

recollections of the veterans themselves. Rubin is not an historian, and his lack of knowledge about some key components of the war will be transparent to those who have studied the war in any depth. As a result, he repeats several old myths and stereotypes about the war. He also has a tendency to simplify very complex topics into one or two sentences. A greater attention to the actual history of the war would have smoothed off some of the rough edges of these digressions. He might also have chosen to drop most of these chapters altogether, keeping the focus where it belonged, on the veterans themselves.

Rubin, a journalist, writes in an informal style that some readers will find engaging and others will find distracting. One three-page stretch of the book features the word “I” no fewer than 33 times. Rubin aimed for a conversational tone, trying to bring the reader along with him into the living rooms, retirement homes, and hospitals where he interviewed these men (and two women). That choice may work for some, but it also distracts us from the people at the center of the book, the best-known of whom, Frank Buckles, was the last surviving American veteran of the war.

And those people are the real reason to read this book. We learn about the intense racism and segregation that marked not just the Army but American society in general. We also learn about the complex identities of so-called hyphenated Americans; the tensions experienced by Americans in this time of transition from a rural to an urban society; and the difficulties of getting the United States involved in the most terrible war the world had yet known. The veterans he talked to told stories of comrades, most likely suffering from post-traumatic stress, committing suicide after the war. He also notes a veteran who never cashed the check the Army gave him on separation. He would rather, he said, have had that check (for one dollar) as a souvenir.

If not for the work of Richard Rubin, these voices and the stories they told would have been lost forever. His book, therefore, performs an important service to all of those interested in World War I, the experience of soldiers at war, and the history of the United States in these years. The criticisms above do not in any way detract from the real value of the book, a chance to listen to men and women who lived through an extraordinary age.

## Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918

By Jonathan Boff

Reviewed by Dr. Dean A. Nowowiejski, COL (USA Retired), whose dissertation analyzed the performance of the American military governor of the Rhineland, MG Henry T. Allen, who commanded the 90th Division in the AEF before commanding American Forces in Germany during the occupation

Jonathan Boff takes the readers of *Parameters* into a different world in this book. Those who are American students of military history get to explore the British perspective. Those who have studied World War I receive a new argument that mines both British and German sources to understand tactics, operational art, and an analysis of the outcome of



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the 100 Days Campaign in the late summer and autumn of 1918. Boff focuses on the hitherto largely unexplored British Third Army defeat of the German Seventeenth and Second Armies, a lens that allows him to use both statistical and cultural terms of analysis. His developed story is complex, but convincing. Jonathan Boff demonstrates mastery of both English and German language sources, and his argument clearly addresses the historians who previously wrote about the British Army at the end of the Great War. In fact, one senses a mastery of the literature in his thorough presentation, and one of the advantages of his book is to connect to the British historiography of the war.

His level of tactical analysis resembles Mark Grotelueschen's insightful observations in *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I*. Both accomplish detailed tactical examination through careful mining of the historical record. Jonathan Boff exhaustively analyzes available war diaries of both the British Third and the German Second and Seventeenth Armies to the Corps, Division, and sometimes Brigade level to understand the complexities of tactical result. His exploration of tactical detail also allows him to dissect the effects of battle on morale and reveal innovations in leadership at that level.

*Winning and Losing on the Western Front* addresses the four prevailing hypotheses (page 15) concerning the result of the "Hundred Days" campaign (from 8 August until the Armistice) and offers a clear conclusion concerning the validity of each one. The first is that the Germans were overwhelmed by superior numbers, both in men and materiel. Boff finds that the progressive attrition that took hold earlier in 1918 bore fruit in the Hundred Days campaign as the German Army became progressively less capable of defense in depth or effective counterattack, and its formations gradually disintegrated as they remained committed and the system of reserves broke down. The Germans also perceived they were at a materiel imbalance, particularly in tanks, and this weighed on their morale.

The second hypothesis: German Army morale collapsed. Boff adeptly reveals that this simply did not occur. The Germans may have suffered poor "mood" but not broken "spirit," a construct he develops in the lengthy chapter exploring morale in both Armies. Boff in fact claims that morale inside the German tactical formations was surprisingly resilient until just before the Armistice.

Third, the British by this point in the war were able to defeat the Germans because of superior tactical method. Here, Boff's analysis carefully takes apart the several factors involved in combined arms operations at this point in the war, and finds that elements such as the employment of tanks, aircraft, and signal were not all that effective for the British, that infantry and artillery cooperation accounted for the majority of instances of combined arms employment, and though this employment was more flawed than previously exposed, the British still exceeded the Germans in combined arms employment by this point in the war. But decline in German combined arms effectiveness accounted for much of the result, too.

Fourth, "British victory was the outcome of superior operational art." Boff finds here British operational command was far less flexible than previously revealed, and it was German failings in operational

command that contributed more to the British success. The failings of the German Army are a surprise emphasis in *Winning and Losing*. The Germans, contrary to popular perception, did not practice “mission command” as we now know it; in fact, their flexible system of command deteriorated ever more severely as they stumbled toward the end of the war, and their operational commanders tried desperately to exert strong control on events, to little avail.

Boff’s useful framework of analysis builds on these broad hypotheses, while recognizing some minor oversimplification and overlap in doing so. To achieve this result, the book explores the four hypotheses as outlined above, taking each in turn through sequential chapter level analysis. Boff begins with a summary of events then offers chapters on manpower and training, materiel, morale, and tactics for both sides. He winds up with operational analysis and a fine, concise conclusion. The use of a series of maps at the front as a common reference proves to be effective, and many of the photographs which dress the text are clear, interesting, and relevant.

Jonathan Boff’s argument is sometimes subtle, often nuanced, and always squarely in the context of existing historiography. You know exactly where he stands on the historical hypotheses of existing literature. His method does not allow for a fast read, because the prose is densely packed with research and meaning, and he offers many significant findings in the course of this short book. For those who want a model of tactical, and particularly operational, battle analysis, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front* offers many valid techniques. His book will be most satisfying, not for the general reader, but for the expert in operational history, World War I battle, and in the character of leadership and of armies. Thus, his book is recommended for many readers of *Parameters*.