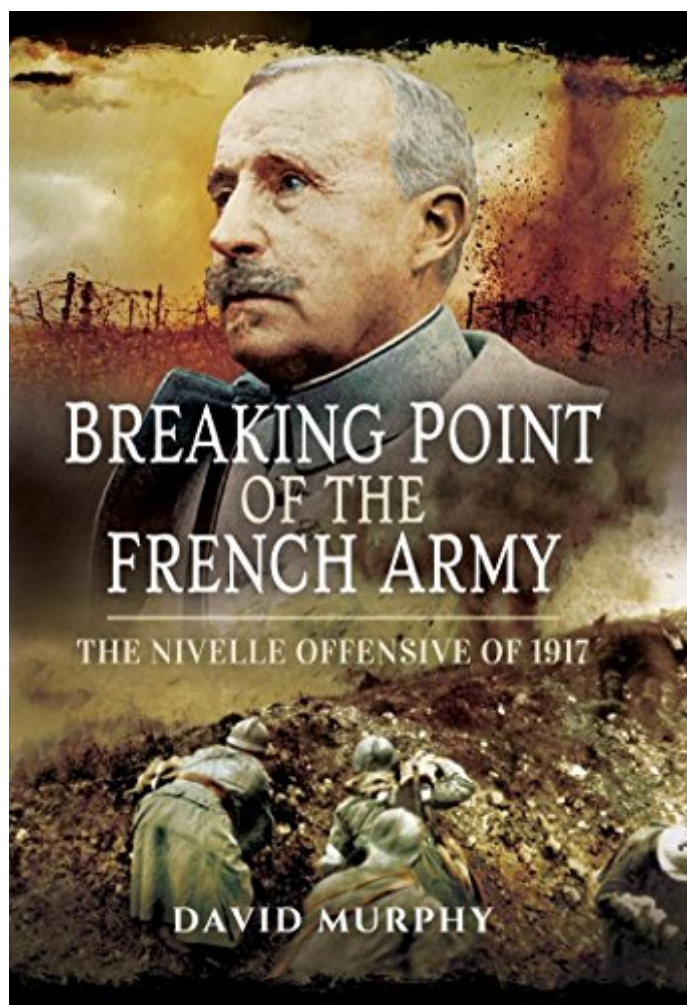


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# Breaking Point Of The French Army: The Nivelle Offensive Of 1917



## Synopsis

In December 1916 General Robert Nivelle was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the French armies fighting the Germans on the Western Front. He had enjoyed a meteoric rise to high command and public acclaim since the beginning of the war - he was a national hero. In return, he proclaimed he 'had the formula' that would ensure victory and end the conflict in 1917. But his offensive was a bloody and humiliating failure for France, one that could have opened the way for French defeat. This is the subject of David Murphy's penetrating, in-depth study of one of the key events in the history of the Great War. He describes how Nivelle, a highly intelligent and articulate officer, used his charm to win the support of French and British politicians, but also how he was vain and boastful and displayed no sense of operational security. By the opening of the campaign, his plan was an open secret and he had lost the ability to critically assess the operation as it developed. The result was disaster.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

An excellent study of major events within the French army during its fourth year of conflict, an army where the goal had continued to be attack, always attack, and stay on the offensive no matter what

the cost. This had resulted in massive casualties, mainly from enemy heavy artillery and well-placed machine guns that decimated attacking infantry. The spring offensive of 1917 was planned by the new Commander-in-Chief of the French armies, Robert Nivelle, who had shown success during the previous autumn's campaign defending the forts of Verdun and promised he had a fresh approach that would not repeat the massive losses incurred at the Somme and Verdun during 1916. David Murphy shows that when these promises led to such conspicuous failure, France came close to dropping out of the war. Murphy's study of Nivelle and the events of 1917 outline how an intelligent and articulate officer who promised so much, but was vain and boastful and worse still, displayed no sense of operational security could lead his country to the breaking point. His plan "was an open secret and he had lost the ability to critically assess the operation as it developed." The resulting disaster literally was the breaking point of the French army. It effectively destroyed French army morale, leading to a series of troop mutinies and the "will of the French politicians and people to continue the war was undermined." David Murphy's study is the first full-length account in English to analyze in detail the reasons for the failure of the Nivelle Offensive and the implications for the future conduct of the war.

This is a very worthwhile book on the WW1 French army, however it assumes to some degree that the reader has a good prior knowledge base of the War, and the problems faced by all combatants. The Price at 1.26\$ is right. Can't go to wrong at that price point.

This was a surprisingly readable book that dealt with the Nivelle offensive of 1917, which is often only a footnote in other WW1 history texts. As a veteran I found the run up to the battle somewhat unbelievable to comprehend. And the overview of the mutiny was well researched but brief. Very good.

Of yet another disastrous battle of World War I is only a couple days away, from the posting of this review. In the movie, *Doctor Zhivago*, there is a classic scene depicting events that also occurred almost precisely 100 years ago. A form covered in ice depicts a soldier frozen to death still holding his machine gun. The camera pans the landscape, and suddenly there are hundreds of soldiers, in their great coats, arising from the trenches, turning their backs on the front, and the narrator says: "and they did what all the soldiers in the war dreamed of doing: they went home." It was the beginning of the Russian Revolution, a prime example of an answer to the question posed, in particular, in America, in the 1960s: "What if they gave a

war and no one came? What occurred on the Eastern Front also almost occurred on the Western Front, something that is not talked about much in polite, or even political company. Thanks to the excellent, and aptly entitled book by David Murphy, we now have much greater insight into events that almost broke the French Army, and would have led to revolution in France. How, How, and How again could they do this, a nouveau!? By 1917 the war had moved so far away from the red pants and the quick march to Berlin of 1914. Two seminal battles of 1916 should have been instructive: the meat grinder of Verdun, with one million combined German and French casualties; and the first day of the Battle of the Somme, on which the British took more than 20,000 killed. THIS time, though, it would be different. No more Sommes, no more Verduns as Murphy would quote historian Richard Holmes. Yet it was largely the same, as most graphically illustrated in those couple of maps at the beginning of Murphy's book, the "before" and "after" of the battle: a very small squiggle in the line representing the front, an adjustment of a couple of kilometers. And the dead? STILL, today, only rough estimates, one of those things not to be talked about in polite etc. Estimates that still vary by a factor of two or three. General Douglas Haig was in command of British forces on the Western Front. He too would do largely the same thing, and thanks to Leon Wolff's excellent book *In Flanders Fields: Passchendaele 1917*, which I have recently read, I can now compare the two actions. Overall, I concluded that General Robert Nivelle's plan and actions were the better, even though the end result was the same. As Murphy quotes American historian James Stokesbury: "Nivelle claimed that he was going to win the war and he very nearly did- for Germany." The overwhelming focus of Murphy's account is on the French military and political leadership. The issues and problems on the German side are almost unmentioned. French relationships with their British allies is covered to some extent. The views of the "poilu," the French infantryman are leavened into the account by quotes from letters home, which went through the censor. The strength of Murphy's account is to put the reader in Nivelle's mind-set, and how his plan just might work. He did have some limited success, if I dare use that word, at Verdun, proving that slowly rolling artillery barrages could support the infantry into a possible breakthrough. He did not see it as the same old frontal charge into machine gun nests, which did largely occur at Passchendaele. They would use the new inventions, tanks and aircraft, to support the infantry, who would decisively break through the German lines, roll up the flanks, and no doubt, march on to Berlin. He promised, promised, that if it did not work within the first 24-48 hours, he would quit the offensive. Much like Haig did. And neither kept their promise. Like many a military plan, it looked great on the big board. Nivelle even

obtained some enthusiasm from the poilu that THIS time it would be different. But the weather, the mud, the inability of those new tanks to cross trenches, their tendency to become fiery coffins, the inevitable failures in communications and the tenacity of the German infantryman and artilleryman all proved sufficient to reduce the planned breakthrough to a few *Ã¢â¬â*Ã¢â¬âÃ¢â¬â.Ã¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âMurphy looks at the *Ã¢â¬â*Ã¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âfallout,Ã¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âÃ¢â¬â the refusal of troops to participate in this folly, revolts of whole divisions. A hundred years later, it is still difficult to obtain a good picture, but for sure, France was on the brink of revolution. The offensive commenced on April 16, and by April 24 the political leadership was meeting in order to replace Nivelle. Fortunately that chose Petain, who was largely responsible for restoring order to the Army, and stopping the revolution. Most ironic, considering the role in played in WW II. A solid, well-documented, balanced historical account of another critical point in French history. Murphy concludes with the following assessment: *Ã¢â¬â*Ã¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âFor France, the Nivelle Offensive remains the epitome of military futility *Ã¢â¬â*Ã¢â¬âÃ¢â¬â a doomed plan driven by an overly ambitious and flawed general. 5-stars for MurphyÃ¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âÃ¢â¬âs account.

Well written and thoroughly researched, this is not a dry account so often found in the genre. It has excellent coverage of a broad range of pertinent information, both civil and martial. It does a great job of describing the context as well as the event. If the subject matter is of interest, get it, you won't be sorry.

For a microism, of what happened. I recommend "Paths of Glory". Of course the British had their Nivelles and by the end of the War, so did the Americans albeit on a much smaller scale.

informative but sad tale of mismanaged generalship. much valor mixed w pride and sheer pigheadedness

A good book about a Battle that does not get enough study. The squabbling amongst the French and English Generals and Politicians makes one wonder how the Allies ever won the First World War.

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