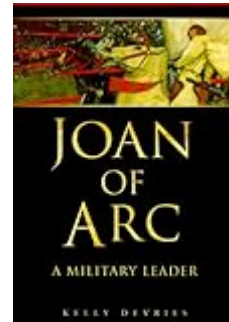


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kelly DeVries. *Joan of Arc: A Military Leader.* Phoenix Mill, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999. xi + 242 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7509-2787-1; \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7509-1805-3.



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Joan of Arc consistently fascinates my World History students when we pass through the fifteenth century in Europe. The female students adopt her as a figure of empowerment, to the extent that one of them took Joan as a confirmation name. The male students lean more towards film depictions, most recently with Leelee Sobieski and Mila Jovanovich. Then after losing interest in the novelty of a medieval woman in men's clothing, the discussion heads for the obvious question—so, how did she do? Excellent biographical works of Joan of Arc address her role as a saint, national hero, a commoner amongst the French nobles, and proto-feminist, but none of them address why Joan, in a single year, reversed the course of the Hundred Years' War.

Leading a late-medieval army was no simple task and the problems were numerous: recruitment and retention of soldiers during losing streaks or lulls in the fighting; supplying and moving a force across rough country and bad or non-existent roads; dealing with century-old aristocratic disputes that complicated borders; and command and strategy. Add to this the dismal morale of the 1420s, after the successes of Henry V of England, and the French situation looked a morass of continued defeatism and chaos. Introduce to this one teenage girl, bearing a message from God and a chorus of saints.

DeVries, whose previous work shows a mastery of

medieval military techniques and events, tries to unravel Joan's effectiveness as a military leader. Using all extant accounts of her campaigns, he pulls together a compelling picture of a gifted natural soldier, who took advantage of France's remaining assets to defeat the English (who had weaknesses of their own to be exploited). Was this a miracle? Not in the context presented here, which may lessen the glamour attached by students, but adds to the understanding of the Joan phenomenon. Although nobles were trained to lead armies, by the early fifteenth century, a preferable leader from the perspective of the commoners was one of their own who possessed sense and held out a chance of keeping them alive; nobles knew they would be ransomed from captivity. This made it possible for Joan to gain command, and through early successes, to keep it. These commoner leaders did not need years of sword training, jousting experience, or knightly etiquette to judge a battlefield. Indeed, Joan's peasant background (of wealthy, not indigent, peasants) may have made her more flexible toward adopting gunpowder artillery as well as more willing to use unconventional tactics.

This work is refreshing in that, after a brief nod to Joan's vetting by the court as a theologically sound virgin (neither of which was a great recommendation as a medieval military leader), DeVries does not dwell on her

gender, just her leadership. Interestingly, she seems to have had the extraordinary effect on her troops of not just defusing their lust toward her but, as Jean the Bastard of Orleans noted, toward all women for the duration of the campaign. By demonstrating the context for a number of the actions that have categorized Joan as feminine, or (in the World History textbook) spiritually important but militarily marginal, DeVries makes the case that Joan's concern for dying English soldiers, crying at her victories, preventing looting, and issuing warnings to garrisons about to be besieged were not signs of weakness. It was important to Joan that the rules of "just war" be followed. Moreover, her emotions could be seen in male noble commanders and functioned as part of their concern for client soldiers and the French territory they were there to liberate.

DeVries explains that Joan's strengths were in lending the army confidence through her total belief in their mission (messages from God should not be scoffed at given their importance to contemporary societies, for example, Shi'ites in Iraq), which allowed them to move quickly and engage in frontal assaults on fortified positions. She brought out the best in her subordinates, brought out pockets of French support against the thinly stretched enemy, played on the fears of her English and Burgundian enemies, and had the strategic vision to insist that the English be chased out of the Loire to the Battle of Patay, rather than be allowed to escape and regroup. For an amateur, her grasp of siege tactics, artillery, and terrain were exceptional. Instead of making generalized claims, DeVries solidly backs these observations with primary documentation that show her contemporaries agreed.

The end of Joan's story is familiar to military historians of any era. After her victories, Joan was no longer

politically or religiously convenient to the French court, whose petty feuds and questionable loyalties Joan had criticized and tried to reform. Additionally, there is the tantalizing suggestion that Joan might have considered ranging outside of France, presented in a letter threatening that she would engage the Hussite rebels in Bohemia. Imagine a Joan not tied to France, but instead acting as the avenging angel of the pope; this was not impossible, since most of Europe remembered the actions of Matilda of Tuscany in the Investiture Crisis. She ended her short career in capture after being sent to fruitless military theaters and denied the crucial opportunity to rebound from small defeats, as the court refused her key logistical support. DeVries does not dwell on the trial and execution, or Joan's post-mortem career as a saint and national symbol, but he carefully debunks popular myths concerning Joan, including the theory that she was an illegitimate child of the Duke of Orleans.

The book is beautifully produced, with glossy color plates of medieval illustrations, clearly drawn maps, and photographs that allow a visualization of the challenges she confronted. Only a few small points detract from the work. The genealogy tables in the appendix leave out many of the women DeVries establishes as key to Joan's career, so that a non-specialist is at sea when trying to place them in the court. Moreover, he tosses into an otherwise fine summary of the Hundred Years' War, the comment that John of England was "Lackland" from his disasters in France (he was Lackland for not inheriting part of the royal domains; he had to marry an heiress to get his title before becoming king).

With this book, Joan has been taken off the pedestal of sainthood and put back where she belongs, on top of a siege ladder on the walls of Orleans.

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