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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: Cambridge University Press, 2005. x + 301 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-84193-1.

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The dust jacket of this volume proclaims that "almost ninety years since its conclusion, the battle of Verdun is still little understood." My understanding was that, early in 1916, the Chief of the German General Staff believed he could force the French to batter themselves to pieces by attacking a psychologically important point in their lines. Over a period of months they would be bled white and Germany could then negotiate a workable peace. Intellectually, it marked one of the points when generals realized that total wars were won by using the latest technology to kill as many people as possible for as long as necessary. Between February and December, 1916, both sides expended about 40 millions rounds of artillery and billions of rounds of machine gun and small arms ammunition to kill or wound nearly 400,000 men on each side.[1] After reading Robert T. Foley's book, that is still pretty much my understanding. I am concerned that he has not engaged deeply enough with recent scholarship, that he has ignored the human component to this story, and that he identifies too closely with its protagonists.

Foley's thesis is that military scholars have made a mistake in arguing that German military strategists were uniformly wedded to a short-war thesis. Relying on recently returned German documents from former Soviet archives, the author argues that from the 1880s a considerable circle of prominent authors and academics understood that the next war would be a *Volkskrieg*, or total war, of long duration in which the enemy could only be defeated after years of bloody attrition. Foley presents convincing evidence that officers from the Franco-Prussian War such as Helmuth von Moltke urged politicians to avoid future conflict with powerful neighbors because it was likely to be lengthy and drawn out. Junior staff officers conducted a lively debate via professional journals about the obsolescence of *Kabinettkrieg* and the ominous rise of total war to warn more senior colleagues that there would be no more Sedans. Academics such as the historian Hans DelbrÃ¼ck even developed a theory of the war of attrition (*Ermattungsstrategie*) in which he suggested that the only way Germany could beat France again was in a protracted conflict. If Russia or England joined France, prospects of a German victory dimmed. In other words, many military leaders in Germany understood long before 1914 that the only way to win the next war was to mobilize all available resources to crush entire enemy societies.

Nonetheless, the German strategy for winning a two-front conflict was based on the Schlieffen Plan. It envisioned a speedy victory in the field over France by marching through Belgium, enveloping Paris, and surrounding the main French forces in the eastern part of the country. Foley shows that Alfred von Schlieffen and his succes-

sors realized the plan had major problems: that invading Belgium likely entailed British entry into the conflict, for example. They stayed with it because they understood that Germany was doomed to lose any war of attrition against the Allies. They hoped somehow to knock out the French and level the playing field. So the Germans tried to avoid something they feared by doing something many believed impossible; this logical contradiction was the heart German strategy. When the Germans failed to defeat the French in September, 1914, the Kaiser promoted Erich von Falkenhayn, a supporter of *Ermattungsstrategie*, to head of the General Staff. One of the first things he did was to ask the civilian leadership to negotiate a truce as soon as possible, while he tried to organize a battle of attrition that would force the French to the bargaining table. A furious row erupted among the military elite over this policy with some supporting Falkenhayn while others argued for the Paul von Hindenburg/Erich Ludendorff axis and their focus on winning the decisive battle, preferably on the Eastern Front. Foley does an excellent job of using this ugly bureaucratic fight as a metaphor for control over the direction of the German war effort. Kaiser Wilhelm II eventually supported Falkenhayn and in 1916 he launched his long-planned attack on Verdun. It succeeded in killing and maiming lots of people, but it did not end the war. Foley believes that the Germans failed because the 5th Army commander and his subordinates really did not understand the essential correctness of Falkenhayn's strategy. An ungrateful Kaiser Wilhelm II then fired his commander in chief, promoting Hindenburg and Ludendorff (who still believed in decisive battles) in his place, with disastrous long-term consequences for Germany.

Foley has made his point that any understanding of German strategy must recognize that many officers did not simply hope for a speedy victory in a short conflict; they understood that total war was going to be a long, brutal process of attrition. This insight is not new, however. By focusing solely on strategic debates at the highest levels the author ignores other recent scholarship elucidating pre-1914 German conceptualizations of total war. In *German Atrocities 1914* (2001) John Horne and Allan Kramer showed that all 13 German regiments involved in the attack on Liege, Belgium, shot civilians on a regular basis because the General Staff was terrified that guerillas (*franc-tireurs*) would disrupt the delicately timed advance much as they had done in 1870. Commanders envisioned this conflict in terms of total war as soon as the Schlieffen Plan was put in place years before the war; every part of enemy society was a legitimate target. Horne and Kramer then draw our attention to the 1917 German retreat to the Hindenburg Line. They poisoned every well, chopped down every tree, blew up every house, ripped out every road, and forcibly moved every male between the age of 14 and 55 as well as many young women. Clearly, German officers had a well-honed concept of total war regardless of what happened at Verdun. In *War Land on the Eastern Front* (2000), Vejas Liulevicius convincingly demonstrated that after German forces conquered much of Poland, the Baltic States and Byelorussia in 1915, army commanders hoped to realize a long-held dream by reorganizing these areas into a German protectorate characterized by *Kultur*. Civilizing and rationalizing the violent east would turn Slavs into good Germans. Not surprisingly, the locals resisted and in German eyes the east switched from being an inviting arena of people and places (*Leute und Boden*) who could be safely assimilated to a dangerous one of nations and spaces (*VÃ¶lker und Raum*) where alien tribes had to be eliminated. At the end of the war, most German troops withdrew but 40,000 of the most diehard stayed on as *Freikorps* and fought a brutal battle in Lithuania and Latvia against the inhabitants that anticipated World War II. One of these was Rudolf HÃ¶ss, the commandant at Auschwitz.[2] It is more accurate to say that *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun* enhances our existing understanding of German conceptions of total war; it does not break new ground.

Just as troubling in my opinion, the author's exclusive focus on strategy leaves little room to discuss the huge numbers of young men who were killed, maimed or traumatized as generals put theory into practice.[3] In *The Face of Battle* (1976), John Keegan was sensitive to both the strategic and human element of the Battle of the Somme, Verdun's 1916 Allied counterpart. He has also remarked on the strange reluctance of many military historians to engage with the tremendous violence that total war visits on human bodies, although this theme should surely figure prominently. French historians of World War I such as StÃ©phane Audoin Rouzeau and Annette Becker devoted one third of their book *14-18: Understanding the Great War* to the violence experienced by soldiers and civilians in "battles" such as Verdun. Foley's focus on high-level strategy gives the book coherence, but only at the cost of limiting its wider relevance.

Foley ends with the following sentence: "Through attrition on the battlefield, the Entente armies reached the goal of the traditional operational approach advocated by most German soldiers–a peace dictated to a prostrate enemy" (p. 268). I am not sure what to make of this statement. On the one hand, the author wants to point out

that the Germans lost because the Allies figured out first that winning total wars depended on mobilizing technology to kill as many people as possible over a period of years. He also seems to suggest that Versailles was a *Diktat*, as the memoirs of just about every Imperial German Army officer argued. I think Foley would have been better served by taking a step back from the perspective of German staff officers and engaging more deeply with the experience of regular soldiers and the work of other colleagues who have also thought deeply about the meaning of World War I.

Notes

[1]. Foley arrives at lower figures by limiting the date of the battle from 21 February 1916 to 31 August 1916, even though intense fighting took place until the end of the year. He lists German casualties as 281,333 and French at 315,000 (p. 256).

[2]. HÃ¶ss had this to say of his experience: "The fighting in the Baltikum was of a wildness and grimness, which I had experienced neither before in the World War nor afterwards in all the Freikorps fighting. There was hardly an actual front, the enemy was everywhere. And when it came to a clash, it became a slaughter to the point of complete destruction ... Back then I believed that a further intensification of human destructive madness was not possible." In Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 241.

[3]. The German artillery bombardment on the first day obliterated most of the French defenders in the first line. One French battalion of 1,200 was reduced to 7 lieutenants and 100 enlisted men in a matter of hours. The survivors had their uniforms blasted off. Their bodies were completely blackened by carbonized earth and vegetation. Somehow they maintained enough discipline to slaughter the first waves of Germans who expected to meet no resistance. One French lieutenant later wrote "Humanity must be mad to do what it is doing? What scenes of horror and carnage!... hell cannot be so terrible." Even the operational name chosen by Falkenhayn, *Gericht*, ominously translates as judgment, among other things. Changed to *Gerichtshof* it becomes place of execution. See Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall, *The American Heritage History of WWI* (New York: American Heritage, 1977), pp. 172, 185-194.

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