

The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World. By Holger H. Herwig. New York: Random House, 2009. 391 pages. \$28.00. **Reviewed by Dr. Eugenia C. Kiesling,** Professor of History, US Military Academy.

Let no one be put off by oddities in the opening paragraph of Holger Herwig's *The Marne*; thereafter, this splendid history of the first six weeks of the Great War on the Western Front is difficult to put down. Herwig is a fine storyteller and thoughtful analyst, and evidence from newly available German records casts new perspective on a familiar narrative. The book reads well enough to suit those looking to enjoy a simple campaign narrative, and the scholar will find much to think about as well.

Herwig claims that the novelty of his work lies in his German sources, his breaking the "German" invasion of Belgium and France into separate Prussian, Saxon, Bavarian, and Baden efforts, his exploration of the six-week campaign as a whole, and his presentation of the voices of ordinary soldiers from both sides. He also promises to clarify myths about the battle, the most pernicious being that the outcome stemmed not from a miracle favoring the French but from gross and culpable failure on the German side. Although the work does not admit to much exploration of the "common soldier's" point of view, it succeeds on all points. The most significant achievement is the presentation of the events of 3 to 9 September as the result not of a stunning, unpredictable *Deus ex machine* but of a series of remarkably poor German tactical choices.

Too many histories have presented the Marne campaign as a contest between elaborate German planning and the realities of logistics. One holds one's breath and wonders whether the trains will keep to schedule, the soldiers' feet hold out, and the commanders retain their nerve as the right flank swings farther and farther west. They never do, but could an army renowned for operational excellence have achieved the victory Alfred von Schlieffen's bold concept apparently deserved? Perhaps in an effort to deny a German commitment to logistical fantasies, recent historiography has moved from the viability to the existence of the Schlieffen Plan. Ignoring these sterile debates, Herwig offers a refreshing new approach. First, there was in fact a Schlieffen Plan. Second, rather than positing special German skill at the operational level of war, the author examines the actual performance of Helmut von Moltke's army.

Herwig's narrative supports a damning conclusion. Individual German commanders from Moltke on down performed badly; institutionally, the vaunted German officer corps proved to lack both clear command procedures and an ethic of professionalism and responsibility. Moltke repeatedly abjured the responsibility of giving orders while complaining impotently of "*ordre-countreordre-désordre*;" his subordinates proved unwilling to press for clarification. Lines of command and control were uncertain; communications were sketchy or nonexistent. Herwig tells of commanders operating in isolation, sometimes because they preferred not to share information, more often because they could not. Reconnaissance received little attention, and Moltke's headquarters had only one radio transmitter. Moltke's pathetic excuse for locating his headquarters far from the fighting, that it would be impossible to "drag" Kaiser Wilhelm to the front, is an apt comment on the chief of staff's competence.

The French Army was not, however, systemically superior to the German. Indeed, its understanding of German intentions, operational deployment, and tactical doctrine all proved faulty. But Joseph Joffre proved the more vigorous commander, ruthlessly replacing unsatisfactory commanders and determinedly shifting troops to shore up his beleaguered left wing. His leadership was matched by the extraordinary

resilience of French soldiers even after a month of retreat. The British Expeditionary Force, incidentally, comes out quite badly.

Paralleling the book's theme of increasing entropy on the German side is a subtext of German atrocity. Violence against civilians was endemic and always preceded by German complaints in the passive voice at having been "shot at." Since the Germans made no effort to ascertain the identity of the shooters, neither, rightly, does Herwig. The result is a convincing picture of fearful and often drunken conquerors lashing out at an inchoate threat about which they had given far too little thought before invading countries occupied by civilians. Following John Horne and Alan Kramer's *German Atrocities, 1914* (Yale University Press, 2001), Herwig argues that the killing of more than 4,400 Belgian civilians represented policy, though not necessarily premeditation, a distinction again raising tacit questions regarding command structures and the nature of discipline in the German Army.

This is a grim story, lightened by good prose and occasional understated wit. But back to that disconcerting first paragraph, which speaks of a German cavalry officer's "broadsword" and describes the infliction of grievous bodily harm upon three French soldiers before labeling the third the "first French casualty" of the war. Jarring editorial failures lead the reader to wonder in what possible sense the French army had a "plethora" of heavy artillery. Was Schlieffen a "foreboding" German or a "forbidding" one? British artillerymen are gunners, not "artificers." Above all, one is fascinated by the novelty of "Hobbesian choice"—presumably "nasty, brutish, or short."

A careful editor also would have noted that Herwig refers to Clausewitz's "fog of uncertainty" at least seven times before finally quoting the relevant passage of *On War* in the epilogue. It is nice to be spared the less accurate "fog of war," but repetition turns what might be an analytical tool into a cliché. There are other duplications in the text, and sometimes the full citation does not accompany the first iteration.

It seems a shame to belabor such defects, but they do distract the careful reader from an otherwise pleasurable reading experience. *The Marne* is highly recommended to anyone looking to understand the opening campaign of the Great War or seeking an example of operational history excellently presented. It ought to be required reading for all enthusiastic admirers of German "military efficiency." Most of all, Herwig is to be congratulated for diverting us from the existential argument over the Schlieffen Plan and redirecting our attention to the details of this pivotal military campaign.