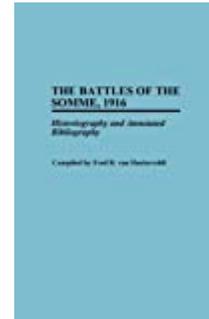




Fred R. van Hartesveldt. *The Battles of the Somme: Historiography and Annotated Bibliography.* London and Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996. 152 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-29386-3.



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Battles of the Somme

Over eighty years after the fact, questions concerning the generalship, strategies, technologies, tactics, techniques, and procedures of the First World War continue to provoke controversy among historians and students of war. The important Somme Offensive which lasted 141 days (1 July - 19 November 1916) lays claim to a number of such controversies. A turning point in the war, the Somme battles marked the beginning of greater British influence in Entente strategy, saw the introduction of new technologies, especially the tank, and tipped the strategic initiative away from the Central Powers. Originally scheduled to commence in late June, the offensive did not begin until 1 July due to poor weather. At 0730 on that date, 100,000 men went “over the top” along an eighteen-mile front, reaching from Gommecourt to Maricourt. The initial attack followed a five-day artillery barrage. Nonetheless, except in the south, in the area around Montauban where the greater concentration of French artillery helped pave the way, the assaults made little headway. Losses on both sides were appalling, with the British suffering over 57,000 casualties (19,240 dead) on the first day. Actual losses for the six-month campaign remain a matter of considerable debate, however,

as incomplete and “doctored” records have created much confusion. As with all such costly battles, compelling questions have emerged concerning the Somme Offensive: Was General Douglas Haig correct to launch the offensive when and where he did? What did it achieve and did the results warrant the massive cost? Did lack of imagination and inflexible generalship on the part of the British high command create unnecessary casualties and hardships for the common soldier? Should the introduction of the tank have been delayed until more were available to increase its shock effect and potential for success? Could different tactics, techniques, and procedures have been used to reduce casualties?

Dr. Fred R. van Hartesveldt has recently compiled an annotated bibliography of works addressing these and similar questions. The book consists of two parts: 1) a summary of the major historical themes; and 2) the annotated bibliography itself. Section I outlines the current historiographical positions concerning the planning, conduct, tactics, casualties, and aftermath of the Somme battles. It is organized into six chapters: 1. Introduction and Historical Background; 2. Archival Sources, Of-

ficial Histories, and Surveys; 3. Generalship and Strategy; 4. Tactics; 5. Technology; and 6. Conclusion: Who Won?

Chapter 1 provides a brief sketch of the historical context of the Somme Offensive, including the debate between “Easterners” such as Winston Churchill who argued that the best strategy was one that focused on defeating Germany’s allies, and “Westerners” who maintained that the war could be won only by defeating Germany itself, in France. The chapter also outlines the traditional and revisionist interpretations of the battle. The former, represented by authors such as Basil Liddell Hart, maintain that the offensive amounted to a complete disaster, the product of mediocre minds. The latter, inspired by scholars such as John Terraine, argue that the casualties of the Somme, though tremendous, were comparable to those of any major modern battle and that the campaign itself constituted only one part of an overall strategy that eventually proved successful.

Chapter 2 briefly describes the pertinent holdings of archives in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. It also assesses the value of the official histories and general surveys of the battle’s major participants.

Chapter 3 provides a short discussion of how the concept for the Somme Offensive evolved from a general desire to launch a combined attack against the Western, Italian, and Eastern fronts into a plan, which in form and location, neither Haig nor Foch wanted. It also outlines the major historiographical views regarding the three primary Entente goals for the offensive: 1) relieve pressure on Verdun; 2) prevent German forces from shifting to the Eastern front; and 3) attrit or exhaust the enemy. The chapter concludes with a summary of scholars’ opinions regarding the quality of generalship displayed by Douglas Haig and Sir Henry Rawlinson, the commander of the attacking army.

Chapter 4 summarizes the status on the tactical innovations that occurred during the battle and emphasizes the important contributions of authors such as Paddy Griffith and Hubert Johnson who attempt to argue that, contrary to the prevailing view, the British rather than the Germans led the way in tactical innovation.

Chapter 5 describes the historical opinion concerning how technology, namely improvements in artillery, aircraft, and the introduction of the tank, impacted the Somme battles in particular and the war in general. Perhaps most importantly, the chapter discusses the historical controversy concerning whether the tank was introduced into the conflict prematurely.

Chapter 6 emphasizes the problematics of identifying the battle’s victor; it presents both German and British opinions on the subject and underscores the inadequacy of measuring military success in terms of yards on the ground verses the cost in human lives. The First World War saw the emergence of two relatively unstudied strategies—attrition and exhaustion; each required the development of a more long-term, multi-dimensional vision of war, a vision slow in coming. Indeed, it has proved quite elusive for both contemporary, and later, soldiers and critics.

Section II lists 704 books and articles alphabetically by author. Criterion for inclusion in the bibliography depended upon the compiler’s subjective judgment of book’s overall contribution to military history. Fortunately, his judgment proves sound. The bibliography’s selections range from unit histories to general surveys and from personal memoirs and private accounts to official dispatches.

Overall, this annotated bibliography is a welcome and useful addition to any personal and institutional library. Undergraduate and graduate students alike will find that it saves them a great deal of time. Even experienced professors will be grateful for the convenient way that it compiles over 700 books and articles, many of which address subjects extending well beyond the Somme Offensive.

One hopes for a second edition, however. The first edition lacks any real discussion of the historiographical issues from the volumes of literature produced by German and French scholars and historians. It does not suffice to say simply that the Germans considered the battle a loss and that the French have given it little thought because of their preoccupation with Verdun. We need more analysis from Dr. van Hartesveldt who, after having read so extensively about the battle, certainly has more to offer. We need to know, for example, which authors have captured the historical context of the Somme Offensive more accurately, and whether “Easterners” and “Westerners” understood how strategy had changed since the early nineteenth century. It would be helpful to know, too, what in the author’s opinion, constitutes a good strategy, and how and whether the historians who have critiqued the Entente’s strategy defined the concept itself. Other questions that Dr. van Hartesveldt might have addressed include: Which major modern battles did John Terraine use to compare with the Somme? Are his conclusions and the comparison valid? How did the course of the battle affect the Entente’s goals and have histo-

rians taken that evolution into account? What are the elements of good generalship and how did the critics and supporters of Haig and Rawlinson define it? Which side in the debate seems to have the better definition? How do French and German historians view the generalship of Haig and Rawlinson? What of the historical interpretation of the qualities of the German commanders involved in the fighting? What were the actual tactical innovations that occurred during the offensive and who initi-

ated them? What was the relationship between technology and tactical innovation and which historians understand it? How have assessments of military victory changed since the time of Napoleon and have scholars and critics appreciated that change?

Answering these questions would, of course, make for a much longer work; and brevity has its merits. Nonetheless, most scholars would surely welcome a more rigorous critique.

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