



## MEN NOT SUPERMEN

TONY COWAN

### *Holding Out: The German Army and Operational Command in 1917*

(Cambridge University Press, 2023), £30, Hardback, 326 pp., 13 figures, 7 maps, 17 tables, chronology, index.

ISBN978-1-108-83023-2

For the British, and more so for the French, the spring offensives on the Western Front in 1917 were a costly disaster. While the

BEF did well on the first day on Vimy Ridge, success quickly turned into disappointment as once again opportunities slipped away. The bloody tale of the eponymous Nivelle Offensive is well known, leading as it did to mutinies among an army which had been fighting and dying for three long years. But what of their foes? How did they view this struggle?

For the Anglophone reader, detailed studies of the German army in the Great War are thin on the ground. Despite the efforts of historians such as Jack Sheldon, Robert Foley and Jonathan Boff, there is still much to discover about how war was conducted on the other side of the wire. Tony Cowan can now be added to this august band, his doctoral thesis having morphed into an

evidence rich book. If the Allies considered the bloody sacrifice in Champagne a defeat, or at best an expensive set-back, the Germans were convinced they had won a major victory. They had predicted and planned for the attacks, and while paying a huge price had held out. Their losses meant that henceforth holding out became a pivotal feature of German strategy. How this position was managed at operational level is the subject of this important study.

The work proper begins with a revealing contextual chapter. While recent British historians of the Great War, notably Gary Sheffield and William Philpott, have argued convincingly that the Battle of the Somme was a victory for the Entente, this new work shows that at the time the Germans considered the laurels belonged to them: yet at what a cost. The German High Command's verdict in early 1917 was that 'very heavy losses' particularly of junior officers and trainers hastened a 'watering down' of the army as the conflict dragged on into 1917. By the end of 1916, 60 per cent of German divisions had fought at the Somme or Verdun – or both. Casualties in that year numbered 1.6 million; four million since the war began. The numbers are barely comprehensible.

Cowan then examines the 'principles' of German operational command, including revelatory material on the notion of

‘function overriding rank’, the essential role of the *Schwerpunkt* – centre of gravity – in any operational plan, and the expectation that commanders and staff officers should work in partnership rather than mutual distrust. Chapters on organisational design and function follow, together with others on personality, intelligence, communication and, that most slippery of concepts to analyse, learning. Logically enough, performance comes last, and a mixed bag of outcomes it certainly, and inevitably, was. The author notes that the German army did not have to be ‘perfect or even good, it just had to be better than the enemy’. As a result, we get not only a review of German performance in the first half of 1917, but also a useful and illuminating one of the British and French armies.

The author defines five main ‘command tasks’ facing German commanders in early 1917: co-ordination of forces with clear levels of command; selection of commanders and senior staff officers; timely and effective use of intelligence and communications; continuous learning and adaptation and ‘winning’ by preventing an Allied breakthrough while suffering fewer casualties than the enemy. These tasks would continue to form the structure of German planning for the rest of the war and provide a useful template which scholars might apply to future studies of operational command in later periods of the war. Any researcher choosing such a range of parameters is accepting a daunting challenge, yet Cowan is up to the task. His fluent German means the study is overflowing with important and fresh primary sources to support his meticulously researched argument.

What this reviewer found most revealing was the evidence showing that the German officer cadre was as riven by professional jealousy, the ready application of Buggins’ turn, cronyism, backscratching and backside covering, and downright snobbery as its British and French equivalents. To this mix was added the regional rivalries in a federal state, principally rooted in the arrogance of, and antipathy towards, Prussia. This happens to a greater or lesser degree in every human system, in war or peace. It even happened, it now turns out, in the German army.

The notion of the German military superman is so ingrained in much thinking about 20th century warfare that it is too often taken for fact. Cowan systematically dissects this myth and reveals ordinary humans doing extraordinary things, often prevailing but sometimes making a hash of things. There is no doubt that the German army in the Great War was highly professional and able to learn and adapt, that is why it was able to hold out for so long in the face of increasingly unfavourable odds. This dense, detailed and fascinating tour de force tells us how it was done.

**John Spencer**