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# STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



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IN FLANDERS FIELDS. By *Leon Wolff*. (New York: Viking. 1958. Pp. 308. \$5.)

This readable new book about the Third Battle of Ypres (better known as Passchendaele), fought by the British against the Germans in the late summer and autumn of 1917, is a good sample of that now popular form of literature, the disaster story. Wolff, a former Air Force public relations officer, chose his subject well, for few campaigns in military history have been so often damned as disastrous. Moreover, no aspect of the British command's conduct of this campaign has been more criticized than its GHQ intelligence estimates; and Wolff faithfully repeats much of the criticism, adding some of his own.

Certainly one of the reasons why the battle was fought, though by no means the only or the most important reason, was the glowing picture of a possible early victory painted by Sir Douglas Haig's intelligence chief, Brigadier General John Charteris. Haig himself was a dogged optimist, and he liked to

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have optimists about him. Charteris, once a correspondent of *The Times* in Vienna, had served with Haig in India, at Aldershot, and at all of Haig's wartime commands. In effect, he was Public Relations Officer, Chief Censor, and GHQ Morale Officer, as well as Chief of Intelligence, and he seems sometimes to have confused his various duties. He was convinced that the Somme battles in 1916 had done the Germans great damage, that the food shortage in Germany was becoming acute, and that revolutionary tendencies were emerging there. On 11 June 1917 he ended a report with the "fair deduction that, given a continuance of circumstances as they stand at present and given a continuation of the effort of the Allies, then Germany may well be forced to conclude a peace on our terms before the end of the year." Haig himself repeated this in substance to the cabinet: assuming that fighting continued at the same intensity, he said, the Germans would be at the end of their manpower in six months.

In retrospect this certainly seems optimistic, for by the end of 1917 Russia had ceased fighting and Italy and France were greatly weakened, while Germany was bringing more divisions to the Western Front. Haig's and Charteris' prognosis contrast with a memorandum of 9 May 1917 from the Director of Military Intelligence in London, G.M.W. Macdonough, who, observing that Germany was still strong and Russia near collapse, recommended remaining on the defensive until the Americans arrived. This memorandum, addressed to the War Cabinet, influenced its opinion of Haig's and Charteris' views. When serious criticism of GHQ developed in the autumn, Charteris became, not surprisingly, the first target. He has in fact been a target ever since. David Lloyd George, in a passage quoted by Wolff, spoke of "more stuff from the Charteris still-room," and Wolff himself deprecates "the fine Scottish hand of General John Charteris." Captain B. H. Liddell Hart and Winston Churchill have also attacked the man, and one is left with the impression that he was little more than a fabricator.

Such a conclusion would be, to borrow a phrase from the other side of the hill, *etwas uebertrieben*. If we look at his diary and the full text of his report, we see that Charteris got his basic information from the classic sources of military intelligence—PW interrogations; captured letters, records and

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paybooks; overt publications; and agents. His interpretation of the effect of the Somme battles has since been documented by German writers. His June estimate of the number of German divisions in the West (157) was, if anything, one to three divisions high. He foresaw the danger of bad weather. He had captured orders indicating that German field rations were being reduced by a third and captured letters revealing the food shortage in Germany, a shortage since amply confirmed in German sources. Perhaps most important, he had an agent report that German casualties in the spring battles in the West up until June had numbered 400,000. The German official study dated 1941 put losses for April through June at 384,000, of which 121,000 were killed or missing. Although this tally includes June, in which there were probably at least 60,000 casualties, the discrepancy with Charteris' report is offset by the fact that the official figures do not include those lightly wounded who were not evacuated out of the corps area; roughly 30% should be added to the net figure of 324,000, making some 420,000 to the beginning of June.

Thus Charteris does not seem to have been so far off in his picture of the German situation in June 1917. His rosy estimate that Germany would be exhausted at the end of the year was probably influenced by recent events in the Battle of Messines, where the greatest explosion of mines in military history for a time demoralized the German defenders. It should also be remembered that he was counting on a continued effort by the French which did not materialize. But he did not grasp the danger and the significance of a Russian collapse, which even a month earlier Macdonough, from his broader perspective in London, had seen more clearly in making his soberer estimate of the German power to resist. Perhaps we may claim Macdonough's clearer view as another proof of the advantages of centralizing intelligence estimates.

The Third Battle of Ypres began on 31 July, and from this time on Charteris seems to have made more errors. He reported at one point that all the German divisions in one sector had been on the front line and had therefore been mangled, when actually some had still not been engaged. For some mysterious reason, he (not just Haig, as Lloyd George and Wolff state) revised his estimate of German divisions in the West downward to 145, now placing 12 more on the Eastern

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Front. Four divisions actually had been sent east in June, but in July eight were moved west from the east, so that the number in France and Belgium was now greater, not smaller. Charteris also reported that the 1919 (1899) class of German conscripts was entering the trenches, a mistake he had to correct later.

It might be pointed out in Charteris' defense that other intelligence chiefs have erred on the side of optimism and lived it down. Some readers may recall that in 1943 the Supreme Allied Command devoted considerable effort to working out what to do in the event of a sudden German collapse.<sup>1</sup> It is natural, unless the enemy is practicing deception, to underestimate him; no news is good news, but it may not be true news. The real trouble in Charteris' case was that his veneration of Haig made his judgment suspect, both in London and in the armies.

Haig told the War Secretary, Lord Derby, that he always discounted Charteris' optimism, but this does not seem to have been true, and Haig always erred on the optimistic side himself. On 12 December, after the German counterattack at Cambrai, Derby gave Haig a month to get rid of Charteris. Haig regretfully replaced him, writing at this time to his wife, "It is now over a year since Derby and the War Office have set their faces against poor Charteris," and later, "He seems almost a sort of Dreyfus in the eyes of our War Office authorities." But when Charteris suggested that the attacks on him represented efforts to attack Haig, Haig did not hesitate to rebuke him; Charteris was told that the commander himself was the only one responsible for his decisions, and that they had been based on other information besides that furnished by GHQ Intelligence.

A reader who is familiar with intelligence will find Wolff's book scanty on details, not only in regard to Charteris but also on matters such as the German failure to exploit the French mutinies. Wolff, of course, has written on the battle as a whole, not just on its intelligence aspects. The truth is that his book is essentially a warm-up of the polemical campaign of the "Easterners"—advocates of an eastern strategy—

<sup>1</sup> The code-name RANKIN was used for the planned pursuit operation in case of abrupt German withdrawal.

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principally Lloyd George and Churchill, against the "Westerners." This is not the place for details, but it should be pointed out that the "Easterners," by comparing non-comparable casualty figures, have made Passchendaele appear more disastrous than it actually was. Wolff adopts Churchill's data without checking into Churchill's source and fails to compare the available unit casualty reports, which show, when analyzed, that the battle losses on both sides were in the neighborhood of 250,000, with the German losses perhaps slightly higher than the British. As often in such polemics, the denunciations by Lloyd George and Churchill were really attempts to conceal or justify weak spots in their own records—Lloyd George's failure to supply manpower in 1918 and Churchill's Dardanelles fiasco. The records of Haig and Charteris were far from spotless, and there were some sound arguments for an eastern strategy; but sound arguments were not the only ones used. It is sobering for us to realize that no part of the denigration was more effective than the exaggerated charges levelled at GHQ's intelligence; an intelligence organization makes a good target.