

Tony Cowan. *Holding Out: The German Army and Operational Command in 1917.* Cambridge Military Histories Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. xxv + 326 pp. \$39.99, pdf, ISBN 978-1-108-90055-3.



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Published on H-War (July, 2024)

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Tony Cowan works to seriously revise perspectives of the German army and its wartime performance in 1917. The book embarks, with a series of chapters, on a reevaluation of the army's fulfillment of five critical tasks: coordinating personnel and equipment, selecting officers for command and staff positions, leveraging intelligence and communications, engaging in institutional learning, and succeeding in combat, measured by preventing entente breakthroughs and inflicting maximum enemy casualties while preserving an economy of force. By the book's close, Cowan depicts a German army that had not only weathered the storm but also been further weathered *by* it.

One salient argument in the book is that wartime changes in tactical doctrine, ostensibly shifting responsibility from the corps to the division level, have lured historians into a false understanding of mission command. Cowan thus takes issue with Timothy T. Lupfer, Martin Samuels, and Graeme C. Wynne.[1] "By 1917 the balance has moved towards *more* control," because of high command concerns about declining experience

and quality of divisions; "corps/*Gruppen* remained central to the conduct of battle" (pp. 90, 115, emphasis added).

Cowan explicitly breaks with David Zabecki about personnel selection, arguing that, although merit played a role in commander and staff selection, its role was much less pronounced than Zabecki has alleged, in relation to factors like seniority. Underpinning Cowan's objection is his belief that existing histories have overplayed the professionalism of the German army. Simultaneously, however, Cowan also deems Robert Citino's dim view of German military intelligence as overly simplistic. For Cowan, the German army upheld the theoretical value of intelligence while allowing its execution to vary, although the execution in 1917 was adequate to enable the German army's survival during a dangerous year. Likewise, German army communications "functioned well enough," although it like its entente counterparts suffered when the defender's intrinsic technological advantages were shorn away by a German need to counterattack (p. 214). Cowan seeks to

combine what he considers the strongest elements of Robert T. Foley's ideas about formalized learning and of Amié Fox's conclusions about bottom-up learning within the army.

Reflecting on the army's performance, Cowan notes that Germany's land forces succeeded in blunting entente assaults (partly because these were less coordinated than had been intended) but that the German army was dealt severe further damage in the process. Germany's high command had at the end of 1916 been worried by the damage to the army's morale and quality, whereas its size had been reasonably well preserved. The army employed organizational models, command and staff selection practices, intelligence, communication, and institutional and networked learning to stave off disaster on the battlefield, and in the end its performance had proven mixed. The battles of 1917 did not bring Germany to defeat, but they ground down the army in that direction.

The book is peppered with nuggets that help flesh out an appreciation for the army, its practices, and the operational situation. These include brief explanations of the impact of military telephones on command and communication dynamics, administrative relationships between units and reinforcing elements like aviation and further artillery, use of spies and disinformation, and the nuanced implications of attempting to compensate for declining personnel strength with increased firepower (something that largely preserved defensive firepower but bit even harder into the counterattacking capabilities of units in which the already thinned infantry ranks were poached in the hunt for new specialist troops). The case studies closing each of the main chapters offer specifics that are of value for scholars as well.

Holding Out exudes Cowan's determination to bring the German army down a peg, because of the mythologically impressive character to which it has often been ascribed. Responsible revisionism demands that a scholar tread a careful path, because changed impressions must be persuaded

through evidence and argumentation, and they should be pursued by degree. Overly strident claims inherently risk "overcorrecting" a historical understanding even under the best circumstances. Cowan, in exploring the surviving primary source documents and poring over memoirs and statistical records that were preserved despite Germany's tumultuous twentieth-century history, necessarily avails himself of many of the same kinds of records as the historians whose works he means to append. He presents his competing perspective in an unabashed manner, and in publishing his conclusions he reinforces the ranks of historians whose studies will be subjected to further scrutiny. The reader can gain from this book further information to consider in understanding the character, practices, and execution of an army that was by no means perfect but that inarguably resisted the combined efforts of powerful enemies on multiple fighting fronts for several years.

Note

[1]. Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine during the First World War* (Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1981); Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1995); and Graeme C. Wynne, *If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West*, ed. Robert T. Foley (1940; repr., Brighton: Tim Donovan, 2008).

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Citation: Nicholas Sambaluk. Review of Cowan, Tony, *Holding Out: The German Army and Operational Command in 1917*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2024.

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