

German soldiers outside a captured concrete bunker on the Maginot Line during the invasion that rapidly overran France in May–June 1940



Blueprint for battle

ASHLEY JACKSON praises a study of Germany's forensic preparations for military dominance over France

Blitzkrieg: Myth, Reality and Hitler's Lightning War, France 1940

by Lloyd Clark

Atlantic Books, 480 pages, £25



It is a riddle that has fascinated historians: how did Germany sweep the European board so easily in 1940? Advancing rapidly through the Low Countries, its forces then defeated one of the world's greatest armies, achieving in under two months what it had failed to accomplish in the four years prior to November 1918. In June 1940, Hitler flew to Paris for a tour of the conquered city, deciding that he would not raze it, but instead strive to make Berlin even more magnificent.

It has been argued that victory was achieved through a revolutionary form of warfighting: 'lightning war', a mix of mobile armour and close air support that paralysed the enemy before delivering the coup de grâce. But this explanation,

cultivated by the Nazis to frighten enemies and burnish the myth of invincibility, was only half the story. Writing with authority and clarity, Lloyd Clark contends that it was the application of technology to abiding military good practice that allowed Germany to win so overwhelmingly. The Germans took timeless principles of warfare and successfully remodelled them. Their operational methods and warfighting capabilities were secretly honed during the 1920s; under the Nazis, the army put on weight, evolved doctrine and sought to apply technology in order to give its traditional battlefield ambitions the mobility, speed and co-ordination that could have major effect.

Victory in Europe, therefore, was no mere panzer-Stuka 'blitzkrieg', but a

'Lightning war', an idea cultivated by the Nazis to frighten enemies, was only half the story

sophisticated all-arms, inter-service team effort, in which the 'teeth' were able to operate with tempo and exploit fleeting opportunities because the logistical 'tail' was so well-developed. Germany's achievement was "rooted in all the advantages provided by a thinking military that had a strong tradition and benefited from relevant training, a sound doctrine, robust leadership and a formidable fighting spirit... Eventual German success, of course, was not due to either the quality or quantity of their military hardware... but where and how their resources were used."

The failings of French strategy were just as important. Post-Versailles, France had settled upon a defensive posture centred upon alliance with Belgium, the Maginot Line and total mobilisation. But the attritional war the French anticipated

was something the Germans had neither the resources to win or desire to fight. Germany's high-risk strategy focused on concentrating strength against known French weakness and avoiding the enemy where possible. Using surprise and manoeuvre, they hoped to start a sequence of events that would shock and demoralise the French and degrade their will to resist. Rapid though the victory was, it was by no means bloodless: 190,000 Belgian, British, Dutch, French and German soldiers died, and the French air force, the Luftwaffe and the RAF lost well over 3,000 aircraft.

This is a compelling and fresh retelling of one of the century's most intriguing and significant campaigns. **LE**

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Ashley Jackson is a professor of history at King's College London

allowed to be accompanied by their wives. In Victorian Britain, lots were drawn to see who would be the lucky ones. But those who 'won' often found the nomadic lifestyle disconcerting. Camp life was dirty and dangerous. Living in close proximity to unmarried and coarse soldiers threatened their married respectability, especially given the presence of 'camp followers' who were prostitutes. They were also routinely disparaged by the military authorities. In the words of a 19th-century adage, "a soldier married is a soldier spoiled".

Historians too have not paid army wives as much attention as they deserve. Unfortunately, while Gillies' book attempts to remedy this neglect, large sections of it actually focus on the lives of

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their husbands, particularly in her chapters on the First World War. This is perhaps understandable: primary sources written by women are scarce. There is also the conundrum that writing about soldiers' wives during periods of mass conscription can easily slide into a history of married women in general – an impossible task in one volume.

Gillies' book is best when she focuses on individual women. She is exquisitely sensitive to the emotional lives of soldiers' wives and she demonstrates that, although their experiences have varied greatly over the centuries, the difficulties they face are remarkably similar. **LE**

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The folly of youth?

THOMAS ASBRIDGE commends a biography of a figure who has often been relegated to the margins of medieval history

Henry the Young King, 1155–1183

by Matthew Strickland

Yale University Press, 416 pages, £30



This year marks the 800th anniversary of Henry III's accession to the English throne – but it is often forgotten that another figure had been proclaimed as Henry III almost 50 years earlier.

The eldest surviving son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, this Henry – known as the Young King – stood to inherit both the realm of England and a swathe of territory covering much of modern-day France: a vast domain sometimes described as the Angevin empire.

In spite of his startling pedigree and glittering prospects, Young Henry's short life came to a grim end in 1183 when he succumbed to a bout of dysentery, aged just 28. The Young King's achievements were soon overshadowed by those of his more (in)famous brothers: Richard the Lionheart and King John. As a result, chroniclers pushed Henry to the margins of history – little more than a footnote in the story of medieval England.

Matthew Strickland's splendid book offers an insightful reassessment of Henry's career, while also opening a fresh window onto the world of the

Angevin dynasty – perhaps the most fascinating (and dysfunctional) family of the Middle Ages. Until now, scholars have been content to brand Henry an indolent playboy. Making the most of the surviving evidence, Strickland overturns this view by reconstructing the world of the later 12th century from the boy king's perspective in order to understand the pressures, ambitions and disappointments that shaped his behaviour.

Much of the book is devoted to a detailed narrative and analysis of Young Henry's two rebellions against his father, with Strickland arguing convincingly that Henry II should shoulder some of the blame, given his stubborn refusal to share power. Towards the end of his life, the Young King also dedicated much of his energy to the pursuit of victory and renown in knightly tournaments. Strickland rightly discards the view that this was idle folly, observing that, due to medieval Europe's deepening obsession with chivalry, tournament success gave Henry some real political influence.

Strickland's deeply researched, richly textured work will be of enormous value to specialists, while general readers will also find much to enjoy in a commendably lucid and entertaining book. **LE**

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Thomas Asbridge is reader in medieval history at Queen Mary University of London



Henry the Young King's 1170 coronation, as shown in a 13th-century illustration

Those left behind

JOANNA BOURKE looks at a work that tells the story of the wives of men in military service, from the Crimea onwards

Army Wives: The Real Lives of the Women Behind the Men in Uniform

by Midge Gillies

Aurum Press, 400 pages, £20



George R Sims' 1888 poem, *A Soldier's Wife*, describes how "Amid the roar of thousands he marched away to fight", leaving behind a woman "weeping... at the sight." The soldier "went abroad

to conquer or perish in the strife", while "she stopped at home – God help her! – a soldier's starving wife".

Army Wives tells the story of such soldiers' wives, married to those serving in conflicts from the Crimea to Afghanistan. They represent a significant number: today, around 68,000 women are either married to, or in civil partnership with, soldiers. As in the past, many spend much of their lives without the companionship of their loved one. In the 1870s, only one in eight soldiers were