

REVIEWS

Simon J. House, *Lost Opportunity: The Battle of the Ardennes, 22 August 1914*. Solihull: Helion & Co., 2017. xxvi+map book (64pp) pp.252. ISBN 978-191-109-642-9. Price £35.00.

It is a curious phenomenon that so many pioneering contributions to French military history have come from the pens of English-speaking historians. In rough chronological order in terms of periodisation, those who have struggled with the bureaucracy of the military archives at Vincennes include David Parrott, John Lynn, Alan Forrest, Paddy Griffith, David Ralston, Douglas Porch, Martin Alexander and Martin Thomas. Important contributions on the French in the Great War have come from Elizabeth Greenhalgh, Leonard Smith, Robert Doughty, Roy Prete, Tim Gale and Jonathan Krause. To these can be added Simon House, whose detailed study of the operations in the Ardennes on 22 August 1914 - the single bloodiest day in French military history - offers a more widely applicable analysis of the implications of pre-war French military doctrine. In addition, House also demonstrates that the French lost key opportunities to derail decisively German operational plans while providing a welcome corrective to Terence Zuber's excessive praise of German military expertise.

Following an overview of what was an encounter battle in thick mist between the French Third and Fourth Armies and the German Fourth and Fifth Armies House examines the operations from an army level perspective. He then analyses the German tactical victories at Bertrix and Rossignol but principally two key French lost opportunities. Joseph-Paul Eydoux's French XI Corps (Fourth Army) had the chance to turn the flank of the German Fourth Army at Maissin-Anloy when opposed by just three regiments of the German 25th Infantry Division. Principally, House points to the failure of Pierre Roques's French XII Corps (also Fourth Army) to exploit its considerable numerical advantage - in places a six to one superiority - over elements of the German XVIII Reserve Corps at Neufchâteau. Had Roques - a politically astute engineer but with no real command experience - or Eydoux pressed then the French could have achieved both tactical and operational victory in the Ardennes with significant results for the 1914 campaign. It should be added that the supplementary map book with no less than 60 full colour maps is a major asset. Author and publisher deserve commendation for what must have been a costly exercise yet one not making the book prohibitively expensive.

The Germans were well aware of the dangers they had faced. Concluding, by contrast, that the French had no clear understanding of the opportunities that had been available, House then probes doctrine and training, armament and equipment. Not least he

considers the popular assumptions concerning pre-war French obsession with the offensive spirit and the influence of Louis de Grandmaison perpetuated by Churchill, Falls and Liddell-Hart. House engages fully with the historiography of the offensive spirit, such as the work by Gat, Goya and Quelox, finding little real differences in operational and tactical doctrine between the French and Germans. French doctrine, however, was in a considerable state of flux. Nor was German equipment noticeably superior but the Germans had a far superior training regime and wider French preparation for war generally was poor.

House's excellent study shows that Joffre's strategy was not quite as bereft of common sense as sometimes suggested - as by Doughty - since superior French forces were delivered at a weak point in German deployment. The Germans were certainly taken by surprise but at the same time French operational intelligence was faulty and there was weak operational control within Ferdinand de Langle de Cary's Fourth Army. Overall, Grand Duke Albrecht commanding German Fourth Army 'fought an excellent battle' (p. 48) and the Germans did sufficiently well to avoid defeat in the Ardennes. Ironically, their subsequent conduct of the operations on the Marne just fourteen days later displayed some of the same deficiencies observed of the French in the Ardennes.

Despite the casualties - 27,000 French and probably 14,000 German - the battle in the Ardennes has previously received little attention. By close analysis of a extensive series of French and German sources, House fully remedies that defect in a what represents a model operational history.

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Douglas Farmer. *Sedan 1870: The Eclipse of France*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2008. Notes, Index, Bibliography, Photographs, pp. 244. ISBN: 78-1-473-82889-6 Paperback. Price £14.99.

The Franco-Prussian War marked an historic shift in the dynamics of the European political and national stage with the decline of France and the rise of the German confederation. This was made all the more significant given the assumption by many of the predominance of French martial prowess and the relatively junior position of Germany. The results of the war left the French in political and military disarray and the Germans as the new masters of the profession of arms. Farmer's book covers the events leading up to the commencement of the war and the proceedings up to the conclusion of the Battle of Sedan and the surrender of Napoleon III, Emperor of the French.