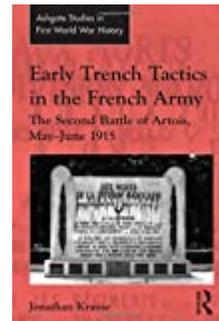




Jonathan Krause. *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915.* Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. xiv + 180 pp. Illustrations. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4094-5500-4.



Reviewed by Nicholas Murray (US Army CGSC)

Published on H-War (March, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In many ways, the year 1915 is the "black hole" of the Great War. Most of the literature generated by the conflict focuses on the road to war, the plans and battles of 1914, the titanic struggles at Verdun and on the Somme in 1916, and on the battles of 1917 and 1918. Very little examines what was going on in 1915. This is particularly true when it comes to the development of the tactics of trench warfare, and it is certainly the case when examining the French in that context. Thus, Jonathan's Krause's book fills a gap in the writing on the war and is very much a welcome addition.

Krause organizes his book chronologically in nine chapters. In the book's introduction he surveys the historiography dealing with the French army during the war and follows this with an analysis of the context of the Second Battle of Artois (May 9 to June 18, 1915) as well as of its importance. This is followed by seven chapters that make up the main part of the book. The first of these analyzes the role of the Grand Quartier Général (the French headquarters) in disseminating the new ideas emerging from the battlefield. The next chapter deals with the role of artillery preparation for the battle, along with a brief overview of the technical details of French artillery. All this provides the background for the next five chapters. These deal with the battle itself.

Krause then concludes his book by examining what ideas came out of the battle of Second Artois as well as where it fits within the broader narrative of the war.

In his introduction, Krause effectively deals with some of the problems presented by the limited amount of literature written in the English language on the French contribution to the war effort. In doing this, he establishes why the Second Battle of Artois is important even if it is largely unknown except by a few specialists. Essentially, Krause argues that much of what occurred in the battle had important knock-on effects on both French and German thinking about the tactical level of war on the western front. The Germans learned to defend in much greater depth, and the French gained "valuable experience" in the organization and execution of large-scale trench offensives (p. 5). These are significant points and it would have benefited the reader to have discussed them more deeply. Certainly, this reviewer would have liked to see a deeper examination of the implications of these changes on other armies. However, this is a minor quibble.

In the next two chapters, Krause discusses the role of the Grand Quartier Général in developing and disseminating a doctrine for trench warfare within the

French army, as well as its thoughts on the role of artillery in that context. This latter piece is important, as it deals with a number of the technical issues preventing the more effective use of artillery fire early in the war (more on that later). Of particular interest was the discussion of the ideas contained in the *But et conditions d'une action offensive d'ensemble* (referred to as Note 5779) (pp. 22-27). Krause argues that the goal of an attack was to break through enemy lines. However, in French doctrine it was unclear how this was to occur. Was it to be through a single operation or through a series of methodical battles (an early form of bite and hold)? The problems with these ideas emerged more clearly as the infantry was instructed to push on for a breakthrough, whilst the artillery's role was to wear out the Germans. This contradiction helps to explain why the battle dragged on as it did, and why the great gains of the first day of the offensive (May 9, 1915) were ephemeral.

His discussion of the roles of artillery and infantry, both in terms of technical detail and doctrine, is interesting. Krause contends that the French developed the rolling artillery barrage and the tactics of infantry infiltration. While this claim is not entirely new, he does show where and when these ideas emerged. His argument also goes some way toward contradicting much of the criticism of the French army's willingness and ability to adapt. Krause also, correctly in this reviewer's opinion, identifies many of the problems with the use of artillery early in the war: the drastic shortage of quick-firing heavy guns capable of high-angle fire, and the critical shortage of ammunition. That being said, Krause could have spent more time explaining these problems and it would have helped the reader if he had further elaborated why high-angle fire was so essential to the attack. It was not simply to hit positions on a reverse slope. There was a need for plunging fire to hit the much smaller target of a trench as high-velocity direct fire could not effectively do this. This problem had been recognized

before the war and was manifested by the changing design of field fortifications, which had become narrower, deeper, and flush with the ground.

The next five chapters deal with the battle itself. Krause details the action until June and he does so through the experience of the 77th and 34th Divisions. This works very well and his analysis of the battle is good. Krause discusses the German response to the effective French attacks, and points out the growth in tactical depth of the German positions along with the greater use of the reverse slope and deeper dug-outs for infantry to protect them from the French heavy artillery. Thus, Krause effectively argues the Second Battle of Artois was of much greater significance than its stature in the history of the Great War would suggest. And all this despite the lack of any clear long-lasting tactical success. The changes that occurred before and during the battle were to have huge implications for Allied attacks and German defense for the rest of the war and this reviewer would have liked a more detailed analysis of them.

Early Trench Tactics in the French Army is part of Ashgate's Studies in First World War History edited by John Bourne. Bourne points out that the books are aimed at a specialist audience. This is certainly true of Krause's book. A previous background in the French experience of the war will be helpful, as will a reasonable grasp of the main tactical and operational problems faced by both sides. Furthermore, the price of \$124.95 means that this is unlikely to be read by anyone other than a specialist, unless a local library has a copy. Additionally, the book would have benefited greatly from a better index, as some of the key terms such as *grignotage* (essentially bite and hold) are not listed. Moreover, the maps, although interesting, were not as clear as they might have been. Perhaps some simple schematics would have helped here. All this is a shame, as this is a very good book on the tactical problems of the First World War, and how the French went about thinking through and solving them.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Nicholas Murray. Review of Krause, Jonathan, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39508>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.