



The German Army on the Somme 1914-1916 by Jack Sheldon, foreword by Richard Holmes, Pen & Sword 2005, pp432 ISBN 1 84415 269 3 £25

I must confess that I struggled with this book. Having dipped into it a few times at the bookshop it appeared simply to be a collection of long extracts from German Regimental histories from the interwar years with little effort to set them into context. It did not seem to be the book that we have been waiting for to tell us about the Battle of the Somme from the German perspective.

The author acknowledges that such a book is long overdue. His own interest in the battle dates back many years and revealed the paucity of German sources. He explains that he seized an opportunity to exploit this gap during a course at the German Command and Staff College in Hamburg in the 1990's. He also discovered that although many records of the Prussian Army had been destroyed in WW2 (a view that I understand is being revised as people trawl through dusty basements in Moscow) those of the Bavarian and Württemberg regiments lie largely intact in Munich and Stuttgart respectively. But the book is largely based upon the hundreds of regimental histories published in Germany during the 1920's and 1930's.

Jack Sheldon is certainly to be admired for this as many were published in Gothic script and I recall my own attempts to decipher extracts from one or two of them as being very painful. The books are themselves the subject of interesting historiographical debate¹. Their intention was not simply to record the historical events but also the heroism of the *Sommekämpfer* and the ethos of soldierly comradeship – the *Frontgeist* – who says that German is a long-winded language. This, of course, for a nation that was gearing up to do it all again. Certainly, a great deal of effort must have gone into them because officers and soldiers who were taken prisoner provide many of the accounts. These men must have been contacted after the war and given an extensive debrief, frequently, I suspect backed by notes and researches they made in captivity.

The author keys the personal accounts to sketch maps of the ground. This is very useful, particularly when the text is annotated with the British trench names. In his foreword Richard Holmes draws together four themes:

- The French attacks around Serre in 1915 which encourage the Germans to dig and keep digging,
- The importance of skilled junior leadership,
- The state of allied training and
- The impact of attrition on the defenders.

Certainly, the author does not discuss in any detail the wider aspects of German operations within a strategic context or analyse the army's methods of operation, command or tactics. And yet... as I read this book I realised that he was building an entirely different picture of the battle to the one to which I had become accustomed. He has achieved this by the very number of accounts and also the universality of the experience which they relate. This being

¹ Wolfgang G. Natter. *Literature at War, 1914–1940: Representing the "Time of Greatness" in Germany*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1999. pp. 280. \$35.00. A useful review is at http://www.wlajournal.com/12_1/Reviews.pdf



a book about the German Army's battle, the author devotes as much space to operations south of the Somme as he does to the north. Clearly, many readers will move immediately to the chapters relating to 1916 but they will miss the vivid accounts of fighting in 1914. There they will find descriptions of infantry and artillery actions west of Péronne that could almost be from 1814 or 1870 (p14) whilst the scene in the dining room of Thiepval Chateau (p30) could be captured in one of those 19th century paintings of officers singing around a piano.

In a British account of the Somme the Germans are almost invisible other than as corpses or POWs. But as the Germans are in defence their image of the battle is very different. Mostly, they do not have the initiative. They await the attack in deep dugouts – or increasingly in muddy holes under concentrated artillery fire. Many of them refer to allied aircraft and the need to hide from them. But then the sentries will sound the alarm... *“From [our] position we could observe the advancing British in detail. Dense columns rose out of their trenches. Behind them came harnessed hospital wagons. The attack withered away in German artillery fire.... [Two hours later] no sooner had the men spread out in the shell craters than it was “Here they come!” The British advanced in immense masses. After a few moments the entire broad battlefield was covered with a great depth of advancing waves.”* (p274). The description continues with British troops using a covered approach to overrun some blockhouses in a sunken road whilst low-flying aircraft strafe the German troops nearby.

Elsewhere *“... beyond the hollow, was the steep rise to the village of Maurepas, down which streamed dense enemy columns. There were countless aircraft in the air buzzing around just above the ground. To our front and advancing in short bounds, were the British. I could see how, on the hand signal of an officer, the whole line rose and rushed towards us. They were about two hundred metres away.”* (p276).

These tactics are very similar to those we have already read about in the 1914 battles between the French and Germans. Now, in 1916, the British are using mass tactics, the wide-spaced skirmishing lines of the old BEF being long gone. Even so, there are plenty of accounts of the New Army units pushing machine guns (presumably Lewis) well forward, searching for flanks and, surprisingly to me, the aircraft are always there; if anything even more ubiquitous than in WW2.

“How much easier it is to attack, than to stand and await an enemy's attack!”. So reads Haig's diary entry for 8 August 1918 and this book does illustrate something of the mental pressure facing the German Army on the Somme, indeed on the whole Western Front. Whatever the scale of their losses, German units tended to be in the trenches for longer than their British counterparts and the impact of artillery fire and the winter weather is illustrated by a series of bleak reports from commanders and Medical Officers.

The German Army on the Somme by Jack Sheldon is not an operational history of how Rupprecht, von Below, von Gallwitz and their Corps and Divisional commanders fought the battle. Its great strength lies in the vivid picture of action at company level downwards. It really does offer a different view of the battle. Whatever the various motives of those who recorded the deeds of they *Sommekämpfer* it is surely right they be remembered as it is so difficult for many of us to imagine how they could endure it.

Andy Grainger

Readers may also be interested in Longueval by Ian Uys, Uys publishers, South Africa 1983 pp62 pbk ISBN 0 620 09532 6. This book also seeks to present a picture of a part of the battle from the German side. It too makes much use of German regimental histories and appears to have been written following the author's researches into the actions of the South African brigade at Delville Wood.

Otto Dix 1891-1969



“Abgekämpfte Truppen, Somme 1916” (Troops leaving the Line)

Dix is frequently described as an anti-war artist. The son of a foundry mould-maker, he studied at Dresden Art Academy, began reading Nietzsche in 1911 and volunteered in 1914. In August 1914 he trained as an artilleryman and later as a machine-gunner. He rose to the rank of sergeant and saw service in Champagne, Artois and on the Somme. In an interview 50 years after war he said:

*The war was a horrible thing, but there was something tremendous about it too. I didn't want to miss it at any price. You have to have seen human beings in this unleashed state to know what human nature is... I need to experience all the depths of life for myself, that's why I go out, and that's why I volunteered.*²

He made sketches, such as the one above, at the front. But his best-known works such as “Krieg”, “The Crippled Card Players” and the famous Triptych appeared after 1924 when he appears to have suffered a delayed reaction to the trauma of war and defeat. Like some of

² Matthias Eberle, *World War I and the Weimar Artists: Dix, Grosz, Beckmann, Schlemmer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), "Otto Dix: Fighting for a Lost Cause. Art vs Nature", p22. Information from homepage.mac.com/.../WarArt/StudyGuides/Dix.html



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Britain's war poets, Dix may have been disillusioned in later life by war and its impact on his country but during the war he was clearly a committed and effective soldier.

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