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The French Army and the First World War

This is a comprehensive new history of the French Army's critical contribution to the Great War. Ranging across all fronts, Elizabeth Greenhalgh examines the French Army's achievements and failures and sets these in the context of the difficulties of coalition warfare and the relative strengths and weaknesses of the enemy forces it faced. Drawing from new archival sources, she reveals the challenges of dealing with and replenishing a mass conscript army in the face of slaughter on an unprecedented scale, and shows how, through trials and defeats, French generals and their troops learned to adapt and develop techniques which eventually led to victory. In a unique account of the largest Allied army on the Western Front, the book revises our understanding not only of wartime strategy and combat, but also of other crucial aspects of France's war, from mutinies and mail censorship to medical services, railways and weapons development.

ELIZABETH GREENHALGH is QE II Research Fellow in the School of Humanities & Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales, Australia.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107605688

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by T. J. International Ltd, Padstow

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Greenhalgh, Elizabeth.

The French army and the First World War / Elizabeth Greenhalgh.

pages cm. – (Armies of the Great War)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01235-6 (Hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-60568-8 (Paperback)

1. France. Armée—History—World War, 1914–1918. 2. World War, 1914–1918—Campaigns—Western Front. 3. World War, 1914–1918—France.

I. Title.

D548.G74 2014

940.54'1244—dc23 2014010862

ISBN 978-1-107-01235-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-60568-8 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at www.cambridge.org/9781107605688

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Preface

More than eight million French citizens were mobilised during the fifty-two months of the First World War, and the principal battleground in Europe was Northern France, which was devastated as a result. In round figures, of those 8.4 million French soldiers, 1.4 million (including colonials and foreign volunteers) were killed or disappeared during the conflict. A further nine million wounded, gassed or ill men passed through the medical service, some of these, of course, figuring three or four times. Almost two million pensions were being paid to war-wounded veterans in December 1921, of whom 42,000 were blind in one or both eyes and 43,600 had lost either an arm or a leg. These figures exceed comparable statistics for the principal allies on the Western Front, although Russian figures are no doubt higher.

The French Army was fighting to defend home and country, unlike the British and Americans, who occasionally exasperated their ‘hosts’ by seeming to be prepared to fight to the last Frenchman. It is difficult to imagine the British Army fighting in England with the home counties occupied by the enemy, but enemy occupation is what drove not only those eight million Frenchmen to accept their duty to serve, but also their parents, wives and sisters to work in war factories. Yet, too often, the enormous effort of the French Army of 1914–18 is seen through the prism of 1940, all the more so because its Commander-in-Chief in 1917–18 was Philippe Pétain (who did not sign the 1918 armistice, but is counted responsible for that of 1940). Those volumes of the British official history dealing with 1918 reveal this tendency very clearly, and some American writing on the war reflects a similar tendency to imagine that effete Europeans required an infusion of transatlantic vigour to finish the war.

This book, then, seeks to counteract such features of the anglophone historiography, through an operational history of the First World War as experienced by France’s soldiers, politicians and population. More than that, it presents the first institutional account of the French Army during the war and its aftermath. Robert A. Doughty’s *Pyrrhic Victory* (2005) has

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preceded me, offering an excellent account of French strategy and operations, and Anthony Clayton has added to his several studies of the French Army his *Paths of Glory* (2003). In the current work, *The French Army and the First World War*, these are extended to include an analysis of the Army's relationship with the nation-at-war, both as regards industrial mobilisation and civil–military relations. The story is carried into the immediate post-war period, to cover demobilisation and the payment of pensions. In addition, the Army's relationship with the French empire and the three principal allies, Britain, Russia and the USA, is examined. Exterior theatres, Africa, Gallipoli, Greece, Italy, Palestine and Romania are discussed briefly, in the context of alliance relationships.

In the notes, readers will find references not only to recent French research, much of it carried out for doctoral theses by serving French Army officers, but also to the great volume of inter-war professional literature. General histories of the war are absent, in the main, so as not to overload the critical apparatus. Works are cited with full bibliographical details at their first appearance in any chapter, except for the most frequently cited, which appear in the abbreviated form to be found in the list of abbreviations. When possible, I have cited documents from the published official history, *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre*, rather than giving the archival reference to the original. Where archives are cited, however, the location is given at the first mention in any chapter, and, where no location is given (the majority of cases), the documents are in the Army archives, the Service Historique de la Défense, in the Château de Vincennes, on the outskirts of Paris.

To avoid confusion, German and enemy army units are printed in italic. Allied armies are cited by number (in words), corps by Roman numerals, divisions by Arabic numerals, and all lower formations (regiments and so on) also by Arabic numerals.

References to Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's published diary may be checked in either the edition by Robert Blake (1952) or that by Gary Sheffield and John Bourne (2000). References to unpublished portions of the diary are from the typescript in The National Archives, Kew, unless the manuscript is significantly different; where this is the case, I have used the manuscript, which has been microfilmed by Adam Matthew Publications. References to the four-volume summary of the official history, *Histoire de la Guerre Mondiale*, all published in Paris by Payot in 1936–37, are cited by the authors' names and simple title *Histoire*: they are General Duffour, *Joffre et la guerre de mouvement 1914*; General Daille, *Joffre et la guerre d'usure 1915–1916*; General Hellot, *Le Commandement des généraux Nivelle et Pétain 1917*; and General Tournès, *Foch et la victoire des Alliés 1918*. All four authors served in staff positions

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during the war. The title *Étapes* refers to the study of 13 Division d'Infanterie, whose fortunes illustrate this work: Lt-Col. Laure and Commandant Jacottet, *Les Étapes de guerre d'une division (13e Division)* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1932). The title *Introduction* refers to the indispensable and highly informative introduction to the SHD's N series, covering 1872–1919: Pierre Guinard, Jean-Claude Devos, Jean Nicot, *Inventaire sommaire des Archives de la Guerre: Introduction* (Troyes: Imprimerie de la Renaissance, 1975), and available online from the SHD website.

I thank all the staff at the SHD for their unfailing welcome and precious help during my annual visits; General Bach and Colonel Guelton, for their guidance in matters military; and Dr Jim Beach, Dr Simon House and Dr André Loez, for their help in sending me part or all of their doctoral theses. I thank especially M. Gobert de Barescut, for allowing me to read his grandfather's highly interesting diary account of his war service.

For permission to quote from material they hold, I am grateful: in Paris, to the Archives nationales, the Archives diplomatiques and the Bibliothèque de l'Institut; in London, to the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum and the Trustees of the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London.

Abbreviations

AEF	Afrique équatoriale française (French equatorial Africa)
AEF	American Expeditionary Forces
AFGG	<i>Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre</i> , 103 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1922–38), cited with tome and volume number, plus either page or annex number: thus <i>AFGG</i> 4/1, 536, refers to tome 4, volume 1, page 536.
AN	Archives nationales, Paris
AOF	Afrique occidentale française (French West Africa)
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
BNF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
CA	Corps d'armée, Army Corps
CinC	Commander-in-Chief
CS	Maréchal Fayolle, <i>Cahiers secrets de la Grande Guerre</i> (Paris: Plon 1964)
DAN	Détachement d'armée du nord (Northern Army Detachment)
DC	Division de cavalerie
DCP	Division de cavalerie à pied (dismounted cavalry)
DGCRA	Direction Générale des Communications et des Ravitaillements aux Armées (in 1918 controlled all the army's supply and transport services)
DI	Division d'infanterie
DIC	Division d'infanterie coloniale
DM	Division Marocaine
EMA	Etat-major de l'armée (Army General Staff)
GHQ	British General Headquarters
GMCC	<i>Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains</i>
GQG	Grand Quartier Général (French headquarters)
GQGA	Foch's Allied headquarters
JMO	Journal des marches et des opérations (war diary)
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London

List of abbreviations

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NARA	National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland
NCO	non-commissioned officer
OHL	Oberste Heeresleitung (German high command)
pcdf	pauvres cons du front (poor bloody infantry)
PV	Robert A. Doughty, <i>Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War</i> (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005)
RHA	<i>Revue Historique des Armées</i> [earlier: <i>de l'Armée</i>]
RHMC	<i>Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine</i>
RI	Régiment d'infanterie
RMF	<i>Revue militaire française</i>
SHD	Service historique de la Défense
SWC	Supreme War Council
TNA	The National Archives, Kew