

Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919-45

Review Number:

160

Publish date:

Wednesday, 1 November, 2000

Author:

David French

Date of Publication:

2000

Pages:

331pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Ian Beckett

A distinguished historian of British strategic decision-making in the Great War, David French has now turned his attention to the British army in the Second World War, a shift in focus already signalled by a number of journal articles that have appeared over the last few years. While the inter-war army has been relatively well covered by scholars such as Keith Jeffery, Paul Harris, Brian Holden Reid and, especially, Brian Bond, there has been surprisingly little academic interest in the British army in the Second World War though its various campaigns have been well trodden in countless popular accounts.

Moreover, while there has been a renewed interest in what might be termed the 'face of battle' in the Second World War, as evinced by the publication of papers from a conference at the University of Edinburgh, edited by Paul Addison and Angus Calder as *Time to Kill* (1997), academic monographs thus far have tended to focus on institutional aspects of the army. Paul Mackenzie, for example, examined morale and education, with particular reference to the controversial role of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs (ABCA). Ironically, the publication of Jeremy Crang's long-awaited study of the army as a social institution, *The British Army and the People's War, 1939-45*, has coincided with that of the monograph under review here.

By contrast, French's intention is to examine the army's combat capability and performance but, inevitably, that cannot be fully explained without reference to the institutional context of, firstly, the resurrection of a small professional regular army in 1919 and, secondly, wartime expansion into a large conscript force, albeit not as large as that during the Great War. French, indeed, explains that his approach will be to examine the three elements he believes generate and sustain fighting ability, namely 'the conceptual, the material, and the moral'. To some extent, therefore, French treads familiar ground to that of Brian Bond in examining the military implications of the social composition of the army between 1919 and 1939, and the attempt to come to terms with the lessons of the Great War amid the financial and other constraints under which the army was compelled to operate in the inter-war period. In carrying the analysis into the Second World War in

terms of officers and other ranks, French also covers some of the ground traversed by Crang, whose doctoral thesis is surprisingly not listed in the bibliography, though French has been assiduous in consulting others, such as Harrison-Place's doctoral work on tactical doctrine between 1940 and 1944. Consequently, there is a much fuller discussion of selection and promotion of both officers and men to be found in Crang, and French does not perhaps give the Adjutant-General, General Sir Ronald Adam, all the credit due him for shaping a wartime citizen army into a more effective fighting force.

In discussing morale and discipline in that expanded wartime army, French certainly well covers the dilemmas of a manpower policy designed to avoid the pitfalls of the Great War, but which left the army often dependent upon relatively poor material. He also makes the important point that even a more scientific approach to selection could not compensate for having an insufficient number of suitable candidates to fill all posts, hence the understandable likelihood that the army's wider needs would take precedence over individual aptitude. There are more parallels here with the Great War, to which French does not always draw sufficient attention, in his generally excellent wide-ranging discussion of morale and discipline. It is one enlivened by judicious use of firsthand testimony from wartime soldiers, whose interests, according to one such witness, extended only to 'football, beer and crumpet'. Small wonder that, as French nicely puts it, the British fashioned an army of soldiers while the Germans fashioned one of warriors. In passing, it should be noted that, while French acknowledges the importance of primary group loyalties in maintaining morale, he makes no mention of the Salerno mutiny, which arose principally from a distortion of divisional loyalty. A very minor point is that the 1st Bucks Battalion was not entirely disbanded in July 1944, as suggested by one of the memoirs French has used, but retained as a guard unit until re-designated as a 'Target Force' battalion in February 1945.

It might also be noted that, while French is fully alive to the tensions between regulars and amateurs, be they Territorials or wartime conscripts, he arguably misses one crucial additional aspect of the opposition to the adoption of Lionel Wigram's concept of battle schools, namely that Wigram was a Territorial. Moreover, in his otherwise commendable attention to the difficulties of the Territorials in the inter-war period, French makes no reference to the significant issue of 'the pledge', whereby their relationship with the War Office was undermined by Churchill's promise, as Secretary of State for War and Air in 1920, that Territorial formations would retain their integrity in wartime, preventing the use of Territorials in the very situation of medium-scale conflict which was regarded as their only likely military employment or from drafting Territorial manpower where it was most required.

The pledge was a result of the poisonous legacy of the Great War, in which the Territorials perceived that pre-1914 guarantees to maintain unit integrity had been wilfully ignored. The wider legacy of the Great War, however, is constantly apparent in French's text and, here, his interpretation of the Kirke Committee of 1932 departs significantly from previous historians. French argues persuasively that the Kirke Committee was not the first, belated attempt to learn the lessons of the war since it effectively crystallised much of what had already been suggested. Moreover, he also argues that the committee's findings were not suppressed, as Liddell Hart claimed, and did lead to some changes.

Undoubtedly, there were pockets of conservatism within the army and, particularly in his case studies of the campaigns in France and Belgium, North Africa, and 'from Alam Halfa to the Rhine', in which the emphasis is largely on Normandy, French skilfully dissects both the faults as well as the merits of leading British commanders. Arguably, while properly acknowledging the shadows of the Great War at this point, French does always not give sufficient emphasis to the impact of the army's imperial duties. In this context, for example, Sir Andrew Skene (not Skeen) is dismissed as being 'antediluvian' whilst CGS in India between 1924 and 1928, but Skene was also the author of the highly influential *Passing it On*, an aide-memoir for officers fighting on the North West Frontier, which went through no less than four editions in the seven years following its publication in 1932.

Historians such as Tim Travers and Dominick Graham have frequently drawn attention to the lack of doctrine in the British army during the Great War, not least that of combined arms, and, as French suggests, the prevailing consensus in accounts of British combat performance in the Second World War is that the

British remained extremely poor in combined arms tactics. French points out, however, that while the Mobile Division stood out in 1938 in being armour-heavy with unfortunate consequences for the early conduct of the war in North Africa, the remainder of the army did not lack a combined-arms doctrine. The problem was that the army's hierarchical command structure impeded its application. Clearly, the army's commanders found it no easier than during the Great War to identify the thin dividing line between exercising too much control over subordinates and too little, even the Bartholomew Committee's enquiry into the reasons for the defeat in France and Belgium in 1940 failing to change the mindset of senior officers. But, in any case, the rigid hierarchical approach to command remained unchanged as a result of the experience of war, despite the value of what Travers has characterised as the 'useful anarchy' of the 'Hundred Days' campaign in 1918, precisely because most regulars believed that only by bringing order to the battlefield could co-ordination of arms be properly established.

In the same way, the army's determination to avoid the mistakes of the Great War also led it to emphasise mobility over firepower, mechanisation over manpower, and consolidation over exploitation. In turn, while financial considerations were always significant, the choice of weaponry and equipment reflected such operational assumptions. Thus, the emphasis upon mobility rather than firepower led to the dismissal of submachine guns as 'gangster-guns', whose provision would impose unacceptable additional logistic requirements through encouraging troops to waste ammunition. Similarly, in the quest for mobility, the otherwise reliable 25-pounder field gun sacrificed shell-weight for range. Another point to emerge from French's valuable discussion of equipment issues is that the much-reviled two-pounder antitank gun was the best weapon of its type in 1938, albeit that it rapidly became obsolete. While it is usually assumed that the British missed the opportunity to emulate the Germans by converting the 3.7-inch anti-aircraft gun to an antitank role, French demonstrates that there were good technical reasons why it could not be used like a German 88 mm, as well as a lack of sufficient numbers to ensure even effective air defence.

French is also excellent on the technical deficiencies of British tanks, which remained under-gunned and under-armoured, while also pointing out that the much vaunted heavy German Tiger and Panther tanks themselves lacked range and mechanical reliability. French remarks on the British capacity to spring an occasional and temporary technical surprise on the Germans, but, in his coverage of the campaign in France and Belgium in 1940 strangely omits any reference to the Arras counterattack, which caused such panic in German command circles. Nonetheless, he makes another telling point in contrasting the ability of the British, even when under-equipped, to sustain operations logistically with the logistic risks increasingly taken by German commanders.

As French suggests, Rommel in particular has been accorded praise for taking such risks, when the tactical successes achieved could rarely be translated into operational success. The British experience in the North African desert, of course, highlights the failures of British command and control in 1941-42. In considering Montgomery's contribution to the success enjoyed there after 1942, French again differs from other historians in seeing Montgomery's operational methods as differing materially from those of 1918. Rather, Montgomery is depicted as interposing his own personality on the lessons of 1939-42, not least a highly particular approach to the imposition of common doctrine and to the guidance of subordinates, whom French maintains were chosen for their professionalism rather than as simply 'yes men'. It is left unsaid that Montgomery's personality also led him to unnecessarily denigrate some of his predecessors, such as Auchinleck.

French is also anxious to demonstrate that British successes after 1942 were not solely due to increasing quantitative superiority of material since individual weapons remained qualitatively inferior to those of the Germans. Once more, there is an echo of the increasing consensus among historians of the Great War that, alongside increasing material superiority, the British army had made immeasurable tactical advances by 1918. French concludes, therefore, that British successes were not won by 'brute force' but by the growing appreciation of how to use those weapons available to maximum advantage.

To the end, however, British commanders frequently declined to take risks, reluctant above all to take unnecessary casualties. It has been argued, of course, that a willingness to incur more casualties might have

shortened the war but, while not actually addressing this issue at any great length, French makes it clear that Britain could not have afforded higher casualties either in terms of its manpower shortages or the morale of a citizen army. It had long been an axiom of professional British soldiers that the citizen soldier or, for that matter, many of the products of urban deprivation from which the army had been recruited prior to 1914, would not advance willingly into a curtain of fire. In the event, British dead in the Second World War averaged 3.6 men per 1,000 per month compared to 5.8 men per 1,000 per month between 1914 and 1918. Yet, as French also shows, losses in some Second World War campaigns were greater than those in the Great War, the average daily losses in Normandy in 1944 actually exceeding those of Passchendaele in 1917.

Overall, in deploying an impressively wide range of primary sources, French succeeds admirably in modifying the judgement of those who have contrasted the British army's performance unfavourably with that of the Germans. As he remarks, 'the British had never believed that they could win their battles by pitting man against man, and indeed they never believed that they should even try to do so'. In the end, it was better to be soldiers than warriors.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/160#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/805>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>