

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.

## REVIEWS

While the book ultimately focusses upon the Battle of Sedan, the author has also provided the reader with a comprehensive understanding of not only the events but also the capabilities and political/military realities of the protagonists before the conflict. This is critical as it speaks to the conditions that resulted in an unforeseen military cataclysm for France. The analysis undertaken by Fermer looks at not only the size and capabilities of the respective armies, but more importantly their respective doctrines and leadership.

France's doctrine relating to combat was only part of the equation and, as Fermer so aptly discusses, it was the doctrine surrounding the processes relating to mobilisation and logistics that proved to be the true Achilles Heel of the French. Their plans were unrealistic, unproven and based on capabilities that existed only on paper. Further exacerbating this shortcoming, the French political and military leadership chose to ignore the realities of French weakness and chose to undertake their roles and responsibilities more as partisan political adversaries living in a delusional world of past glories than the *real politique* of 1870 Europe.

Fermer also casts a strong light on the nascent German Empire and its efforts to establish itself as a leading member within the European host of nations. While Fermer equitably identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the German approach, it is clear that the political and military leadership of Prussia (read Germany) was much better prepared than were the French. The Prussians also had the benefit of recent combat experience in the Danish and Austrian wars and from which they were able undertake a critical analysis of their plans and doctrine.

Having prepared the groundwork through this macro, pan-European approach, Fermer is able to focus on the immediate events leading up the outbreak of hostilities and the initial stages of the war. His eye is critical and unrelenting as he relates the activities of the individual armies and commanders. As he discusses, the French were not without opportunity and courage but they were immediately caught behind the 'power curve' and surrendered the initiative to the Germans. The Germans, for their part, maintained a clear operational focus that allowed their armies to operate independently but in concert with one another. The French command and support structure rapidly collapsed under a rapidly changing operational and tactical environment and they found themselves operating reactively instead of proactively with little or no central control.

The narrative reaches its apogee with its examination of the Battle of Sedan itself. The study is such that the reader instinctively feels for the French soldiers as they fight with futile desperation under a command that has abrogated its responsibilities to the vagaries of fate. The unfolding of the battle is easily followed and related with a critical

eye to the impact of local encounters on the overall battle. Both the Prussian and French leadership is studied in some detail as to their conduct and competence with lessons to be learned for the modern-day practitioner.

Fermer is an eminently readable author and his books well worth the investment. *Sedan 1870*, is an excellent study in hubris and hunger, doctrine and professionalism and the underlying motivation that drives troops, regardless of the quality of their leadership, to astonishing levels of self-sacrifice.

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**Oliver Wilkinson. *British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. pp. 308. ISBN: 978-110-719-942-2. Hardback. Price £75.00.**

For nearly a century, scholars relegated prisoners of war to the margins of the First World War's history. In recent years, however, a once-neglected subject has become a dynamic field of research characterized by new interpretations of how combatants experienced the war. Oliver Wilkinson's recent examination of the 185,329 British prisoners held in Germany from 1914-1918 is no exception. While aiming to 'write the British POWs back into the history of the First World War', (p. 5) Wilkinson has delivered a significant contribution to the scholarship on military captivity and the British soldiers who fought the conflict.

Surrender was a disempowering ordeal that compromised a man's identity as an honourable soldier. This reality was underscored by prisoners' obligation to face a Court of Inquiry upon repatriation. The German camp system into which British prisoners were transferred was far from uniform, but as Wilkinson demonstrates, captivity did not alter the military hierarchy with which prisoners were familiar. In accordance with international standards, the Germans held officers and prisoners of other ranks (OR) separately. Officers enjoyed a range of privileges denied to OR prisoners, who were often utilised as a source of labour. The nature of a prisoner's captivity thus depended upon a number of factors, including rank, location of internment, and employment.

Life in captivity was psychologically challenging. Leaders accustomed to active duty confronted days of idleness that confirmed their status as disarmed captives.