

## *Book Review*

# **Point of Failure: British Brigadiers in France and Norway 1940**

*Philip McCarty*

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Warwick: Helion  
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The book, *Point of Failure: British Brigadiers in France and Norway 1940*, is the output of a doctoral thesis and maintains the academic structure in its published format. The content however, is the culmination of years of military experience and academic labour, representing a unique insider view of the British Army. The study reported here makes a unique contribution by using a modern analytical technique, namely social network analysis, in a historical context.

The book concentrates on the brigadier rank of military officers, tracking the career progression of 156 British Army officers who held the rank in 1940. The brigadier held a unique position in the British Army in the Second World War (1939–1945), being predominantly a temporary rank at the time. The main focus of *Point of Failure* is to peel back the layers of networks that enabled these officers to progress to higher command during the war. The book addresses multiple gaps in literature. Firstly, few studies have been conducted on the middle echelon of command, specifically brigadier-level, caught between the tactical and operational levels of war. Secondly, within military history where the narrative approach has dominated, McCarty chose a thematic analytical approach. Thirdly, the author uses a lesser-used method, social network analysis, to explore the multiple linkages between the officers under consideration qualitatively. He points out that this technique has been used by military intelligence analysis to understand connectivity within adversary organisations. The mathematical nature of this technique (which includes statistical analysis of proximity) and its origins in military intelligence work, means that historians have been wary about applying the technique in their work. The most notable exception is Niall Ferguson, who argues that social network structures have had a significant influence on events.<sup>1</sup>

McCarty conducted a prosopographic study, where a group of carefully selected people are handled as a ‘collective biography’ where characteristics are averaged across the group, to flesh out the biographic data that are required to undertake a social network analysis.<sup>2</sup> He fully exploited various archives, biographic directories, obituaries, published lists and newspaper articles to place each candidate in time and place.

The author discusses the various networks in a logical, chronological manner. Chapter 2 covering the early life (formative years) of the officers, focussing on family, education and commissioning regiments. Chapter 3 covers the career development of officers during the interwar period, focussing on their training and postings. Chapter 4 reports on the wartime career advancements of officers to identify key trends and traits. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the identified group through the social network lens, with the final chapter presenting findings and conclusions.

Despite an in-depth discussion regarding social networks in the British Army, McCarty limits himself to analysing time periods where the experiences of these officers directly overlapped – in upbringing, training or operations. Such analysis, although rigorous, means that common experience and direct social interaction are held at a premium. As a result, many of his conclusions are cautious. He argues, for instance, ‘there are no evident “rings” among the officers, based either on places served, or officers served with or under. There is some evidence of patronage’<sup>3</sup> and

The assertion by Bowman and Connelly that the Edwardian officer corps was dominated by the products of six great schools is not borne out among this group of officers, although over half did come from schools of the Clarendon Group and the Headmasters’ Conference.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, the author could have used the ideas of Bourdieu regarding “social capital” and “habitus”, to strengthen his arguments and to provide a strong philosophical underpinning to the study.<sup>5</sup> By doing so, the narrow focus of direct engagement between officers could have been broadened to argue that similar contexts generate similar social capital and habitus, thereby identifying networks of loyalty between soldiers who had attended the same schools and training colleges, and deployed to key operational areas at different times. In this way, the ‘old school tie’ loyalties (p. 73) could have enriched the qualitative analysis, providing another layer of networking and loyalty.

The tables, figures and photographs reproduced in *Point of Failure* retain the look and feel of a thesis rather than a popular history book, and in this regard, the publisher could have refined the end-product. The layout of graphs is minimalistic and technical aspects, such as table labels being either cropped or not included, unfortunately detracted from the overall presentation. The tables bombard the reader with information, and require explanation in the text. Presenting the data in network diagrams, more focussed tables, and graphs would have made the information more accessible to a person not familiar with the use of social network analysis.

McCarty’s rigorous and structured analysis of the British Army brigadiers of the Second World War shows that many assumptions regarding the influence of upbringing, training and experience on promotions in the British Army were overstated. Although the majority of brigadiers attended public school, no specific public school guaranteed promotion. Similarly, no specific regiment gave the brigadiers an advantage for advancement, nor

was there evidence that schools channelled their learners to preferred regiments. Despite finding little evidence of “rings” of officers, McCarty concedes that Generals Alanbrooke and Montgomery did exercise a limited degree of patronage. This could however be attributed to their role of directing staff at the Staff Colleges, which allowed them to “talent spot” among promising students. McCarthy however correctly de-emphasises this point by arguing that the attendance of Staff College, the Imperial Defence College, and operational experience, played a deciding factor in rank advancement. The book stands as an important contribution both in the application of social network analysis and in understanding the British Army culture during the Second World War.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> P McCarty, *Point of Failure: British Army Brigadiers in The British Expeditionary Force and North Western Expeditionary Force, 1940: A Study of Advancement and Promotion* (Warwick: Helion, 2024), 19.
  - <sup>2</sup> K Verboven, M Carlier & J Dumolyn, 'A Short Manual to the Art of Prosopography', in KSB Keats-Rohan (ed.), *Prosopography Approaches and Applications: A Handbook*, (Oxford: Linacre College, 2007), 35-69, 39.
  - <sup>3</sup> McCarty, *Point of Failure*, 197.
  - <sup>4</sup> McCarty, *Point of Failure*, 198.
  - <sup>5</sup> See, for instance, P Bourdieu & J-C Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1990).
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