



Battle Studies by Charles Jean Jacques Joseph Ardant du Picq.

Ed. and trans. Roger J. Spiller. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2017. Pp. li, 183. ISBN 978-0-7006-2392-1.

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Ardant du Picq (1821–70) was a French infantry officer who served in the Crimean War and subsequently enjoyed a respectable career at home and in colonial postings. In 1870, outside of Metz, he was killed by harassing fire from Prussian horse artillery before he could lead his infantry regiment against the foe. Eighteen years after his death, du Picq's family published his writings on combat behavior and tactical organization and employment under the title *Battle Studies*. Ernest Judet brought out a modestly revised version of the work fifteen years later. Judet's edition was translated into English first in 1921¹ and now by noted military historian Roger Spiller (US Army Command and General Staff College). *Battle Studies* quickly became a useful text for those who (wrongly) believed superior morale could overcome the withering firepower deployed on modern battlefields.²

Du Picq's most original insight was the anonymity of combat conducted with long-range modern weaponry.

Today, strong, firm, trained, courageous as I am, I can never say I shall return. I am no longer dealing with men, whom I do not fear. I deal with fate in the form of iron and lead. Death is in the air, invisible and blind, with blasts of breath that bend the head. (43).

But he was often overconfident that no defense could resist an organized frontal attack at the point of collision of forces. As B.H. Liddell Hart put it, "The weak point of the 'will to conquer' was shown in August 1914, when bullets—the hardest of facts—proved that they could overcome the will of the stoutest commander by their effect on the bodies of his men."³ By then, du Picq had been dead for forty-four years. He saw little of the Franco-Prussian War or the escalating lethality of weapons technology displayed in the Boer, Russo-Japanese, and Balkan wars. That is, his insights are relevant to his time; moreover, as Spiller emphasizes, du Picq's manuscript was far from complete.

The first, most polished part of *Battle Studies* offers perceptive commentary on classical accounts of ancient combat by Polybius and Julius Caesar. It evinces firm convictions about the behavior of soldiers in battle, understandable in a thoughtful career officer. Du Picq worried most about a commander's loss of control over his advancing troops due to their fears of injury or death. He believed the answer lay in the social cohesion of the unit—the mutual responsibility of soldiers to one another.

Part II of *Battle Studies* attempts to define the nature of battle in du Picq's time and seems to be the response of a senior officer to the 1868 reform movement in the French Army. It is a hodge-podge of observations and speculations based on long personal experience and the replies to a circular letter canvassing the opinions of fellow officers,⁴ à la today's informal social media polling. Though often

1. Ardant du Picq, *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*, tr. John N. Greely and Robert C. Cotton (NY: Macmillan, 1921; often rpt'd).

2. In a letter printed in *Battle Studies* (note 1 above), Marshal Ferdinand Foch calls du Picq "the exponent of moral force, the most powerful element in the strength of armies" (28). See further the concise evaluation of du Picq's influence in Spiller's introduction (xxxvi–xxxix).

3. *The Ghost of Napoleon* (1933; rpt. New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1935) 139.

4. A sample of the responses is included in the book's appendices.

astute, the author's observations are bound by his own experience and the influence of Napoleonic precedents.

Du Picq asserts several axioms: "Man does not enter combat to fight, but for victory. He does everything he can to avoid the first and guarantee the second"; "Man strains his ingenuity to kill without the risk of being killed. His bravery rests on his feeling of strength and it is not absolute; in the face of greater strength, he flees shamelessly"; "Discipline keeps ... [the soldier] face to face with his enemy a little longer, but the instinct of survival reigns supreme, and the sense of fear with it"; "Nothing changes in the heart of man" (5, 7–8). Paradoxically, du Picq assumed soldiers' responses varied according to national temperament. "Nothing can be prescribed wisely in an army ... without an exact understanding of its ultimate instrument, man, and his morale at the defining instant of combat" (3).

Strict external discipline was essential in combat, but had to be supplemented by certain moral forces, including self-pride. In addition, "To ensure solidarity in combat ... we must see that everyone is dedicated to one another Pride is born. Flight is disgraceful because the soldier is no longer alone in battle but part of a legion, and he who runs away abandons his commander and his comrades" (8).

Spiller's interest in translating du Picq's *Battle Studies* went back to his time as a young civilian historian at the US Army Command and General Staff College after the Vietnam war. He taught for some thirty years at the Staff College, writing and lecturing extensively on the subject of men in battle, with a gift for lively narrative.⁵ Upon his retirement, he recalled his early ambition to translate du Picq, now with the advantage of a distinguished career teaching military officers and reflecting on men in battle. The resulting English edition is distinctive for its smooth prose style, many helpful explanatory notes, and comprehensive introduction.

Ardant du Picq was a line officer facing practical problems of the battlefield, not a philosopher concerned with epistemological or metaphysical questions. And, too, his never completed book has been used to further claims for the significance of morale that he himself never espoused. Nonetheless, his seemingly modest conclusion—that soldiers will fight for their buddies—is an article of faith in the American armed forces. DuPicq's *Battle Studies* anticipated much of twentieth-century literature on the importance of morale in battle.⁶

General readers will value this new edition du Picq's work for its author's insights into human behavior in combat in a distant age. Among military professionals, the book will stimulate salutary reflection and discussion. Its editor/translator deserves our gratitude for his last gift to military history—a definitive English version of *Battle Studies*.⁷

5. See, e.g., *An Instinct for War: Scenes from the Battlefields of History* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2005). For a collection of his lectures and occasional papers, see *In the School of War* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 2010).

6. See, e.g., John Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London: Constable, 1945); S.L.A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (NY: Morrow, 1947); John Baynes, *Morale: A Study of Men and Courage* (NY: Praeger, 1967); and the classic remarks attributed to Field Marshal William "Bill" Slim in John Master's *The Road Past Mandalay: A Personal Narrative* (NY: Harper, 1961) 36–37.

7. Roger Spiller died at his home in Leavenworth, Kansas, on 13 Aug. 2017. An obituary was published in the *Leavenworth Times* (18 Aug. 2017) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1710.htm.