



If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West by Captain G. C. Wynne (edited by Robert T. Foley), Tom Donovan, Brighton, 2008 price £75.00 including p&p, ISBN 978-1-905968-01-5

This is the second in the Tom Donovan Editions series of publications in limited editions of 300 copies under the overall editorship of Professor Brian Bond. The first book in the series, *War Memoirs of Earl Stanhope 1914-1918*, was reviewed in *Mars & Clio No 19 (Summer 2007)*.

As Robert Foley points out in his Introduction, Wynne had originally prepared the manuscript, which was drawn on articles had had written for the *Army Quarterly*, before the outbreak of war in 1939. After war was declared Faber and Faber, his publisher, became concerned that Wynne's criticisms of the British High Command would do little for morale and therefore invited him to sanitise the manuscript, which duly appeared in published form in 1940. All copies of the original version were destroyed, apart from that which Wynne had used to revise the book. This is in the possession of Wynne's son and thanks to him the unexpurgated edition is now in print.

Two points need to be made at the outset. The title *If Germany Attacks* is a misnomer and was probably dreamt up by the publisher during the Phoney War to catch the potential reader's eye. In truth, the book is a study of German defensive tactics during 1915-17 and the British failure to appreciate them and adapt accordingly. It should also be borne in mind that Wynne was clearly an embittered man. A platoon commander in the 2nd KOYLI in August 1914, he was captured at Le Cateau and spent the remainder of the war in German hands. Dr Foley cites passages from Wynne's personal account of the retreat from Mons in which he pulls no punches in blaming the shortcomings of his own high command for his predicament. Yet, while Wynne may have regarded his captivity as a blight on his military advancement he did not waste it, but used the four years as a POW to become thoroughly conversant with the German language. After the war he continued to pursue his German studies and joined the team under James Edmonds which wrote the official history of the war on the Western Front. His wide reading of German accounts served to reinforce his belief in the incompetence of the British High Command, especially its belief that artillery conquered all regardless of the changes that the Germans were making. In other words, the so-called 'learning curve' pertained to the Germans and not to their opponents.

The hero of the book is Colonel (later General) Fritz von Lossberg of the German General Staff. He had evolved a successful method of defence during the French attacks in the Champagne in autumn 1915 when he was chief of staff of the German Third Army. The keys to it were defence in depth, the deployment of artillery observation posts to places from where a good view of the battlefield could be had and the use of counter-attacks. These could be of two types – the immediate counter-attack to catch the enemy before he was able to consolidate and the deliberate counter-attack, which might take several days to prepare. In both cases the aim was to restore the original front line. His experience showed, however, that a hastily arranged counter-attack after consolidation had taken place was bound to fail. Fast forward to the Somme, and von Lossberg recognised that the German forces on the Somme were initially too weak to mount counter-attacks, but his attempts to persuade von Falkenhayn to close down the Verdun battle so that effective reserves could be created met with no



success. Matters changed when Ludendorff became head of the OHL in late August 1916. He welcomed ideas from his staff, who were arguing for a more flexible or elastic type of defence. The result of this was the publication of a manual *Conduct of the Defensive Battle* at the beginning of December 1916. This acknowledged the growing *Materialschlacht* in the form of the increasingly heavy Allied artillery bombardments, which were capable of destroying any front line. Hence the defence was now to be elastic, with the defenders being allowed freedom of action within a deep defensive belt. Many, including von Lossberg, disagreed with the idea that defence of the front line to the last was now no longer sacrosanct. Indeed, he himself wrote a pamphlet on the experiences of the First Army (he was now its chief of staff) on the Somme, which continued to insist that the front line must be held, albeit more thinly than before, and that the crucial element was the placement of the reserve divisions. It says much for Ludendorff that he allowed this to be circulated at the same time as the OHL pamphlet.

It was at Arras that von Lossberg saw the light on elastic defence, although Wynne points out that the initial British success was because of the lack of German reserves in this sector. In contrast, the German success at Chemin des Dames was achieved using largely the old methods of defence and there was regret afterwards among commanders and their staffs that they had not made more effort to try out elastic defence against an attack about which they had had plenty of forewarning. By now Ludendorff was using von Lossberg as a 'fireman', moving him to sectors which were under threat, and the pinnacle of his success and that of the elastic defence came at Third Ypres.

Wynne argues that the French did learn some lessons, but their British ally did not. At base was the apparent British inability to provide effective fire support to the infantry once an attack started. As he wrote (p162): *'Millions of shells were fired at targets suspected but unobserved on the reverse slope of hills and ridges; and infantry, unsupported by covering fire, were asked time after time to advance against machine guns on those reverse slopes. For lack of the most elemental knowledge of the science of war by senior commanders, the squander of the blood of thousands of British lives on the battlefield and the sweat of hundreds of thousands of British workers in the munitions factories continued.'* This sort of comment has made Wynne a popular source for the anti-revisionist school of Western Front history. But he largely ignores the 'bite and hold' philosophy which came to permeate the BEF, with the possible exception of Gough at Third Ypres, and also the extensive technological advances in the science of artillery which came to fruition at Cambrai. Indeed, Wynne dismisses the initial success of this battle on the grounds that the tanks were misemployed. Furthermore, he makes no mention of the development of the combined arms battle, which was pioneered at Cambrai and perfected during the Hundred Days. In fact, 1918 is only briefly covered, with the emphasis being laid on the fact that the British attempted to copy German defence methods, but largely misunderstood them to their cost in March 1918. As for the performance of the BEF during the final offensives, Wynne considers it insignificant in that the German Army was already broken, by the ultimate failure of its offensives earlier in the year, influenza, and the deteriorating situation in Germany itself (perhaps a faint echo of 'the stab in the back' here).

Wynne is on firmer ground when it comes to styles of command. He recognised that elastic defence and attack through infiltration caused German commanders to adopt an increasingly flexible system of command, one that we know today as *Auftragstaktik*. In contrast, the



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British Army remained wedded to a rigid system, although this was less in evidence during August – November 1918, and continued to pursue this during the interwar years. His fears were certainly realised during the first part of 1939-1945, but he was forced to erase these from the 1940 edition of the book.

Robert Foley's perceptive introduction puts *If Germany Attacks* firmly into context. Wynne's analysis of the German concept of defence has largely stood the test of time, and the book is a valuable source for that. Certain caveats should be borne in mind when reading it, however. As Dr Foley emphasises, Wynne was looking primarily at the ideal, which was by no means practised by all German commanders all of the time. Furthermore, his failure to take into account the new weapons systems and their influence on tactics and the improvements that Germany's opponents did introduce make the work unbalanced. That said, both publisher and editor are to be congratulated on once more bringing this book to public notice.

Charles Messenger

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