

Edward Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force 1939-40*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 272pp. ISBN 978-1-137-41419-1 (Hardback). Price £60.

Only in the last fifteen years or so has the British Army's performance in the Second World War been subjected to close academic scrutiny; David French's *Raising Churchill's Army* (2001) being a notable landmark. Edward Smalley's thorough study traces the origins of the poor performance in 1939-1940 through the previous twenty years when the 'Cinderella Service' was under-funded and had no clear mandate to prepare for war on the Continent against a major power. Although he allows that the BEF's small size and subordination to the calamitous French high command entailed that it was not primarily responsible for the allied defeat, he nevertheless insists that its performance must be subjected to severe criticism.

Smalley concentrates on four aspects of shortcomings or failures in military organisation: Training, Communications (in the widest sense), Discipline, and Headquarters and Staff. Previous historians of the campaign, including the present reviewer, have exposed many of these defects, such as the cumbersome command structure, concentration on linear defence and complacency regarding German strategy and operational dynamism. But in many cases Smalley contends that these criticisms have not been based on exhaustive research. His book cannot be faulted on this score: his chapter on Training, for example, has 209 references, the majority based on documentary sources.

As regards training, Smalley shows that before 1939 no centrally imposed uniform standard was enforced because it would interfere with commanders' independence and, more generally, because of the diversity of terrain, opposition and rules of engagement in which the Army had to operate. There was less excuse for the unimaginative training during the months of Phoney War when too much effort was devoted to preparing static defences along the Belgian border, which persisted even after the allies had agreed that in event of a German attack the leading units of the BEF would advance to the river Dyle.

Communications at all levels and by various technical means were put under severe pressure with the outbreak of war. Throughout the Empire tried-and-tested cable, visual signalling and even carrier pigeons had seemed satisfactory, but on the Continent much more reliance would need to be placed on wireless. Smalley shows that there was confusion about its role: different commanders and units used available equipment in accordance with their own preferences and there were understandable concerns about security. He also criticises over-reliance on detailed written orders, excessive paperwork and formal procedures. The key point is that the network of communications which was just about adequate during the months of

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Phoney War collapsed within days of the German invasion. Ever more reliance had to be placed on personal contacts through liaison officers whose task was often delayed or made impossible by the mass of refugees blocking the roads.

The chapter on discipline is extremely wide-ranging and is the most original in probing beyond the official records which under-recorded levels of crime and misdemeanours to prevent adverse publicity for individuals and units. The examination ranges from the most common offences of theft and drunkenness to more serious but more difficult to document failings such as incidents of friendly fire, premature bridge demolition and ill-treatment of enemy prisoners. As might be expected, ill-discipline was greatest at Dunkirk and the later phase of operations south of the Somme when unit cohesion sometimes broke down completely. It is doubtful if any other Army's discipline would have been better under these appalling conditions.

Smalley concludes persuasively that the themes he has explored are of critical importance to historians to explain the subsequent defeats and later successes of the British Army in the Second World War. After this shattering experience in France in 1940 reforms were gradually introduced in training, communications, discipline, command procedures and staff work. In the aftermath of Dunkirk it is questionable to what extent the authorities were able to take an objective view of the lessons to be learnt.

It is perhaps surprising that Smalley has not highlighted two large issues which proved so problematic in the next three years; namely the co-ordination of tanks with the other arms in mobile operations; and the development of closer understanding and technical co-operation between the Army and the RAF in ground warfare. This limitation, however, does not seriously impair the value of this impressive contribution to our understanding of the BEF's deficiencies in 1939-1940. On a personal note, if your reviewer was still teaching his undergraduate special subject 'From Munich to the Fall of France', this book would at once be added to the select list of essential reading.

PROFESSOR BRIAN BOND
King's College London