that launched Germany into a hell-for-leather offensive against France in 1914.

Schlieffen seems to have been a popular figure, but his tenacious defense by German soldiers after the Great War—essentially, that his Schlieffen Plan was brilliant but bungled by Schlieffen's successor, the younger Moltke—was as much about protecting the army's reputation as about the genuine search for truth. Insisting on Schlieffen's genius meant that not only the younger Moltke required denigration, but similar scorn had to be meted out to all those who before the war did not share Schlieffen and his

“school’s” viewpoint regarding the best response to *Volkskrieg*, people’s war. Seldom, until Foley’s work, has this alternative strategic viewpoint been heard.

Those who disagreed with Schlieffen advanced their own strategic theory, *Ermattungsstrategie*, a strategy of exhaustion—a war of attrition. They advanced this argument not because they preferred such a war—who would?—but because they believed that the power of the nation-in-arms really made *Vernichtungsstrategie* unachievable. Mass war was inevitable; “decisive battles” like those fought by Napoleon or the great Moltke were increasingly difficult to achieve and, if attempted, were fraught with peril.[9] The only way to wage a modern, great power war was through attrition.

Among those who advocated this strategy of attrition was the military historian Hans Delbrück, who repeatedly crossed swords with the purveyors of the German official histories. In his articulation of attritional warfare he had the temerity to insist that the first modern champion of this school was Frederick the Great himself. Inevitably portrayed by Germany’s adoring soldiers as an apostle of decisive battle, forerunner of Napoleon, and the real initiator of modern military history, “Old Fritz,” in the historian’s view, was forced by his lack of resources to wage *Ermattungsstrategie*. [10] Delbrück’s ideas, though bitterly controversial, did not entirely fall on deaf ears. There were soldiers who were persuaded of the necessity to utilize *Ermattungsstrategie*; among them was Erich von Falkenhayn. Foley’s book tells the story of this general’s rise and fall, which centered on the planning, and the execution, of the German assault on Verdun.

Falkenhayn was Prussia’s war minister in 1914, a post that saw him accompany the Kaiser as a member of Imperial Headquarters to the front, and provided a perfect position to critique the failures of Moltke the Younger. Foley agrees with several modern accounts that claim the German attack in 1914 was indeed a sort of pre-emptive strike, launched by a deeply pessimistic Chief of the Great General Staff because he felt the “window of opportunity” that would allow the Germans to fight and defeat a Franco-Russian coalition was closing (p. 81). Russia was recovering all too rapidly from her 1905 defeat by Japan, and the proverbial noose was tightening around Germany. Better to fight in 1914 than delay an inevitable confrontation (so Moltke thought) that would see Russia grow in strength year by year. After initial successes, however, the German Army faltered, exhausted by its great offensive, and Moltke lost his nerve. The massive (if generally unsuccessful at the tactical level) French counter-attack, known as the First Battle of the Marne, halted the German advance and led, almost inevitably, to the stalemate of trench warfare. By mid-September 1914, Moltke was sacked and Falkenhayn appointed as his replacement.

Falkenhayn took supreme command at a difficult time. The command partnership of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, newly victorious at Tannenberg over the Russians, was clamoring for an eastern reorientation of German strategy, an option the seminal weakness of Austria-Hungary, Germany’s one major ally, emphasized. Falkenhayn, however, was increasingly skeptical about the feasibility of any military solution to Germany’s situation. As early as 1915, he took, for a German general, the breathtaking step of requesting that the Chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, make peace with at least one of Germany’s enemies, for Falkenhayn himself believed that Germany would have great difficulty sustaining the war into 1917 (p. 181). It was this conviction that Germany lacked the resources to attain a decisive victory that would guide Falkenhayn’s two years as Chief of the Great General Staff.

This gloomy assessment was not universally shared inside the high command. Indeed Falkenhayn quarreled bitterly with the “easterners,” who won virtual autonomy in their theater by the threat of resignation: Germany’s most successful commander, Hindenburg, essentially blackmailed the Kaiser, who dared not let this newly-popular “icon” retire. Falkenhayn would have a difficult time allocating Germany’s dwindling resources facing the constant clamor from the east for decisive reinforcement.

Against these liabilities could be set his belief that the western allies, especially the French, were by the close of 1915 approaching the end of their strength. This was neither idle surmise nor mere fervent hope: the little known bloodbaths, offensives launched by the French to liberate their homeland made 1915 the bloodiest year of the war. Falkenhayn decided that he could force France out of the war with an attritional battle at Verdun, pitting German artillery against French manpower, and utilizing relatively small German forces in the process.

Foley's account of the battle itself (chapters 8-10) is brief. The real focus of the book is the debate inside the army over strategy, the "Schlieffen School" versus that of Delbrück and Falkenhayn. That debate was settled by German defeat at Verdun, resulting in Falkenhayn's sacking in late 1916, and replacement by his bitter rivals Hindenburg and Ludendorff, determined apostles of *Vernichtungsstrategie*. They would set the tenor for the war's bitter fight to the finish.

*German Strategy and the Path to Verdun* is only tangentially a book of French history. But it at last provides the context needed to understand one of the Great War's most important battles. Had the Germans won at Verdun, there is every likelihood that Falkenhayn's hope of a negotiated settlement might well have come to pass. That Falkenhayn came close to succeeding—that French losses in holding Verdun approached 315,000—does not mitigate the enormity of his failure; German losses totaled 285,000, validating all his fears of the essentially attritional nature of modern war (p. 81). The consequences of this failure for the Western world are incalculable but enormous. If the war had been ended by negotiations in 1916 the "what-ifs" are staggering enough to invite a brief flight into counterfactual history: what-if no Russian collapse and no revolution in 1917, and thus no Lenin or Stalin? "What-if" peace had perpetuated the Hohenzollern dynasty? Surely the unstable Kaiser and his goofy-looking son were infinitely preferable to the follies of Weimar and the nightmare of Hitler? "What-if" no American intervention? (How might America's twentieth century have unfolded?) "What if" France had at some point decided to stop the endless effusion of its lifeblood on the Meuse, and had terminated the battle and the war through negotiations? How different might the terrible twentieth century have been? [11]

The answer to any of these questions is impossible to know, but they suggest why the epic encounter at Verdun was so important, and why *German Strategy* may be read with great profit by scholars of France and western civilization who perhaps normally devote little time to the study of military thought.

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## NOTES

[1] Studies of the German military are legion. Still to be consulted with profit regarding the General Staff are Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657-1945* (New York: Praeger, 1953); Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany*, 4 vols. (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1969-73); Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and the General Staff, 1807-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977); Larry H. Addington, Jr., *The Blitzkrieg Era and the German General Staff, 1865-1941* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1971).

[2] Several scholars have referred to the back-to-back-nightmares of World War I and II as a second "Thirty Years' War." See, for example, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Grande Guerre des Français, 1914-1918: L'Incompréhensible* (Paris: Perrin, 1998), pp. 437-448.

[3] The phrase “love battles” to describe the epic and sanguinary encounters on the Western Front comes of course from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Dick Diver in *Tender is the Night*.

[4] A recent check on the Barnes and Noble website (<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/>), for example (in English), turned up 219 citations for “Battle of Waterloo”, 654 for “Battle of Gettysburg”, and 26 for “Battle of Verdun.” On the Amazon.com French language website (<http://www.amazon.fr/exec/obidos/ASIN/1568982585/171-7267713-2697853>) only 64 books appeared in the keyword search “bataille de Verdun.” It must also be noted that in all instances, most books in each citation are simply various editions of the same text; nowhere near this number of different books have been written about any of these battles—although with Gettysburg, the figure may be close!

[5] Alistair Horne, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1962).

[6] “Hell in a very small place” is the title the brilliant Bernard B. Fall gave to his epic history of the battle of Dien Bien Phu: *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967).

[7] In addition to Horne, (note 5, above), a short list of titles detailing this battle includes Georges Blond, *Verdun* (New York: Macmillan, 1964); Gerard Canini, *Combattre à Verdun: Vie et souffrance quotidienne du soldat, 1916-1917* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1988); Alain Denizot, “Les Conditions de la bataille de Verdun” (Thèse 3e cycle, Paris, 1983); Pierre Miquel, *Mourir à Verdun* (Paris: Tallandrier, 2002).

[8] Foley discusses these sources on pp. 11-13.

[9] The massive power of modern militaries seemingly had, by 1914, produced a situation in which the modern commander probably could not win a war in one day but could certainly lose it: thus Churchill’s famous dictum about Admiral Jellicoe in World War I—“Jellicoe was the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon.”

[10] For the work of this remarkable scholar, see Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War*, 4 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975).

[11] British general and curmudgeon, J.F.C. Fuller, called April 6, 1917, the date of American entry into the Great War, “the most fateful day in European history since Varus lost his legions”; *A Military History of the Western World, vol. 3: From the Seven Days’ Battle, 1862, to the Battle of Leyte Gulf, 1944* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1956), p. 269.

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