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Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xii + 469 pp. Preface, maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliographic essay, and index. \$29.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-10-760568-7.

Review by Andrew Orr, Kansas State University.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh's decision to write *The French Army and the First World War*, her contribution to the Cambridge's *Armies of the Great War* series, was courageous. As she herself acknowledges, this topic has been extensively and relatively recently covered by Robert Doughty in his *Pyrrhic Victory* and Anthony Clayton's *Paths of Glory*.^[1] Greenhalgh thus faced a formidable challenge, but succeeded in producing a valuable and eminently readable book by emphasizing the crucial connections between the political and military spheres before and during the Great War.

Because of the outstanding preexisting scholarship on the operational history of the French Army in World War I, Greenhalgh's treatment of military operations could have been her greatest challenge. In particular, Doughty's highly detailed *Pyrrhic Victory* provides such an authoritative narrative of the French Army's military operations during the war, that writing a more detailed operational history would certainly have produced a book from which most historians of France, let alone other readers, would shy away.

Greenhalgh overcomes this challenge by expertly interspersing detailed examples of individual battles and unit histories with a general narrative of the French Army's operational history during the war. To do this, she draws on a combination of secondary sources such as Leonard Smith's history of the 5th Infantry Division and Émile Laure and Jacottet's *Les Etapes de guerre d'une division d'infanterie (13e division)*, as well as primary sources from the Defense Historical Service.^[2] By focusing on the experiences of individual units, she humanizes the struggle by presenting the war on a scale to which people can relate. This makes Greenhalgh's book a potential goldmine for anyone teaching classes on the First World War. Her examples highlight units in famous battles like Verdun and the Marne but she also explores battles such as Le Linge and the 1915 Artois offensive, which are mainly known only to specialists. In the process, she fuses the operational history of the battles with three levels of politics: intra-Army politics, civil-military relations, and inter-Allied diplomacy.

The French Army and the First World War is especially useful when it departs from the traditional "big battles" to explore less well-known operations. Through her analysis of operations in 1915, a year histories of the war in the west often pass over quickly because it does not contain a famous battle on par with Verdun or the Somme, Greenhalgh directly combats the frustratingly resilient idea that French generals did not adapt to the changing realities of the First World War, did not care about casualties, and should have recognized the futility of continuing to fight on the Western Front. She does this by showing that French units proved capable of major tactical successes in 1915 and that generals had good reasons to hope that it was possible, in fact, to rupture the German front because they had repeatedly come close to doing so in 1915. When that rupture proved just out of reach, they adapted their tactics and continually sought to find doctrinal, technological, and organizational ways to allow the decisive breakthrough to occur, while also trying to reduce casualties for humanitarian and

utilitarian reasons. She also demonstrates that French generals continuously adapted based on their troops' experiences by learning lessons from their own failures and from their enemies, such as Foch's adoption of new offensive tactics in 1916 and Pétain's implementation of the German Army's elastic defense in 1917. Her integration of military-to-military relations with France's allies also shows that much of what scholars have sometimes viewed as stubbornness and indifference to casualties on the part of French generals was more often the result of commanders continuing attacks in order to support allies in distress on other fronts. For example, Joffre's desire to continue attacking in May of 1915 despite the heavy losses French troops were taking looks different when placed in the context of Joffre trying to take pressure of the Russian Army which had suffered a major defeat in Poland.

Greenhalgh's success at bringing these often-forgotten battles to life is a result of her successful effort to use social history to fuse political and military history in her narrative. She is certainly not the first author who has combined military, social, and political history, but few have done so as effectively from the military history side of the divide. Historians have long combined diplomatic and operational military history, but Greenhalgh's ability to show the interrelations among the history of military operations and a combination of politics within the army, the army's relationship with the civilian government, and the relationships between the French, British, and American armies is remarkable. More importantly, she manages to show how generals and ministers negotiated the complexities these relationships created as they sought to fight and win a total war. In Greenhalgh's hands, politics emerges as central to total war and the ability of generals to manage political relationships within their own army, with foreign armies, and with their political leaders becomes a critical part of modern generalship. This is hardly surprising given her previous study of Anglo-French cooperation in *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War*, but her emphasis on the centrality of politics to military leadership is still an important rejoinder to the widely-held assumption that good generals avoid politics. [3]

The book does not ignore the French Army's roles outside of the Western Front, but the treatment is sparing. The French contributions to the Dardanelles and Salonika campaigns are discussed, as is the army's role on the Italian Front, but Greenhalgh never really focuses her analytical lens on any front other than the Western Front. The book's focus on the Western Front, keeps her from exploring the effects of the continuing conflict in Morocco, the fight against the Senussi, and the army's role in occupying colonies had on how the army fought the war.

One area in which Greenhalgh fails to meet the challenge she set herself is in her treatment of demobilization. Her work is unusual in that it does treat the demobilization within the story of the wartime army, but it is relegated to just over five pages that do not prove to be enough space to explore how demobilization reshaped the French Army. Later chapters deal with demobilization as well, but usually through the expedient of an anecdote to illustrate a broader point and then moves on. The result is more an intriguing glance at the topic than a rigorous analytical examination of the demobilization. This difference is highlighted by the book's success in being both lively and analytical when treating other topics. As a result, the author generally presents the demobilization as a tidying up of the effects of the war instead of a transformative event that help birth a new institution in ways that went far beyond being merely an incomplete return to the prewar status quo. This is unfortunate because a deeper exploration of the demobilization that fully took advantage of the methods she uses to study the wartime army could have shown readers, most of whom know almost nothing about demobilization, that the process of demobilizing the army proved to be a politically, militarily, and socially transformative endeavor which profoundly shaped French institutions for years to come.

The strength of this book is shown in the fact that most of its main weaknesses are flaws of omission which reflect the limits of space and time that constrain all scholars' work. None of these flaws are crippling and none come anywhere close to negating the overall value of this outstanding volume. Despite the challenges she faced, Elizabeth Greenhalgh has succeeded in producing a cogent and

eminently readable rebuttal to the inaccurate stereotypes that have long dominated non-specialist view of the French Army in World War I. She shows a French Army that was flawed, but whose officers and men continually sought new ways to overcome the momentous challenge they faced. By humanizing the Western Front and framing politics as a struggle to properly organize and coordinate a massive war effort, rather than a sign of military or ministerial weakness, she reminds her readers that even intelligent, honest, and diligent leaders inevitably struggle when faced with a challenge as great as the First World War.

NOTES

[1] Robert Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005); Anthony Clayton, *Paths of Glory: The French Army 1914-1918* (London: Cassell, 2003).

[2] Leonard Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); Émile Laure and Commandant Jacottet, *Les Etapes de guerre d'une division d'infanterie (13e division)* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1932).

[3] Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *Victory through Coalition: Britain and France during the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Andrew Orr
Kansas State University
aorr1@ksu.edu

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