BOOK REVIEW:

The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World

Gary Kleptach, Marion Harding High School


The First Battle of the Marne, fought between 6 September and 12 September 1914, represents an epic event that was comprised of a series of battles, which pitted more than two million soldiers against each other. This battle, initiated by an advancing German army against French and British defenders, traversed five rivers (Ourcq, Grand Morin, Petit Morin, Saulz, and Ornain) that empty into the Marne River. The outcome of the engagement culminated in the stabilizing of the British and French lines, still protecting Paris, while the German forces pulled back along the Aisne salient. With the German advance halted, the Western Front become deadlocked into murderous trench warfare devoid of mobile combat until 1918; hence Herwig contends that, “the Marne was the most decisive land battle since Waterloo (1815).” (p. xii)

Herwig’s book, as he claims, differs from others in that his analysis of the Battle of the Marne comes from the German perspective, reporting the independent actions of individual units fighting simultaneously throughout the Marne sector, as opposed to previous works written from the Allies’ point of view of a single battle. His resources include fighting soldiers’ and observing civilians’ letters and diaries, as well as military archives, some discovered, in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Herwig’s writing style is consistent with operational military history. His Introduction serves as the “Warning Order,” the main body of the book constitutes the “Operations Order,” culminating with the Epilogue, the “After-Actions Report.”

The origin of the Battle of the Marne was rooted in the “Schlieffen Plan.” Herwig dispels the revisionist historians who argue that this plan was not available to the German military leaders. He identifies instances as early as 1907 when General Moltke instructed the Bavarian General Staff to conduct war games based on scenarios of the plan. In 1912, Wilhelm II had conferred with his military commanders concerning the implementation and execution of the Schlieffen Plan. There are continuing references by German commanders as late as 1914 to the plan; by the Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria (Sixth Army Commander) who compared Moltke’s actions to the Schlieffen Plan, as well as General Falkenhayn and Colonel Müller-Loebnitz, both of the German General Staff, who had participated in pre-war maneuvers testing the plan.

Herwig explains that the Schlieffen Plan, which Germany took to war in 1914, was a reconstructed version of the original. Moltke, upon his appointment as head the German General Staff, incorporated Schlieffen’s framework for offensive operations that he then modified slightly. He acknowledges, once the war went full stage, that an outnumbered Germany was an island surrounded by enemy forces. Mobility was the key, and France had to fall quickly in order to combat the threat of both the British and Russian mobilizations. Moltke removed the invasion of Holland, due to the fact that a neutral Dutch state would allow the flow of American resources to supply a wartime Germany. Secondly, he increased the number of his troops in the east along the Russian frontier; he felt that Schlieffen’s analysis of the Russian mobilization timetable was incorrect. Finally, Moltke reduced the number of forces committed to the right wing to strengthen the middle of his primary advance.

Herwig’s German perspective, offers an insight as to Moltke’s character and criticisms of his actions before and during this offensive. He notes that friends and foes agreed that Moltke was a complex figure, and
one without the sharp Napoleonic eye for the main prize (coup d’oeil) or the necessary ambition and drive (feu sacré) (p. 41). Moltke did not expand the strength of the German military to meet the requirements of the Schlieffen Plan, which included both active duty and reserve forces. Nor did Moltke invest in modern technologies but placed the bulk of his budget on combat arms forces, such as infantry, artillery, and cavalry. Moltke was aware in 1914, that the French would concentrate their forces toward the center of his impending assault by the fifth day of operations, yet he maintained his direct assault through the Ardennes region meeting the forces head on as opposed to enveloping them from the right wing.

The Marne offensive was a series of engagements along a 480-kilometer (approximately 300 mile) front. Herwig details the actions of the seven advancing German Army groups as they clash with the defending French and British forces that culminated with combat actions along the Grand and Petit Morin Rivers, around the villages of Revigny and Vitry-le-François down to the marshes of Saint-Gond. The climax of the battle was rife with uncertainties. Should the group commanders pull back and redeploy to deflect a French counter-attack or should they continue the fight? Even though the advance of the German offensive was a mere 48 kilometers (approximately 30 miles) from Paris, Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch communicated the order to the army group commanders to withdraw their forces to the Aisne River. Hentsch was fearful that the French forces might exploit a gap in the German lines that would have resulted in a catastrophic collapse of the whole German center.

Herwig’s epilogue provides many “what ifs” concerning the possible outcome of the Battle of the Marne. As an exercise in counterfactual history, what if the commanders of the German First and Second Armies had simply refused to follow Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch’s “recommendation” to retreat from the Marne; could the German First and Second Armies have held on to the Ourcq and Marne Rivers, with possibly war-ending results? (p. 310) Moltke never surveyed the front; he led from the rear, sending runners to convey his intentions for the ever-changing battlefront. The statistical data that is provided reinforces Herwig’s claims of the far-reaching impact that the Battle of the Marne had on the remainder of the Great War.

With his exhaustive research, Herwig recreates a momentous incident in military history. His details of first-hand accounts create a narrative outlining the actions of armed combat that would be essential reading for any student of the Great War. Even though his use of operational battle maps could have been of better quality and annotated for the non-military reader to better comprehend. The Marne, 1914 constitutes a great companion to Herwig’s other works about the Great War and meets the lofty challenge that: The Marne was the most significant land battle of the twentieth century. (p. xi).

"Makes vivid the full tragedy of what the Marne set in motion." — The Wall Street Journal

"A thoroughly informed panorama of the immense and bloody campaign that kicked off World War I." — The Washington Times.

"As fine an addition to scholarly World War I literature as has been seen in some time." — Booklist.

"[An] engrossing narrative . . . The answer lies in the seriousness of the Austro-Hungarian request for backing and in the changed mind-set at Berlin. First, a few myths need to be dispelled. For the first time in a generation, here is a bold new account of the Battle of the Marne, a cataclysmic encounter that prevented a quick German victory in World War I and changed the course of two wars and the world. With exclusive information based on newly unearthed documents, Holger H. Herwig re-creates the dramatic battle and reinterprets Germany's aggressive "Schlieffen Plan" as a carefully crafted design to avoid a protracted war against superior coalitions. He paints a fresh portrait of the run-up to the Marne and puts in dazzling relief the Battle of the Marne itself: the French resol The Marne, 1914 book. Read 58 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. It is one of the essential events of military history, a cataclysmic..." — It is a slim volume that covers "much like The Guns of August" the opening battles of World War I, culminating in the epic clash along the eponymous French river. In 1914, with war imminent, the German Army followed the dictates of the Schlieffen Plan and invaded Belgium. Their purpose in violating Belgium's neutrality was to swing around France's strong frontier fortresses and take her armies from behind. Despite the inevitable delays and holdups, the revised Schlieffen Plan worked remarkably well.