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Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 324. ISBN 978-0-19-931689-2.

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This is a formidable work of traditional scholarship that offers a refreshing interpretation. As Paul Jankowski (Brandeis Univ.) concedes, military history hardly needs another book on the ten-month Battle of Verdun (21 February-18 December 1916): “between 1983 and 1998 over a quarter of all French publications about the battles of the Great War were about Verdun” (7). Among the major battles of the First World War, Verdun may be the most thickly adorned with myth and legend. Jankowski stresses that a responsible treatment of Verdun must be comprehensive, centering on the battle itself and “mixing the old history with the new, the cold calculus of terrain gained and shells expended and lives lost with the depths of human experience on both sides” (8).

Jankowski’s earlier (award-winning) work has focused primarily on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French political history. In his latest book, he has written a superb history of the three hundred days of Verdun. He highlights the motivations behind the German offensive and the factors that thwarted it. He also explains how French perceptions enshrined the engagement as a national epic even before it had ended. Jankowski shifts seamlessly between the strategic and tactical dimensions of a massive contest of arms while also astutely analyzing the neuroses of the political classes in the Third Republic and the Wilhelmine Reich.

The book’s eleven chapters are enhanced by maps of the Western Front and the Verdun salient, a selection of photographs, a bibliography of secondary and unpublished primary sources, and a serviceable index. The first six chapters treat the reasoning behind the German offensive in the eastern portion of the Western Front, the evolution of the French response to it, and the blinkered military thinking that relentlessly increased the scale, duration, carnage, and futility of the battle.

The book pivots upon its seventh chapter, “The Nightmare,” a detailed exploration of the ordeal of soldiers exposed to the most concentrated and unremitting firepower ever experienced by humankind. Jankowski also describes instances of insubordination and mutiny of men pushed beyond their limit. He reveals the soldiers’ perceptions of the enemy and the loyalties they clung to when there could be no rational justification for their suffering.

Jankowski exposes the efforts, first of journalists and governments, then of historians, to confer on Verdun the meanings they preferred. “Memory, like amnesia, begins during an event, not after it,” in the case of Verdun transforming a secondary battle into one “for national survival, centering on a place whose millennial historical significance acquired a retroactive glow it had never enjoyed in its lifetime” (250).

Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, saw the first German offensive at Verdun not as a chance for a breakthrough on the Western Front but as a preliminary gambit in a strategy to split the Entente. Falkenhayn, Jankowski reminds us, respected France and admired its culture, but deemed it a second-rate power that posed a danger to Germany only as an ally of its greater enemy, Britain (30). On this point there is a good deal of scholarly consensus.¹ Jankowski succinctly argues that Falkenhayn’s reasoning reflected his conviction (or hope) that France in 1916 was near the breaking point at a time when far too many of Germany’s plans had gone awry: “At Verdun he hoped to damage France in some manner so irretrievably that England would give battle before she was ready, or even lose heart altogether. It marked yet another ploy by a power confident about its superiority today but anxious about its inferiority tomorrow.”

1. See Malcolm Brown, *Verdun 1916* (London: Tempus, 2003) 34–35, and Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005) 261–62.

row, a sentiment of urgency and a presentiment of doom entirely consistent with the way the Wilhelmine Reich fought the war and even the way she had entered it” (41-42).

Falkenhayn hoped that defeating the French at Verdun would weaken the resolve of the British government to continue the war. In that sense, the Verdun offensive was a calculated strategic move, “ancillary to the wider developments that [Falkenhayn] fondly envisaged would bring the war to an end” (46). Diminishing the French army materially without sustaining proportional material damage in return—*Ausblutung* (bleeding-out) was the term he preferred—proved more difficult than Falkenhayn had anticipated. Even after some twelve hundred German guns had saturated French positions with more than a million shells of varying calibers on the first day of action, the advancing German infantry “came under fire from isolated but intact machine guns” as well as still undamaged 75mm and 155mm guns (71).

Falkenhayn later conceded he had underrated the quality of the French army at Verdun, but he refused either to break off an offensive foundering in its initial stages or to commit a fresh division to battle without withdrawing a bloodied one (88). Nothing else can explain the German commander’s “inveterate parsimony..., nothing else his perennial aversion to parting with reserves before and even during the battle” (37), Jankowski observes. Falkenhayn believed the Verdun offensive would either move the French to denude other parts of their front or prompt the French or the British to counterattack in the West, when neither was adequately prepared for such an action (36). That the Germans committed fifty divisions to an ancillary offensive was a measure of the surrealism of their military reasoning eighteen months into the war.

French Gen. Joseph Joffre, facing Falkenhayn at Verdun, grasped from the outset that the attack was diversionary and was determined not to allow it to “scuttle his own strategic vision or deflect his gaze from the summer offensive and the shimmering prospect of victory” (58); therefore, he brought reinforcements to Verdun only as needed. Both sides, Jankowski stresses, shared an obsession with offensive operations; they continued to covet the prestige of winning a prolonged battle long after any real chance of decisive victory had vanished. Both expected the Somme to be a far more consequential battle in the scheme of things and accordingly stinted on resources for Verdun, with the result that the two battles piled up corpses with industrial efficiency without moving the war an inch closer to decision.

Whatever hopes Falkenhayn might have had of preempting his enemy’s Somme offensive lay buried with the German dead on the crest of le Mort-Homme or in the ditches around Souville, and after the Maasmühle, the mill on the Meuse, had decimated the reserves available to the OHL [T]he French had envisaged sending 40 divisions to the Somme, and Verdun cut their contribution to 14. Perhaps the forces entombed or still committed on the Meuse could have allowed the French to push more deeply or the Germans to resist more vigorously that day. Verdun assured neither deliverance nor disaster to either, and the measurable contribution of the one stalemate to the other remained forever shrouded in ambiguity. (99)

Simultaneously, the struggle at Verdun gathered significance as the press of both countries invested it with a redemptive symbolism. The setting of the epic battle on French soil gave the journalists of Paris a distinct advantage in myth-making:

Enough idle speculation, the papers began to grumble in March. The fate of France hung in the balance.... Why worry about motives or strategic objectives when the lonely stoicism of the French *poilu* was holding back the Germanic masses at the gates of France? ... Verdun had become a struggle between right and might, individualism and collectivism, French civilization and German barbarism.... [T]hree weeks after the German attack, the existential narrative of the German invasion and French resistance had dissolved all doubts about origins and stakes.... In February they had spoken more often than not of Ypres and the Yser. A more ancient and heroic parallel lay at hand: Thermopylae. (60-61)

Jankowski next shifts to a sober assessment of Verdun’s place in the evolution of armed conflict over the previous half-century:

Once, firepower had worked only at close range and presented solutions and obstacles to attacker and defenders alike. Its progress had led the attacking generals to resort to movements on the wings or outflanking movements—at Sadowa in 1866, at Sedan in 1870, in Manchuria in 1904 and 1905. By 1916 artillery and machine

guns multiplied range and firepower many times over, but, like locomotion, had the perverse effect of shutting down movement in battle. The new rapid-fire killing machines, the guns that laid down impassable barrages at 3,000 yards or scattered the terrain with their projectiles at 8,000 or 10,000 ... onto targets identified by aerial observation and communicated by wireless ... kept the infantry away, rendered attacks less frequent and more costly, put off the close-quarter shock that had once provided the be-all and end-all of battle. Employed as counter-battery, they more easily nullified the enemy's offensive than his defensive capability; they usually neutralized rather than destroyed the artillery on the other side. (83)

These observations are not new. The Cambridge historian J. Holland Rose, writing in 1927 of the impact of firepower on the indecisiveness of modern war, asserted that he knew of no admiral or general who "will speak out plainly as to the devastating deadlock to which modern warfare on a great scale has been reduced."² But Jankowski's great contribution is his creation of a "complete history" of Verdun that transcends military and political history to shed light on a moment when European society was stunned by a war that slammed the door on the world it had known.

An impression of fighting an unrecognizable war, one bearing little resemblance to that of 1914 and none at all to any earlier, took hold of the men of Verdun, sometimes even before they arrived. *Poilus* marched in helmets and horizon blue greatcoats through the Champagne toward the bank of the Meuse in 1916, past faded red kepis that hung on wooden crosses at the roadside. They were all that was left from the battles of September 1914, sartorial relics of a heroic age, *memento mori* from a bygone war in the sun. And what had become of the Napoleonic lore of their upbringing? The timely charge, the pregnant moment that schoolbooks had celebrated and that journalists still lamely invoked? (144)

Among the book's photographs is a particularly poignant image of troops carrying the remains of the many unknown dead to Verdun's unfinished ossuary under a suitably leaden sky. Chapter 11, "Circle of Loyalty," is a discerning reflection on efforts to confer some collective meaning on a meaningless nightmare, both during the battle and for decades afterward. Only in the higher reaches of the military hierarchies, political classes, and civil society did Verdun seem to make sense as an existential struggle, a clash of civilizations. The common soldier instead endured his nightmare through attachments to his comrades and often despised the press and the generals who urged him to hate the enemy soldiers who, after all, shared his condition. This historical truth, Jankowski notes in his epilogue, may seem sacrilegious next to hallowed cultural fantasies, "but to demystify Verdun is not to impugn the compelling power of the truths behind legend, nostalgia, or parable." The men Falkenhayn and Joffre sent to their deaths at Verdun were neither chauvinists nor pacifists but journeymen, doing their jobs "so well and so doggedly that they left behind lasting testimony to the destructive capacities of two of the most creative national cultures in history" (254).

Paul Jankowski's clear-headed, compassionate, instructive, and moving book belongs in the hands of all students, historians, and common readers with a serious interest in Verdun as an archetypal battle of modern mechanized warfare.

2. *The Indecisiveness of Modern War and Other Essays* (London: Bell, 1927) 48.