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Response to Douglas Porch Review of Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army. The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915*. Burlington, VT and Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. xiv + 180 pp. Maps, pictures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$124.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781409455004; £65.00. (eb-PDF). ISBN 9781409455011; £65.00. (eb-ePUB). ISBN 9781409474678.

Response by Jonathan Krause, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom.

Having your first book reviewed cannot often be a comfortable experience, especially when your reviewer is a senior scholar with a rather different point of view. It was thus not without some trepidation that I learned Douglas Porch had written a review of my book for H-France. Given our differences in interpretation, I had expected a pretty rough review. What I did not expect was that the review would contain so many gross mischaracterizations of my research. My actual arguments are further obscured by the reviewer's frequent use of sensational language (notice how often words like "slaughter," "tragic," and "suicidal" appear). What follows then is a selected analysis of certain comments made by the reviewer which I would like to rectify. If readers still find my arguments unconvincing, they will at least be able to make such a decision based on an accurate representation of my findings.

The review opens with a fairly long section (some five paragraphs) whose purpose is to associate me and my work with a pre-determined school of thought (the "learning curve" school) which Porch claims, by a long series of loose connections, is somehow responsible for the debacle that was the Iraq War of 2003. Leaving aside the frankly bizarre nature of the accusation (and the fact that the book does not even class itself as a "learning curve" work) it was disappointing that the reviewer felt the need to so quickly begin attacking my (incorrectly) presumed biases, rather than reviewing my arguments on their own merits. The concept of a "learning curve" in Britain is very much a First World War phenomenon. It has absolutely nothing to do with Vietnam or any other internal debate within the American military. Instead, it was a reaction to the extreme "lions led by donkeys" school of thought (led by the likes of Alan Clark and Denis Winter, Ludendorff never used the term), which portrayed British generals as wantonly sending their men to die while they drank champagne safe in their palatial châteaux (a severely outdated stereotype). That said, the reviewer did well to quote Carl Pépin who argued, correctly, that the "learning curve" is too linear a model for accurately understanding the First World War. In caricature, it posits that the Allies improved against an implicitly static enemy, robbing the Germans of agency in what was actually a highly dynamic struggle. My work, including this book, has always accepted a much more organic depiction of the war, with both sides constantly vying for tactical advantage, rather than a blandly linear one.

For reasons that are unclear, the review takes many of my comments wildly out of context. The reviewer wrote that "Krause admits that 'wishful thinking in terms of operational goals' so characterized the approach of Foch and d'Urbal in 1915 that, had more lucid commanders been in charge, the Second Battle of Artois would not have been fought at all" (p. 17). The actual line from the book is: "During this period [General] Fayolle was regularly frustrated with what he considered to be Foch and d'Urbal's wishful thinking" (p. 17). I am not sure if I should be flattered or offended that Porch confuses Fayolle's sentiments with my own! The comment is especially frustrating as earlier on that very same page I quote Foch saying, "I have insisted that it is less important to advance rapidly, *but essential to move*

securely, step by step, as each objective is gained” (p. 17). Foch’s concern, from as early as December 1914, was preserving the lives of his troops. He proposed to do so by launching a coordinated series of small- to medium-scale attacks over time to achieve certain strategic goals (what we would now recognize as ‘operational art’). Such a methodology would capitalize on the advantages that attackers had in the initial phases of a trench battle, gaining ground by expending munitions rather than lives. The debate within the French high command over this concept is recounted in the book and hinted at in the review, but never actually described. Such an analysis would have had the unfortunate consequence of depicting senior French officers making efforts to reduce casualties.

Along a similar vein Porch wrote that “[r]epeatedly Krause seems eager to launch a revisionist attack on ‘arm chair generals’ (p. 167) and in particular this author [Porch] who ‘casts down blame as if from a pulpit’ (p. 2) who fail to ‘esteem’ (p. 15) the French army—with every line, a reputation dies—only later to agree with them, simply fail to make a convincing case, or become bogged down in arcane disputes about tactics.” Again we have a gross mischaracterization of my argument. The actual quote is, “While this tactical methodology [long artillery bombardments] was far from ideal, it was responding to very real material concerns, and as such needs to be understood as operating within a larger logistical, operational and strategic framework (complexities not always addressed by armchair generals and popular histories)” (p. 167). In short, I am simply arguing that we need to understand the French army’s tactical conduct of the war in its wider context. If there is anything controversial about this argument, I am unaware of it. It should also be clear that I do not “later agree” with Porch’s interpretation of the French army. If the reviewer and I agreed, my guess is that his review would have been rather more generous!

One of Porch’s most scathing criticisms is that “there is nothing new here and, second, Krause’s evidence actually contradicts the revisionist thrust of his arguments.” Porch remarks that “the idea of infiltration tactics is usually traced to André Laffargue, an artilleryman who fought in the Second Battle of Artois.” He does not take the next step of acknowledging my finding that Laffargue’s ideas are almost exact copies of official French doctrine (such as Note 5779), which pre-dates his famous pamphlet by over six months. There is a substantial difference between saying that these tactical precepts came from an artilleryman fed-up with an incompetent command structure and acknowledging that the ideas were actually French doctrine at the time of Laffargue’s writing. It takes Laffargue’s work from being one of insightful tactical analysis to a potential act of plagiarism, a significant shift in how Laffargue has been seen in the historiography up to now. There is also no evidence of self-contradiction in my arguments; the points raised are either taken out of context or misinterpreted by the reviewer. My statements made in favour of nuance (especially regarding the apparent similarity between the comments of Clayton and myself) are instead represented as “contradictions” of my presumed bias and “revisionist” slant.

Regarding French doctrine, Porch wrote that, “Krause admits that Note 5779 was naïve in that it maintained that breakthrough was possible, demonstrated the ‘inexperience and indecisiveness’ of the planning staff, and their refusal to recognize the likely costs in casualties.” My discussion of the document highlighted the internal debate going on within the French army between those that wanted to gain rapid strategic victories in “breakthrough” battles, and those who preferred a more methodical, less costly approach. While elements of Note 5779 were ill-suited to the Western Front (namely those advocating a “breakthrough”), other aspects of it (the rolling barrage and early “infiltration tactics”) constituted the tactical foundation of French offensives for the rest of the war. Generally speaking, new ideas take time to infiltrate into any large organization, especially one composed of literally millions of individuals. What makes 1915 so interesting is being able to witness this process of integration, and the co-mingling of current and outmoded methodologies. My analysis of this rich and interesting institutional evolution is lost in the review. Perhaps needless to say at this point, the comment about the “likely costs in casualties” was an invention of the reviewer, and completely outside my arguments concerning French doctrine.

Sadly, there are further examples of the reviewer taking arguments out of context. He wrote that, “Significant problems remained: Franco-British cooperation was non-existent, corps commanders exercised little oversight, divisions were often poorly disciplined and trained, soldiers did not know their chain of command, and so on (p. 155)”. It is true that Franco-British cooperation was strained (albeit hardly non-existent; I do discuss Franco-British cooperation, including the exchanges of materiel between the two armies), but the rest of the comment is in no way representative of my argument. Somehow the comment, “corps commanders provided only a basic level of oversight when it came to infantry tactics” (a statement made in reference to the division, rather than the corps, being the tactical unit in the war) is blown up into “corps commanders exercised little oversight” (a statement implying negligence, and completely out of sync with my discussion of commanders like Maistre, Pétain and Dumas). The comment about poorly trained divisions and ignorant soldiers are both drawn from the book’s case study of the 34^e division, which was chosen specifically as an under-performing division to provide a sort of check to balance my examination of the highly successful 77^e alpine division. It was the reviewer, not this author, who took the example of one single division and then applied it to the entire rest of the army.

Regarding the tactical developments covered in the book, Porch complains that “[T]he fact that these ‘improvements’ were ‘ultimately unsustainable’ (p. 140) because they were acquired at the staggering costs of dead 350,000 *poilus* in 1915, the highest yearly tally of the war for the French, strikes Krause as a regrettable but necessary price of ‘learning.’” Aside from yet again taking my words out of context (it was the initial advance of Pétain’s XXXIII corps that was “ultimately unsustainable,” not any tactical developments) the point seems more interested in an emotional discussion of the cost of the war, rather than any analysis of it. The reviewer hammers this point home by saying that, “[t]he alternative in Krause’s view is that denied a chance of carrying out suicidal offensives, [the soldiers] will quickly despair and conclude, as modern interpretation seems to have done, that the many attacks he is being asked to carry out, and perhaps the entire war itself, are ultimately pointless.” In addition to the sensational language (“suicidal offensives”), we are faced with another mischaracterization. In that section, I was discussing the importance for leaders to hold out tangible goals for their soldiers, rather than openly adopting a Falkenhayn-like attritional approach (p. 165). This, as a matter of fact, is the exact issue the Germans came up against at Verdun. Falkenhayn could not flat out tell his subordinates that he was planning a purely attritional battle. As such, certain tangible goals had to be held out before the men (i.e., the capture of Verdun itself). Anything less would likely have failed to inspire compliance and cooperation (which is the point I made in the book).

All of this is not to deny that there are valid criticisms in the review. Principally, these are that I did not focus on strategy or on the accounts of individual soldiers enough. The second of these criticisms rings truest. Fundamentally, my work is about institutional learning and the creation of doctrine. I wrote with an interest in how ideas from the front were transferred up to the high command, and then passed on to the rest of the army (in the book I described the French doctrine machine as a “pump” which circulated ideas, rather than inventing them). The examples of memoirs and trench diaries that I read tended to be unhelpful in this analysis, and were therefore omitted. As it is, the book is already quite “in the weeds.” Spending a great deal of time relating the stories of individual soldiers would have only taken it further down into minutiae (the “arcane disputes about tactics” that the reviewer had earlier condemned), and would not have significantly altered the conclusions reached.

The criticism that the book does not focus on strategy enough is also valid, although should be qualified again by saying that an examination of strategy was not the purpose of the work. The discussion of strategy may have been brief, but it was there and provided an important backdrop for the rest of the work. My take on French strategy in the First World War is straightforward: France had been invaded. In this situation, the French government (and by extension, the armed forces) could not just sit idly by. The French had no choice but to try to drive the invading Germans out of the *patrie*. The reviewer apparently disagrees. He condemns the French for attacking in 1915 (implying that any attack would be

“suicidal”), but does not provide any realistic alternative. My book, on the other hand, does (a fact which the review omits). The methodical, step-by-step, operational approach advocated by Foch and Pétain would ultimately prove to be the most effective methodology for attacking on the Western Front. It would have been an absolutely feasible approach in 1915 had certain commanders (especially Joffre) been content with a string of small-scale tactical victories, rather than gambling in the hopes of winning grand strategic victories on the battlefield. This point is made clearly in the book, and yet is ignored.

For the next five years, individual nations will commemorate the war that birthed the twentieth century. My goal is to use this time to get people to think beyond the narrow confines of their own particular nation and to imagine the war as it was: a global affair. This first book was only intended to be a small contribution in this regard. I had hoped, above all else, to better inform experts on the British army about the experience of the French. My guess is that they will have to revise significant portions of their usual depiction of the war if they take in the new research being done by a recent surge of junior historians working on the French army (I’m afraid I am the first, not the last, such historian of this new class to be reviewed here). To be clear: the book has many faults, I freely admit that, but it also some merits. It is the first book to so closely examine the French army’s early tactical and doctrinal adaptation to trench warfare. My research has not only been able to trace a series of important early tactical developments to the French, rather than the German, army (developments in infantry, artillery and poison gas tactics), it has also found clear evidence that these practices arose far earlier than had previously been thought. Hopefully after reading my response, potential readers will now have a somewhat more accurate sense of what I tried to get across in the book and be encouraged to read it, if just in order to form their own opinion.

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