



**Jonathan Boff. *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918.*  
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For understandable reasons, historians have consistently tried to clear the waters by reducing the complexities of the First World War. This process has been vital in understanding the origins of the war, its conduct, victory and conclusion, and in shaping the historiography. Moving beyond earlier fixed interpretations, for the last twenty years the idea of a 'learning curve' has played a major role in explaining British success in the autumn of 1918. Yet, its explanative power is limited in three significant ways. Firstly, war and strategy is reciprocal; the battlefield is an interactive play of forces, and not simply the play of one side. Secondly, friction resulting from this and multiple other interactions means war is complicated and winning is difficult. Thirdly,

learning is often uneven within large institutions and dynamic problems cannot be solved with single solutions. With this in view, Jonathan Boff's book addresses these fundamental issues and reanimates the complexities of the First World War, challenging many assumptions about victory and defeat on the Western Front in 1918. Boff expertly navigates these muddy waters and demonstrates how explaining complexity trumps earlier monocausal explanations; showing as Clausewitz made clear that everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult, especially winning.

Winning and Losing on the Western Front is a brilliantly detailed comparative study at the tactical and operational level of General Sir Julian Byng's British Third Army and the opposing German Second and Seventeenth armies during the Hundred Days campaign fought from August to the Armistice in 1918. Four basic assumptions dominate explanations by historians for the British defeat of the German army. The Germans lost either because they were outnumbered in men and machinery or German army morale collapsed. The British won either because they were tactically better and employed a successful combined arms method or by virtue of superior operational art. By integrating and adding nuance to these hypotheses, Boff argues that Third Army was able to win on the Western Front during the Hundred Days because it was better able than the seriously weakened and increasingly operationally limited German armies facing it to maintain a higher operational tempo and execute better combined arms tactics. There was no single sufficient condition for victory and winning required a combination of British success and significant German failures. Although innovation and learning were uneven in the British army, it adapted better than the German army to modern warfare. The principal conclusion is that British ability to better apply the techniques of modern war, added to the accumulation of earlier attrition and the tactical and operational shortcomings of the German army, caused German defeat and produced British victory (247).

Boff meticulously and persuasively demonstrates this argument by addressing the four basic hypotheses explaining victory and defeat. First, successful attrition meant that the German army started the Hundred Days at a manpower disadvantage and attrition during the campaign aggravated the problem, accelerating the exhaustion of German divisions. While Third Army by comparison was better able to replace casualties, it was less able to maintain its material advantage. As the Hundred Days

progressed weather conditions and logistical problems reduced any British material lead, however the perception by some German soldiers of British material superiority was greater than the reality (91). Manpower and material were important, but never alone decisive. Secondly, the effect of perceived inferiority under worsening conditions undoubtedly damaged German morale. Yet, the morale picture is less straightforward than historians have hitherto suggested and the view of the German army as a morally spent force is an oversimplification. Rather, morale in the German Second and Seventeenth armies is shown to be better than previously thought; mood may have been poor, but spirit was not broken. Although British morale was probably good and certainly better than that of the Germans, it was not unwaveringly great. Nonetheless, good morale was important for success at the tactical and operational level. Thirdly, the British army employed good combined arms tactics and the calibrated use of combined arms in support of infantry, including artillery, machine guns, tanks, aeroplanes, gas and cavalry, maximising combat effectiveness. However, it is not clear that Third Army's combined arms method was fully 'the true elixir' of Allied success that John Terraine described. Undoubtedly, at the small-unit tactical level Third Army did display a highly sophisticated, flexible and diverse practice of combined arms method. Yet, some units were unwilling or unable to grasp the approach and even between the sophisticated units no universal tactical method existed. Nonetheless, the German tactical response was slow, rigid and exaggerated the threat of armour and aviation, which distorted and weakened the German defensive scheme. German failure to respond to the impressive diversity of British combined arms method contributed to British success. Fourthly, by delegating control to the 'man on the spot,' British command was able to maintain a higher operational tempo than the German army. However, a complex and variable command system meant decentralisation of command and the promotion of initiative in Third Army were not consistent, undermining British efforts. Nevertheless, the over-centralised German command system was deeply flawed and contributed to the failure of German operational art. In attempting to fight on fixed defence lines often without good intelligence or artillery support, the German army was unable to match British operational tempo, counter attack effectively, or regain the initiative. The British may not have done everything right, Boff argues, but they did more things better than their enemy, and the shortcomings of the German army were a major factor in its defeat (242).

Relatively overlooked by historians, the British Third Army advanced over sixty miles and was one of the most active, suffered the most casualties, captured the second most prisoners and was the largest and most representative of British fighting manpower of the five British armies in the late summer and autumn of 1918 (15-16). Redressing this, and adding balance by giving due attention to the opposing German armies, Boff's well-formed case study provides the basis for his insightful analysis and clear argument. Boff's use of quantitative and qualitative methods are excellent. For example, by combining a stylistically strong narrative with simple but illustrative figures, Boff is able to effectively demonstrate the importance of attrition to British success (19-20, 70). Moreover, the consistent and authoritative use of the available German primary source material is impressive, especially in support of British records. Indeed, the chapter on morale in particular makes a significant contribution to an understudied and important aspect of the war. While the Canadian Corps receives little attention, Boff's treatment of the analogous New Zealand Division provides an interesting comparison that will interest Canadian military historians, as will his analysis of Third Army operations and command at Havrincourt in September 1918 (57, 196). Although the Canadian Corps is well covered by Tim Travers, Bill Rawling, Ian M. Brown, Shane B. Schreiber and Tim Cook, a methodologically similar study of the Canadian Corps in the First World War would be welcome. This book left me disputing only one small detail. Does Boff make a clear enough distinction between tempo and momentum and explain how they relate? If tempo is about timing and rhythm, and momentum is about mass and velocity, is it not true that the former allows you to achieve the latter, that they are not interchangeable words, but rather, have a causal relationship? Indeed, tempo allows the application of pressure, which in turn, creates and then increases momentum, allowing you to control operations (6-7, 38, 191, 203, 206). That being said and nitpicking aside, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front* is a model study of combat at the tactical and operational level.

Boff effectively challenges those narratives reliant on reductive explanations for British victory and German defeat in 1918 by explaining the complexity of war on the Western Front, while making an important argument about the difficulties of the problem faced by the British army in adapting to fight and win in modern warfare. This required "an intensely practical attempt to unpick a series of different specific tactical,

operational and strategic knots” as both “armies were locked in a deadly evolutionary struggle” (248). What *Winning and Losing on the Western Front* makes clear in very Clausewitzian terms is that the British army demonstrated “an understanding of the complex nature of modern warfare which was more complete than the Germans ever achieved” (249). The German army was unable to compensate for all the intrinsic friction of warfare to the same extent the British army did. Winning was difficult and British success was in adapting to the realities of modern warfare. It is impossible to do justice to Boff’s multiple and elegantly intertwined arguments. It simply must be read. The specialised undergraduate class and graduate level seminars will benefit from reading this book, but it may not serve a general lower-level undergraduate course. Nonetheless, it is surely made accessible to the general reader by its methodical style. In this book, soldiers will recognise the characterisation of the immense difficulty and complexity of operations in war, theorists will rediscover the utility of history in adding example after example to their theoretical bones, and historians will praise Boff’s historical method. *Winning and Losing on the Western Front* will be a standard reference for historians of the First World War for years to come.

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