

Jack Sheldon, *Fighting the Somme: German Challenges, Dilemmas and Solutions* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books 2017). pp. vii, 225, Hardback, Illus., Maps, Bibliography. RRP: £19.99.

Anglophone historians of the Great War are greatly indebted to Jack Sheldon for his series of eight books on the German Army between 1914 and 1918.¹ There are very few other works that have mined German sources so intensively as to give us a balancing view of the Western Front from the other side of No Man's Land.² Sheldon has written about the Somme battles before. His first book covered the German Army in that region for a longer period and from the perspective of the frontline soldier. In contrast, *Fighting the Somme* examines the campaign of 1916 from the perspective of the various headquarters, focusing on, as the book's subtitle suggests, the huge problems of command and control that commanders and General Staff faced and their attempts to deal with them. By the skin of their teeth they prevented a decisive breakthrough, but the effort fatally undermined the old German Army. As Sheldon remarks, that the army was able to fight on for another two years was 'remarkable' (p.176).

Sheldon begins with an historical analysis of the German Army's battle doctrine in 1914. Basically, it followed the theories of Clausewitz in seeking 'the *centra gravitatis*' (centre of gravity) of the enemy's forces and focusing all one's might on that point to destroy it. Once achieved, the enemy would collapse (p.2). This was the victory of annihilation, the strategy that was tried but failed in 1914 (not least because Clausewitz's insistence on concentration of force was ignored during the advance to the Marne). Once the trench system was in place from Belgium to Switzerland a different tactical theory was required and the German Army found it, again, in Clausewitz's writings. In essence, it was the same *centra gravitatis* theory but used in a different way. The German word was *Schwerpunkt*, translated by Sheldon as "'centre of gravity", "crucial" or "focal" point', but used by the German Army as "point of main effort" (p.17). This could be both defensive and offensive. It appears that there were multiple sub-*Schwerpunkte* that, presumably, combined to support the main effort: 'Every level of command, from *OHL* [Supreme Army Command] to infantry company or artillery battery, identified a *Schwerpunkt*; but so did the entire system of service support, so at any given moment a decision maker would know at once where to place his priorities and why' (p.17).

According to German commanders on the Somme front, the major problem they faced from 1 July 1916 was that General Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the General Staff, had been fixated on Verdun as his *Schwerpunkt* for too long and neglected to provide them with the necessary manpower and material resources for an effective defence. Sheldon feels that Falkenhayn's refusal to reinforce the Somme sector 'amounted almost to professional negligence' (p.39). As far as the Somme commanders were concerned, not only were they refused crucial defensive resources, they also had plans rejected for a pre-emptive strike

¹ These include: *The German Army on the Somme 1914-1916* (Barnsley 2007); *The German Army at Cambrai* (Barnsley 2009); *The German Army at Ypres 1914* (Barnsley 2010); *The German Army on the Western Front 1915* (Barnsley 2012); *The German Army at Passchendaele* (Barnsley 2014); *The German Army on Vimy Ridge 1914-1917* (Barnsley 2014); *The German Army in the Spring Offensive 1917: Arras, Aisne and Champagne* (Barnsley 2015).

² Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes: The British and the Somme 1916* (London 2006); Martin Kitchen, *The German Offensive of 1918* (Stroud 2001); Irena Renz, Gerd Krumeich and Gerhard Hirschfeld, (trans. Geoffrey Brooks), *Scorched Earth: The Germans on the Somme 1914-1918* (Barnsley 2009); Matthias Strohn (ed), *The Battle of the Somme* (Oxford 2016); Frank Buchholz, Joe Robinson and Janet Robinson, *The Great War Dawning: Germany and its Army at the Start of World War 1* (Vienna 2013).

against the Allies to disrupt their preparations for a major attack either side of the Somme. One such plan was Operation *Hubertus*, aimed at pinching out Arras (p.23).

In the sector of the line facing the British in 1916 the *Second Army's* defensive *Schwerpunkt* centred on Thiepval and 'the *Schwerpunkt* of *Schwerpunkts* was the Schwaben Redoubt, located on dominating high ground north of Thiepval village' (p.37). On 1 July the 36th (Ulster) Division came very close to taking and retaining the *Schwerpunkt*. Sheldon believes that Sir Douglas Haig made a mistake in not following up this near success with further heavy attacks. Instead, he allowed a smaller assault on 3 July that was a failure and concentrated on developing the successes that had occurred further south. This was 'arguably the greatest mistake General Haig made during the entire battle' (p.66).

Was it a mistake, though?³ To be a *Schwerpunkt* required major resources and, with Falkenhayn's refusal to transfer them from Verdun before 1 July, they could only come from other parts of the line defended by *First* and *Second Armies*. Hence the weaknesses further south that were exploited by both the British and the French. It might be thought axiomatic that success rather than failure should be built upon. As it was, Haig's policy after 1 July still brought enormous pressure on the German *1st Army* command. As Sheldon points out, the capture of Pozières by the Australians on 23 July took away a vital defensive blocking position for Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt and caused a crisis. All counter-attacks failed (p.96).

Given that the Somme campaign was an allied effort, it is important to recognise that the greatest penetration of the German defences by the British on 1 July occurred close to where the French had been even more successful. Admittedly, cooperation between the allies was to be difficult in the ensuing weeks. Nevertheless, focusing on Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt would have opened up any further French advances to flank attack and, no doubt, to French claims that the British were not pulling their weight. Sheldon's book brings out clearly that throughout the ensuing months the Germans seemed to regard the French front to be the more threatening. *Politically*, therefore, Haig's strategy was probably the correct one. As a military decision it remains open to debate, although it is unlikely that casualties would have been any lower than those sustained by the attacks on Pozières and Mouquet Farm (to outflank and make Thiepval untenable) if Haig had decided to take the alternative course of action and order another full-scale frontal assault that, at the time, could only have been carried out on a narrow front.

It may be worth pointing out, also, that the BEF's *Schwerpunkt* throughout the war would have been Flanders and especially Ypres, which was the key point in the protection of the BEF's lines of communication and supply from Britain. Moreover, as Gary Sheffield has pointed out, 'The Atlantic lifeline was Britain's centre of gravity; the thing which, if attacked successfully, would cause maximum damage to its war effort'.⁴ Haig always accepted that the Belgian ports had to be a major objective, in order to reduce the submarine threat, and from the very beginning of his tenure as C-in-C his personal plans were for the BEF's main efforts to be in Flanders. But politics and French military demands normally meant that in 1916 and 1917 he was usually fighting in regions not of his choice or timing.

³ Stuart Mitchell writes of 'Haig's wise insistence on exploiting the success gained in the south rather than attempting to reinforce failure in the north ...'. Stuart Mitchell, 'The British Army's Operations on the Somme', in Strohn, *Battle of the Somme*, p.104.

⁴ Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London 2011), p.199.

Much has been made of the differences between Haig and General Rawlinson, commander of Fourth Army, on 1 July and later (breakthrough versus ‘bite and hold’).⁵ Sheldon shows that, on the other side of the wire, dissension at command level was rife. The famed German command structure, especially under Falkenhayn, was less efficient and streamlined than its reputation suggests. Army commanders had overlapping responsibilities on the Somme that led to conflict and the parallel use of General Staff working with army commanders, the acme of the German system, could be a source of tension. The highly trained professional General Staff officers were directly answerable to the Chief of General Staff and thus had considerable influence, even when they were outranked by army commanders. There is a hint of the Soviet Commissar in their role. Some were, however, of crucial importance in organising the defence and planning counter-attacks. Oberst von Loßberg, in particular, was the Red Adair of the Somme, a genius in plugging holes and dampening fires. He was probably the key figure in ensuring that the army held on until winter ended the campaign. Thanks to Sheldon, the reputation of the German Army’s high command now looks rather different to the Anglophone world.

In other ways, too, it seems that Anglophone historians may have misunderstood some of the German command’s actions, perhaps giving them more credit than they deserve. For example, Falkenhayn’s insistence that no ground should be given up and that counter-attacks should attempt to regain any ground lost was recognised as a) using reserves in a piecemeal and inefficient way and b) causing unnecessary heavy losses at times. It is usually thought that the replacement of Falkenhayn by Hindenburg and Ludendorff brought about a change in tactics. Sheldon quotes Ludendorff saying in early September 1916 that ‘all trenches or areas of terrain not essential for the overall defence be relinquished if their rigid defence meant that particularly heavy casualties would have to be endured’ (p.200). Yet more than a month later, in the French sector where Sailly was lost, even Loßberg was refusing to allow ground to be given up (p.172). He was to continue the policy in 1917 (p.200).

On 15 September 1916, as the Guards Division attacked Lesboeuifs, they were surprised to find, after they had advanced about one hundred yards over a small crest, a large number of shell holes filled with soldiers of *21 Bavarian Regiment* who swept them with withering fire. Air reconnaissance photos had failed to pick up this new tactic. According to Oliver Lyttleton, of 3rd Grenadier Guards, the first wave stopped to fire at the defenders, giving ‘several terrific whoops’, and ‘Then we killed. I have only a blurred image of slaughter’.⁶ This unforeseen impediment nevertheless threw the attack seriously off balance. The use of shell holes as a temporary holding line was to become very common in the last weeks of the battle and has been seen as one aspect of a new tactical response by the Germans (and has been called ‘semi-trench warfare’ by Pugsley and part of an ‘elastic area defence’ by Sheldon (p.198)).⁷ In reality, the use of shell holes by ground holding divisions had been thrust upon the Germans as a way of reducing casualties and by the effectiveness of allied artillery. Its advantages, however, scarcely outweighed the disadvantages, especially in relation to command and control and supply and experienced commanders were soon urging that shell holes should be linked into a continuous line as soon as practicable (p.143). Using shell holes was a desperate, not a considered, response to a desperate situation.

This is an important book on a subject that is only now being given the attention it deserves. Sheldon rightly emphasizes the magnificent scrambling defence of the German Army on the

⁵ See, for example, Peter Hart, *The Somme* (London 2006), pp.63-67; Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme*, (New Haven and London 2006), pp.41-47; Sheffield, *The Chief*, pp.167-68.

⁶ Oliver Lyttleton, ‘Description of Battle written at 16 Great College St when on leave’, Chandos Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, CHAN I, 8/4.

⁷ Christopher Pugsley, ‘Trial and Error: The Dominion Forces on the Somme in 1916’, in Strohn, *Battle of the Somme*, p.127.

Somme and this should be given due weight when the BEF's effort in 1916 is considered (it often isn't). Sheldon also acknowledges that when considering why the breakthrough never occurred, no reason 'was more important than a significant change in the weather' (p.179). Hindenburg and Ludendorff had good reason to be grateful to Freyr, the Norse God of Rain.

October 2017

Copyright Michael Durey. All rights reserved.