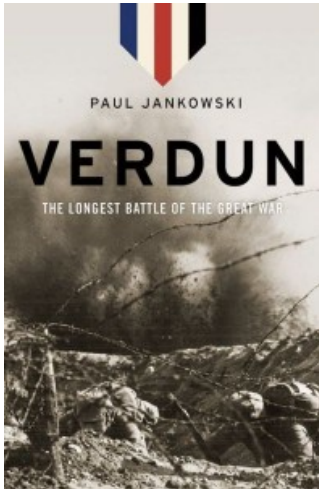


Review of Paul Jankowski's Verdun: The Longest Battle Of The Great War by Nathaniel L. Moir

canadianmilitaryhistory.ca



Verdun-cover

Review of Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle Of The Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), Pp. 324.

By Nathaniel L. Moir (State University of New York at Albany)

War presents historians with an array of unique challenges. Indeed, Michael Howard described how the study of war evokes a complexity that supersedes simple recounting of battles: “War has been part of a totality of human experience, the parts of which can be understood only in relation to one another. One cannot adequately describe how wars were fought without giving some idea of what they were fought about.”^[1] In *Verdun*, Paul Jankowski, a professor of history at Brandeis University, seeks to investigate this totality of human experience by balancing military, social, and cultural history to reframe the enigmatic and bloody battle that unfolded through the majority of 1916.

Through the book’s eleven chapters, Jankowski investigates a sound and fundamental question about Verdun: “Why attack a place of uncertain strategic and imaginary symbolic significance, and attack it so fiercely?” (p. 15) To explicate this inquiry, he mixes 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” (p. 8). He also attempts to place Verdun in the larger social and cultural context of the First World War in order to explain how Verdun gained such an important and symbolic status.

At the time, combatants and civilians from Germany and France did not recognize the specific importance of Verdun when fighting began on 21 February 1916. The Chiefs of Staff, Falkenhayn of Germany and Joffre of France, regarded the Verdun area of operations as of secondary importance and possibly a diversion from some important attack elsewhere. For the German Fifth Army, attacking the area of Verdun, along the Meuse River to the southwest of the French-Luxembourg border, was perceived as an opportunity to return to a war of maneuver. In late 1915 and early 1916, the Western Front had bogged down into trench warfare so increasing mobility also provided the best chance for overall victory against the Entente. Instead, however, Verdun culminated into a positional battle that exemplified military and political stalemate of epic proportions.

One outcome of the stalemate was Falkenhayn’s dismissal on 29 August 1916. In an attempt to explain his decision to commit concentrated effort at Verdun, Falkenhayn would later and regrettably term the battle, an effort of *Ausblutung*, an attempt to bleed the French Army white through attrition. Falkenhayn’s actual strategic goals in 1916 belie the subsequent mythologizing of him as a manifestation of “Moloch.” That Jankowski focuses on Falkenhayn’s pressing military concerns is to his credit, as noted by other reviewers of *Verdun*, such as Geoffrey Norman.^[2]

The German High Command’s focus included breaking the Entente, beating the French, and then turning the German Army against the British. The French, meanwhile, sought to hold on as the British joined their ranks on the Somme in June 1916. Slowly, however, the importance of Verdun sharpened in focus. Jankowski’s analysis of Falkenhayn and German decision-making emphasizes how these elements contributed to the larger strategic picture because, once the battle began, the symbolism of Verdun for the French skyrocketed.^[3]



French soldiers at Verdun

In a manner that comported with the mythologizing of Falkenhayn as “Moloch,” the symbolic construction of Verdun was possible because no clear outcome was forthcoming despite incredible effort from both sides. However, already by March 1916, it was decided that the “fate of France hung in the balance” (p. 60). It is important to note that untangling this web of fate—which Verdun became during the battle and which grew exponentially once it was concluded—is part of Jankowski’s stated task. The analysis of the myth-making of Verdun and the battle’s structure on an operational level is the focus of chapters one through three. For combatants and the French and

German public, the importance of Verdun surfaced early in the battle even if that reason was not clear. The value given to Verdun from the beginning was also a primary reason for why it lasted so long:

In one way or another, over the course of ten days, Verdun had become a struggle between right and might, individualism and collectivism, French civilization and German barbarism. By the middle of the month, three weeks after the German attack, the existential narrative of German invasion and French resistance had dissolved all doubts about origins or stakes. Who worried about them anymore? (p. 60)

The battle became, as Jankowski notes, a French version of Thermopylae. In more earth-bound terms, it was the longest battle of World War I and only wound down eventually as a result of the battle on the Somme, which began in June 1916. However, the symbolism evoked by Verdun did not depend solely on the length and intensity of the positional battle it embodied for generations. It evolved because the French fought the battle alone and without direct support of allies. Most importantly, it was perceived as the most significant French victory of the twentieth century (p. 5).

The paradox of Verdun is a theme that Jankowski hammers home. The irony is that it became a symbolic national victory, yet it was also perceived as an unending struggle exemplifying futility. Why was Verdun so important? As one reviewer accurately suggests, “a glance at a map reveals that France would not have fallen even if Verdun had. But something nearly as important would have: public morale. After 18 months of war, during which France had so little to show for so many dead, the public was not ready for such a defeat.”^[4] This balancing act is the reason why Jankowski’s work succeeds overall. He is able to show how the battle was not about an unimportant place but was about everything, at least for the French.

An examination of the futility of the battle is found in chapters four, five, and six. The contents of these sections contrast and deepen the symbolism examined in earlier chapters. Jankowski then breaks down French and German decision-making, respectively, into operational, prestige, and attritional traps. Further analyses of these “traps” occur in the appropriately titled chapter seven, “The Nightmare.” Throughout, Jankowski writes in an elevated style that at times detracts from the useful sources he employs and the incredible subject matter he investigates. There are points where overwrought descriptive analysis of French and German generals’ decision-making is overbearing and where a simpler approach would more effectively describe the situation.

While there is nothing simplistic about the First World War, there is value in rendering clear judgment and Barbara Tuchman’s analysis of the French and German generals’ decisions as a series of actions that exemplified “stupidity” is not unfair. This is reasonable considering how decisions were made and orders were issued without clear understanding of what was going on during some the war’s battles. Indeed,

according to author Norman Cru, quoted by Jankowski, “If all orders had always been obeyed, to the letter, we would have massacred the entire French army before August 1915.”[5] That being said, Jankowski works with a highly complex topic and approach. The battle means so much now that analyzing it without a burdensome post-mortem framework certainly poses problems. This is understandable when one considers that almost a hundred years of thought and discussion on Verdun exists. Nonetheless, the book raises good questions, and Jankowski successfully explores them with an awareness of the overall strategic importance of Verdun—or lack thereof—and ties it into the greater geopolitical tragedy of the First World War.



“They shall not pass” – Verdun river crossing.

In a tragic sense, the horror occurring at Verdun was enforced by the possibility of the equally terrible battle occurring on the Somme. The Somme contributed to the stalemate at Verdun, Jankowski convincingly argues, because the German and French High Commands refused to pull too many troops from Verdun to fight elsewhere. Meanwhile, the High Commands failed to allocate adequate troops to the Somme because they feared losing Verdun. Jankowski artfully describes this paradox in a manner that not only enforces the tragedy of how stalemate occurred at Verdun and possibly with other battles, but how these smaller instances may have contributed to stalemate at the theater level.[6]

In the case of Verdun, Jankowski describes how both political and military leadership could just not give up and order a retreat—something that perhaps Barbara Tuchman had in mind when she referred to the generals as “stupid”. [7] In a sense however, both the paradoxes examined by Jankowski and Tuchman are correct, and they each have a point. For Jankowski, “To call off the engagement and pull back after all they had sacrificed, conveying signals of weakness and irresolution to the enemy abroad and the people at home, might save manpower only to wreak willpower” (pp. 100-101).

This inability to call things off when they have reached bottom is another characteristic of Verdun and is a problem that comes up in other modern conflicts, especially the Vietnam War. This problem is a logical pitfall social psychologists term the “Sunk-Cost Fallacy.” [8] This is a situation in which leaders assume that pouring more resources and troops into a war or conflict, precisely because they have already expended so much in the effort, will somehow fix it rather than more astutely withdrawing from further involvement. At times readers might be put off by Jankowski’s decision to avoid more evaluative or critical assessments of the French and German General Staffs and, while his historical account is responsible, it also misses opportunities to explore the contingency of how things might have been different.

As stated early in the book, Jankowski’s intent is to provide a total history of the battle that includes military and cultural history. The end result, however, is more in line with social and cultural history with relatively minor contributions from traditional military history. Not that this is a problem per se, but his analysis would have benefited from the inclusion of more tactical-level analysis. As such, there is virtually no analysis of military order of battle and only few instances where units below division are specified. Of course, for interested readers there are numerous tactical analyses of the First World War to consult, beginning with Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s *Infanterie Greift An*. [9] A work purporting to be a “total history of the battle” of Verdun however, should include these elements more thoroughly. Despite these remarks, Jankowski’s

work still exemplifies how historians may invoke a number of historical approaches to create a sum larger than its parts. Through this balancing act, Verdun succeeds and it may serve as a positive model for historians on many levels.

Notes

[1] Michael Howard, *War in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), ix.

[2] Geoffrey Norman, "Book Review: 'Poilu' by Louis Barthas and 'Verdun' by Paul Jankowski," *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 June 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/book-review-poilu-by-louis-barthas-and-verdun-by-paul-jankowski-1403302984>, accessed on 22 October 2014. Norman writes, "Jankowski presents convincing evidence to the contrary, showing that Falkenhayn actually believed an attack at Verdun would provoke Allied countermeasures that might present an opportunity for an offensive elsewhere on the stalemated Western Front."

[3] Norman, accessed on 22 October 2014. In explaining this process, Norman agrees that the myth-making process that occurred after Verdun was complex and "burdened with myth and error," but that Jankowski succeeds in his explanations.

[4] Robert Zaretsky, "*Verdun: The Longest Battle Of The Great War*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 11 May 2014, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/les-aura>, accessed on 22 October 2014.

[5] Paul Jankowski, *Verdun: The Longest Battle Of The Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173; Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* by Barbara W. Tuchman. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 38. In *Practicing History*, Tuchman describes her analysis of the stupidity of the World War I generals by noting that, "the generals were in a trap of the circumstances, training, ideas, and national impulses of their time and individual countries." She discusses her use of the term "stupidity" and, in this reviewer's interpretation, appears to defend its use. This assessment is not because it was inaccurate but because, arguably, she and her critics may have felt that it was not academic enough or descriptive enough to adequately describe and account for the complexity of the general staffs' decision-making.

[6] Zaretsky, accessed on 22 October 2014. Zaretsky describes how "Jankowski untangles the paradox of Verdun." Zaretsky's review is long and detailed and he focuses on how Jankowski unpacks the symbolism that Verdun would become in both its own time and in contemporary accounts such as Jankowski's recent work.

[7] Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays* by Barbara W. Tuchman. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 38.

[8] Fredrik Logevall, *Embers Of War: The Fall Of An Empire And The Making Of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), xx.

[9] Erwin Rommel, *Infanterie Grieft An*. (Provo, Utah: Athena Press, 1979).

This article was made possible by the hard work of our staff and especially our student-volunteers. Please consider supporting our work by [clicking here](#).