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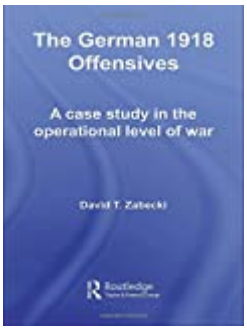

David T. Zabecki. *The German 1918 Offensives: A Case Study in the Operational Level of War.* New York: Routledge, 2006. xxiv + 408 pp. $135.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-35600-8.

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Operational Failure

In this volume David T. Zabecki provides a highly detailed account of the planning and execution of German offensives on the western front in the last year of World War I. In November 1917, the German high command began planning a series of offensives on the western front. This desperate gamble was intended to push the British Expeditionary Force out of France and compel the French to agree to terms before American troops arrived in enough force to affect the outcome of the war. These offensives were to take advantage of the large numbers of German soldiers freed from duty in the East by the surrender of Russia. The Germans planned to use the new infiltration tactics they had perfected at Riga and Caporetto in 1917, as well as the innovative artillery techniques of Colonel Georg Bruchmueller, to drive through the British and roll up the Entente lines.

On March 21, 1918, Operation *Michael*, the first of the offensives, began. The German attackers gained staggering amounts of territory, but failed to break through the British lines or to gain key operational objectives. As Zabecki clearly points out, the Germans did not plan effectively beyond the tactical level. It appears as though General Erich Ludendorff assumed that, once his armies ruptured the British line, the Entente would simply crumble under the weight of the German onslaught. The Germans' failure to identify key weak points in their opponents' transportation network and to maintain the focus of *Michael* and subsequent offensives doomed the German efforts. As the spring wore on, however, German tactics became predictable and manpower in the highly trained assault divisions dwindled, frustrating Ludendorff's dreams of a tactical breakthrough that would cement a German victory.

The tactical innovations that generated the early German successes in 1918 have been well documented by Martin Middlebrook, Tim Travers, Bruce Gudmundsson, and others, but Zabecki concentrates entirely on the operational aspects of the offensives. To that end, Zabecki devotes about one-third of the text to defining the operational art, setting the tactical and strategic realities of the western front, and discussing the German decision to mount the offensives in 1918. The remainder of the book is devoted to describing and analyzing the offensives themselves. Operations *Michael* (March 21-

April 5), *Georgette* (April 9-29), *Bluecher* (May 27-June 5), *Gneisenau* (June 9-15), *Marneschutz* (July 15-August 3), and the planned, but never executed Operation *Hagen* each merit its own chapter. Zabecki begins each of these chapters with a detailed discussion of the planning sessions for the operation under discussion. Seeing how the plans for each of the offensives changed, or did not change, to reflect developments on the battlefields of France and Belgium–the later operations were planned as the German Army was on the offensive–is quite interesting. Zabecki proceeds to describe the preparations and execution of each operation and concludes with a detailed analysis of their operational failures. Much of the discussion in these chapters is based on previously underutilized German documents transcribed by the U.S. Army between the world wars and preserved in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Historians who have conducted research on World War I in German archives have experienced the frustration of dealing with lacunae in the records produced by the destruction of documents during World War II and will understand the boon these relatively unknown documents represent for research on the western front in the period of 1917-18.

The chapters detailing the offensives are supplemented with a variety of maps and tables. The small size of the maps does, however, limit their usefulness and many of the geographical features and locations mentioned in the text do not appear on the maps. Many of the tables are also limited in their utility. Tables 6.1 and 6.2, which establish the German corps and divisions on March 21, 1918, for example (p. 135-136), are useful in establishing the German order of battle for Operation *Michael*, but without a discussion of the real strength of German divisions in 1918, the reader cannot gain an accurate understanding of the strength of the German attack. The tables that detail the German artillery preparations for the various offensives, on the other hand, give the reader a great deal of insight into how Colonel Georg Bruchmueller's hurricane barrages were intended to work.

Still, Zabecki's focus on the operational level of war is one of the more problematic aspects of the book. Zabecki's numerous references to "FM 100-5, Operations" indicate that the intended audience is made up of readers familiar with the U.S. Army's field manual on operations. The use of the 1976-93 editions of the field manual also demonstrates the changing understanding and use of the concept of operations some seventy-five years after the German offensives. Zabecki states, in his critique of Operation *Michael*, the first of the German offensives, that "the German Army and its General Staff had a tendency to ignore the strategic level of war, and their understanding of the operational level was deeply flawed" (p. 161). Entente commanders, for the most part, did not have a demonstrably less flawed understanding of operations, yet Zabecki tends to hold German commanders and planners, especially Ludendorff, liable for not possessing a more advanced comprehension of operations than one might reasonably expect of leaders of the time. As an intellectual exercise for teaching officers about the operational art, this may be a valid approach, but applying a modern comprehension of operations to an age when they were not fully understood is inherently ahistorical.

Zabecki's volume is an important addition to the historiography of Germany's 1918 Spring Offensives. The strength of the book lies in the detailed discussion of the planning of the various offensives, which adds to the existing literature on the topic, while the description of the execution of the offensives on the operational level adds a new understanding of what happened in the spring and summer of 1918. Finally, the analysis of the German Army's failure to comprehend fully how to plan and execute the offensives, on the amorphous level between the tactical and strategic concepts of war, adds a new voice to the discussion of why Germany lost the war. Despite some problems of anachronism, I heartily recommend this volume to historians of World War I, the German Army, and the twentieth-century military.

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