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Joel Carlson

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

M.A. (History)

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FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

**From Spion Kop to the Somme:
Experience of Warfare and its Imperial Context**

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Dr. Richard Connors

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

EXAMINATEURS (EXAMINATRICES) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS EXAMINERS

Dr. Vasilis Vourkoutiotis

Dr. Galen Perras

Gary W. Slater

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

From Spion Kop to the Somme:
Experience of Warfare and its Imperial Context

By Joel Carlson

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Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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Abstract

The First World War caught Europe's military establishments largely unprepared for a conflict that exceeded contemporary expectations of length, scale and advances in technology. The British Army was no exception. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) may have entered the war as one of the most professional forces in the field, but throughout the war British generalship suffered from a distinct lack of imagination in their attempts at coping with the realities of modern warfare. Indeed, the names of such battles as Loos, Arras, the Somme, and Passchendaele evoke images of tragic and unnecessary waste of thousands of lives. Amongst all the major protagonists, Britain alone possessed a truly extensive catalogue of experience pointing to what a future conflict on continental Europe might entail, courtesy of the many colonial wars Britain fought during the nineteenth century. During the Omdurman campaign (1898) and the South African War (1899-1902) in particular, the brutal effectiveness of the machine gun, smokeless gunpowder, quick-firing artillery, trench warfare, and the complexities of organizing large formations were clearly demonstrated. These lessons seemed mostly forgotten or ignored, despite the existence of substantial reform sentiment and current criticisms of the Army's performance in Africa prior to 1914.

Why had the British military failed to capitalize on its experiences in its African campaigns and bring those lessons with them into the First World War? Almost the entire British Army High Command from 1914 to 1918 had participated in the Sudanese and South African campaigns, yet virtually to the man they proved remarkably resilient in rejecting the lessons on modern warfare learned by the lower ranks at a very high human cost. Even when these lessons were reinforced by the observations of British officers

during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), they went largely ignored or misinterpreted. What prevented the senior British officers from heeding the voices of commonsense? Experiences during the South African War were considered anomalous and it was suggested impossible to apply to a European context. There was also a general trend of imparting more emphasis on personal training and qualities of *élan* as the best method of dealing with advanced battlefield technology. Britain's social hierarchy also played a part in this process, abetted by the fact that the majority of senior officers were from the Cavalry Arm, perhaps the most resistant to any sort of change or reform and comprised mainly of members of Britain's elite class. In addition, the British Army, like any other army in history, suffered from an institutional unwillingness to adopt new ideas and technology. A notoriously spendthrift British peace time government compounded the situation by ensuring that not only would there be substantial resistance to reform but that any reform would be constrained by tight fiscal considerations of Parliament and His Majesty's Treasury.

This thesis will examine the reasons why the lessons of imperial and African conflicts were largely dismissed by military strategists on the eve of the Great War and reveal how such thinking lay in a long running conflict between the Victorian outlook on life and the new realities of the world ushered in by Industrialism. With the rise of Industrialism in Britain, this clash began to take form as the established British elite class saw a host of social ills residing within the movement that threatened their perceived order of society, especially their place at the top of that order. This clash of "progress versus nostalgia," a term coined by Martin J. Weiner in his book *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*, was a driving force behind the British High

Command's struggle to undo the reform efforts of men such as Field Marshal Roberts and Richard Haldane as the Victorian/Edwardian elite class sought to bring this conflict to a resolution. The end result was that in 1914, the British Army, having only partially benefited from its African experience, was still in a state of transition and even those small gains had vanished along with most of the original BEF by early 1915.

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Introduction

““The Zand river incident merely confirmed that the war had not produced any self-evident lessons, only a range of experiences which could be interpreted to suit the preferences of the interpreter.”¹

“It is these developments of the future that we must look out for, and our tactical training must be in accordance with our experiences of the most modern introductions, instead of, as so frequently practiced in the past, taking as our basis occurrences of thirty or more years ago.”²

The experiences of Britons during the Great War continue to captivate and bewilder the imagination. The guns of August still echo across the decades and such an interest is perhaps best seen in the prolonged popularity of the writing of war poets such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen and the haunting memoirs of Vera Britain. This thesis will examine a similar set of experiences of British soldiers serving in the Sudan and South Africa from 1898 to 1902 and the reasons why the lessons garnered from these Imperial and African conflicts were largely dismissed by military strategists on the eve of the Great War. In addition, it will be revealed how such thinking lay in a long running conflict between the Victorian outlook on life and the new realities of the world ushered in by Industrialism.

Chapter One will set the stage outlining the emergence of the modern battlefield and some initial reactions to the new challenges posed by advances in military technology that had been developing since the 1850s. These advances had completely altered the nature of how war was waged by the end of the nineteenth century. The primary dilemma faced by European military establishments centered on their willingness to accept these very changes. The second half of the nineteenth century presented many

¹ Edward Spiers, *the Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.318.

² B.F.S. Baden-Powell, *War in Practice: Some Tactical and Other Lessons of the Campaign in South Africa 1899-1902* (London: Isbister & Company Limited, 1903), p.266.

circumstances and conflicts in which the potential effectiveness of new battlefield technology could be observed. The Crimean War (1853-1856), the American Civil War (1861-1865), Austro-Prussian War (1866), the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the Russo-Turkish War of 1877/78, and the Anglo-South African Conflict of 1899-1902 were all significant for the valuable lessons they provided for those who were willing to witness and comprehend what was changing on the modern battlefield. Moreover, all the European powers had a sizable set of experiences of campaigns waged in their respective colonial empires. Possessing the largest and oft contended empire, Britain proved the leader by a considerable margin in this respect.

Unfortunately, most of these conflicts, except for the Franco-Prussian War, were viewed as anomalies; as such, whatever lessons they had to offer were diluted or largely ignored by European military tacticians. For example, the “propensity to entrench” on the part of Union and Confederate troops during the American Civil War was attributed by European experts as a manifestation of the shortage of trained and professional troops in both armies.³ Colonial conflicts were dispelled as the native opposition was not only usually armed with obsolescent weaponry,⁴ they relied upon tactics that were clearly outmoded by European practices. Including formations like the square which for better armed European forces found very effective when in a defensive posture. Though the irony was not all too apparent, cavalry shock tactics, obsolete by the early nineteenth

³ Russell F. Weigley, “American Strategy from its Beginnings Through the First World War,” In *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* Peter Paret ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.419. It is interesting to note that while the inexperience of the American troops on both sides was often cited for reasons why the American Civil War had no real lessons to be learned, that exact inexperience enabled the Americans to more readily accept technological advances in weaponry like the Gatling gun or new concepts like cavalry fighting as mounted infantry or trench warfare. G.F.R. Henderson was correct in using this conflict as a source of inspiration for his ideas and theories on modern war.

⁴ The only real exception was the Ethiopian forces fighting the Italians at Adowa in 1897. The Ethiopians had prudently purchased modern arms before the campaigns.

century but so desperately maintained by European armies, were employed with great effect against native colonial opposition. In fact, British Army training manuals had separate chapters on “savage warfare” and considerable attention was given to the waging of colonial wars as evidenced by Charles Callwell’s seminal *Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice*, published in 1896.⁵ Nevertheless, advances in military technology were changing the conduct of modern warfare at a very rapid pace whether disguised by or described as “anomalies” or not.

These technologies were to have a devastating effect upon the nature of war and upon the armies that experienced it in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, there was the evolution of infantry small-arms. The smoothbore musket that had been a fixture of European armies since the seventeenth century had made way for rifled muskets in the middle nineteenth century and breech loading rifles by the 1860s.⁶ The efficiency of these weapons was greatly improved by the introduction of metal cartridges, smokeless gunpowder, and insertable multi-bullet magazines. The logical conclusion of these advances in infantry firepower came in the form of the machine gun which more than any other weapon of the time, would leave its mark on the period. Compounding the lethality of these weapons was the development of quick firing artillery and the increasing utilization of trenches and prepared positions by troops on the defensive.

These technological advances profoundly changed the modern battlefield. Gone were the massed but now vulnerable infantry and cavalry formations of the Napoleonic era. The armies of the late Nineteenth Century were forced to adopt more open formations and new tactics leading to a much larger battlefield with smaller units

⁵ A later edition was published in 1899 incorporating the first phase of the South African War.

⁶ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, pp.238-239.

stretched out. Across its varied terrain, problems of communication meant that smaller company-sized units would be isolated from commanding officers thereby placing far more stress on the individual initiative of junior officers than had previously been thought possible or necessary. Problems arose with the mixed reception of these new military technologies, formations, and tactics. This was especially pronounced for the cavalry, the arm of the services which stood to lose much of its tactical relevance in modern warfare. Traditionally, the cavalry had been the dominant force on the battlefield. However, ever since the introduction of the bayonet enabled the infantry the ability to fend off cavalry attacks while still being able to fire volleys, the utility of the cavalry units had become increasingly restricted. This development did not sit well with cavalry officers who, usually coming from the aristocratic class, could not conceive the lowly infantrymen establishing anything close to primacy on the battlefield.

While the importance of modern firepower was acknowledged, its proper application and appreciation of its devastating capabilities would fall prey to men who still looked back to the Napoleonic era for guidance in matters of military theory. It was at this point that the British Army became involved in two major campaigns in Africa - Omdurman and South Africa - which would give the British military leadership some ideal opportunities to experience, first hand, the potential all these technological and tactical changes had in reshaping modern warfare.

The next chapter will deal with the nature of warfare and the experiences of the British Army as encountered during the Omdurman and South African campaigns. Unlike previous colonial wars, these two campaigns were unique and held some crucial portents of how modern warfare might progress. If previous experience with Gatling and

Maxim automatic guns in Africa had not revealed the true destructive potential of these weapons, then the battle of Omdurman in 1898 could not have provided a more convincing demonstration of the machine gun's fearsome capabilities. By the end of the first day of the battle, 11,000 Dervish followers of the Mahdi would be dead along with an additional 16,000 wounded at a cost of 48 killed and 382 wounded for the Anglo-Egyptian Army.⁷

The British soldiers present at the battle were universal in their awe of the fearful carnage caused by their Maxims and also - in characteristic Briton fashion - in the bravery and pluck of their opponents who confronted that suicidal hail of bullets. None of the Dervish warriors came within 300 meters of the British lines.⁸ Ironically, German soldiers in 1916 would echo the same sense of awe at British bravery and pluck in the face of an identical hail of bullets. In 1898/1899 it was inconceivable to the British officers present at these imperial battles that any European troops would be caught in a situation similar to those inflicted upon their "uncivilized" native opposition.

The experiences of the South African War would be taken much more seriously as, for the first time the British were on the receiving end of modern weaponry as the Boers owned up to date Maxim machine guns, Maxim-Nordenfeldt 30mm automatic cannons (Pom Poms), and the latest artillery pieces produced by the Krupp and Cruesot factories. To add to these problems facing the British in South Africa, the Boers proved to be unusually skilled opponents, especially adept when on the defensive. They had an

⁷ Richard Holmes ed. *Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.672.

⁸ John Meredith ed., *Omdurman Diaries 1898: Eyewitness Accounts of the Legendary Campaign* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword books Ltd, 1998), p.186 and Peter Harrington and Frederic A. Scharf eds., *Omdurman 1898: Eyewitnesses Speak. The British Conquest of the Sudan as Described by Participants in Letters, Diaries, Photos, and Drawings* (London: Grennhill Books, 1998), p.127.

intimate knowledge of the countryside and the theatre of operations and exploited this knowledge to maximum effect. The Boers also utilized well prepared and concealed trench positions and possessed inner lines of communication which were further enhanced by the mobility given them by the fact that they were expert horsemen.

A great challenge for the British involved the interpretation of these experiences and how the lessons could be transformed into subsequent training for soldiers' training. To those enlisted ranks and the junior officers who had experienced Boer resourcefulness and skill in defensive warfare first hand this did not pose a major problem. But for the senior commanders, politicians, and correspondents, incorporating such knowledge proved more of a matter of personal priorities and bias. The next fifteen years witnessed an incredible level and variety of debate over the significance and meaning of the experiences of the African campaigns. One thing that was certain was that the British Army had learned some valuable, if costly, lessons from their Boer opponents and would be able to put them to good use in 1914.

The third chapter examines the initial reactions to all that had transpired during the Boer War and Omdurman. These reactions fell in one of two general groupings which can be traced chronologically too. First, there was the period from 1899 to 1904 in which the South African experiences still lingered in the minds of participants and observers alike. The second period from 1904 and onwards - after the Russo-Japanese War - was characterized by an increasing failure to retain many of the lessons these earlier imperial experiences offered. Such tendencies were accompanied by a selective memory of those officers who wished to concentrate upon specific issues to suit their own personal and service agendas. The one lesson that was retained throughout both

these periods was the acknowledgement of the lethality of modern firepower. The differences of opinion emerged with the various interpretations of how firepower might affect the tactics used on the modern battlefield.

The priorities and biases of the observer helped shape these interpretations to a large degree. Some such as R.F.S Baden-Powell,⁹ Charles Callwell, Col. B.F.R. Henderson, and Major Ian Hamilton were more willing to accept the practical lessons that the African campaigns and earlier campaigns had to offer and incorporated them in new tactics that were more relevant on the battlefields of the Twentieth Century. Others, notably Leo Amery, Captain William Cairnes, and Lord R.S.S. Baden-Powell, looked at the situation through a larger lens focusing on strategic considerations. Their concerns included the ability of the Empire to defend itself and this brought the British Army under intense criticism for the leadership qualities and training of officers and the caliber of new recruits. More importantly, they perceived a moral and social decay within the British population that threatened to bring down the whole edifice of the British Empire. Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys. A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship* was perhaps the epitome of this rationale.

Others saw in the South African campaign a vindication of their views that modern technology has made the conduct of wars so prohibitive in the cost of lives that war might prove morally and physically impossible to fight. The Polish banker Jean de Bloch was one of the leading voices in this respect. His six volume *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations* was published in 1899 before the Boer War had effectively demonstrated just what modern weaponry and tactics could actually do on the battlefield. In it, Bloch predicted that advantage given the defensive by modern

⁹ Brother of the more well known Lord R.S.S. Baden-Powell of scouting fame.

military technology would be so overpowering as to make any sort of offensive action extremely costly, almost to the point that war would be virtually impossible to justify. Instead, wars would become long stalemates having more in common with siege operations rather than any maneuver. The resulting carnage would prove pyrrhic for the victors and thoroughly devastating for the defeated armies.

The majority of the British Officer Corps saw things differently. They deflected criticisms of their training and competence onto the enlisted ranks. The traditional background of their (the officers') profession, many of whom were from the cavalry which happened to be the military arm most threatened by advances in military technology, would not permit these men to accept the possibility of any shortcomings in their training or competence as officers. Instead, they tended to pass blame for any tactical shortcomings on the faulty education and poor class of recruits among the lower ranks. The initiative of the enlisted ranks was also criticized and by 1905 many British officers used the supposedly superior martial qualities of the average Japanese soldier as proof of their views about British recruits.¹⁰

There was also a plethora of foreign criticism which served mainly to confirm to German, Austrian and French observers (among others) that continental armies possessed superior training and skills to the British forces. For a generation the Germans concluded that British Army's training of officers, enlisted men, and arms were unrealistic and outdated, that the British utilized tactics that the Germans had long discarded. It was felt that the British had become too accustomed to fighting "savages" in their numerous

¹⁰ Keith Neilson, "'That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise': British Military Thinking and the Russo-Japanese War," In *War and Society. A Yearbook of Military History* Brian Bond and Ian Roy eds, (Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1975), p.24.

colonial campaigns and once they had encountered opposition like the Boers who were armed similarly to European standards, the British were rudely surprised.

While the effectiveness of the machine gun and the failings of the British artillery arm were more or less acknowledged, the surprise observation had been cavalry's inability to come close to fulfilling its traditional battlefield roles and the new found utility of mounted infantry. This revelation sparked off heated debate over a host of related issues. Critics and military thinkers settled into years of arguing over the relevance of the cavalry arm, new battlefield duties, armament, or whether the mounted infantry was more capable. Field Marshal Frederick Roberts was able to temporarily settle the matter on a temporary basis by retiring the lance as primary cavalry armament in favour of the rifle, but that solution pertained so as long as Roberts remained in the High Command. His resignation in 1904 rekindled the cavalry debate which would not be satisfactorily resolved until after the Great War's outbreak.

There existed an ideal opportunity in the immediate years following the Boer War, for the British, capitalizing on their experiences in Africa, to implement much needed Army reform which had the potential to transform the British Army into Europe's foremost military establishment. But before that transformation could be realized, there were still the myriad interpretations of these experiences to examine and evaluate. The divisions and cliques within the British Army Officer Corps proved a major hindrance with a resurgent cavalry clique under Douglas Haig and Sir John French eventually making any comprehensive reform of the British Army an extremely difficult, if not impossible, undertaking.

The fourth chapter will concentrate upon the mindset of those who opposed reform and were responsible for the misinterpretation of the British Army's recent African experiences. Given the existing evidence revealing how advances in military technology had profoundly affected the nature of the battlefield, radically changed the traditional roles of the various military arms, begging a revision of tactics and training in order to cope with these new advances, the decision of the British High Command to ignore most of them was very puzzling. When the social, educational, and professional background of these individuals is examined, a greater understanding of their thinking and actions is possible.

At the heart of this chapter and indeed, the entire thesis is the application of Martin J. Wiener's interpretations on social degeneration and stagnation which are drawn from his contentious and highly acclaimed *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*.¹¹ Wiener identifies an English "ambivalence" and hostility to industrialism in modern English society, especially amongst the upper classes which found expression in English literature and popular culture as well as economic, social, and historical thinking. Wiener traces the development in Britain of a long and drawn out clash between "progress and nostalgia" or between "industrialism" and the Victorian ideal of the individual. Since at least the fifteenth century, the British elites had been struggling to reconcile a perceived decline in their importance and relevance in the British social hierarchy. The emergence in the eighteenth century of a middle class, industrialists, the rise of a working class and socialism all threatened in the eyes of the elites, to transform this social hierarchy beyond recognition.

¹¹ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

The de-humanizing nature of the international revolution and industrialism further enhanced their anxiety over the ills that spreading throughout the Empire. One visible manifestation of this process was the machine gun with its production line-like killing ability to scythe down men in rows before they might even have a chance to come to grips with their foe. Warfare in the twentieth century was threatening to become a contest of numbers, resources, and production capacity with attrition becoming not only the most efficacious strategy but perhaps the only one. The machine gun paid no heed to status, class, honour and reputation and as such its “egalitarian” abilities to kill undermined a military mentality based upon rank and privilege. With these developments came the realization that all the romantic and heroic qualities of warfare (if they actually existed in the first place) that the Victorian/Edwardian British elites held so dearly were being swept away by circumstances beyond their control. Rather than adaptation, the elites followed the path of denial and reaction.

The social and educational background of the senior British officers made them admirably suited as instruments of reaction against the forces of progress as they embodied the ideals of Victorian manhood. The majority had spent their youth in a public school system which emphasized privilege, athleticism, fair play and good form, and a sense of duty to empire over actual academic ability. Most officers, especially the very senior ones - Major Generals and above - originated from the privileged classes (24% from the aristocracy and 40% from the gentry).¹² Many of them embraced concepts of traditional social hierarchy and for many, Social Darwinism, an ideology which was applied in a variety of contexts. To complete this portrait, these men were officers in a British Army, which like other European armies, was suspicious, if not

¹²John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p.48.

overtly hostile to most elements of change. Moreover, they were primarily officers in the cavalry, the one arm of the military whose identity was under the greatest threat from modern military technology.

Complementing the character and motives of the British High Command was a larger encompassing anxiety over the moral and physical well being of the British Empire existing in all strata of British society. By the mid-nineteenth century, more Britons had come to perceive that Britain was in a general state of moral and physical decline that imperiled the entire empire. This anxiety found its greatest articulation in 1908 when Lord Baden-Powell published *Scouting for Boys. A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*. In its pages Baden-Powell outlined what he concluded were the ills afflicting the greatest empire on the planet. Baden-Powell utilized many parallels to the decline of the Roman Empire to illustrate the perils facing the British Empire. The general theme in *Scouting for Boys* was a decline in the manhood and citizenship of the empire which could be solved by instructing Britain's young males in how to become good citizens, and, soldiers of the British Empire.

Chapter Four concludes with the British Army's generals seeming lack of awareness of the factors inducing them to react so strongly against almost every initiative aimed at reform or from recognizing the harsh realities of modern warfare ushered in by recent technological advances. To these men, it did not matter. Common sense and progress became the voices or manifestations of the lower and working classes, socialism, and whatever else that threatened tradition and the established order of society. For this seemingly lost world/paradise lost, the British ruling elite was willing to sacrifice the lives of millions.

The final chapter covers the period of reaction to the experiences of the African campaigns when the voices of wisdom started diminishing and those of selective memory began to take greater significance. From 1904/1905 to 1914, there were forces at work facilitating this reverse which commenced with Field Marshal F. Roberts's resignation as Commander-in-Chief of the Army in 1904. Roberts, who had been the primary force behind the successful conclusion of the South African War, also provided the main impetus to Army reform following the war in 1902. Although Roberts came from aristocracy and was the product of Eton and Sandhurst, he endorsed a great number of efforts aimed at army reform. Unfortunately, Roberts was a small minority voice and his resignation removed the only senior support for reform, thus opening the door wider for cavalry generals such as Douglas Haig and Sir John French to reverse all of Robert's work.

The erroneous conclusions taken from official observations of the Russian and Japanese armies during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/1905 served to speed up the reversal process. If there was any doubt over the lessons of the African campaign of 1898 to 1902, the Russo-Japanese conflict definitely put these to rest. Only a person in the clutches of utter denial could refute the awesome destructive power of the machine gun and the effectiveness of complex trench works in strengthening the defense but deny they did. This denial is evidenced in the changes made to the Army training manuals which in 1902 and 1905 reflected the experiences of the Boer War. By 1909, the same manuals began to revert back to outdated tactics that might have been more at home in the 1896 editions.

These tactical reversals were not only a British phenomenon. Indeed, the same movements were also transpiring in the major powers on the continent. Like minded cliques of senior officers had embraced what has been termed “The Cult of the Offensive,” a trend of military thought espousing the aggressive application of the principles of the attack concentrating on morale or *élan* to carry through massed frontal assaults with little regard to one’s own losses. Inspired by the Prussian victories of 1866 and 1870/71 and vindicated by the success of the costly Japanese frontal assaults in Manchuria during 1904 and 1905, the cult did not take long to attract a large number of followers though its appeal was by no means universal. According to proponents of the offensive, troops endowed with enough morale and spirit would prevail over any defensive position no matter how well prepared or armed. The military establishments of Germany and France, in particular, fell under the influence of this thinking. Germany’s ambitious Schlieffen plan was predicated on aggressive offensive action while in France, such outspoken adherents of the cult as Generals Ferdinand Foch and Jacques Joffre dominated French military thinking leading right up to the First World War.

As allies of the French, Britain was bound to feel the influence of current French military doctrine. Under the control of Haig and French, infantry training took on elements of continental thinking with a healthy emphasis put on the use of the bayonet rather than attaining fire superiority. The cavalry once again adopted more obsolescent tactics and the lance was brought back in emulation of the German uhlans.¹³ The British Army would still differ from its continental counterparts in some crucial aspects such as importance placed on musketry training, an increased appreciation of the value of

¹³ Uhlans were German lance equipped cavalry that had been experiencing a revival in the latter half of the nineteenth century with no small thanks to prevailing doctrine of the “Cult of the Offensive.”

entrenching, and the utilization of more open formations. Fortunately, the move to roll back reform in the British Army was not totally comprehensive. The power of modern weaponry was still recognized and much focus was applied to musketry training (even for the cavalry) while the British infantry also became very skilled in entrenching and field craft. These reforms owed much to the fact that there were enough veterans of the recent African campaigns still present in the lower ranks to ensure that the hard lessons learned in Africa were retained. 1914 thus found the British Army the best trained in Europe as it had profited greatly from its African experience. Yet these benefits were compromised by the fact that the High Command was, with one or two exceptions¹⁴, populated by generals who represented the traditional and reactionary element opposed to reform. Nevertheless, there could be no denying that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 1914 was the finest contingent Britain had ever sent overseas. The heavy losses incurred by the BEF in 1914/1915 and the dismissal of its most competent general Horace Smith-Dorrien in 1915 had serious implications for the fate of the new divisions that would take the BEF's place in the front line in late 1915 and early 1916. It would not be till 1918 that the British Army once again approached the level of professionalism it had possessed prior to the First World War.

¹⁴ General Horace Smith-Dorrien being perhaps the only British general to truly appreciate the value of the machine gun and to an extent, Lord Kitchener who was conspicuously solitary in his conviction that the First World War would go quite a ways beyond Christmas and proceeded to plan accordingly laying the foundation for the creation of a mass army referred to as either "The New Army" or "Kitchener's Army".

1) The Modern Battlefield

“Hang your chemistry and electricity! If you want to make a pile of money, invent something that will enable these Europeans to cut each others’ throats with greater facility.”

[A fellow American businessman to Hiram Maxim, inventor of the machine gun]¹

On the eve of the Twentieth Century, the nature of war had changed considerably since Napoleon’s campaigns of the early 1800s. Advances in not only in weapons technology, and field-craft, but also in the organization and administration of mass conscripted armies all combined to reveal a radical transformation which, even as late as the 1880s, few Europeans could truly assimilate. Indeed, this lack of recognition would prove a major hindrance to truly understanding the potential implications of these changes that lasted right up to the outbreak of the First World War and beyond as the new technological and administrative advances sparked a protracted series of debates regarding their effectiveness and possible employment. Some were able to see what was happening. In a series of letters to the *Volunteer Journal for Lancashire and Cheshire* in 1862, Freiderich Engels, in describing the American Civil War spoke of a “war without precedent” where a series of marches and counter-marches by largely volunteer armies which only laid waste to the terrain with no appreciable hope of any decision. In this new kind of war, “even a victory would be of no use at all.”²

The significant changes in weapons technology manifested themselves in three ways; the rifle, the machine gun, and in artillery. At the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the standard infantry firearm was the old smoothbore, muzzle-loading flintlock

¹John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p.134.

²Friederich Engels, *Engels as Military Critic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959), p.109.

musket of the Napoleonic era (1795-1815). The musket had an effective range of around 100 yards (some argue it was considerably less than that).³ Muskets with rifled bores were used during this period but they were too difficult and slow to load, lessening their battlefield utility.⁴ The muskets were eventually replaced during the 1840s and 1850s by rifled versions notably the Springfield employed during the American Civil War or the British Army's Enfield, with effective ranges of up to 500 yards.⁵ But to load a musket or rifle was a time consuming and laborious task. A soldier had to bite the end of the cartridge off, pour the gunpowder down the barrel, then insert the bullet using a ramrod. Next, a percussion cap was placed in the firing mechanism and finally the weapon was ready to be discharged.⁶

In 1866 the Prussian Army introduced the Dreyse needle gun which, unlike muzzle loading muskets, featured a breech-loading mechanism. Breech-loading greatly simplified the loading process leading to an important doubling of the rate of fire.⁷ The loading process was further aided by the introduction of the fixed metal cartridge in 1866/67 which inserted the bullet, powder, and cap together. Another benefit was that the firer could load while lying in a prone position, enabling better protection through cover and concealment. The other European powers were not far behind; the French Chassepot (1866) and the British Snider/Enfield (1868) and eventually the Martini-Henry (1874) which became the standard British rifle until the mid/late 1880s emerged.⁸

³ Daniel R. Headrick, "The Tools of Imperialism: Technology and Expansion of European Colonial Empires in the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 Technology and War. (June, 1979), p.249.

⁴ Headrick, "Tools of Imperialism," p.249.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.250.

⁶ Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London: Hyman, 1983), p.112.

⁷ Strachan, *European Armies*, p.113.

⁸ Edward M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.239.

The size of the rounds fired from rifles also had been steadily decreasing. Because a smaller caliber bullet encountered less air resistance, its projectile had a longer range and a flatter trajectory. Larger musket balls could inflict frightful injuries but they lost penetration and hitting power over longer ranges. The Harder metal and cylindro-conoidal shape of the newer bullets enabled greater accuracy, penetration, and hitting power over longer ranges.⁹ Eventually, bullet size decreased from the .577 inch caliber of the Enfield, to the .43 inch of the Chassepot, down to .303 of the Lee-Enfield of the late 1890s.¹⁰ The smaller caliber of bullets allowed the infantryman to carry a much greater number of bullets.

The next development was the magazine, or clip fed rifles such as the German 1892/3 model Mauser (Five round clips) and the British Lee-Metfords (1888) and Lee-Enfields (1895) (Ten round magazines). As opposed to a soldier of the early Nineteenth Century who probably averaged two shots a minute on his musket, a soldier of the last decade of the century was able to loose off fifteen to thirty rounds in a minute depending on training and the model of rifle in use.¹¹

Previously, the expenditure of an excessive amount of ammunition resulted in the accumulation of a cloud of smoke that would not only obscure the target but would also reveal the location of the firer. The introduction of smokeless gunpowder (cordite) by Alfred Nobel in 1892¹² enabled modern infantrymen to maintain a concentrated fire upon still visible targets while having an excellent chance of keeping their own positions concealed. In addition, an attacking force no longer was aided by great clouds of smoke

⁹ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p.239.

¹⁰ Strachan, *European Armies*, p.113.

¹¹ Headrick, "Tools of Imperialism," p.256.

¹² Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p.240.

from their own lines obscuring an advance which would have to be conducted across a greater distance, swept by more accurate gunfire. Cordite was also more powerful than gunpowder, further increasing the range of the rifle. In the face of the increased firepower available to infantry units, offensive action offered very little chance of success. As early as 1864 during the American Civil War, at the battle of Cold Harbor, Union soldiers, so sure about the futility of their impending assault, pinned pieces of paper with their names on their backs so that their bodies could be identified after the battle.¹³

If the increased effectiveness of rifle fire was not enough, the development of the machine gun - notably the Maxim - by the 1890s imparted a far greater lethality to the modern battlefield due to extreme rates of fire over quite considerable ranges. The early developers were for the most part, American (Gatling, Lewis, Browning, and Maxim), Sir Garnet Wolsely, Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, actually telling Hiram Maxim, "You Yankees beat all creation. There seems to be no limit to what you are able to do."¹⁴ The first working examples like the Gatling, the Gardner, and the Nordenfeldt were all hand-cranked and had a rate of fire of however fast the operator could turn the handle.¹⁵ Many were put into service by the British in their colonial campaigns in Africa where they very much impressed Lord Chelmsford (of Zulu war fame) and Sir Garnet Wolsely¹⁶

Nevertheless, acceptance of the machine gun and the strategic/tactical opportunities it developed in the battlefield was not immediate. The early models were

¹³ Gerald F. Lindeman, *Embattled Courage. The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), p.161.

¹⁴ Ellis, *Social History of the Machine Gun*, p.21.

¹⁵ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p.244.

¹⁶ Ellis, *Social History of the Machine Gun*, p.21.

saddled with a reputation for frequently breaking down due to the delicacy of their mechanisms. At inopportune moments ie; when repelling mass charges, the tendency to malfunction could lead to “unfortunate results” as had happened at the battles of Ulundi, Dogali, Abu Klea, and Tofrek.¹⁷ The weight of these weapons was also considered a liability in battle, especially within the confines of dense tropical jungle or rugged mountainous terrain.¹⁸ In addition, the gun carriages restricted the arc of fire, further reducing their effectiveness.

The first automatic machine gun was invented by American Hiram Maxim in 1884.¹⁹ Using the force of the recoil to operate the ejection, loading, and firing mechanisms, the Maxim represented a definite leap in automatic weapons technology. Unlike the Gatling, the Gardner, or the Nordenfeldt, the Maxim was quite portable weighing in at around forty pounds.²⁰ Possessing a rate of fire at least 600 rounds per minute,²¹ the Maxim proved more reliable than the Gatling which increased its value as a battlefield weapon. Though the Maxim’s true potential had as yet to be realized, by 1899, its killing power had already been more than amply demonstrated in African campaigns such as that in Matabele (in what later became Rhodesia), and most notably at the battle of Omdurman in 1898. There, Kitchener, with 20,000 troops shattered the

¹⁷ Charles Callwell, *Small Wars, their Principles and Practice* (London: HMSO, 1899), p.440. In all these battles, the Gatling gun or maxims at one point jammed resulting in moments of acute anxiety for the Europeans while the issue(s) were still in doubt.

¹⁸ Callwell, *Small Wars*, p.440.

¹⁹ Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, p.33.

²⁰ John Meredith ed., *Omdurman Diaries 1898: Eyewitness Accounts of the Legendary Campaign* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 1998), p.2.

²¹ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p.245.

Mahdi's army of over 50,000, killing 11,000 and wounding another 16,000; British losses were 48 dead and 382 wounded.²²

When properly used with interlocking and pre-sighted lines of fire, the machine gun could sweep an attacking force with a hail of bullets so thick that even the most determined assault become near impossible. The major obstacles to the effective employment or embracement of the machine guns into the armies of Europe were the ongoing debates over to which branch of the military - Infantry, Cavalry, or Artillery - the weapon should be assigned to, and how it was to be best utilized. During these debates, no one branch appears to have pursued the requisition of the machine gun with much conviction. These debates will be covered to a greater extent in future chapters.

The development of quick-firing artillery further changed the nature of the modern battlefield. By the late 1860s the British Army had adopted rifled breech loading guns.²³ As with the machine guns, the acceptance of breech loading artillery pieces was limited as a host of alternatives were considered. Rifled muzzle loading guns remained the dominant form of artillery into the 1880s. Following the example of the German and French armed forces, the British finally put their faith in breech-loading artillery in 1885.²⁴ The advantages were significant; the rate of fire was substantially increased, the crew was less exposed as the guns could be positioned well out of effective rifle range, accidents were less frequent, there was less strain on the gun, and manufacturing was easier.²⁵ With the adoption of new propellants for artillery rounds like cordite and lyddite, the range of artillery was greatly increased from 1000-1200 yards in the

²² Richard Holmes ed. *Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.672.

²³ Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army*, p.241.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.242.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.244.

Napoleonic era to 5,000-10,000 yards by the 1890s. With the increasing appearance of trenches on the battlefield, indirect fire from howitzers became ever more necessary as flat trajectory direct fire had little effect.

Modern warfare was not all about changes in offensive weaponry. Fortifications and trenches had become a major characteristic of the battlefield by the mid-Nineteenth Century. Fieldworks/fortifications had always been a part of warfare by they really started to come into their own during the American Civil War. The sieges of Vicksburg (1863), the battle of Cold Harbor (1864), and especially the siege of Petersburg (1864-65) highlighted the effectiveness of sometimes very intricate series trench-works utilized in defensive operations. Trenches were dug seven to nine feet or deeper, possessed firing parapets and were reinforced with gabions (large wicker baskets filled with earth) and sandbags. Abattis, chevaux-de-frises,²⁶ and barbed wire were employed in order to hinder the enemy's advance and to channel attacking troops into more exposed fields of defensive fire. In this way, a considerably outnumbered Confederate army was able to fend off the much larger Union Army of the Potomac at Petersburg for the better part of a year. For those inclined to denigrate the North American examples for their frontier, or colonial nature, the British experience at Sevastopol during the Crimean Campaign (1854-55), and the Russian experience at Plevna (1877) demonstrated the time, material, and manpower it would take to deal effectively with a well dug in defender.²⁷ Next to the rifle, the shovel was gradually becoming the infantryman's most essential piece of equipment.

²⁶ Abattis was a barrier of felled trees with sharpened edges pointed towards the enemy while chevaux-de-frises were a series of interlocked pointed stakes.

²⁷ These two long drawn out siege operations were characterized by brutal trench warfare which effectively demonstrated the prohibitive cost involved in assaulting prepared positions.

Another development that aided the survivability of the late Nineteenth Century infantry was the change in the colour of uniforms from the more colourful reds, blues, and whites of the mid century, to more drab and earthy tones like khaki (British), or grey (or feld grau, German). The British Commanders in India during the 1850s sought to cloth their soldiers in a lighter, looser fitting, linen khaki drill uniform. Besides facilitating ease of movement and being more comfortable to wear, the new uniform also rendered the wearer more difficult to distinguish on the battlefield.²⁸ Because of their many colonial wars in varied regions, the British were the first to adopt camouflage uniforms but the rest of the continent, except France remained (for reasons of élan) attached to blue coats and the (in)famous “pantalons rouges”, were not long in following Britain’s lead.

The tactics endorsed during this period reflected the recent technological improvements yet, strived to retain many traditional aspects as Napoleonic ideals of movement continued to hold great importance in the minds of many theorists. The dominating influence of firepower was recognized or acknowledged in the doctrine of seeking the “decisive engagement” and winning the all-crucial battle of fire superiority and breaching the enemy lines as the major keys to victory on the battlefield.²⁹ Unfortunately, this establishing of fire superiority, though considered essential, was superseded by the even more important goal of enabling the infantry to carry out the final assault with the bayonet.³⁰

²⁸ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, pp.296-297.

²⁹ G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War. A Collection of Essays and Lectures, 1892-1903* Neil Malcolm ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1905), p.341.

³⁰ Some, like the Russian General Mikhail Dragomirov (1830-1905) who had a fair measure of influence on later French theorists like Foch, attached more importance to the man rather than firepower and that massed troops properly inspired, were of far more use on the modern battlefield. “It is not those who know

This line of thinking had led to a rather unrealistic dichotomy in late 19th Century tactics. On one hand, extended firing lines and open skirmishing formations were emphasized and endorsed. Cover and concealment were to be sought, especially when on the defensive. This approach reflected the reactions to recent experiences and observations of the American Civil War (1861-65), the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), or the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), conflicts which all had demonstrated the effectiveness of trench warfare and modern firepower, and then would find its greatest expression in the tactics utilized by the Boers in the last two decades of the Nineteenth Century.

On the other hand, artillery influenced by such works as Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen's *Letters on Artillery* of 1887 was to advance up to distances from their targets perilously within rifle ranges (1000-2000 yards) in order to establish superiority while the infantry advanced in dense columns with fixed bayonets to conclude the matter with their final bayonet charges.³¹ The Prussian victories of 1870/1871, at least on the surface, bore out the validity of these tactics. Prussia's staggering losses - 10,500 dead and wounded at the Battle of Woerth, 16,000 at Mars La Tour, and 20,163 killed, wounded and missing at Gravelotte-St Privat -³² during these battles should have amply demonstrated the defects of contemporary offensive thinking. Instead, they were marginalized with more focus being given to the merits of the superior training and offensive spirit of the Prussian Army. The French Army, equally offensive minded,

how to kill but those who know how to be killed that serves us in a crisis." Joseph C. Arnold, "French Tactical Doctrine 1870-1914," *Military Affairs* 48, no.2 (April, 1978), p.62.

³¹ Spiers, *Late Vivtorian Army*, p.253.

³² Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp.116, 161, and 181.

suffered correspondingly heavy losses during the conflict and found itself criticized for its outmoded strategies and tactics; France, after all had lost the war.

The nature of modern warfare made an impact in other very crucial ways, notably in communications, supply, and leadership. There were two levels of influence; local and strategic. Communications on a small unit level - company, battalion, regiment - became very difficult as new formations left the units spread out over a wider area of coverage than in previous decades. Generals found it increasingly challenging to keep in contact with their men while the junior officers were hard put to attempt any sort of coordinated actions or make decisions in lieu of the presence of senior commanders. In addition, there was often a lack of officers due to the fact that they tended to stand out more on the battlefield with their distinctive features (hats, badges, swords, fancier uniforms etc...) and became obvious targets as a result. Rank did have its privileges.

The methods of battlefield communication available had not kept up with the advances in weapons technology during the latter half of the Nineteenth Century. Wireless telegraph was too cumbersome to employ in the front lines. The introduction of the heliograph, a device utilizing mirrors reflecting sunlight to communicate through Morse code, was portable enough but it too had drawbacks. First, the reliance on sunlight made the heliograph useful only during the day. Second, a clear line of sight was necessary to properly send a message on the heliograph. Obtaining this line of sight, more often than not, meant that the user was required to stand outside of any cover in an exposed position vulnerable to enemy rifle and shrapnel fire. This is exactly what transpired at the battle of Spion Kop (Jan. 24/25, 1900) when the beleaguered British troops on top of the Kop were unable to send any messages detailing their situation by

heliograph as any attempt to do so courted a Boer's Mauser bullet in the head.³³ The only other option of communication was by a runner. This method was clearly inadequate by the 1890s as the messenger was exposed to hostile fire or often became lost (as also happened to the British at Spion Kop). Had the commander of the British troops on Spion Kop been able to communicate with his superiors, a military disaster might have turned out to be a very costly but spectacular British victory.³⁴

A major but often overlooked area of change was the organization of later Nineteenth Century armies. The Napoleonic campaigns had introduced the concept of mass conscript armies which completely dwarfed the small forces employed in the previous century. The size of armies had increased from an average of 40-50,000 at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century to around 100-500,000 by 1812-15.³⁵ The problem was that it was next to impossible to maintain effective control of such large formations with the existing command structure which usually consisted of the Commander-in-Chief and a small group of staff officers. The weaknesses of such a system were dramatically exposed at the battle of Leipzig in 1813 where events outside of Napoleon's control decided the fate of the battle, and ultimately, his Empire.

These lessons were not lost on the Prussians who, after the disastrous defeats of Jena and Auerstadt at the hands of Napoleon in 1806, took the opportunity to completely re-structure their army. A result of this re-structuring was that Prussia became the first power on the continent to develop an efficient command structure most notably the

³³ Oliver Ransford, *The Battle of Spion Kop* (London: The Camelot Press, 1969), p.85.

³⁴ Ransford, *The Battle of Spion Kop*, p.104.

³⁵ For example, French and Austrian army strengths at the Battle of Marengo (1800) were 23,000 and 34,000 respectively. Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory. Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Delaware: Scholarly resources Inc., 1987), p.67. At Leipzig in 1813, the French Army, numbering 195,000, fought the combined Russian, Austrian, Prussian Armies totalling 375,000. Francis Loraine Petre, *Napoleon's Last campaign in Germany 1813* (NewYork: John Lane, 1912), pp.328-329.

creation of a proper General Staff under the guidance of General August von Gneiseneau, and a staff college designed to train officers for staff service. The General Staff would enable the modern commander to ensure that all elements of an army's organization were taken care of. This included the supplying of large formations, in peace time and in the field, the training and supplying of these formations, the creation of an adequate medical staff, and transportation and communications elements.

The efficiency of the Prussian General Staff, which reached its zenith under the auspices of General Helmuth von Moltke, was perhaps the major factor contributing to the success of Prussia's wars against the Austrians (1866) and the French (1870-71).³⁶ By the end of the century, virtually every continental power had developed their own general staffs, revamping the administration of their respective armed forces (which by this time, numbered close to one million in size each).³⁷ Great Britain was the one notable exception, despite various individual efforts to initiate reform.³⁸

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, these developments in weapons technology, defensive tactics, and the increase in efficiency of an army's high command structure and organization had thoroughly transformed the manner in which wars were to be fought. Due to the increased range and effectiveness of modern weaponry, troops had to deploy at a far greater range from their objectives, limiting their mobility. The advances in weapons technology benefited the defensive in particular. Attacking soldiers would have to cover an extended distance across an increasingly lethal battle-zone swept by rifle,

³⁶ Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, p.127.

³⁷ Jean de Bloch, *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1972, originally published in London, 1899), p.63.

³⁸ Edward M. Spiers, *Army and Society 1815-1914* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1980), p.222. The thirty-nine year tenure of Queen Victoria's son the Duke of Cambridge as Commander-in-Chief had a large part in this. The Duke had acquired a substantial amount of personal power which hindered many efforts aimed at reform, including the formation of a general staff.

machine gun, and high explosive and shrapnel fire from the artillery, win the decisive engagement of fire superiority, and then press home an attack against a foe most likely to be protected by a series of formidable entrenchments.

All these advances in weaponry and tactics would mean very little if they were not backed by the organizational benefits of a skilled general staff. Training, supply, efficient transportation, and communications were increasingly viewed as constituting the determining factors in the successful conclusion of modern warfare. A popular example was the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871). In this case, the French possessed better weapons - the Chassepot rifle and the Mitraleuse - while the Prussians used inferior or outdated tactics leading to terrible casualties inflicted on their armies. The superior general staff work and organization of Prussia's forces enabled the strategic outmaneuvering of Napoleon III's armies and France's eventual surrender in 1871. The main problem was that so few generals or politicians who were witness to these events drew the proper or practical lessons from them. Military minds still looked too frequently to the experiences of the Napoleonic wars as a source of inspiration while marginalizing the effects of recent developments. Although increased firepower of modern weapons were tacitly acknowledged, the principles of the offensive, rapid movement, *elan* and the decisive charge with bayonet, or the *Armée à la Française* still held the fascination of senior military minds right up to the First World War.

2) The Nature of the African/South African Theatre of Operations

“Brave men they are - most certainly! But very misguided.”

[Lt. Angus McNeil of the Seaforth Highlanders when describing the courage of the Dervishes at Omdurman, September 2, 1898.¹

“You don’t know what it means shooting at a Boer; he is behind a rock and all you ever see is his rifle sticking out”

[2nd Lieutenant C.E. Kinahan, Royal Irish Fusiliers, December 28, 1899]²

To many contemporary observers, the experiences of the 1880s and from 1898-1902 were seen as anomalous - they were, after all, only colonial conflicts - and in no real way, indicative of what “real” war on European soil would be like. Several factors combined to make the experience a unique one but there were numerous factors that indicated/suggested what a future war on the European continent might entail. When one compares diary excerpts of soldiers from the Sudan/South African campaigns with those from the First World War, there is very little to differentiate the experiences they encountered. For Tommy Atkins, the Omdurman campaign and especially the Boer War held experiences of trench/blockhouse warfare, long periods of inactivity punctuated by brief but potentially very lethal outbursts of action, experiences very similar to those endured by the Tommy in France and Belgium from 1914 to 1918.

The Omdurman campaign in the Sudan was precipitated by the Italian military disaster at Adowa at the hands of the Ethiopians in 1896, and increasing French interest in control of the upper reaches of the Nile which had culminated in the Fashoda incident

¹Peter Harrington and Frederic Scharf eds., *Omdurman 1898: The Eyewitnesses Speak. The British Conquest of the Sudan as Described by Participants in Letters, Diaries, Photos, and Drawings* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998), p.144.

²Gary Owens, “‘Dear Mother it’s a Terrible Life’; Irish Soldiers’ Letters From the Boer War’ *Irish Sword* 21 (1998), p.179.

of late 1898.³ The British Commander-in-Chief (or Sirdar) in Egypt, General Horatio Herbert Kitchener, felt it time to re-assert British influence up the Nile before the implications of the aforementioned events made the British position in that region altogether untenable. In 1897 the campaign began in earnest.⁴ The campaign and its climactic battle at Omdurman provided the British Army with its first significant indication of the efficiency and lethality of modern weaponry. Although modern weaponry's killing power had been demonstrated before Omdurman, the sheer scale of the casualties inflicted on the Dervish forces should have been enough to show once and for all that past notions of conducting war needed drastic re-thinking in the face of modern technology particularly because of the institutionalized killing capacity of the machine gun. Perhaps the principal reason why the lessons to be learned at Omdurman did not particularly resonate in the minds of the British High Command was that British forces had not been on the receiving end of the advanced technology. In 1878 Sir Garnet Wolsely had reasoned that as long as the Army had suffered no serious setbacks during the 19th Century, the chances of any meaningful reform or retention of new practical ideas concerning warfare were negligible to say the least.⁵ Indeed, the primary obstacles to British success in 1898 were not so much the Khalifa's army but rather the "harsh climatic conditions and the inhospitable terrain"⁶ of Sudan's desert regions and the near legendary "parsimonious" nature of the High Command which insisted that the campaign be fought on an extremely tight budget.

³ Fashoda was a town in what is now Southern Sudan. In 1898, after the battle of Omdurman, Kitchener led a flotilla up the Nile to head off a French expedition under orders to claim the area around Fashoda as a French protectorate. The ensuing stalemate which nearly brought Britain and France to war ended up in a diplomatic victory for Britain and was the last serious colonial dispute between the two nations.

⁴ John Meredith, *Omdurman Diaries 1898. Eyewitness Accounts of the Legendary Campaign* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 1998), p.4.

⁵ Edward Spiers, *Army and Society 1815-1914* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1980), p.2.

⁶ Meredith, *Omdurman Diaries*, p.2.

In terms of the climate and terrain, the Sudan promised such a degree of difficulties that the British waited for almost 13 years after the death of Major-General Charles Gordon (1885) at Khartoum and intervention in the area was an absolute necessity before they committed forces there. The extreme heat and dearth of sources of drinking water were major problems as was the often featureless terrain in which troops could easily become lost. Lines of communication kept open only with considerable difficulty. In his diary, Captain Alfred Hubbard of the Lincolnshire Regiment states the two most terrifying things encountered as the “sun and the dust.”⁷ Accounts of the campaign are liberally strewn with remarks and complaints about the virtual inability to escape the oppressive sun (including deaths from sunstroke)⁸ and problems finding adequate drinking water other than from the Nile, a very dubious source.

The British Government’s reluctance to spend money on a war fought over a desert was manifested in its choice of Kitchener, a commander known for his financial stringency as much as military ability.⁹ Many of the soldiers’ complaints can be seen in Captain FitzGibbon Cox’s list of “Failures Noticed on Campaign”, among them; “allocation of ammunition, disgraceful state of boots, field service dressings when opened, found to be rotten, cutting tools rotten, and faulty water bottles.”¹⁰ In addition, 3 million rounds of Lee-Metford rifle ammunition, a round with insufficient stopping power, were issued. Rather than replace the obsolescent rounds with new ones, Kitchener and William F. Gatacre (British Divisional Commander) had their men file the

⁷ Harrington & Scharf, *Omdurman 1898*, p.58.

⁸ Meredith, *Omdurman Diaries*, p.189.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.191-192.

tips down so as to fashion make-shift dum-dum, or expanding bullets.¹¹ Cox points out that after filing, the bullets will not fit into the magazines but “GOC says he doesn’t care...Don’t know that I agree with him.”¹² Not every participant felt such dissatisfaction with the manner in which the Sudan expedition was carried out. *The Daily Graphic* correspondent William Theobald Maude applauded the preparation of the Sudan expedition,¹³ while Captain Hubbard stated that “I do not suppose that a better organized campaign has been known in the history of warfare-Everything was carefully thought out and every plan laid with the greatest prudence and forethought.”¹⁴

Difficulties of campaigning in the Sudan aside, an examination of the battle of Omdurman is clearly a demonstration of the destructive capabilities of the magazine-fed rifle and the machine gun. Lord Kitchener had amassed a land force of 8200 British regulars, 17,600 Egyptian and Sudanese troops, 44 field guns, and 20 Maxim machine guns. Gunboats also carried 36 guns and 24 Maxims were allotted to his gunboats.¹⁵ The Anglo-African troops were issued primarily with up-to-date Lee-Enfield rifles though some Sudanese soldiers still possessed the old single shot Martini-Henry rifles.¹⁶ Against this force the Khalifa reportedly fielded a Dervish army numbering in excess of 50,000 men, while some accounts suggest 80,000 or to 90,000.¹⁷ But the disparity in numbers was more than made up by the overwhelming fire power possessed by Kitchener’s army. While his troops were armed with modern weapons, the vast majority of the Khalifa’s men employed spears. A lucky minority possessed old/obsolescent muskets or early

¹¹ Meredith, *Omdurman Diaries*, p.26.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹³ Harrington & Scharf, *Omdurman 1898*, pp.36-39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.72.

¹⁵ Winston Churchill, *The River War: An Account of the Reconquest of the Sudan* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1933), p.249. and Meredith, “Omdurman Diaries,” p.164.

¹⁶ Edward M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.241.

¹⁷ Winston Churchill puts the figure at 50,000 to 60,000 warriors. Churchill, *The River War*, p.259.

model breech loaders, but they lacked the advanced 'musketry training'¹⁸ of their British or Sudanese/Egyptian counterparts. Artillery was virtually non-existent in the Dervish army. Its few guns were, badly served and had no effect in the battles of Atbara and Omdurman.

At the battle of Omdurman, September 2, 1898, the two opposing armies finally met for the decisive clash of the campaign. Kitchener's men were drawn up in a semi-circle on the west bank of the Nile River utilizing outdated mass linear tactics characteristic of past colonial wars. Instead of proper trenches or field works, a brush wall called a Zariba was erected to present an obstacle to the advancing enemy but it did not provide protection from enemy rifle or artillery fire. The Khalifa deployed over 50,000 men behind the surrounding hills from which they would attack the Anglo-Egyptian position. Despite the reservations of some of Kitchener's officers about the exposed nature of their position, the British could not have asked for a better arena in which to employ their weaponry as they possessed a clear field of fire of at least 2,000 yards over which any successful advance was deemed highly impossible.¹⁹ Their main worry had been the possibility of a night assault before September 2 which would have reduced the line of sight to just 300 yards. If that had happened, Winston Churchill feared that a "massed attack against the Gypies or Soudanese would probably break through, with highly unpleasant results."²⁰

¹⁸ Although 'musketry training' might sound a little dated, with connotations of old 17th/18th century flintlock muskets like the 'Brown Bess', the term was still in widespread use in British Army training manuals right up to the First World War as well as in the lexicons of most senior British officers and military theorists.

¹⁹ G.W. Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1898), p.263. Lieutenant Meiklejohn of the Warwicks has the British artillery opening up at 3,000 yards and the infantry at 1,500 yards. Meredith, *Omdurman Diaries*, p.185.

²⁰ Meredith, "Omdurman Diaries," p.180.

Throughout the morning of the 2nd, massed Dervish assaults were met with concentrated rifle, Maxim, and artillery fire as time and again the Dervishes were mown down in short order. None of the Khalifa's men came close to making contact with the British lines except for the group that was impetuously charged by the 21st Lancers including (Churchill) in an heroic but ultimately useless and strategically antiquated gesture. Lt. H. Hodgson of the Lincolnshires witnessed the carnage, "I was awfully sorry for these men, they were simply wiped out...I don't suppose the majority ever got within 1000 yards except the lot who came to die."²¹ Lt. Robert Napier of the 21st Lancers wrote "Maxim and infantry fire very steady and deadly. Enemy gets within 300-400 yards...break up and fly...a regular inferno."²²

Another salient feature of the failed Dervish assaults was the brief time it took to break them. Almost every eyewitness account relates how the firing, although intense, lasted no more than 10-20 minutes. Captain Hubbard of the Lincolnshires "We opened fire as soon as we were in our places and in 10 minutes, there were no enemy left."²³ Lionel James, a correspondent for Reuters, commented that the two attacks he witnessed were "crushed" in 10-15 minutes "long before they can hit home"²⁴ The British observers were also universal in their praise of the Dervish bravery. According to Hubbard, "The pluck and bravery shown by the Dervishes under an absolutely appalling hail of bullets was most marked."²⁵ "No white troops would have faced that torrent of

²¹ Harrington & Scharf, "Omdurman 1898," p.127.

²² *Ibid.*, p.127.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.68.

death for five minutes”²⁶ George Steevens from *The Daily Mail*. Hodgson noted “I never could have imagined anything so cool and brave as those men were.”²⁷

These descriptions bear a remarkable resemblance to eyewitness accounts of the first day of the Somme Offensive, only (and quite ironically) then the Germans mowed down massed British waves of infantry. One German machine gunner was astounded by the British pluck, their officers walking calmly toting walking sticks. “We were very surprised to see them walking, we had never seen that before...When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn’t have to aim, we just fired into them.”²⁸ Other accounts are just as uncannily similar, the only real difference being the words ‘Dervish’ and ‘British’. As in 1898, most of the British losses in 1916 were inflicted in minutes. British soldiers rarely got anywhere near their objectives, and the dumbfounded Germans admiring the foolish bravery of their opponents.

Most striking to this historian is the fact that the British failed to embrace or comprehend the implications/lessons of what had transpired at Omdurman. During the better part of just one morning the Anglo-Egyptian forces had annihilated the Dervish army, killing almost 11,000 and wounding more than twice as many. 8000 British soldiers and their officers were on hand to behold the awesome destructiveness of modern firepower, especially the Maxim. But rather than being impressed by this demonstration of firepower, the British focused on the bravery and savagery of their foe as well as the gallant charge of the 21st Lancers which earned three Victoria Crosses,²⁹ as

²⁶ Spiers, *Army and Society 1815-1914*, p.213.

²⁷ Harrington & Scharf, *Omdurman 1898*, p.81.

²⁸ John Ellis, *Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p.135.

²⁹ Meredith, *Omdurman Diaries*, p.165.

the most memorable features of the battle. Some, like Churchill even used the experience of the 21st Lancers to assert the truly effective role that cavalry could still play in modern warfare.³⁰

The Sudan campaign of 1898 became yet another colonial war whose lessons could never be realistically applied to a future possible conflict on the European continent. Outmoded tactics were retained as was faith in the Victorian notion of individual courage triumphing over the soulless anonymity of the Industrial Revolution. The true value of the new weapons would have to wait until the British themselves were at the receiving end starting in 1899 before the weapons' abilities could begin to be fully appreciated. Even then, this appreciation did not really materialize until nearly halfway through the First World War. Few observers in 1898 would realize just how accurately George Steevens comment on how no White troops could or would withstand the hail of bullets held true in 1916. It never crossed Steevens' or most of his contemporaries' minds for that matter, that British troops might find themselves some time in near future facing that same "torrent of death" that the Mahdi's Army did in 1898. General Neville Lyttleton, in his book *Eighty Years: Soldiering, Politics and Games*, pointed out the reversal of roles from Omdurman to the battle of Colenso in 1899. "In the first, 50,000 fanatics streamed across the open regardless of cover to certain death, while at Colenso I never saw a Boer all day till the battle was over and it was our men who were the victims."³¹

³⁰ Churchill, *The River War*, pp. 284-288. Indeed, Churchill portrays the role of the 21st Lancers out of all importance to the much larger conflict raging around him. Much of this attitude originates from the ongoing debate on whether cavalry was still relevant on the modern battlefield or had technology rendered them obsolete?

³¹ Sir Neville Lyttleton, *Eighty Years: Soldiering, Politics and Games* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), p.212.

The British experience during the Boer War (or South African War) from 1899-1902 held many similarities to the Sudan campaign with some key differences. Like Sudan, South Africa climate and geography proved challenging and in South Africa as in Sudan the theatre of operations was staggering in scale, being roughly the size of Western Europe. While not as stifling as the Sudan, South African temperatures were still excessively hot for the average British soldier and conditions were made worse by sudden variations in temperature or cold rainfalls during the winter season. Where South Africa really differed from the Sudan, and from the rest of Britain's colonial campaigns for that matter, was most crucially the battlefield enemy. In the Boers, the British Army faced a foe unlike any other they had encountered on the African continent. Being European descended White farmers the Boers were a more comparable foe than previous native African opposition. For the first time the British had to confront an opponent that was well armed with up-to-date weapons such as German Mauser rifles purchased by the Boer Republics some time before the conflict.³² Moreover, the Boers also fielded the latest German artillery pieces from the Krupp works, 155mm French Cruesots, and even a shipment of 37mm rapid fire Maxim-Nordenfeldt canons (Pom-poms).³³ The Boers also enjoyed a major advantage in mobility. Every single burgher was an experienced horseman who brought with him at least two horses so that he always possessed a fresh mount, something the British never caught on to at considerable expense (they lost at least two thirds of horses employed during the war).³⁴

³² Denys Reitz, *Commando. A Boer Journal of the Boer War* (London: Faber, 1932) p.25.

³³ John Gooch ed., *The Boer War Direction, Experience and Image* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), p.80.

³⁴ Jay Stone and Erwin A. Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p.93

This was not the first occasion in which the British Army and the Boers had clashed arms. From December, 1880 to March, 1881 the British had fought in a short war precipitated by Boer anxieties over the imperialist ambitions of the more recently arrived British. In that conflict the British had been given a sample of what they could reasonably hope to expect in 1899. The major engagements, though small, were all disasters for the British Army culminating in the battle of Laing's Nek and the humiliation at Majuba Hill when Boers stormed a British position on the 2000 foot summit of Majuba Mountain and inflicted a severe loss on the British, killing the commander, Major-General George P. Colley with no appreciable loss to their own forces - 287 British casualties compared to 7 Boers.³⁵ Peace with the Boers was made shortly after.

The embarrassment of Majuba Hill was enough that "Remember Majuba!" was Britain's rallying cry from 1899 to 1902. Unfortunately for the British, that is where their collective memory of that conflict seemed to end. No one appeared to recall that the Boers were expert horsemen, excelled at shooting, were rarely visible, that their intimate knowledge of the terrain had greatly augmented their martial skills, and most importantly, that William Gladstone's government had decided to cut its losses and end the First Boer War to avoid becoming further embroiled in a potentially long and costly affair with few political returns. To be fair, the First Boer War was of short duration, lasting nearly three months. The combination of scant coverage from correspondents, declining public enthusiasm after a string of British defeats, and divided public opinion over the weak moral justification of war had aided a "best forgotten" attitude in regards to this conflict. Besides, were more important events such as the death of former Prime Minister

³⁵ John Cannon ed. *Oxford Dictionary of British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.419.

Benjamin Disraeli and the assassination of the Russian Tsar had diverted attention from the squalid little affair in South Africa.³⁶

The Boers also had the “disturbing” habit of not fighting by the proper rules of established warfare. They preferred to fight from well prepared and sighted trenches instead of coming out into the open and doing battle according to the protocols of war as practiced by conventional European forces in the late Nineteenth Century. The reasons for this lie in the nature of the Boer people and their oftentimes violent history. The Boers, a rugged people, had fought several battles with the native African population in the process of establishing their republics. Many drew inspiration from the Bible and tended towards fundamentalism, even to the point of comparing themselves with the Israelites of the Old Testament. This religious zeal justified the virtue of their cause as they viewed the new conflict with British Imperialism as a crusade.³⁷ In addition, virtually every Boer had some experience with firearms thanks to hunting, and one found a spiritually motivated civilian-soldier who put equal faith in God as he did his Mauser. Through his hunting experience, the Boer boasted an extensive knowledge of the local terrain, and possessed the tactical mobility to put his strengths to good use on the battlefield.

The Boer’s primary concern was self-preservation, even at the cost of giving up ground or the tactical initiative by not following up any victories with potentially risky pursuits. No Boer thought any piece of terrain was actually worth dying for. To this end, the Boers employed their advantage in mobility to good effect, withdrawing just prior to any chance of being overrun by an assault, often and using their intimate knowledge of

³⁶ Edward Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.259.

³⁷ Gooch, *The Boer War Direction, Experience and Image*, p.86.

the surrounding countryside to easily escape encirclement.³⁸ Sometimes as well the Boers withdrew too soon when they were on the threshold of victory. This happened at Modder River (October 28, 1899) and nearly happened at Spion Kop had it not been for the efforts of Louis Botha to rally his fleeing troops.³⁹ This common sense approach held a dominating influence over Boer strategy and tactics during the initial conventional part of the war (Fall 1899-Spring 1900). It was not until later, during the guerilla stage that the Boers, led by younger, and more motivated leaders like Louis Botha, Jacobus de la Rey and Christiaan de Wet, would fight with greater conviction.

The Boers had no real military training or organization comparable to European armies. They were loosely organized into regionally defined groups called commandos,⁴⁰ led by men elected or selected by virtue of their charisma as much as any martial skill. The only government set standard was that each burgher had to supply his own horse, a rifle and at least 30 rounds of ammunition. Beyond that, the burghers were left to large degree to their own devices and given free rein to decide whether they wanted to stay in the fighting lines at the particular moment or perhaps retreat to fight another day and on their terms.⁴¹ In his book, *The Boer War Direction, Experience and Image*, John Gooch even goes so far as to suggest that the commando was not really the fighting unit, instead it was the individual burgher, who in effect became his own general, giving the Boers at least 35,000 generals at the war's start.⁴² While this marked individuality led to greater personal initiative during battle, it also ensured a marked lack of group discipline.

³⁸ Pamela Todd and David Fordham, *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary. The Transvaal War of 1899, 1900, 1901, & 1902 With the Natal Field Forces* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1980), p.79.

³⁹ Oliver Ransford, *The Battle of Spion Kop* (London: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1969), pp.109-110.

⁴⁰ The Commando system was originally set up to facilitate Boer self-defense against their numerous hostile neighbours.

⁴¹ William Balck, "Lessons of the Boer War and the Battle Workings of the Three Arms," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 48 (November, 1904), p.1272.

⁴² Gooch, *The Boer War: Direction, Experience, and Image*, p.88.

Artillery and rifle fire often suffered from a lack of coordination and made counter-attacks very difficult to launch when coupled with the Boers' self preservation instincts, this meant a Boer abandonment of the tactical offensive which was (and still is) considered key to military success. As a result, the British were handed perpetual ownership of the strategic and tactical initiatives which in turn, gave the British time to rectify their early blunders and eventually win the war by virtue of their superior numbers.

The Boers were exceptional in their ingenuity and craftiness on the battlefield. They were willing to augment the accuracy of their rifles and artillery by employing whatever methods possible in order to draw their opponents in as either better targets or to impel them to retire from the field altogether. One way was to leave behind painted rocks at pre-set distances to better facilitate range finding for the artillery pieces.⁴³ Private Graham Chambers of the Durham Light Infantry, related in his diary how during the Battle of Pieters Hill (February 25, 1900), "The Boers lit fires on the right and left of the hill and when our fellows went by the light they were shot down...I was close by and saw my comrades fall left and right."⁴⁴ On another occasion, this time during a river crossing, Private Frederick Tucker of the Rifle Brigade noticed the Boers had positioned a white washed boat lying on its side on the river bank near an expected crossing point where any British soldiers fording the river would make "marvelous targets".⁴⁵ Fortunately for Tucker and his comrades, this trick was discovered before any casualties were sustained. Another incident at Pieters Hill had the Boers trying to fool the Durham

⁴³ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Army Reforms*, p.34.

⁴⁴ Graham Chambers ed., *A Soldier's Diary. The Boer War 1899-1902* (Cambridge: The Pentland Press Ltd, 1999), pp.24-25

⁴⁵ Todd and Fordham, *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary*. p.73.

Light infantrymen by blowing mock British bugle calls while calling out for the Durhams to retire.⁴⁶ The Boers were also known to set fire to the grass in front of their positions so that the British Khaki uniforms would stand out in contrast to the blackened earth.⁴⁷

The many small colonial wars of the decades preceding the Boer War had not prepared the British adequately for the task ahead, especially tactically. The failure to appreciate the technological advances in weaponry meant that the British troops paid a high price for acquiring that appreciation during the war's early stages. The descriptions of battles from the war's conventional or first part are littered with grim testaments as to the effectiveness and extent of the Boer opposition. The most common metaphor seems to be that of the air coming "alive" with bullets as had happened to Private Tucker at the Battle of Colenso (December 15, 1899). "It seemed as if all hell had been let loose. Mauser rifle, Pom-Pom. Maxim big guns and I don't know what else rang out until the air seemed alive with iron and lead."⁴⁸ At Pieters Hill the result was the same; "Hardly had we left cover of the kopje (small hill) before our men began to fall fast. The air seemed to fairly crackle...and how any of us survived all the bullets, pom-poms and pieces of shell...is a marvel to me."⁴⁹

Another popular metaphor on both sides was that of "sweet" music. Sol Plaatje, a black soldier fighting for the British at the siege of Mafeking under Baden-Powell, found solace/comfort in "that sweet and enchanting music from our musketeers. It gave us an entertainment of the sweetest music imaginable when slow volley after volley was directed at the angry Boers: now and then a 7-pounder would harmonize the

⁴⁶ Chambers, *A Soldier's Diary*, p.21.

⁴⁷ Balck, "Lessons of the Boer war," p.1272.

⁴⁸ Todd & Fordham, *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary*, p.30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.77-78.

proceedings.”⁵⁰ Not to be left out, “the occasional tapping of the Maxims entertained us with that sweet music I have already described.”⁵¹ Others note how the Mausers “sweetly sing that little song entitled ‘ping,’”⁵² or noting how singing bullets woke up members of the West Yorkshire regiment.⁵³ Other metaphors included storms. For Private Corcoran of the Connaught Rangers at Colenso “The bullets were like a shower of hail” while a Wexford soldier at the same battle described “a fearful shower of hail falling on an iron roof.”⁵⁴ Private Chambers’ commented about “a variable hailstorm scattering our fellows like chaffe before a whirlwind.”⁵⁵

Whatever the metaphor, the British soldiers were up against the famed marksmanship of the Boers whose hunting backgrounds ensured a close familiarity with the rifle from an early age. Their reputation seemed to grow as the war progressed. One Boer, Deneys Reitz, attested to his comrades’ mettle early on at Ladysmith, recounting a battle “in which the soldiers (meaning the British) were badly worsted, for they were up against real old fashioned Free State Boers for whom they were no match in sharpshooting of this kind.”⁵⁶ At Spion Kop the Boers reportedly found at least 70 dead British soldiers with bullet wounds all on the right side of their heads hit by Boer snipers firing from the hill commanding the right side of the British positions on Spion Kop.⁵⁷ Private Chambers and his unit were subject to the attentions of Boer snipers (from three different positions no less) at Vaal Krantz (February 6, 1900) as they had to pass along

⁵⁰ Sol T. Plaatje, *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's View of a White Man's War* Edited by John L. Comaroff (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1973), p.20.

⁵¹ Plaatje, *Mafeking Diary*, p.46.

⁵² Chambers, *A Soldier's Diary*, p.35.

⁵³ Nicholas Riall ed., *Boer War. The Letters, Diaries, and Photographs of Malcolm Riall From the War in South Africa* (London: Brassey's, 2000), p.135.

⁵⁴ Owens, “Dear Mother it's a Terrible Life,” p.181, p.185.

⁵⁵ Chambers, *A Soldier's Diary*, p.9..

⁵⁶ Reitz, *Commando*, p.44.

⁵⁷ Ransford, *Battle of Spion Kop*, p.80.

rations on their stomachs for “to raise your head meant a bullet through it...this is the time when you think of the evil you have committed in the past.”⁵⁸

The Boers employed their artillery pieces in a unique manner, usually individually rather than in batteries as was the accepted practice in most other armies. They also fired at much longer ranges than the British thought possible. The accepted distance was between 4000 and 5000 yards. The Boers opened up at anywhere between 5000 and 10,000 yards. While the overall damage or casualties inflicted upon British forces was not that great, long range Boer artillery fire upon supposedly secure British positions unsettled British troops who often felt they were never safe even at a great distance from the battle field. For example, during the crossing of the Tugela River prior to Spion Kop, a column of British troops was hit by a lucky shell fired from well over five kilometers that killed and wounded nineteen men.⁵⁹ The rest of the company proceeded unmolested to the front lines but with a great deal more caution than necessary and considerably diminished enthusiasm as well. Another result was the increase in seemingly pointless stand to arms at very “inappropriate” or inconvenient times of the morning. Private Tucker relished a move far enough behind the front so he can enjoy a sound sleep without being woken up by a “sudden alarm or screaming shell”⁶⁰

Augmenting the Boers’ small arms and artillery tactics was their skilled use of trenches and rifle pits. They used topography to great and devastating effect. Unlike most armies of that time, the Boers took special care to make sure that their fieldworks were positioned so as to make them virtually invisible to British soldiers. Concealment allowed the Boers to compensate for their paucity of numbers. Rather than put their

⁵⁸ Chambers, *A Soldier's Diary*, p.21.

⁵⁹ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.91.

⁶⁰ Todd & Fordham, *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary*, p.63.

trench-line on a hill's crest, Boer generals placed them at the hill's base. This positioning eliminated any possible silhouette on the skyline and providing riflemen with a flat field of trajectory which rendered the fire zones just that much more perilous for advancing British. Earth excavated during the preparation of trenches was piled up in the rear in order to hide the occupants' outlines while extensive use of bushes provided additional camouflage.⁶¹ Thanks to measures such as these, British artillery often bombarded suspected enemy strong points only to have their infantry assaults run into concentrated fire from Boers occupying unknown trenches. As Baden-Powell noted, it was very rare that attacking British infantry knew the exact location of Boer positions even when the opposing lines were within 400 to 500 yards.⁶²

The Boers employed additional deceptions to direct British attention away from their actual positions. False fortifications complete with dummy defenders were used as decoys. Specially selected artillery pieces used black powder to draw British fire away from their true artillery emplacements. Extra artillery emplacements were constructed so Boer cannon could constantly move to new locations to keep their enemy guessing and to allow the Boers to outflank or outmaneuver the British. Charges were also exploded in areas under British fire to throw off the calculations of British artillery spotters.⁶³ Wet/damp animal hides were thrown upon the ground in front of their artillery pieces to prevent clouds of dust from being thrown up by the force of the muzzle blasts and revealing their positions.⁶⁴ In addition, the Boers took great care to conserve ammunition and were careful not to return fire unless they absolutely had to, thus making British

⁶¹ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, pp.34-35.

⁶² B.F.S. Baden-Powell, *War In Practice. Some Tactical and Other Lessons of the Campaign in South Africa* (London: Isbister & Company, Limited, 1903), p.47.

⁶³ Balck, "Lessons of the Boer War," p.1272.

⁶⁴ Balck, "Lessons of the Boer War," p.1272.

attempts to draw their fire and expose their positions very difficult.⁶⁵ These were the shrewd tactics of a well prepared and experienced soldier.

When confronted with this new, unconventional manner of waging war, the British soldiers were collectively at a loss as to how to most effectively deal with the sudden new reality of conflict. From September 1899 to mid 1900, the clash between outdated training and tactics and common sense of experience raged throughout the British Army as its soldiers struggled to adapt to the hard lessons taught by the Boers. Ironically, in many cases, it was the Territorials and conscripts from the cities who displayed more aptitude for adapting finding cover under fire as they had not been in the military for long enough for a sense of discipline to overpower their basic instincts of preservation/survival.⁶⁶ As the war progressed into later guerilla phase in May 1900, more territorial and troops from the dominions would be utilized as regular units were withdrawn from the theatre of operations. The British High Command had noted an increasing indifference in their regular troops and sought to employ native cavalry from India and additional contingents from Australia, Canada and New Zealand.⁶⁷ The majority of these colonial troops would be mounted infantry or cavalry.⁶⁸ It was found that these men not only possessed better riding and shooting skills than then the average British soldier but were more inclined to fighting in a manner of their opposition. They eventually made up at least half the number of mounted troops serving in South Africa.⁶⁹

Another disconcerting feature of modern warfare that the British experienced for the first time was their inability to see the enemy, often times throughout the duration of a

⁶⁵ Reitz, *Commando*, p.73.

⁶⁶ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, p.82.

⁶⁷ Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York: Random House, 1979), p.525.

⁶⁸ Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p.260.

⁶⁹ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.95.

whole battle as occurred at engagements at Vaal Krantz and Colenso. Lt. George Crossman's description of a day's action at Tabanyama (part of the Spion Kop battle) in January 24, 1900 was fairly typical; "I have personally fired over 100 rounds today. Wonder if I have hit anyone."⁷⁰ Not being able to see the enemy adversely affected the British soldiers in a number of ways. First, laying down accurate fire was difficult and usually quite hazardous for British troopers. Boer concealment went against the British public school traditional sense of "fair play" and worked against their morale. As Private Tucker recalled, "We endured the worst trial a soldier can be subjected to, that is: waiting under fire without being able to return a shot...Fighting shot for shot is much more sportsmanlike, I prefer it to waiting and I think everyone else does."⁷¹

As the British also were hard pressed to acquire any accurate intelligence about Boer troop numbers, casualties, and true location of defensive positions, British forces were rudely shocked on a number of occasions. A prime example is the battle of Colenso (December 15, 1899). When General Redvers Buller, commanding about 20,000 British soldiers attempted a river crossing in the face of 6000 resolute and well dug in Boers, the British suffered 145 dead, 762 wounded, and 220 missing or captured; the Boers reportedly lost eight dead and forty to fifty wounded.⁷² As the British rarely saw any of their opponents that day, extrapolating from their excessive losses, Buller and his men concluded they had faced more than 6000 Boers and that the Boers too had suffered just as, if not more heavily than the British. Lt. Malcolm Riall of the West Yorkshire Regiment mentioned how the British troops did well that day inflicting about 2000 losses

⁷⁰ Riall, *The Letters, Diaries and Photographs of Malcolm Riall*, p.43.

⁷¹ Todd and Fordham, *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary*, pp.76-77.

⁷² Riall, *The Letters, Diaries and Photographs of Malcolm Riall*. P.34.

on the enemy.⁷³ In a previous engagement, Lieutenant T.B. Ely of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers related how 3,500 men “who had licked 7,000 Boers in an almost impregnable position, were practically surrounded by 17,000 of the enemy with 40 guns and ‘Long Tom.’”⁷⁴

The British took a fair amount of time to emulate the Boers’ skill in entrenching and concealment. At the outbreak of hostilities, the British Army found itself sadly deficient in this respect. The 1896 *Rules For Field Manoeuvres* suffered from an over-enthusiasm for the offensive while large scale peacetime maneuvers had provided little if any training in entrenching or utilizing cover mostly for fears of damaging local terrain.⁷⁵ Once war came, the British High Command did not endorse proper entrenching, partly for fear of imparting a defensive mindset in their troops, and partly because entrenching did not fit British notions of martial fair play.⁷⁶ But despite this opposition, by war’s end, British infantrymen had become quite sophisticated in their approach to entrenchments as the 123 pages in B.F.S. Baden-Powell’s *War in Practice: Some Tactical And Other Lessons Of The Campaign In South Africa 1899-1902* on the art of defense and fortification testify.⁷⁷

Despite the modern battlefield dangers, many experiences remained unchanged in nature from those in past centuries of campaigning. Virtually every diary or memoir account are universal in their litany of complaints that even veterans of the 1704 Battle of Blenheim would have immediately identified with. Ragged clothing, terrible rations, and

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁷⁴ Owens, “Dear Mother, it’s as Terrible Life,” p.178.

⁷⁵ Stone, Schmidl, “Boer War and Military Reforms,” p.15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.83. It was not until the final year of the South African War that every British infantryman was issued with an entrenching tool be it a shovel or a pick.

⁷⁷ Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, pp.76-199. Chapters IV, V, and VI on defense, selection of ground and positions, and fortification form the bulk of the book.

overly long periods of tedious activity such as marching and digging trenches all loom large in these accounts. By the time Buller's forces had relieved Ladysmith some of his men had so worn their boots down that some boots were soled with biscuit tins and strung together by thongs made from animal hides.⁷⁸ To many British soldiers, the only thing worse than the dangers of the battlefield was the boredom between battles. As one Wexford soldier wrote home, "fighting is the only thing that keeps us in good spirits."⁷⁹

By the end of 1900 it had become abundantly clear that the war's conduct would have to change drastically to avoid any repeats of the disasters of 1899/1900. The main obstacle to concerted action lay in the differing interpretations about the reasons for those defeats. For some, firepower was the major issue to be dealt with; for others, it was the decline of English manhood and the decay of the Empire. Still others, paranoid about the security of the British Isles, saw the recent events as a wake up call to set things right again. What was really significant was that this variety of opinions concerning the South African War illustrated only too clearly the British inability to adapt to these new realities and foreshadowed the hard struggle to initiate any reform based on these experiences.

Whatever the perceptions of the generals, politicians, and correspondents, the lower ranks of the British Army had learned some valuable and costly lessons about modern warfare from their Boer opponents. The Generals could debate all they wanted to about whether cavalry should be armed with rifles or lances, but from the rank of from Lieutenant and down, the real practical matters such as proper trench digging, good marksmanship, and the art of concealment had been ingrained in their collective minds. As Private Chambers boasted in the latter stages of the South African War, "Instead of

⁷⁸ Chambers, "A Soldier's Diary," p.29.

⁷⁹ Owens, "Dear Mother, It's a Terrible Life," p.186.

having a red coat and white helmet to fire at they had men the colour of their beloved veldt, men who in nine short months had learned the Boer way only too well.”⁸⁰ The key challenge was to retain these lessons over the long term, which meant ensuring that senior officers recognized the lessons and then integrated them into British military training manuals.

⁸⁰ Chambers, *A Soldier's Diary*, p.51.

3) First Impressions 1899-1904...Commonsense Rules?

“If the man in the street is asked, ‘What is the lesson you deduce from the war?’ he will reply: ‘I deduce that all your barrack-square drill, and pomp, and pipe clay is no use at all, and that a few farmers, possessing individuality, horsemanship, and marksmanship, proved, man to man, more than a march for you.’”¹

“What a lot they are teaching us, these farmers! When we have settled them we shall be the most magnificent army in the world”²

The war in South Africa was nowhere near its conclusion when the British made the first efforts to comprehend what was transpiring. These reactions to the South African conflict can be grouped in two major periods differentiated by their underlying themes about the effectiveness of modern firepower. The observations from the period of 1899 to 1904 were characterized by the perception that firepower was the primary means through which to achieve victory. This period stands in contrast to the post Russo-Japanese War era when the general perception changed to one in which firepower could potentially make a conclusion to the conflict possible.³ This change can perhaps be explained by an “out of sight, out of mind” outlook, reinforced by the erroneous conclusions reached by foreign military observers of the Russo-Japanese War. The one constant in both themes remained the near universal recognition of the increased lethality of modern firepower. The differences between the two approaches began with their interpretation(s) of how the effects of modern firepower might influence tactics used on

¹L.S. Amery, *The Problem with the Army* (London: E. Arnold, 1903), p.237.

²Edward M. Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.166.

³This polarization is put forward in T.H.E. Travers’ “The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation in British Military Thought 1870-1915,” in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 13, No. 3(July, 1978), pp.531-553.

the modern battlefield. These differences sparked a generous outpouring of literature dealing with the potential of firepower right up to the outbreak of the First World War.⁴

Popular criticisms of this subject included Leo Amery's *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* (1900-1909), William Cairnes' scathing *An Absentminded War* (1900), *A Commonsense Army* (1901), and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The War in South Africa its Cause & Conduct* (1900/1901). Official enquiries were typified by the comprehensive Royal Commission on the War in South Africa of 1903. Many British Army officers, having their own ideas about what had happened, did not hesitate to make their thoughts known. Major B. F. S. Baden-Powell's, *War in Practice. Some Tactical and Other Lessons of the Campaign in South Africa*⁵ (1903) and Major Charles Callwell's *The Tactics of To-day* (1900), and Colonel G.F.R. Henderson's⁶ *The Science of War* (1891-1903) were perhaps the most lucid distillations of the British Army's experiences in South Africa.

There was also a plethora of foreign observations and criticisms of the South African War. Observers from Germany and Austria-Hungary found themselves engaged in watching the conflict from both sides, reporting what they had seen back to their superiors. Captain Ernst von Trimmel of the Austrian Army traveled with the British commander in Natal, General Redvers Buller, while the Austrian Adalbert Count Sternberg who fought with the Boers until his capture by the British in February, 1900

⁴ R.S.S. Baden-Powell's *Quick Training For War* published in late 1914 is a prime example.

⁵ B.F.S. Baden-Powell mentioned here is not to be confused with his older brother, R.S.S Baden-Powell the hero of Mafeking and the creator of the Boy Scouts movement.

⁶ Colonel G.F.R. Henderson was indeed one of the most universally respected officers in the British Army through his work in the Staff College and tireless lecturing on tactics, virtually single-handedly bringing the lessons to be taken from the American Civil War into widespread consideration, especially the merits concerning the tactics utilized by both the Union and Confederate cavalry.

are typical.⁷ As in Britain, there were a great number of “experts” at home who reached their own conclusions from second hand accounts of the action in South Africa. Major William Balck of the German General Staff was a good example of this. Among the more high profile foreign observers was the Polish banker Jan Bloch (or Jean de Bloch) who added to his already profoundly important *The Future of War* (1899) by conducting a series of lectures across Britain based on the themes presented in his book and augmented by the British Army’s recent South African experiences. This tour culminated in Bloch’s three-lecture engagement in front of a less than receptive audience at the Royal United Service Institution in mid-1901.⁸

The lessons gleaned from three years of conflict in the African theatre depended largely on an observer’s priorities. To some, the tactical considerations of firepower and the increased effectiveness of the defense offered the most practical direction as to how to approach modern warfare. Others held a more strategic outlook of the conflict and a deep seated fear for the Imperium in analyzing not just advances in technology, but a perceived social, cultural, and physiological malaise which had affected Britons and was threatening to destroy Britain’s colonial dominance of not just South Africa, but its entire empire. Unfortunately, as in the Sudan campaign of 1899, the full implications of most of these lessons would be tempered by a colonial caveat; that the nature of the fighting conditions and the irregular character of the opposition⁹ precluded any meaningful application of these lessons to a continental European context. Many observers and

⁷When discussing Austrian observers in *Boer War and Military Reform*, Erwin Schmidl discounts Sternberg’s accounts for reasons of reliability and professionalism (or lack thereof). While not the most professional of observers, Sternberg still manages to arrive at some inciteful conclusions, earning inclusion in this paper.

⁸ Travers, “Technology, Tactics, and Morale; Jean de Bloch, the Boer War and British Military Theory,” *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no.2 (June, 1979), p.265. Travers describes the audience as hostile.

⁹ In contemporary accounts, the Boers, despite earning a grudging respect from the British, are often referred to in terms such as “ignorant farmers”, “Peasants” or “a nation of farmers”

thinkers expected that European regulars would continue to fight in the conventional manner as outlined by most military theorists prior to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Many believed that the recent changes in technology gave the attacker just as much, if not more, of an advantage as the defender on the battlefield. This line of thinking found its fullest expression in Ferdinand Foch's *Principles of War* (1903) in which Foch declared that "any improvement in firearms is ultimately bound to add strength to the offense."¹⁰

The immediate lessons of the South African campaign were apparent to virtually everyone regardless of interpretation. The first and perhaps most important observation was the "new found" discovery that smokeless gunpowder, magazine-fed rifles, and automatic weapons such as the machine gun and the Nordenfeldt/Vickers-Maxim 30mm gun (Pom Poms) did indeed, make the modern battlefield a far more dangerous place. Moreover, the skillful employment of trenches, fortifications, and camouflage had given the defender a decided advantage. Second, British artillery, despite a pronounced numerical superiority, had seemingly been outclassed in terms of range of fire, quality of pieces and their employment, try as they might, they had rarely made any appreciable impact on the well dug in Boers. The third was the Cavalry's inability to perform its primary functions of reconnaissance and to charge home using the *Arme Blanche* to put the enemy to flight.¹¹ This point proved to be a very sensitive area for the many traditionalists. Indeed, the deliberation over the perceived roles of cavalry was at the vortex of an already existing conflict between Victorian notions of fair play,

¹⁰ Joseph C. Arnold, "French Tactical Doctrine 1870-1914," *Military Affairs* 42, no. 2 (April, 1978), p.64.

¹¹ All these immediate lessons are covered in Jay Stone and Erwin Schmidl's *The Boer War and Military Reforms* pp.79-97 or in Spier's *Army and Society* pp.79-94.

individuality, the hero, mass production and the anonymity in the process of killing as represented by the machine gun.¹²

At the grand strategic level there was a widespread fear that any large conflict would find Britain not only woefully unprepared to meet its overseas commitments but that it was now also vulnerable to invasion of the home islands. A major problem was the inefficient recruitment system that had emerged from the Cardwell reforms. While Edward Cardwell, Secretary of State for War (1868-1874) lacked any real experience in military matters, he had possessed proven administrative and financial talents which he utilized in initiating a number of controversial changes altering the organization of the British Army to a very substantial degree. First, he had introduced short service enlistment,¹³ a move intended to create a larger reserve of trained soldiers that could be called up in a crisis. Other more radical initiatives had included the abolition of the commission purchase system in an effort to democratize the officer corps¹⁴ and the establishment of a linked battalion regiment system whereby one battalion served overseas, while another served as a depot at home. Cardwell also had worked at centralizing of the duties of the War Department and reforming the Home Army through the Localization Act of 1872 (which the linked battalions were part of).¹⁵ The primary concern in Cardwell's reforms was to procure maximum military returns from a limited budget. But Cardwell's efforts had only mixed success and his programs had left few satisfied, especially in such a traditionally minded institution as the British Army of the

¹² Joanna Bourke, in *An Intimate History of Killing* (Great Britain: Basic Books, 1999) details the transformation of modern warfare by the "mechanization of the battlefield in the twentieth century", describing how technology imparted a more impersonal effect enabling "numbed killing". P.xvii.

¹³ Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society. 1815-1914* (London: The Longman Group, 1980), p.183.

¹⁴ Brian Bond, *The Victorian Army and the Staff College, 1854-1914* (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1972), p.19.

¹⁵ Edward Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp.19-20.

late Nineteenth Century. There was a widespread perception that the detrimental nature of Cardwell's reforms had led to a shortage of troops for home defense and Empire, the absence of a competent general staff, an absence of realistic training for enlisted personnel as well as officers, and no tangible, contingency plans for reacting to possible foreign or domestic crises. The chief critics included the likes of Arnold Forester, Leo Amery, and William Cairnes. The leadership qualities of British officers, in particular, came under a deluge of criticism from almost every circle. Tommy Atkins was not to be held responsible; rather his officers were at fault for being "fatally ignorant of the meaning of modern warfare."¹⁶

As mentioned earlier, Bloch, Baden-Powell, Callwell, and Henderson were perhaps the most rationally minded when it came to deriving useful or more realistic lessons from the conflict. They, especially Baden-Powell, tended to lean towards a defensive school of thought, placing considerable emphasis on the advantage that modern firepower bestowed on the defender. The primarily tactical outlook put them, albeit, unintentionally more in tune with the voice of the non-commissioned ranks. Army hierarchy ensured that Baden-Powell's and Henderson's opinions and the valuable lessons in survival on the modern battlefield, did not translate very easily and that they lacked any real lasting effect into any practical change in Army training manuals. Their findings contrasted with the observations and conclusions of their senior officers. Conversely, the lower ranks retained their lessons right into the First World War; unfortunately the same could not be said of the majority of the senior British officers.

Baden-Powell, in particular, championed the tactical lessons in his very accomplished book, *War in Practice*. Contrary to the prevalent doctrine of offense,

¹⁶ William Elliot Cairnes, *An Absentminded War* (London: J. Milne, 1900), p.96.

Baden-Powell stated that the established notion of maneuvering to advance into ‘actual contact’ with the enemy was no longer a necessity. Instead, fire superiority could bring victory on the battlefield as it did for the British forces that had outmaneuvered and cut off the Boers under General Piet Cronje at Paardeburg in February, 1901. After nine days, the Boers succumbed to the superior firepower of the British artillery and a worsening supply situation and surrendered.¹⁷ Indeed, firepower, in Baden-Powell’s view had come to greatly change the values of attack and defense, especially the defense. He pointed to increased range of weapons, rapidity of fire, flat trajectory of modern fire arms, and the advent of the machine gun as major factors in making the zones of advance virtually impossible to pass over.¹⁸ Attacks could only be successful under four conditions: surprise; against a “very inferior enemy”; defenders occupying a “naturally bad position”; or if darkness or broken ground allowed.¹⁹ Henderson concurred adding that “The most brilliant victories are not those which were mere ‘bludgeon work,’ and cost the most blood; but those which were won by surprise, by adroit manoeuvre, by mystifying and misleading the enemy, by turning the ground to best account, and of which the butcher’s bill was small.”²⁰

A noticeable feature of *War in Practice* was the attention Baden-Powell gave to the issues concerning defense. While containing one chapter on the offense, *War in Practice* had one discussing the defense, another on the selection of ground and positions, one on fortification (this being the largest chapter), and finally, one on outposts and

¹⁷ Major B.F.S. Baden-Powell, *War in Practice. Some Tactical and Other Lessons of the Campaign in South Africa* (London: Isbister & Company, Limited, 1903), pp.33-34.

¹⁸ Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, pp.42-43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

²⁰ G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War: A Collection of Essays and Lectures, 1892-1903* Neil Malcolm ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1905), p.357.

protective screens. Boer tactics were definitely not lost on Baden-Powell. Compared to the meager trench the British had scraped out of the summit of Spion Kop,²¹ Baden-Powell's pictures and diagrams represented a definite transformation in the seriousness in which the British Army took entrenching battle positions. As Lt General Thomas Kelly-Kenny pointed out during the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, the British soldiers were found wanting at first but they "copied the Boers and became excellent."²²

While the actual construction of fieldworks was important, two factors ultimately would determine their effectiveness: the suitability of the position; and the availability of supplies.²³ In terms of the position while a clear field of fire was ideal, Baden-Powell realized that this ideal would rarely present itself, leaving the local commander to maximize the effectiveness of his position as much as possible. As in Baden-Powell's eyes, dispersion and especially, concealment were the ruling features of modern tactics, the utmost care was to be taken in ensuring that the trenches blended in with the surrounding terrain to the greatest extent conceivable.²⁴ Plentiful supplies could also make the difference between victory and defeat with Baden-Powell arguing that one of the primary factors leading to the defeat at Spion Kop had been a lack of food, water, and ammunition. This situation had contributed to their demoralization and the commanding officer, Col/Gen Thorneycroft's decision that the wisest course of action was to withdraw and concede victory to the Boers.²⁵

²¹ Oliver Ransford, *The Battle of Spion Kop* (London: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1969), p.103.

²² Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1903), p.282.

²³ Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, p.77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.145.

²⁵ Ransford, *Battle of Spion Kop*, pp.101-103.

In short, if the defenders possessed adequate cover, had a clear field of fire, and were well supplied then no frontal assault should be able to succeed. To illustrate the power of the defensive, Baden-Powell had more than a few examples at his disposal. At the battle of Paardeburg (Feb. 23-27, 1900), 4,200 “indifferent, half-starved Boers” held off over 16,000 fresh British troops for four days. At the Modder River (Dec., 1899), 3,500 Boers stalled 8,000 Britons, while at Itala, 200 British soldiers repulsed nearly 2,000 Boers.²⁶ Not only did entrenched defense render frontal assaults very hazardous, but combined with new fire power tactics and skillful maneuvering, it could also bring about the surrender of opposing forces. The best example of this happened at Nicholson’s Nek when almost a thousand British troops attacking a Boer position were in turn surrounded and compelled to surrender thus facilitating the Boers’ investment of Ladysmith in late 1899.²⁷

Before the South African conflict had even begun, Jean de Bloch had also come to the same conclusions about modern firepower as Baden-Powell and Henderson. However, he possessed a much more brutal, destructive, and perhaps more fatalist approach. Sharing Baden-Powell’s attitude about charging with the bayonet, Bloch could not see modern infantrymen getting to “within one hundred yards of one another, let alone a yard.”²⁸ General Neville Lyttleton, the 5th Division commander in South Africa, had remarked that to get anywhere near enough to force combat with the bayonet, British troops would have to be equipped with bayonets 700 yard long.²⁹ If anything, Bloch was

²⁶ Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, p.88.

²⁷ Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York: Random House, 1979), pp.158-159.

²⁸ Jean Bloch, *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations* (New York: Garland Pub., 1972), p.xiv

²⁹ Sir Neville Lyttleton, *Eighty Years: Soldiers. Politics and Games* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927), p.220.

so steadfastly convinced of the utter futility of the attack that he believed war itself would become impossible. On the other hand, Baden-Powell and Henderson believed that under the proper conditions, an attack could be successfully (if only rarely) carried out. The early British disasters of December 1899 and January 1900 seemed to vindicate Bloch's uncompromising views.³⁰

Bloch's views had their foundation in his six volume work, *The War of the Future*, published in 1899. Beginning in the tactical arena, Bloch outlined how modern firepower had given the advantage to the defender, so much so, that frontal attacks were at best efforts of wasteful futility. War therefore would become a series of extended siege operations with the constricted nature of European battlefields allowing no room for outflanking the opposition. When describing a possible Franco-German conflict, Bloch stated, "The operations between France and Germany are likely to be so prolonged that on looking at a map it will impossible to discern their progress."³¹ The predicted deadlock would bring on a war of attrition which would seriously tax the economies and national will of the powers involved, eventually leading to the economic collapse of not just the losers, but most likely the supposed victors as well. As Bloch wrote, "A great war would bring forth terrible catastrophes without solving the questions in dispute, owing to the exhaustion of economic resources; and probably internal revolution would force the conclusion of peace, with the social order of Europe in dissolution, and Europe would find herself faced by complications which it is now impossible to describe."³² For

³⁰ Jean Bloch, "The Transvaal War Its Lessons in Regards to Militarism and Army Reorganization," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 45 (December, 1901), pp.1338-1339.

³¹ Bloch, "The Transvaal War," p. 1414.

³² Bloch, "The Transvaal War," p.1316.

Bloch, the South African War offered a valuable opportunity to illustrate the very reality of his message and to profit from the lessons to be learned.

But the defensive school was opposed by a school of thought that concluded that events in South Africa had shown that technology also added greatly to the powers of the offensive. Some, Foch among others, went so far as to claimed that the added capacities of both the offense and defense had cancelled each other out; therefore nothing had really changed and movement and morale still counted more than the increased destructive potential of the rifle and the machine gun and numbers of men for that matter. In the British Army, individuality became a key attribute to be sought after in the modern soldier. It was in this capacity that the ‘Tommy’ was found most wanting. No one could deny the bravery of Britain’s soldiers, but their lack of initiative came under heavy criticism. Lt. General Thomas Kelly-Kenny, commander of the British 6th Division in South Africa, observed that it took a little while for the instinct of self preservation to sink in; “the British soldier as a rule has very little imagination.”³³

General Ian Hamilton (who had served in Natal) was an ardent supporter of individual initiative in the lower ranks. Declaring “the big battalion phase is now about to pass away” he added “the idea of swarms of men surging forward by word of command to the assault of a position is one which we should do our best to encourage among our potential enemies.”³⁴ Like Baden-Powell, Hamilton viewed dispersion, concealment, and choice of terrain integral either in attack or defense.³⁵ Where Hamilton differed was in his adherence to the inevitable success of the attack if it was properly led and conducted by “good men”. Hamilton was not alone in his convictions. Douglas Haig too advocated

³³ Kelly Kenny, “Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,” p.282.

³⁴ Amery, *Problem with the Army*, pp.232-233.

³⁵ Amery, *Problem with the Army*, p.234.

a higher training of the individual in order to further the chances of frontal attacks. Even Henderson, Callwell, and to an extent, Baden-Powell,³⁶ despite their defensive leanings, held the belief that static or passive defense could not in itself win a war; a counter-stroke was necessary to achieve a final victory. For Henderson, movement and envelopment was crucial in any campaign. To these men, the final charge with the bayonet lingered in the backs of their minds albeit in varying degrees of importance.³⁷ The enlisted ranks knew better. Their view of the martial qualities of the bayonet is for the most part, summed up in this short poem written by a British regular while serving in South Africa:

‘Tis my mighty Excaliber, sir,
I’ve used it in joy and grief,
For digging up many a tater,
Or opening bully beef,...
Has it ever drawn blood?
Yes, once, I grieve to say;
It was not in any battle,
Or any bloody fray;
‘Twas just outside Pretoria,
The deed was never meant,
I slipped and fell on the point, sir,
‘Twas quite an accident.³⁸

In light of the new emphasis being put on the soldier’s individuality, critics turned their attention to the training of the enlisted ranks and officers. Many believed that the lower ranks had been sorely let down by unrealistic training and by officers who failed to

³⁶ While others advocated the use of the defense as a foundation for the inevitable push forward, Baden-Powell theorized that it would be the aim of forces to cut off the enemy by outflanking them and then adopting defensive postures along their supply lines, Paardeburg being a prime example. In fact, the only blot on that action was a very costly frontal assault ordered by Kitchener the day before Cronje’s surrender when the logical course was to wait and starve out the Boers. B.F.S. Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, pp.32-33.

³⁷ Henderson, *Science of War*, pp.338-343, Calwell, *The Tactics of To-day* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), pp.18-19, and Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, pp.62-62 and p.102. These three men were not as eager about the bayonet charge as Hamilton or Haig, preferring outflanking movements and skirmishing to compel defenders to leave their positions as a more effective alternative.

³⁸ Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism, and Identity in Late Victorian Culture. Civil and Military Worlds* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.114.

cope with the demands put on them by modern warfare. The contemporary Captain William Cairnes noted “all originality of thought, all effort after a more correct appreciation of the true tactics of the future, has been ruthlessly squelched by authority; mediocrity, if assisted by influential friends so much the better, has been pushed to the front.”³⁹ Not one to mince his words, Cairnes added that “the energies of our officers, especially those of the higher ranks, have been directed with singular imbecility into channels where they have been absolutely wasted,”⁴⁰ Cairnes waxed poetic about the “magnificent raw material” of new recruits while bemoaning the time wasted in nonmilitary or irrelevant pursuits such too much drill and sentry duty and complained about limited musketry practice. It must be said that Cairnes represented an extreme view of this school of thought, but there were many others who felt the same way though they were not so ready to voice their opinions as strongly as the outspoken Cairnes.

Not surprisingly, the majority of senior officers - Haig, Kitchener, Gatacre amongst others - had a different perspective. The pride and arrogance of many British generals would not permit them to acknowledge the fact that neither their training, their experience (or lack there of), or their competence in military matters were adequate to prepare the Army for the realities of modern warfare. It is from this group that most of the justifications or rationalizations derive. One of the major excuses offered for military incompetence was the faulty education or poor class of the average recruit as if to exonerating the senior ranks of accountability. Some generals even went so far as to say that the Boers' shooting was not impressive, insinuating that Boer marksmanship was a product of volume of fire rather than accuracy. Defying reality, General Buller actually

³⁹ Cairnes, *Absentminded War*, pp.5-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5.

thought his men shot better!⁴¹ General Maurice Barton rationalized the supposed Boer superiority; “we gave them very good opportunities of shooting us and they gave us very few opportunities of shooting at them.”⁴² This statement reveals just how slim a grasp of tactics and battlefield planning that British senior officers actually possessed.

Some senior officers also believed the British soldier had problems coming to terms with the Boers’ reluctance to fight pitched battles. “At first Atkins is rather loath to take cover ‘as per drill book’ thinking it not quite a fair way of fighting. He soon learns from bitter experience that it is a vital craft of modern warfare.”⁴³ In a written reply to Bloch’s lecture, Colonel F.J. Graves of the 83rd Regimental District stated that “I take it that the Boer fights personally to prevent his foe getting at him. The Britisher, I am proud to believe, fights with the view of getting at his foe.”⁴⁴ General Charles Warren, who had commanded British forces at Spion Kop also noted how “the whole traditions of the Army are against taking cover” and though while being an honorable notion, had little place in modern warfare. Warren attributed most of the early severe British losses to the Tommies’ inability to respond to the circumstances and methods of modern irregular (as distinct from guerilla) warfare employed by the Boers.⁴⁵ Put more brutally by Cairnes, “They (the Boers) could read the skies and sounds of the veldt, a sealed book to our town-bred Tommies. They fought to slay, not to display their heroism; they had no illusions about seeking cover, an illusion which I am glad has been killed in our service by Boer bullets.”⁴⁶

⁴¹ Buller, “Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,” p.212.

⁴² Barton, “Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,” p.250.

⁴³ James Milne, *The Epistles of Atkins* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1901), p.65.

⁴⁴ Bloch, “The Transvaal war,” p.1425.

⁴⁵ Charles Warren, “Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,” p.226.

⁴⁶ Cairnes, *Absentminded War*, p.96.

Against such an enemy, many British commentators were unable to reconcile the conditions/experiences they had encountered in Africa with their perceived expectations of the battlefield. The Germans and Austrians also ascribed British failures to inferior or unrealistic training of the enlisted men, but emphasized a more pronounced deficiency in the training of officers. "The want of success of the English attacks was to be traced to defective arms and an inadequate training in shooting under battle conditions, and more especially to the unsatisfactory tactical training of the superior officers, whose lack of initiative and fear of taking responsibility became a by-word."⁴⁷ The British, too accustomed to dealing with "savages" in their colonial wars, had found themselves rudely surprised by the Boers. The British had utilized outmoded assault tactics, spending too much time crossing open ground, by volley firing, and employing close order formations. These tactics were not endorsed by German drill books. "The existing English 'Infantry Drill' of 1896 is in many respects similar to that of the German Army...It contains, however, some views and precepts which owing partly to their direct influence and partly to their one-sided or narrow-minded comprehension by leaders, must certainly share the blame of the failures."⁴⁸

It should be noted that the German observers clearly contrasted the defects of British system with German military virtues. Lt-Colonel E. Gunter of the German Army haughtily proclaimed in the *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* that "The English are still adherents of volley firing, which we Germans have given up years

⁴⁷ Balck, "Lessons of the Boer War and the Battle Workings of the Three Arms," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 48 (November, 1904), p.1276.

⁴⁸ Lt-Colonel E. Gunter, "A German View of British Tactics in the Boer War," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 45 (July-December, 1901), p.801

ago.”⁴⁹ This attitude was pervasive throughout the German officer corps whose General Staff’s history of the war theorized that the British approach to frontal attacks was unlikely to achieve success unless it was “executed according to German regulations.”⁵⁰ The Germans particularly criticized the apparent British reluctance to employ proper open formations when approaching known enemy positions. This claim can be born out by General Fitzroy Hart’s decision to deploy his whole brigade for assault in closely packed columns at the battle of Colenso (Dec. 15, 1899). Not surprisingly, his brigade suffered at least half, if not more, of the 1,200 casualties sustained by Buller’s army that day. At Elandslaagte (Oct. 21, 1899), the 2nd Devonshires suffered 34 wounded and no dead while in open formation. But in that same battle, the Gordon Highlanders, operating in denser firing lines, suffered 106 killed and wounded.⁵¹

For many German observers then, the South African War only served to confirm what they had already known since the campaigns of 1866 and 1870/1871. “Nothing has transpired to change excepted principles of war. This war, like all those since 1870-71, only illustrates certain principles of action established in that war and in the Bohemian campaign of 1866.”⁵² The Germans were not alone in this assessment. Foch and his followers and British officer Col. F. N. Maude were proponents of this notion as well. Going against the grain, Count Sternberg stated that “While in the wars of the past an energetic offensive has led to victory, in wars of the future it will lead to destruction.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Gunter, “A German View of British Tactics in the Boer War,” p.802.

⁵⁰ Jay Stone and Erwin Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p.208.

⁵¹ Spiers, *Victorian Soldier in Africa*, p.161.

⁵² Gustavus Ratzenhofer, “A Retrospect of the War in South Africa,” *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 45 (Jan.-June, 1901), p.43.

⁵³ Count A. Sternberg, *My Experiences of the Boer War* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1901), p.211.

These were prophetic words for those who ignored the African experiences doomed a generation of young men in Flanders between 1914 and 1918.

The South African War presented the first real opportunity to experience the destructive qualities of the machine gun both in attack and defense modes. Unlike the Sudan campaign of 1898, both the British Army and their opposition possessed machine guns. Surprisingly, at least at senior levels, British accounts have more mention of the Vickers-Maxim 30mm automatic cannon (nicknamed “Pom Pom”). It fired one pound shells at a rate of one per second which made a distinctive sound, hence its nickname. Most accounts remarked on the relative ineffectiveness of the Pom Pom in terms of accuracy, though its psychological effects were considerable. One might question whether this attitude was affected nonchalance or merely English understatement. One correspondent wrote “Our men shudder at the very sound, the moment they hear it; no wonder, for the accurate shooting accomplished with this murderous weapon is something fearful to see—men disemboweled, legs and arms carried away.”⁵⁴ Major Charles Callwell, author of the influential *Small Wars, Their Principles and Practice*, noted how in Boer hands the Pom Pom had rendered “appreciable mischief.”⁵⁵

At least the Pom-Pom made an impression. In a special committee on the machine gun and the Pom-Pom in 1901, the Chairman, General Neville Lyttleton (who commanded one of Buller’s brigades in Natal) neglected mentioning the machine gun altogether!⁵⁶ The machine gun was cumbersome to transport, especially in broken terrain. Its water cooling system froze at inopportune moments, and also presented a

⁵⁴ W.K.L. Dickson, *The Biograph in Battle, Its Story in the South African War Related With Personal Experiences* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995, Originally published London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1901), p.135.

⁵⁵ Callwell, *The Tactics of To=Day*, p.102.

⁵⁶ Tim Travers, “British Military Thought 1870-1915,” p.534.

large target, attracting an appreciable amount of Boer attention in the form of Mauser bullets. Part of this problem can be attributed to the indifferent handling or an inability to properly appreciate the machine gun's capabilities, resulting in an exposed weapon being set up too close to the Boers' positions.⁵⁷ The machine gun did prove its worth in attack and defense, as it had been instrumental in repelling some Boer mounted raids on isolated columns or convoys. Baden-Powell witnessed such an occasion at Hornies Nek when a British column had been attacked by a number of Boers. The escort would have been driven off had it not been for the presence of a Maxim gun which was utilized with "telling effect" forcing the assailants to speedily abandon their raid.⁵⁸

Some did note the machine gun's great potential for providing support fire for advancing infantry, an increasingly important notion if one wished to understand offensive action in the face of modern firepower. In the War Office's *Reports on Equipment from South Africa, Machine Guns, Cavalry, Mounted Infantry and Infantry* of 1901, General F. W. Kitchener noted that the machine gun's effects "could not be exaggerated", and would most likely dominate all considerations of attack. Kitchener added that "the lost opportunities, owing to neglect of proper tactical use of machine guns, was the most important lesson of the war."⁵⁹ Not very one was convinced of the Machine gun's worth. The well respected Major Charles Callwell stated that "It does not appear probable that machine guns will ever play a very great part in battle."⁶⁰ The next fourteen years would continue to be a period of lost opportunities for the machine gun as

⁵⁷ Leo Amery, *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902* (London: Sampson Low, 1900-1909), vol. 3, p.490.

⁵⁸ Baden-Powell, *War in Practice*, p.262.

⁵⁹ Travers, "British Military Thought," p.535.

⁶⁰ Callwell, *Tactics of To-Day*, p.84.

Britain's military leadership struggled to come to terms to best utilize what it eventually called "a weapon of opportunity"⁶¹

The performance of the artillery on both sides prompted many observers to rethink the employment of this combat arm. The Boers impressed the British early by engaging targets at 4,000 to 6,000 yards, exceeding the British maximum range of 3,500 yards.⁶² The Boers also demonstrated the ability to utilize in the field guns previously thought to be too heavy for any use but for sieges. As a result, there was an immediate call in the British military for larger, heavier field guns and longer ranges of engagement. The increase in ranges of small arms fire necessitated a change in artillery placement. The British soon realized the importance of concealment and protection of gun positions. Properly digging in artillery and machine guns became standard practice while attempts at painting gun barrels and shields in disruptive patterns were initiated.⁶³

The actual effectiveness of the artillery came into question. Jean de Bloch characterized it as "absolutely contemptible" citing Paardeburg as a classic example. There 100 British guns had shelled Boer entrenchments for four days with accurate shrapnel and high explosive fire but the defenders lost just 179 men. In fact, the only case in which artillery proved truly destructive had been at Spion Kop where British troops were exposed on a small rocky position without entrenchments.⁶⁴ Count Sternberg's observations support these claims. He saw that preparatory bombardments were practically useless and the Boers did not take long in getting accustomed to the

⁶¹ Great Britain, War Office, *Infantry Training, 1914* (London: HMSO, 1914), P.201.

⁶² Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, p.84.

⁶³ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, p.88.

⁶⁴ Jean Bloch, "The Transvaal War," p.1344.

noise, in some cases even continuing on with coffee breaks in the midst of “vigorous” shelling.⁶⁵

In a good number of assaults involving lengthy preparatory bombardments, British infantry upon overrunning the Boer positions, usually came across nothing more than hastily discarded food and ammunition boxes, not the expected carnage and dead Boers. The British soldiers noted the quality of Boer entrenchments especially when compared to their own meager efforts.⁶⁶ Lt. D.G. Auchinleck of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers recorded how the British artillery fired at Boer positions prior to an assault expending 11,5000 rounds yet the Boers were only forced from their entrenchments after seven to eight hours of hard fighting.⁶⁷ In another engagement, Private L.J. Bryant of the same unit remarked how a “good hammering” failed to prevent the Boers from escaping.⁶⁸ While the ineffectiveness of preliminary bombardments had been widely noted, many observers like Callwell commented that despite the futility of bombardment, as long as the artillery could support attacking infantry by keeping the heads of the defenders down, it still had a place on the battlefield.⁶⁹

A universal observation made by observers and theorists concerned the inadequate performance of the British cavalry. The South African campaign had caught the British cavalry troopers wholly unprepared in terms of their training, weaponry, and

⁶⁵ Sternberg, *My Experiences of the Boer War*, pp.228-229. Sternberg actually advised against preparatory bombardments altogether as they were efforts in futility which only gave away the commander’s intentions to the enemy (p.247) This was something that happened with too much frequency during the First World War.

⁶⁶ Pamela Todd and David Fordham, *Private Tucker’s Boer War Diary. The Transvaal War of 1899, 1900, 1901, & 1902 with the Natal Field Forces* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1980), p.69 and Nicholas Riall, *Letters, Diaries, and Photographs of Malcolm Riall. The Letters, Diaries, and Photographs of Malcolm Riall From the War in South Africa* (London: Brassey’s, 2000), p.60.

⁶⁷ Dennis M. Cassidy and Martin Cassidy, *The Inniskilling Diaries, 1899-1903, 1st Battalion, 27th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in South Africa* (United Kingdom: Pen and Sword Books Limited, 2001), p.68.

⁶⁸ Cassidy, *The Inniskilling Diaries*, p.120.

⁶⁹ Callwell, *Tactics of To-Day*, pp.12-13.

tactics. The Cavalry was unprepared for the realities of modern warfare. As some regiments had virtually no training in the use of rifles, many British cavalry units found themselves in a rush to equip their troopers with carbines at the commencement of hostilities in 1899.⁷⁰ Their equipment was outdated and weighty, existing mainly for aesthetic purposes rather than serving any combat function. Remount availability was always a problem over the course of the entire war. While the Boers generally averaged two horses per man, the British barely maintained one, eventually working and starving as much as two thirds of their horses in South Africa to death.⁷¹

The British cavalry quickly became frustrated by the Boer habit of withdrawing before close contact could be made thus negating the primary shock mission for which the British had trained. Equally frustrating was another Boer habit, of dismounting from their horses once they found a suitable firing position and then proceeding to lay down a withering fire at long ranges. As a result, the British cavalry could not perform their other primary mission, reconnaissance, thanks to excessive casualties. Confidence in the cavalry diminished to such a point, that during the Natal operations, General Buller was forced to admit to the Austrian observer Captain von Trimmel, who was eyeing a group of British officers on a Kopje (small hill) with a large telescope, that “This is my reconnaissance. My cavalry patrols obtained no results other than fifty percent losses. So I resorted to naval telescopes: They bring equal results, but suffer no losses!”⁷² In another example of the apparent ineffectiveness of the British cavalry, an Australian war correspondent having commented to an ambulance orderly that “Boers being only part human,” was told that the Boers “will fire on the ambulances, They ‘ave no respect for

⁷⁰ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.94.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.93.

⁷² Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, p.193.

the 'elpless. They've even been known to fire on the cavalry."⁷³ During the action at Pieter's Hill (Feb. 27, 1900) where a bloody infantry assault was followed by the usual Boer mounted withdrawal, one British soldier present contemptibly mentioned how the British cavalry managed to stay safely behind their lines where they could not support the attack.⁷⁴ Count Sternberg concluded from his experience with the Boers that cavalry were "incapable of fulfilling its task" and had become more of an "encumbrance to the commander."⁷⁵

Matters were complicated by the large scale introduction of mounted infantry (M.I.) regiments in an attempt to counter the Boers' superiority in mobility. The regular cavalry units disdainfully dismissed these new M.I. regiments as inferior riders incapable of delivering anything resembling a proper charge. A heated and prolonged debate ensued over whether or not cavalry troopers should forget their lances and swords and concentrate on musketry training. Most observers saw the merits of equipping troopers with rifles but differed when it came to defining the line between regular cavalry and Mounted Infantry. Lord Dundonald, who commanded a cavalry brigade in Buller's Natal Army, listed being a "first class rifle shot" as his number one attribute for a cavalry trooper.⁷⁶

Colonel G.F.R. Henderson pushed for a new direction, taking its inspiration from the Confederate and Union cavalry regiments of the American Civil War. Not only did the American troopers ride well, but they charged home with the saber or had dismounted

⁷³ Barbara R. Penny, "Australia's Reactions to the Boer War-A Study in Colonial Imperialism," *The Journal of British Studies* 7, no.1. (November, 1967), p.104.

⁷⁴ Todd and Fordham, *Private Tucker's Boer War Diary*, pp.78-79. Tucker's account of the British cavalry waiting behind their own lines for an opportunity to join in is all too similar to the numerous instances yet to be played out throughout 1914-1918.

⁷⁵ Sternberg, *My Experiences of the Boer War*, p.234.

⁷⁶ Major Gen. C. E. Webber, "Army Reform Based on Some 19th Century Lessons in Warfare," In *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 45 Part 1 (January/June, 1901), p.389.

and had become creditable infantry.⁷⁷ The disruptive raids behind enemy lines conducted by the likes of J.E.B. Stuart presented another way in which the cavalry could still remain a relevant force on the modern battle field.⁷⁸ On the other hand, Major General C. E. Webber, writing on army reform in the *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, declared the actual term “cavalry” as “obsolete as descriptive of an ‘arm of the Service.’ Its usefulness as a title could only be justified by its antiquity, and it cannot compete with that of *mounted rifleman*.”⁷⁹

Bloch, however, did not even have room for disruptive raids in his theories. The cavalry had lost its traditional roles in the face of long range rifle, machine gun, and artillery fire. The “thorough reconnaissance of the enemy’s position can only be the business of scouts working on foot...we must eliminate all cavalry charges, as far as the scheme of attack is concerned.” Even the advantage of mobility in outflanking maneuvers was cancelled out by the constricted nature of any possible European theatre of operations excepting perhaps Russia. Cavalry’s only real principle service was for quick marches.⁸⁰ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle concurred, insisting that “There was, outside artillery, only one weapon in the world, the magazine rifle, and that the only place for swords, lances, and revolvers was in a museum.”⁸¹ Ian Hamilton too regarded the sword and lance as “medieval toys” when compared to the rifle though he admitted the sword’s encouragement value.⁸²

⁷⁷ Henderson, *Science of War*, p.55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁷⁹ Webber, “Army Reform,” p.392.

⁸⁰ Balck, “Lessons of the Boer War,” p.1343.

⁸¹ Stone and Schimidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.109.

⁸² Ian Hamilton, “Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,” p.111.

Douglas Haig, the future Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in the First World War, advised improved musketry training based on his experiences on the veldt. But he also pointed out that Boer General Smuts admitted that the Boers would have been more “prudent in the face of British cavalry ready to charge with the *arm blanche*.”⁸³ In his diary, Haig noted with satisfaction how a unit of New Zealand cavalry - “a sensible lot of men dressed like the Boers” - who did not carry swords or lances were made by the commanding General to use their carbines with bayonets fixed as lances.⁸⁴ Colonel J. B. Dickson, a cavalry commander in South Africa, went even further on this point indicating how the lack of proper cavalry prevented the Boers from capitalizing on their successes while the fear of the *arme blanche* “paralysed their initiative”⁸⁵

Perhaps, on account of being a cavalry officer himself, Haig - and many others - still saw the value of training cavalry for shock attacks, a role it had practiced for since Napoleonic times. The rationale behind this adherence to clearly outdated tactics lay to a large degree in the concept of movement in attack, a theme which would dominate the “cult of the offensive”. Passive defense was believed to be useless without the ability to mount decisive counter-attacks. In this context, many believed that cavalry more than capable of performing its traditional duties. “Without attack no scouting is possible” wrote Major Balck.⁸⁶ Even Henderson and Hamilton held on to the belief that cavalry still could function in its traditional shock role. Though admitting that shock tactics were rendered obsolete by modern conditions, Callwell recognized the potential in having

⁸³ Douglas Haig, “Royal Commission on the War in South Africa,” p.411.

⁸⁴ Douglas Scott ed., *Douglas Haig. The Preparatory Prologue 1861-1914. Diaries and Letters* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2006), p.148.

⁸⁵ Webber, “Army Reform,” p.414.

⁸⁶ Balck, “Lessons of the Boer War,” p.1405.

mobile cavalry carrying out flanking movements.⁸⁷ These assumptions rested on the existence of room in which cavalry could maneuver, not a likely characteristic of future European battlefields already studded with fortifications⁸⁸ by the turn of the century. Echoing his British contemporaries, Balck also pointed out that as Boers were not regular cavalry but mounted infantry, any lessons taken from the British cavalry's experience in fighting such unconventional foes would find little practical application on the continent.

In the meantime, the matter was put to rest by the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Field Marshall Roberts. Roberts made it known that he was in favour of increasing the musketry training of his cavalry regiments while trying to discourage the further training in sword and lance. As Roberts noted, "Cavalry has never been able to beat staunch infantry except by surprise, and now it is almost impossible for cavalry to approach near enough to the enemy's firing line to effect a surprise, except under unusually advantageous conditions of the ground."⁸⁹ Roberts also stated that in the future, "cavalry will generally act dismounted but that small bodies, such as brigades, regiments, and squadrons, may effect surprises against all arms by making use of shock tactics."⁹⁰ Though Robert's views did not always reflect future British High Command attitudes towards cavalry, they imparted a slightly more realistic approach in training. Thus, the British Army was the first major army to adopt rifles rather than carbines or revolvers as official weaponry for its cavalry, and the only army to do so before 1914.

⁸⁷ Callwell, *Tactics of To-day*, pp.18-19. The last stages of the first, or conventional phase of the war were characterized by large flanking/turning movements of established Boer positions of massed British cavalry. In this way, the Boers were turned out of successive prepared defenses though with very little loss due to the fact that the Boers were still far more mobile than the heavily equipped British troopers.

⁸⁸ Verdun, Metz, Liege, and pretty much the whole Alsace-Lorraine/Vosges frontier.

⁸⁹ Field Marshall Roberts, "Cavalry Armament. Memorandum by the Commander-in-Chief," In *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 48, Part 2 (July/December, 1904), p.577.

⁹⁰ Roberts, "Cavalry Armament," p.580.

The lessons to be derived from the war in South Africa and the not too recent Omdurman campaign did not easily translate into effective action on part of the British Army or Parliament. The divergence of opinions and interpretations were such that any comprehensive effort aimed at reform was bound to suffer from being too compromised to affect a widespread lasting impression. Furthermore, tradition within the Army as well as long standing personal rivalries and feuding cliques also had a hand in preventing the implementation of reform and the advancement of key personnel who might have made a difference.⁹¹ During this period, prodigious effort was spent on examining possible lessons and publishing countless essays and lectures, but very little of any real use came of it. Having said all this, changes did manage to find their way into the 1902 and 1905 training manuals. Entrenchment policies as endorsed by Baden-Powell appeared in the 1905 edition⁹² as did the beginnings of sound machine gun tactics. In fact, the importance of firepower was officially recognized. Success in an attack was “only to be attained by fire at decisive range” or “via supporting fire.”⁹³ It became understood that reaching this decisive range⁹⁴ would be a “long and difficult operation”⁹⁵ There was also the realization that not just accuracy of fire but volume counted for much. At least in a defensive posture, units were urged not to worry about ammunition expenditure.⁹⁶ The increased range of modern weaponry was acknowledged by the adoption of open

⁹¹ Throughout the later half of the 19th Century, the British Army was subject to an ongoing feud between the African clique of Generals - Wolseley, Buller & co. - and the India clique (Roberts, Kitchener, Haig, & friends). Each group had their champions and their prodigies. To a large extent, the South African War settled the feud though its adverse effects were still felt within the British Officer Corps even in 1914 and 1915.

⁹² Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1905* (London: HMSO, 1905), pp.157-158.

⁹³ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1902* (London: HMSO, 1902), pp.193-194.

⁹⁴ Decisive range was 600 meters or less from the objective. Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1902*, p.195.

⁹⁵ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1905*, p.86.

⁹⁶ Wasteful expenditure of ammunition by modern weapons, especially machine guns was one of the primary arguments of those opposed to the widespread use of machine guns right up to 1914.

skirmish formations (6-20 paces apart) at a much longer range as well as advising officers to dismount, even at extreme ranges.⁹⁷

These changes were recognized primarily amongst the lower ranks as they mostly affected the lower ranks and NCOs. These men realized that trenches, magazine fed rifles, smokeless gunpowder, and quick-firing artillery all had the same effects no matter where they were used, a fact that was to a large degree, lost on many senior officers. Again, the argument that the South African terrain was different and in no way reflective of what conditions in Europe would be like still held much currency with senior military minds.

To a considerable extent, the experts were correct in their declarations that the South African and Sudanese theatres of operations were very different than the European continent. Change of locale did not alter however, the realities of modern warfare and the lessons painfully learned remained valid to those that remembered them.

Unfortunately, barely a handful of far-sighted individuals were able or willing to appreciate this fact. As time passed, especially after 1905 with the experiences of the Russo-Japanese War and the rising profile of the 'Cult of the Offensive', the voices of these individuals would fall upon deaf ears as the Anglo-Boer War receded from immediate memory and become just another one of Callwell's "Small Wars".⁹⁸ Perhaps the Gordon Highlander present at the battle of Paardeburg Drift was a little hasty if not thoroughly ironic when he uttered; "Our Generals have learnt their lesson in the harsh

⁹⁷ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1902*, pp.192-196.

⁹⁸ Which actually happened in the 3rd edition of Callwell's famous book *Small Wars. Their Principles*

school of adversity. The dangers attending misdirected strategy and antiquated tactics have been recognized.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa*, p.174.

4) Morale Decline of Empire...What Have We Come To?

A nation is never a nation
Worthy of pride or place
Till the mothers have sent their firstborn
To look death in the field in the face ¹

“Be Prepared to die for your country if need be; so that when the moment arrives you may charge home with confidence, not caring whether you are going to be killed or not.”²

By 1905, the lessons of the Anglo-Boer War were proving short lived as the war receded in peoples' memory. Some military reform had been made but these would in turn be diluted in the coming years. Efforts to reform the cavalry, using the success of the mounted infantry units as inspiration, worked only as long as the aging Field Marshal Roberts, one the few heroes to emerge from the South African campaign and champion of such reform, was still in uniform. His presence ensured that younger and up and coming officers like Douglas Haig and John French - cavalry officers who were not at all happy to see the rifle replace the lance and the sword - would be hard-pressed to undo all of Robert's work.³ The Army training manuals which had undergone some revision in 1902 and 1905 were altered significantly in a regressive manner by 1909. Much of the impetus for reform became mired in government initiatives aimed at disseminating the possible lessons of the war, most notably, the Royal Commission of the War in South

¹Barbara R. Penny, “Australia's Reactions to the Boer War-A Study in Colonial Imperialism,” *The Journal of British Studies* 7, no.1. (November, 1967), p.101.

²Baden-Powell, Robert, *Scouting for Boys. A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship Original 1908 Edition*. Edited with an introduction and notes by Elleke Boehmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.292.

³Haig and French were two of the main opponents of Robert's reform efforts which included the issuing of Lee-Enfield rifles to cavalry troopers and the withdrawing of the lance as official cavalry armament in 1904. Edwards Spiers, “Between the South African War and the First World War, 1902-1914,” in *Big Wars and Small Wars. The British Army and the Lessons of War in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Hew Strachan (London: Routledge, 2006), p.28.

Africa in 1903⁴ or through incessant debate among various cliques within Government and the military establishment itself. By 1905, it seemed as though the British Army was willing to take some rather large steps backwards in terms of strategic and tactical approaches to the solution of the relevant military issues of the day. British Army infantry tactics began to emulate those found in the French or German militaries. Long extended skirmish lines increasingly gave way to more densely packed formations where movement and élan were valued over taking cover and rifle marksmanship. The training of the cavalry featured more emphasis on shock tactics as the lance was reintroduced as primary armament forsaking the dismounted rifle training advocated after the Boer War.

What forces were prompting this reversion? The fact that the British Army was a very conservative and traditional minded institution (like other armies in Europe) which displayed a remarkable resilience to new ideas does not altogether explain this shift in thinking. There were other factors which influenced not only the majority of senior officers but the nation as well. In a broader context it is worth noting that the cultural and social nature of Great Britain and its empire played a major role. Here, the nature of Victorian/Edwardian society featuring the elites' properties such as those of honour, masculinity, and duty (among others) all had a considerable part in the formation the character of the officer class. Major components of this formation included the role of the Empire, the general excitement and concerns attending the period of high imperialism, the militarization of public school curriculum, and the attachment of British sports ethic and gamesmanship to the education of the elites which subsequently spread into the military and administrative aspects of the empire as it was realized that the team

⁴ Other examples included the Royal Commission on Machine Guns 1902.

sports ethic learned in schools prepared the graduate for life in the service of empire.⁵ In addition, there existed the desire of the upper class to maintain the order and hierarchy of Victorian society in the face of progress (read: CHANGE) both scientific and social.⁶ They would do this armed with a rough sense of Social Darwinism that not only confirmed the superiority of their class over the rest, but justified their empire, their right to rule the “savage peoples” within the empire, and the belief that Britons were superior to the other nations of Europe.⁷

Alongside these broad cultural and social factors, in the post Boer War period the practical lessons of modern firepower and tactics were progressively overshadowed by two primary streams of thinking. First was the ‘cult of the offensive’, rapidly gaining momentum fueled by the events in Manchuria during 1904/1905 and new Continental attitudes towards the strategic importance of the offensive. The second stream was represented by the pervasive threats to Britain and its dominions posed by the serious malaise afflicting its citizens and the Empire writ large. After all, who really wanted to hear about how brutal the experience of the infantrymen had been made by machine guns and trench warfare when the peoples’ imagination had been captured by the prospect of how Britain stood to lose all its Imperial and European prestige, things it had struggled for in the last century? If Britain continued on its current trajectory, its possessions and prestige could pass into the hands of colonial rivals. The primary issues of importance

⁵ J.A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), p.18.

⁶ Martin J. Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.9-10. Martin Wiener refers to this maintenance as a “culture of containment.”

⁷ Edward Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army 1868-1902* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp.184-186. J.A. Mangan outlines how the games ethic could also be tied in here as a “derivative source of sacrifice” and a “Manifestation of the moral supremacy of the white Motherland and her dominions over black, brown and yellow ‘races’,” Mangan, *Games Ethic and Imperialism*, p.51.

here, were those dealing with the ability of Britain and its empire to defend itself. The maintenance of the Empire required its citizens to be of the right frame of mind and body.

At the root of the perceived failings of the Empire and indeed, the difficulties the British military had in appreciating/comprehending its experiences in the Omdurman and South African campaigns was an ongoing clash between the traditional Victorian outlook on life and empire and the realities of a mechanized world ushered in by the Industrial Revolution. Martin J. Weiner, author of *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, describes this paradox as “progress versus nostalgia.”⁸ Late Victorian society celebrated the achievements of the individual, personal bravery, rigid class structure/hierarchy, and also embraced a mentalite of racial superiority which achieved its ultimate expression in the ideology of Social Darwinism.⁹ It must be added that this instance of doubt and an inability to reform was also a part of a larger European process. In *War and Society in Europe 1870-1970*, Brian Bond found that the same concept of an idyllic world “greatly preferable to urban, industrial society” existed in most of the other European nations as well.¹⁰

The principles of Social Darwinism were applied on many levels in Britain. On a personal level, it sanctioned the institutional superiority of the upper class and its right to reap the full benefits of its social standing. Social Darwinism was also employed in an imperial context as a justification for the continuing expansion of European colonial empires. The reasoning behind this logic was the idea that major European powers possessed a God given right augmented by their advanced culture and technology, to rule

⁸ Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*, p.6.

⁹ John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p.80.or in *The Late Victorian Army*, Edward Spiers covers how Social Darwinism was applied in a variety of contexts, be it class, racial, or political. pp.184-186.

¹⁰ Brian Bond, *War and Society in Europe 1870-1970* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1983), p.97.

less advanced peoples. Furthermore, the governing of inferior races and cultures became not just their right but their moral duty. An Australian politician put it quite bluntly, “I believe it is one of the laws of nature—a predestination—that the better type of humanity should displace the lower type.”¹¹

In the British Army, from the highest ranked General down to the lowly private, there existed a widespread sense of racial and moral superiority over non-Europeans (and some Europeans as well) and a corresponding obligation to bring the numerous benefits of advanced civilization to lesser peoples, even if this meant their (the lesser peoples’) sometimes violent subjugation and eradication.¹² The imperialist drive was given justification through this racism and its proof was found in the fact that Europeans possessed advanced technology in the form of modern weapons, most notably the machine gun, with which to carry it through.¹³

Within the context of this rough but readily applicable Social Darwinism, it was possible while covering the Omdurman campaign for the correspondent William Theobald Maud, who fervently backed the righteousness of Kitchener’s cause, to write that “The Sirdar’s army has year by year pushed back the savage Dervish rule along the Valley of the Nile, and brought to its suffering inhabitants the blessings of peace and civilization.”¹⁴ Another correspondent, G. W. Steevens, spoke of the filth of Khartoum; “The reek of its abominations steamed up to justify us of our vengeance” and that British

¹¹ Penny, “Australia’s Reactions to the Boer War,” p.103.

¹² Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army*, pp.184-185. See also Steevens and other contemporary correspondents as well as soldiers’ diaries whose accounts provide ample insight into this racial and moral superiority.

¹³ Daniel R. Headrick, “The Tools of Imperialism: Technology and Expansion of European Colonial Empires in the Nineteenth Century,” *The Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 2 Technology and War. (June, 1979), p.249.

¹⁴ Peter Harrington and Frederic A. Sharf eds., *Omdurman 1898: Eyewitnesses Speak. The British Conquest of the Sudan as Described by Participants in Letters, Diaries, Photos, and Drawings* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998), p.17.

victory would bring for the Sudan “immunity from rape and torture and every extreme of misery.”¹⁵ At the same time, Lt. Hamilton Hodgson of The Lincolnshire Regiment looked forward to an upcoming battle with the Dervishes, referring it as “partridge shooting”¹⁶ A year later a British cavalry officer likened chasing down Boers as “most excellent pig sticking”¹⁷

It is not surprising to find the hunting reference here as the British elite ruling class, especially the officer component, was consumed with a passion for hunting. Celebrated in such works as R.S.S. Baden Powell’s *Sport in War* (1897), the hunt represented many things to the late Victorians and Edwardians. In his book *The Pleasures of the Past* (1989), David Cannadine relates how the elite class’ enthusiasm for shooting staggering numbers of wildlife was manifested itself in their obsession with food as a symbol of virility. These preoccupations with killing and hunting eventually found their way from the grouse moors of Scotland to the killing fields of Flanders.¹⁸

In their article “‘Pig-Sticking is the Greatest Fun’: Martial Conditioning on the Hunting Fields of Empire”, Callum McKenzie and J.A. Mangan cite the careers of such individuals as Frederick Courtney Selous and Major-General A.E. Waldrop as perfect examples of this preoccupation with hunting as a metaphor for manliness. The authors also note the effect that these and other like minded adventurers had on literature. A great many books and magazines were filled with their “laconic accounts of the thrill of

¹⁵ G.W. Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum* (Blackwood: Edinburgh, 1898), pp.301, 324.

¹⁶ Scharf, *Omdurman 1898*, p.79.

¹⁷ Steve Atteridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture. Civil and Military Worlds* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.106.

¹⁸ David Cannadine, *The Pleasures of the Past* (London: Fontana, 1990), pp.235-236.

hunting big game.¹⁹ Like Cannadine, Mangan and McKenzie bring sport and war together, “The dangerous pursuit of big game by the officer-hunter served as harbinger of sterner tests on the battlefields.”²⁰ For the officer class, hunting, particularly pig sticking, was not only endorsed as training for war it also had a hand in maintaining imperial identity and confirming their Social Darwinist views. Hunting was symbolic of British Imperial dominance, the officer hunters proclaiming “the prestige of the race” and “their acknowledged leadership as men.”²¹ Many defenders of the British Army following its poor performance in the South African War reasoned that the officers’ penchant for the sport had “stiffened up the Army for the Boer War.”²² Carried even further, hunting served to confirm Victorian military and social divisions and further maintained their position in the British social hierarchy.²³ Field Marshall Garnet Wolsely, one the most successful British generals during the nineteenth century, reasoned that the officers’ leadership traits originated from such masculine and noble qualities as their “innate love of sport and adventure” and “frequent practice in war,” concluding that the “British officer is by birth and education the natural leader of the British private.”²⁴

During the course of Britain’s many later nineteenth century African colonial wars, racism and technological superiority allowed British soldiers to distance themselves from their adversaries and de-humanize them to a considerable extent. Sudanese and Somali dead became “piles of heaps or lumps”, words never used to describe British casualties. Instead, one typically finds British casualties listed hierarchically; x amount

¹⁹ J.A. Mangan and Callum McKenzie, “Pig-Sticking is the Greatest Fun’: Martial Conditioning on the Hunting Fields of Empire,” In *Militarism, Sport, Europe: War Without Weapons*, ed. J.A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003), pp.97-99.

²⁰ Mangan and McKenzie, “Pig-Sticking is the Greatest Fun,” p.98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.100.

²² *Ibid.*, p.112.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.100.

²⁴ Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p.112.

of officers killed (sometimes with a short bio in the newspaper), x wounded, other ranks killed and wounded, colonial troop losses, then an approximate number of native casualties. This hierarchical listing served to attach a greater value to white lives, especially those of the officer class.²⁵ Indeed, Britons were class-bound even in death. In the *Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (1993), David Cannadine explores class hierarchy in great detail, revealing how traditional hierarchical distinctions and attitudes were expressed in rank, order, station, and class. Industrialization only added more hierarchies.²⁶ To Cannadine, this sense of class hierarchy was so strong that it played a considerable role in the lack of wide scale reception of Karl Marx's writings, with criticism originating from "across the political spectrum."²⁷ In this atmosphere, it would not be surprising to see this hierarchy carried on into death.²⁸

Throughout this process, the actual impact of the effects of rifles and machine guns was reduced to the point where their potential effect on European foes would come into question. European troops, it was thought in the late 1890s, would never charge en masse against well prepared positions armed with machine guns in the manner the Dervishes had at Omdurman. As Sgt. Harris of the Grenadier Guards wrote about that experience; "It was a contest of science against savagery and science must gain."²⁹ This was only because the Dervishes were "ignorant" of "civilised warfare." The fact that

²⁵ Glenn R. Wilkinson, *Depictions and Images of War in Edwardian Newspapers, 1899-1914* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p.121 and Churchill, "The River War," p.19??.

²⁶ David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.107.

²⁷ Cannadine, *Rise and Fall of Class*, pp.118-119.

²⁸ Indeed Cannadine perceived that all strata of Victorian society were seemingly obsessed with death and prone to especially extravagant funerary and mourning customs. These customs were seen as more of an assertion of status and consumption rather than dealing with sorrow. David Cannadine, "War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain," in *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death*, ed. Joachim Whaley (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), pp.190-191.

²⁹ Major John Harris ed. "The Nile Expedition of 1898 and Omdurman-The Diary of Sergeant S. W. Harris, Grenadier Guards." In *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 78 (2000), p.23.

11,000 Dervishes were mowed down with virtual mechanical precision at Omdurman and that their example might provide an indication of what fate awaited any European army foolhardy enough to emulate the Dervish tactics resonated in very few minds.

Instead, attention turned to the sensational and heroic aspects of the campaign. Accounts by correspondents like G. W. Steevens and Winston Churchill³⁰ and that of *The Times* of the battle of Omdurman glorified the useless/superfluous charge and subsequent mauling of the 21st Lancers. ‘Thomas Atkins’, the true hero of these campaigns gradually became the stereotypical hooligan of popular imagery evoked in contemporary songs and poetry by the likes of Rudyard Kipling. This imagery could also be associated with the negative aspects of the British government’s overly aggressive imperialist exploitation as well as with elements of lower class culture which some people might have construed as a threat to national identity and the Empire in general.³¹ This returns us to the “progress versus nostalgia” conflict considered earlier in this chapter. It is here that the lower ranks found themselves part of the broader implication of technology as produced by industrialization. What was a novel about this experience for the British soldier was the sheer magnitude and scale of death that the machine gun and modern warfare elicited/produced. In a sense, the British soldier during the last two decades of the eighteenth century had been functioning as sort of a barometer of the state of the nation, reviled in times of peace but very much appreciated in times of crises.

The logical progression of industrialization was the application of Social Darwinism to the arena of European diplomacy where, as Edward Spiers in his book *The*

³⁰ Churchill’s thrilling escape from Boer captivity in the early months of the South African War provided the British public not only an entertaining account but also served as a much needed tonic following the initial reverses of the campaign.

³¹ Atteridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture*, pp.70-71.

Late Victorian Army reveals, war became the “ultimate test of national power”³² and the concept of survival of the fittest relating to the nation possessed of the best spirit and best technology. Unfortunately, advanced technology came to be viewed more in national patriotic terms of convenience, making wars shorter as opposed to protracted and nastier. The reality was far worse as wars degenerated into siege-like trench warfare operations while national will, patriotism, and the morale fiber of its manhood remained the primary determinants of ultimate victory.³³ This remained true even throughout the First World War as the participants endured casualties on the most appalling scale while waiting for their opponents’ faith and morale crack first. By the late 1890s, Darwinism had become “misinterpreted as the survival of the most belligerent rather than as the most adaptable.”³⁴

The Industrial Revolution, in part, can be characterized by de-humanized mass production, an emergence of technology over man, that threatened the established social hierarchy and that manifested itself in the impersonal, automatic, almost production-line like killing properties of modern weaponry, principally the machine gun. Contrary to current military thought, industrialization had ensured that war became more of a costly contest where greater resources of men and material³⁵ could most likely determine victors, though the likely prohibitive cost in lives meant that the victorious parties would

³² Spiers, *Late Victorian Army*, p.185.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.185-186.

³⁴ J.A. Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School. The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.136.

³⁵ Grant’s Wilderness campaign in 1864 and the following battles from Cold Harbour to the siege of Petersburg (1864/65) are textbook examples of a contest of greater resources. Grant knew he had more men and material than Lee so for him, it was only a matter of reducing the Confederate Army to a point where it was no longer capable of resistance. Though the price in lives was very high, Grant stood vindicated at Appomattox. Russell F. Weigley, “American Strategy from its Beginnings through the First World War,” In *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp.433-435.

be in almost as much of a reduced state as the losers. In *The Future of War* Bloch foresaw not just wholesale slaughter on the battlefield but an almost complete breakdown of the economic capacities of the warring nations and an inevitable³⁶ convulsion of their respective social orders. Accompanying the horrors was the dehumanizing nature of war. Soldiers were no longer individual men but had become 'rifles'.³⁷

The process of industrial development also precipitated uncomfortable associations with the working class, unions, lower class groupings in general, and socialist ideals. These perceived associations along with what Martin Weiner identifies as an inherent distrust or suspicion of progress caused the British upper classes in Britain to react violently against the Industrial Revolution. As he notes in his contentious thesis work, "The English nation even became ill at ease enough with its prodigal progeny to deny its legitimacy by adopting a conception of Englishness that virtually excluded industrialism."³⁸ Another factor feeding upper classes anxiety had been the noticeable indifference by the lower and working classes when it came to being for or against the South African War. This we can agree with since responses like enlisting by the working classes stemmed more from a financial need rather than any patriotic sense of duty which would more likely have been the case with middle and upper class Britons.³⁹

By the turn of the century then nostalgia was triumphing over progress. The conflict had created an upper class steeped in fading feudalism, reactionary to anything connected with progress, and embarrassed of its greatest success, the Industrial

³⁶ Jean de Bloch, *The Future of War in its Technical, Economic, and Political Relations* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1972, originally published in London, 1899), pp.347-356.

³⁷ 'Rifles' was a common term in manuals and officers' memoirs even being used by correspondents like G.W. Steevens' in *With Kitchener to Khartum*, p.15.

³⁸ Weiner, *English Culture*, p.5. It should be noted that the thesis of his book is still controversial.

³⁹ Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class. Working-Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899-1902* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp.239-242.

Revolution.⁴⁰ Its victory ensured that a conservative minded officer corps would not only misinterpret or ignore the valuable lessons learned in South Africa and the Sudan, but that the British ruling elites would do so as well, channeling their energies into a different set of priorities. Even British lower classes appeared caught up in the rhetoric and jingoism of empire, preferring to read or hear about heroes like Gordon of Khartoum, Baden-Powell, and celebrating Mafeking Day or the glorious charge of the 21st Lancers at Omdurman. This atmosphere presented a great challenge to any comprehensive understanding of the British military's experience in Africa and the implementation of meaningful reform.

Great emphasis was attached to improved education of officers and enlisted ranks as a step towards rectifying the general situation. G. F. R. Henderson was appalled at the quality of education available, finding few incentives in the present system for officers to increase their knowledge or intellect.⁴¹ Leo Amery echoed these sentiments in his *The Problem of the Army* (1903), writing that "At present there can be little doubt that the ordinary officer loses rather than gains in intelligence and initiative with every year in the service."⁴² Amery saw enlisted recruits as mentally and physically unfit, far below national average, possessing little or no initiative for if he did, the recruit would have found "more profitable employment".⁴³ Amery also noted that even the average enlisted recruit would be far more effective if possessed of 'general intelligence' enhancing his basic training leading Amery to conclude that perhaps a "better class of men" should be sought for the ranks. Amery also suggested that a better educated recruit was more

⁴⁰ Weiner, *English Culture*, p.5.

⁴¹ G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War. A Collection of Essays and Lectures, 1892-1903* Neil Malcolm ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1905), pp.406-407.

⁴² L.S. Amery, *The Problem with the Army* (London: E. Arnold, 1903), p.199.

⁴³ Amery, *Problem with the Army*, p.184.

inclined to keep himself in a healthier physical state as well as being prone to an increased patriotic and military spirit.⁴⁴ Improved education also meant increased patriotism and general health of the lower ranks. Amery identified the decrease in the nation's agricultural population, the corresponding rise among those crowding in urban slums, the people ravaged by tuberculosis, syphilis, and the effects of intemperance as major obstacles to be overcome in order to make an army worthy of the Empire.⁴⁵ Likewise, for Lord Baden-Powell, the challenges were "the decline of good citizenship and the want of energetic patriotism."⁴⁶

However, education did not always necessarily indicate a predominance of academics. By the late 1890s public schools had seemingly transformed from "institutions of scholarship" to institutions increasingly occupied with the "formation of character" and the introduction of militaristic notions through contemporary literature and sports.⁴⁷ Sports, especially team sports such as football or cricket, were increasingly seen as ideal vehicles, in which to promote discipline, patriotism, and character development, eventually forming the perfect leadership material that would to maintain the prominent position and status of the British Empire.⁴⁸ In arguing for a quality over quantity approach to Army reform, General Ian Hamilton recognized the value of sports; "The fondness of our officers for sports, such as hunting, polo, and shooting, assists them a good deal in such matters, for it must be remembered that war itself is, after all, a game,

⁴⁴ Amery, *Problem with the Army*, pp.186-187.

⁴⁵ Leo Amery, *Union and Strength: A Series of Papers on Imperial Quest* (London: E. Arnold, 1912), p.207

⁴⁶ Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, p.296.

⁴⁷ Wilkinson, *Depictions and Images of War in Edwardian Newspapers*, p.7.

⁴⁸ Veitch, "Play Up! Play Up! and Win the War!" Football, the Nation and the First World War 1914-1915," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20, no.3 (July, 1985), p.364.

just like any other game,” adding that fifty “sporting” officers on horse or foot could equal the efforts of 300 average soldiers.⁴⁹

There also existed an underlying traditional abhorrence of academics in the officer corps not to mention the upper classes. As early as 1857 Sir John Burgoyne writing about Army reform, identified two sets of boys to be found at a public school; one group applied themselves in academic studies while the other excelled in cricket, football, and boating. Of the two, Burgoyne readily preferred the second group as much better officer material.⁵⁰ In 1872, in an article entitled *Modern Athleticism*, W. Turley suggested that “a nation of effeminate, enfeebled bookworms scarcely forms the most effective bulwark of a nation’s liberties.”⁵¹ In fact, so few officers were able or were actually encouraged to indulge in military writing that of articles and books on military subject matter published in 1900, 50% came from Germany, 25% from France, while a partly 1% originated from Great Britain⁵²

Within the officer corps, the public school ethos of games and fair play loomed large as did perceptions of masculinity, honour, and conduct. One’s skill on the cricket field or the rugby pitch counted for more than good grades. Sports, particularly amateur sports were deemed better suited in instilling the qualities demanded of a member of the social elite, which included character, courage, pluck, patriotism, and the organizational sense of playing for the team. Professor Colin Veitch also adds that “regulation of sports brought with it an appreciation for order, good form and fair play.”⁵³ The sense of fair

⁴⁹ Amery, *Problem with the Army*, pp.236-237.

⁵⁰ Veitch, “Play Up and Win the War!,” p.365.

⁵¹ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p.189.

⁵² Jay Stone and Erwin Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p.12.

⁵³ Veitch, “Play Up and Win the War!,” p.365.

play was so ingrained that even Captain William Cairnes, while bemoaning the intellectual qualities of British officers finds some comfort in the notion that “if our army does not breed great generals, it at least breeds honest gentlemen.”⁵⁴ A true gentleman did not overly trouble himself with more mundane, even feminine academic pursuits:

“What in the world is the use of a creature
All flabbily bent on avoiding the pitch,
Who wonders about, with a sob in each feature
Devising a headache, inventing a stitch?
There surely would be a quick end to my joy
If possessed of that monster – a feminine boy.”⁵⁵

This attitude is fairly representative of a widely held ambivalence or discomfort displayed by much of the upper/middle-class men in Britain concerning the apparent effeminate qualities associated with intelligence and intellect. J. A. Mangan, in his book *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, chronicles the development of this trend with many examples of the perceptions of intelligence and intellect and how it was more practical to “rely on action rather than ideas.”⁵⁶

“A pound of weight
With an empty pate
Is far more gain
Than a pound of brain.”⁵⁷

In a similar vein, Lord Robert Baden-Powell, the hero of Mafeking⁵⁸ outlined in his 1908 book, *Scouting for Boys. A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*, his solutions to the challenges faced by British youth. “Get the lads away from this” urged

⁵⁴ William Elliot Cairnes, *An Absentminded War* (London: J. Milne, 1901), p.183.

⁵⁵ Mangan, *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, p.189.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.189.

⁵⁸ Mafeking was one of three towns besieged by Boer forces in the early stages of the war (along with Ladysmith and Kimberly). Baden-Powell was the commander of the garrison which held out for 217 Days, effectively earning Baden-Powell hero status in a war notably short in such personages.

Baden-Powell and “teach them to be manly, to play the game whatever it may be, and not merely be onlookers and loafers.”⁵⁹ “Manliness”⁶⁰ can only be taught by men, and not by those who are half men, half old women.” In fact, Baden-Powell could not hide his utter disgust for those who preferred to watch a football game rather than participate. As he noted in *Scouting for Boys*, replete with an extensive catalogue of the stereo types of all that was wrong with British manhood at the turn of the century:

“ I yield to no one in enjoyment of the sight of those splendid specimens of our race...but my heart sickens at the reverse of the medal—thousands of boys and young men, pale, narrow-chested, hunched-up, miserable specimens, smoking endless cigarettes, numbers of them betting, all of them learning to be hysterical as they groan or cheer in panic unison with their neighbours—the worst sound of all being the hysterical scream of laughter that greets any little trip or fall of a player. One wonders whether this can be the same nation which had gained for itself the reputation of being a stolid, pipe-sucking manhood, unmoved by panic or excitement, and reliable in the tightest of places.”⁶¹

This indictment betrays, to a certain extent, Baden-Powell’s class consciousness. His concern was emblematic of the upper class’ apprehension over the emerging dominance of what used to be an elite preserve by working class professionals. In addition, professional football attracted so many of the lower classes, who Baden-Powell believed as degenerate and, in need of drilling and discipline as spectators, were seen as distracting that same group from their economic duty, and as a threat to the established social hierarchy.⁶²

Baden-Powell took the concept of gamesmanship even further. Someone who was not a good sportsman should be thought as insignificant; a cricketer or footballer

⁵⁹ Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, p.298.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.301.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.297-298.

⁶² R.W. Lewis, “‘Touched Pitch and Been Shockingly Defiled’: Football, Class, Social Darwinism and Decadence in England, 1880-1914,” In *Sport in Europe, Politics, Class, gender. The European Sports History Review – Volume 1*, ed. J.A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999), pp.130-133.

should not be thought of much unless they displayed martial qualities of scouting, shooting, and drilling. “That is the fellow who is going to be useful if England is attacked. I hope that before long every eleven, whether football or cricket, will also make itself a good eleven for shooting and scouting and therefore useful for defence of our King and country.”⁶³ In 1914, Baden-Powell still maintained this outlook, imploring British officers to instill in the minds of their men that “they are like bricks in a wall, or players in a football team: each has to be perfect and efficient, each has to adhere patiently to the rules and to play in his place and to play the game—not for his own advancement or glorification, but simply and solely that at all costs his side may win.”⁶⁴ Despite Baden-Powell’s assertions that he was not being militaristic, *Scouting for Boys* strove to address the decaying of the once magnificent Empire that had been brought to the fore by the South African War. If readers were unclear on this, the second part of the book’s title, *A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*, might have provided a better indication. All classes had to play their part in Baden-Powell’s diligent, disciplined, and determined vision of a reinvigorated Imperium.

Baden-Powell had indeed become seriously concerned about the state of the nation’s manhood and he was not alone in his convictions. A 1909 article, *Sport and Decadence* proposed that “race suicide is possible...it may be brought about by popular tendencies towards effeminacy and self-indulgence.”⁶⁵ Baden-Powell saw in the British Empire a strong parallel with that of the ancient Romans. The Roman Empire fell because Romans “gave up soldiering and manliness altogether”, paying others to do their

⁶³ Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, pp.283-284.

⁶⁴ R.S.S. Baden-Powell, *Quick Training For War* (London: Herbert Jenkins Limited, 1914), p.102.

⁶⁵ Lewis, “Touched Pitch and Been Shockingly Defiled,” p.122.

fighting and participating in sports, just as he observed was happening in Britain.⁶⁶ His fears were confirmed and compounded by emerging threats of Germany and the United States to Britain's ascendant global position, producing doubts concerning the economic and military strength of the Empire. Here he was not alone. In his book, *The Evolution on Infantry Tactics* (1905), Colonel F. N. Maude proposed that the nation's situation will not improve till its intelligence is "thoroughly and visibly aroused."⁶⁷ G. F. R.

Henderson, Leo Amery, and Ian Hamilton and others also identified this problem but their scope of view tended to lie within the context of the British military usually from the outlook of one of the privileged classes.

Where Baden-Powell stood out was in going beyond the military and attacking the issue through the preparation of Britain's young boys to become "good citizens" of the Empire. Even though he had no socialist leanings, Baden-Powell stated that social position was not to be considered when the defence of the Empire was at stake. It was not enough to wave the flag at celebrations of empire; one had to be prepared to help in whatever capacity to defend the empire. Baden-Powell made the words "Be Prepared" his personal motto, imploring British citizens on numerous occasions to "Be Prepared to help defend their country", or to "Be Prepared to give their lives for their country at any time"⁶⁸ for the empire would not do so of its own accord. "PEACE cannot be certain unless we show that we are always fully prepared to defend ourselves in England, and that an invader would only find himself ramming his head against bayonets and well

⁶⁶ Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, p.277. Leo Amery also looked to the Roman Empire for the same analogies in his collection of essays on empire, "Union and Strength," p.212.

⁶⁷ Colonel F.N. Maude, *Notes on the Evolution of Infantry Tactics* (London: William Clowes and Sons Limited, 1905), p.xii.

⁶⁸ Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, p.283. and p.288.

aimed bullets”⁶⁹ Baden-Powell had little time for “loafers”, “wishy-washy slackers”, and “agitators”. In the section entitled “Insects”, Baden-Powell subtly revealed his disdain by using the bees as an example for good citizenship; “They are quite a model community, for they respect their Queen and kill their unemployed”⁷⁰

By the early Twentieth Century the result of this transformation of the public school system, the surge in imperial patriotism, and its subsequent effect on the attitudes and mores of young privileged and elite men was to create an officer class, who almost to a man, embodied the Victorian traits associated with the “nostalgia” side of the great struggle with “progress”. These men, instilled with notions of “playing the game”, knowing their place, and duty to the empire, shared the same apprehension over the perceived degeneration of Britons. In addition, most of the senior officers destined to provide Britain’s military leadership in the Great War came from the cavalry, the most established, tradition bound, and reactionary of Britain’s military arms and the one facing the greatest threat to its existence by the threats modern battlefield technology posed to their century’s old and honoured tactics.⁷¹ Such developments imparted a more fierce and fatal edge to their struggle with progress.

Whether they were cognizant of the fact or not, the majority of British Army officers opposed many aspects of reform or change not only because they were particularly tied to or held sentimental affectations for the spirit of the offensive, charging home with the bayonet or cavalry lance, or outdated traditions, but also for reasons lying

⁶⁹ Baden-Powell, *Scouting for Boys*, p.277.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.117.

⁷¹ Some notable cavalry officers who held senior command in the First World war included Sir Douglas Haig, Sir John French, Hubert Gough, Edmund Allenby, Julian Byng, and William Birdwood. Henry Rawlinson, Horace Smith-Dorrien, Ian Hamilton, and Hubert Plumer were notable infantry officers while Horation Kitchener was an engineer and Frederick Roberts, an artillery man.

beneath the surface of their collective psyche. To a greater extent, the senior officers' opposition to change originated from a deeply ingrained sense that reform and change in the Army were a manifestation of all the social ills that threatened their position in society, their way of life, and to carry it further, eroded the very foundations of the mighty empire for which so many had made the ultimate sacrifice.

5) Second Wave of Reaction, 1904-1914. Selective Memory Sets in.

“It is not those who know how to kill but those who know how to be killed that serves us in a crisis”

[General Mikhail Ivanovich Dragomirov (1830-1905) on how man will triumph over modern military technology]¹

“The frontal attacks over open ground against a portion of our unshaken infantry, carried out by several English cavalry regiments which had to retire with heavy losses, gives some indication of the tactical knowledge of the Higher Command.”²

[German officer after the ill-advised British cavalry charges on the Germans entrenched in High Wood, July 14, 1916]

Throughout the history of warfare, the greatest catalyst for military reform has often arrived in the form of the military disaster. Rome's catastrophe at Cannae, Prussia's defeat at Jena/Auerstadt in 1806, and France's disastrous 1870/71 campaign all prompted the defeated powers to embrace reform at an accelerated pace that virtually any peace time army or victorious force would never have accepted. The flurry of activity and reflection within the British military circles precipitated by the disasters of the first year of the Boer War suggested that the same pattern would continue. To a great extent, that transpired, at least in the immediate term. Before 1905, with the long South African war still fresh in most minds, not even the most tradition bound of senior officers could ignore or stall efforts at initiating reform that, some would argue, had been decades in coming.³

One of the main driving forces behind much of the reform was Field Marshal Frederick Roberts (“Bobs” as he was known by his men), Commander of the British

¹ Joseph C. Arnold, “French Tactical Doctrine 1870-1914,” *Military Affairs* 48, no.2 (April, 1978), p.62.

² John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p.129.

³ The incomplete and unsatisfactory nature of Cardwell's Army reforms of the early 1870s continued to be a major problem which was never resolved before the outbreak of the First World War. The changes brought on in the latter nineteenth century by advances in military technology only further complicated the situation.

forces during the South African campaign. Upon returning from South Africa, Roberts took on the mantle of Commander-in-Chief of the Army, a post he occupied until his retirement in 1904. As discussed earlier, Roberts had initiated the overhaul of the artillery arm of the forces, equipping them with one hundred and eight quick firing field guns and endorsing the addition of heavier guns and howitzers. He undertook this rearming as a response to the problems posed by the increasing utilization of entrenchments. Rather than follow the French lead by employing massed, direct, rapid artillery fire as close support for infantry assaults, Roberts helped the British artillery to adopt tactics more suitable to fighting the Boers, using dispersed, hidden batteries firing from greater distances than previously accepted.⁴ Training manuals of 1902 doubled ranges not just of artillery but of small arms too.⁵ In a more controversial move, Roberts abolished the lance as a cavalry weapon, replacing it with the infantry Lee-Enfield Mk III and machine guns. Cavalry troopers would carry increasing amounts of rifle ammunition on their person as a sign of this tactical transformation.⁶ The British infantry training was perhaps the most realistic of any European army at the time as the one hundred and forty eight pages devoted to the art of defense and fortification in Baden-Powell's *War in Practice* more than illustrated.

But when Roberts retired as Commander-in-Chief in 1904, efforts to undo his work commenced almost immediately. Sir John French moved to prevent or forestall the publication of Robert's 1906 Cavalry Training Manual. French as well as Haig were traditional cavalry troopers. French was so convinced of the primacy of the cavalry's

⁴Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society. 1815-1914* (London: The Longman Group, 1980), pp.246-247.

⁵ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1902* (London: HMSO, 1902), p.195.

⁶ Jay Stone and Erwin Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p.111.

shock role that he argued that the rifle would be of absolutely no use to the cavalry in European wars.⁷ To French and his peers, having cavalry troopers use a rifle was not just a sign of weakness but was also an effeminate display of weakness. Fortunately, Roberts had enough influence to check French's attempt.⁸

Robert's reforming activities were bolstered by the findings of the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa of 1903 and to a lesser extent, the reform policies of Richard Haldane who was appointed Secretary of State for War in 1905. The Royal Commission covered a broad selection of issues. Small arms tactics, cavalry armament, entrenching, effectiveness of artillery, individual training, and battle formations were among the topics addressed by Haldane's reforms. Upon taking office, Haldane set out to carry out reform mostly on a strategic level. Haldane possessed no formal military experience nor did he have any preconceived notions on how to go about the task of reforming the Army. In fact, Haldane's appointment reflected the Liberal Government's placing more importance on fiscal, rather than military reform.⁹ One of his aims was to make the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) a larger force, far more relevant to the context of a conflict on the continent that could potentially involve hundreds of thousands of men. He was also responsible for the setting up of the first practical General Staff. Haldane also sought to consolidate the change Roberts had made in the cavalry arm which incurred the ire of many officers. To an extent, Haldane was successful though he was severely limited by financial constraints imposed by the peacetime Liberal Government.

⁷ Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1903), p.306.

⁸ Philip Towle, "The Russo-Japanese War and British Military Thought," *Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies* 116 (December, 1971), p.66.

⁹ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, pp.146-147 and Spiers, *Army and Society*, p.265.

The training manuals of 1902 and 1905 reflected a great deal of the practical experience gained in Africa. Proper entrenching was advocated and cover was to be sought even by officers.¹⁰ Open skirmish formations should be adopted even by the rear ranks with care being taken to adapt the formation to the ground conditions.¹¹ Frontal assaults were frowned upon. Reliance on fire superiority or outflanking maneuvers, or a combination of both, became preferred alternatives in the face of withering fire. An advance was to be conducted in rushes from cover to cover in the manner the Boers had employed to such great effect at Majuba Hill and Spion Kop.¹² The potential of the machine gun was beginning to be realized as was an acceptance of the importance of firepower in battle to the point that the expenditure of ammunition, always a concern of the parsimonious Army supply, was no longer an issue.¹³

Nevertheless, French and Douglas Haig proved instrumental in the reactionary movement. Haig served as Director of Military Training from 1906 to 1907 before his appointment as Director of Staff Duties from 1907 to 1909. Meanwhile, Sir John French occupied the key position of Inspector-General of the Forces (1907-1911). Their collective disdain for much of the new emphasis in tactics that had come out of the British experience in the South African War was encouraged by the observations of the Russo-Japanese War. Coupled with a return of traditional offensive military thought rapidly ascending in Europe, the British Army lost much of the collective wisdom and experience it had gained at such a high cost between 1899 and 1902.

¹⁰ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1905* (London: HMSO, 1905), p.88. Officers were instructed to dismount at long range. Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1902*, p.192.

¹¹ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1905*, p.141 and p.95.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.85-86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.194 and p.224. The manual advised "in defense, not to worry about economy of ammunition."

The conflict between Japan and Russia from 1904 to 1905 played a major role in the resurgence of the “Cult of the Offensive.” Military experts from the major European powers drew newfound inspiration for their arguments about how recent technological advances could not prevail over the human element in modern warfare. The visions of massed Japanese bayonet charges carrying all before them despite the horrific casualties sustained from Russian machine gun fire stirred Ferdinand Foch who proclaimed that the French Army must revisit the days of its past glories and that the Army “no longer knows any law other than the offensive”¹⁴ This mentality had a ripple effect throughout the upper echelons of the British High Command.

What is puzzling about such logic is that there were on hand, a host of observers from the Western powers, both military and civilian correspondents, many possessing a great deal of experience such as Sir Ian Hamilton who had served in the Sudan and South Africa, yet the lessons extracted belied the reality of what most of those observers witnessed. The accounts are littered with grim testimonies to the effectiveness of the machine gun.¹⁵ In the British War Office’s massive three volume set, *Russo-Japanese War: Reports from British Officers attached to the Japanese and Russian forces in the Field* (1908), the majority of Japanese assaults fell apart and were abandoned after very heavy casualties were sustained. “But there is a limit even to the magnificent bravery of the Japanese, and once more the attack failed, for to reach those trenches meant extermination and not success.”¹⁶ In Manchuria, by the time of the battle of Mukden (February 20 to March 10, 1905), the Japanese had suffered so excessively at the hands

¹⁴ Arnold, “French Tactical Doctrine 1870-1914,” p.64.

¹⁵ Great Britain War Office, *Russo-Japanese War: Reports From the British Officers Attached to the Japanese and Russian Forces in the Field vol.I* (London: HMSO, 1908), pp.248, 274.

¹⁶ Great Britain War Office, *Reports from the British Officers*, v.1, p.239. Account of opening phase of battle of Liao-yang, 1904/05

of Russian machine guns that they resorted to the desperate measure of moving up mountain artillery pieces to within a very dangerous 500 yards¹⁷ in order to silence the machine guns.¹⁸ The Japanese were impressed with the machine gun's defensive qualities. Serving with the Japanese Army in Manchuria Captain F. Tanegouchi, affirmed that; "The nature of the machine gun makes it especially suitable as a weapon for the defence, painful proof of which has been frequently demonstrated to me in the attacks on the Russian positions."¹⁹

As for the artillery, just as Baden-Powell had pointed out in 1903²⁰ where it had little effect on well entrenched infantrymen in South Africa, so it was with the Russians and Japanese in Manchuria. On one hand, British views on long distance indirect fire recently adopted from the Boers were confirmed by a moderately successful Russian use of similar tactics. In fact, it was noted that artillery exchanges took place at much longer ranges than before, with a corresponding wastage of shells.²¹ On the other hand, direct fire against prepared positions, especially when conducted against the increasingly elaborate Russian entrenchment systems failed. In one early battle, a British observer noted how the Japanese pounded a Russian position all day with little appreciable effect.²² Time and again, Japanese and Russian commanders were disappointed by the lack of results generated by artillery bombardment. As in the aftermath of South Africa,

¹⁷ Dangerous to both Russian machine gunners and Japanese artillery men who were well within optimum rifle, not to mention machine gun range.

¹⁸ Great Britain War Office, *Repts From the British Officers*, v1, p.153 and p.83.

¹⁹ Captain F. Takenouchi, "The Tactical Employment of Machine Guns With Infantry in Attack and Defense," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 51 part 1 (January/June, 1907), p.454.

²⁰ B.F.S. Baden-Powell, *War in Practice: Some Tactical and Other Lessons of the Campaign in South Africa 1899-1902* (London: Isbister & Company Limited, 1903), pp.252-253.

²¹ Keith Neilson, "'That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise': British Military Thinking and the Russo-Japanese War," In *War and Society. A Yearbook of Military History* Brian Bond and Ian Roy eds. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers Inc., 1975), p.21.

²² Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.1, p.244.

this conspicuous failing went largely unnoticed by the British back at home. Some British observers in fact, were impressed by the use of artillery. From his experience out East with the Japanese, Major J. M. Home of the 2nd PWO Ghurkas concluded that artillery would now be the dominant arm on the battlefield; all others would be subservient.²³

Surprisingly, little of note was written about cavalry. Cavalry proponents put out the familiar tried (tired?) and tested argument that the terrain in Manchuria, like South Africa, was an aberration. European battlefields would never resemble those of Mukden or Liaoyang. The ineffectiveness of both sides' cavalry was due to either poor leadership - particularly the Russians - or the mistaken tendency to employ cavalry in a mounted infantry capacity.²⁴ The endless miles of barbed wire and entrenchments interspersed with machine gun nests supported by well concealed artillery positions never seemed to enter into the equation, except to the more perceptive minded individuals such as Ian Hamilton who had concluded that the only useful job for the Japanese cavalry was to stay behind the front lines and cook rice.²⁵ Later, during the battle of Sha Ho in October 1904, Hamilton foreshadowed many First World War critics of the cavalry by noting that the Japanese cavalry "were sitting idle on their horses whilst infantry and artillery were fighting for their lives, waiting for an opportunity to charge which never came."²⁶

One of the primary lessons retained by not only the Russians but the Western powers as well was the recognition of the importance of 'initiative.' From Henderson to

²³ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.2, p.493.

²⁴ Neilson, "That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise," p.23.

²⁵ Sir Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officer's Scrap-book During the Russo-Japanese War*, by Lieut.-General Sir Ian Hamilton, K.C.B. With Illustrations, Maps, and Plans, v.II (London: E. Arnold, 1905-07), p.153. The Battle of Liaoyang.

²⁶ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.2, p.529.

Baden-Powell and Foch, it was widely accepted that defense alone was useless unless reinforced by the ability to launch a counter-offensive. Japanese strategy more than vindicated this view. The well dug in Russians surrendered the initiative by remaining in their trenches. The Japanese then turned the Russians out of all these positions though usually at a prohibitive cost in lives.

Like his British counterparts, and despite witnessing to what the machine gun could do, Captain Tanegouchi argued that not only should the power of the machine gun not be exaggerated, but stated that it would be a mistake to conclude that the machine gun would influence modern tactics.²⁷ British observations of the Russian experience in entrenchment presented a unique opportunity to confirm what had been learned by the British in South Africa. Faced with such brutal examples of the ineffectiveness of the frontal assault which more than confirmed any alarmist visions of the power of defensive fire power, the majority of the British senior officer corps seemed to be in denial. There was plenty about this war that would not apply to the conflict in a European theatre and it did not take long for those observations to dominate strategic thinking. First, the absence of a decent road network and the limited railway available greatly hindered the strategic movement of troops. Rail mobility was a feature of modern warfare that was taken for granted. As mentioned earlier, the terrain was not suitable for cavalry action.²⁸ Instead, the lessons so dearly learned by the Russians in 1904-1905 were used as examples of Russian failings. The Russians were credited with having appalling musketry training²⁹ which, in the observers' eyes, proved instrumental in allowing Japanese assaults to

²⁷ Tanegouchi, "Tactical Employment of Machine Guns," p.457.

²⁸ Neilsen, "That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise," p.23.

²⁹ Major J.M. Home of the 2nd PWO Gurkhas reasons the deplorable musketry standard of the Russians was due to excessive concentration on bayonet training. Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.3, p.215.

succeed with fewer losses than might have been expected. In addition, some observers felt that the Russians did not understand how to properly use their machine guns.³⁰ This is puzzling as virtually every battle report on Japanese assaults on Russian entrenched positions concluded that all too often intense Russian small arms fire, especially machine guns, brought Japanese assaults to a halt.

By the end of the war, the Russians were building far more elaborate trench systems than the simple and clean Japanese trenches. To one British observer, this reflected the attitude of each country. The Japanese used their positions as a springboard for the next attack while the Russian multi-lined systems only encouraged the inclination to retire.³¹ The Russian will to launch the all important counter-attack was simply not there, thus victory was forfeited. Many observers back in Britain saw the same lack of success evident in the British frontal assaults on Boer trenches and as in the Russian case, attributed this lack of success to shortcomings in British leadership.³²

Hamilton and other observers were able to remain relatively unimpressed with the argument that morale, not technology, that won the war. They noted the appallingly heavy casualties sustained by the Japanese - 50,000 at Port Arthur and 70,000 at Mukden - as a result of their aggressive tactics.³³ The casualties might have even been worse had it not been for the lamentable Russian musketry standards.³⁴ After witnessing a Japanese assault on a Russian entrenched position, Colonel W.H.H. Waters stated "I consider that no infantry could get near enough to them to use the bayonet...fire should be the

³⁰ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.1, p.161.

³¹ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.2, p.19.

³² Towle, "Russo-Japanese War and British Military Thought," p.65.

³³ Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets Before Bullets. The Imperial Russian Army, 1861-1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 194.

³⁴ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.1, p.46. and v.3, p.215.

predominant factor in a battle.”³⁵ That the Japanese reliance on increasingly heavier artillery to solve the problem of the Russian entrenchments with little success, did not go unnoticed. Neither did the fact that at almost every available opportunity, the Japanese troops would entrench even on the offense to help consolidate their newly won positions. Moreover, the Russians were not driven out of their trenches so much as they were forced to vacate them when outflanked. The list of Japanese wounded from March 1 to 8 in Manchuria - 4,251 bullet wounds, 1,022 shell wounds, 14 bayonet wounds, and 115 other - supplied by Captain D.S. Robertson provides a telling reality of the Japanese bayonet charges.³⁶

In reality, the illusion that the Japanese, by seizing the initiative, and driving the ill-prepared and ill-led Tsarist armies out of their trenches at bayonet point was just that, an illusion. The Russians, though defeated, were not destroyed. Indeed, there was an absence of decisive Jena-Auerstadt or Austerlitz style victories though not for want of trying on Japan's part. The Japanese, having paid an exorbitant price paid in casualties, were left with little energy or resources with which to exploit their successes. By mid 1905, the Japanese Army had simply reached the limits of its endurance; peace could not have come too soon. Bruce Menning put it very aptly in his book, *Bayonets Before Bullets The Imperial Russian Army 1861-1914*; “So the war ended not with a ringing battle of annihilation but with the whimpering cries of exhaustion.”³⁷ That would prove

³⁵ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v.3, p.116.

³⁶ Great Britain War Office, *Reports From the British Officers*, v2, p.215. Statistics for the whole Japanese 2nd Army at Mukden have the vast majority of wounds coming from bullets (9,615), and shells (1,449) while only 48 were caused by sword and 216 listed under ‘other’. “Reports From the British Officers,” pp.146-147.

³⁷ Menning, *Bayonets Before Bullets*, p.199.

to be one of the main characteristic outcomes in modern warfare.³⁸ The notion of the decisive battle, if it had ever existed other than in dreams of generals and theorists, was all but gone.

The British were not the only ones revising their conclusions drawn from recent experiences in Africa. German, French, Austrian, and other Western military minds did the same. Most of the Western powers had sent their own observers to the Japanese or Russian forces. Each country's military leadership drew its own conclusions from the conflict. For the most part, these conclusions reinforced the theories of offensive doctrine they held. This can be traced back to what has been termed the "Cult of the Offensive." The "Cult of the Offensive" was a movement that had been gathering momentum since the late nineteenth century, especially after Prussia's impressive set of victories in 1866 and 1870/71. The conflict in South Africa provided a major setback as countries began to take notice of the effectiveness of firepower, particularly when utilized by the defense. One senior French officer, General Hippolyte Langlois had coined a phrase for this phenomenon in his *Revue militaire generale*, "Acute Transvaalitis."³⁹

Each country sported (albeit in varying degrees) its own clique of senior officers who were dedicated to the "Cult of the Offensive." Perhaps the most extreme vocal proponents resided in France finding their voice in the likes of Ferdinand Foch, Noel de Castelneau, and the more senior General Langlois. Foch was the most outspoken of the group. His uncompromising belief in the power of morale, movement, and the human element as the primary components of the offensive bordered on the fanatical, almost

³⁸ At the end of both the First and second World Wars, countless soldiers' accounts describe a general atmosphere of numbing exhaustion, devoid of emotion be they victors or the vanquished.

³⁹ Michael Howard, "Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914," In *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* Peter Paret ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), p.517.

farcical (when viewed with present day hindsight. Foch's writings and speeches provide the historian with a wealth of quotes, including "The laurels of victory are at the point of enemy bayonets."⁴⁰ and "The new kind of war has begun, the hearts of soldiers have become a new weapon."⁴¹ Foch was an adherent of the concept of the decisive battle. The decisive battle was necessary in order to end the campaign. To do this, the application of all available forces was of the utmost importance. Anything less, was a waste of time and resources, "decisive attack in battle is not to be sought indifferently on any point."⁴² "All attacks must be pushed to the limit...charge the enemy with the bayonet in order to destroy him...this result can be obtained only at the price of bloody sacrifice. All other conceptions should be rejected as contrary to the very nature of war."⁴³ Morale played a large part in Foch's offensive equation, but even he had to recognize the fact that war had become a contest of material; "Moral superiority, resulting from numbers, formations, etc., is no longer sufficient to-day with modern weapons: their effects are too demoralizing."⁴⁴ Foch, however, added his own touch to the acceptance of material superiority, arguing that increased numbers of guns, men, etc., had the effect of adding to the Army's overall morale. "A battle lost is a battle one thinks one has lost."⁴⁵

Yet the attachment to offensive theory was universal. As early as the 1890s, German generals Paul Bronsart von Schellendorf and Sigismund von Schlicting had warned that frontal assaults over open terrain guaranteed a "first class funeral."⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Arnold, "French Tactical Doctrine 1870-1914," p.64.

⁴¹ Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War* (New York: The H.K. Fly Company Publishers, 1918), p.32.

⁴² Foch, *Principles of War*, p.372.

⁴³ Arnold, "French Tactical Doctrine," p.64.

⁴⁴ Foch, *Principles of War*, p.371.

⁴⁵ Arnold, "French Tactical Doctrine," p.64.

⁴⁶ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.245.

Schlicting went even further stating that the entire Schlieffen Plan was outdated; perhaps it may have worked in the days of Frederick the Great, but in the early twentieth Century, it could only lead to catastrophe.⁴⁷ Phillippe Petain advocated caution in accepting the doctrine of the offensive. In Britain, Roberts, the younger Baden-Powell, and Hamilton as already noted, possessed of a defensive frame of mind. Even Winston Churchill was wary of the wisdom of not granting technology its proper due; "Modern war is fought with fire-arms, and if the horsemen will adapt himself to the new conditions his role on the battlefield will be greater than ever. But if he still clings to the weapons of barbarism, long knives and sharp spears, he may be only a ridiculous anachronism, a curse to himself, an encumbrance to the Army, and an unjustifiable expense to the nation."⁴⁸

How did Foch influence the thinking senior British officers? As Foch and his clique had become the leading voice in French military circles and they were bound to gain some disciples across the English Channel. The gradual entente between Britain and France to confront what was perceived as inevitable German aggression on the continent facilitated this process, underscoring the shift of British military towards a more offensive minded outlook. French associations added extra momentum to the already increasingly backward movement in tactics that threatened to undo much of the reform that was accomplished prior to 1908. In Robert's absence, there was no real senior agent who could oppose this regression. It did not take much time for General Allenby to bring back the lance as a cavalry weapon in 1909 though rifle practice and the utilization of

⁴⁷ Arden Bucholz, *Hans Delbruck & The German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985), p.90.

⁴⁸ Winston Churchill, "Some Impressions of the War in South Africa," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute* 45 (January/June, 1901), p.845.

machine guns continued to be given priority.⁴⁹ Subsequent cavalry maneuvers also reintroduced the adherence to out dated shock tactics complete with culminating close order formations charging home over the opposition as proof of their utility on the modern battlefield. More change came in the new training manuals published after 1908. In the *Field Service Regulations 1909* - Haig himself personally oversaw the compiling of its second volume - more emphasis was put on movement and initiative. Firepower and proper entrenchment became more subordinate to the assault as opposed to the importance previously imposed on the achieving of fire superiority before any offensive action could be considered.

The 1914 edition of the infantry training manual further drove home Haig's and French's vision, although it also reflected the fact that not all the lessons learned from 1898 to 1902 could be undone. As the infantry training manual of 1914 noted, the primary ingredients were the concepts of movement and initiative. "The main essential to success in battle is to close with the enemy, cost what it may. A determined and steady advance lowers the fighting spirit of the enemy and lessens the accuracy of his fire."⁵⁰ Terrain was still to be considered and used wisely when assaulting an enemy position. Planned rushes and precautions, such as not showing one's silhouette on the skyline were stressed, but at the same time movement was emphasized as it was believed that even under moderately good cover infantry lying down would suffer more losses than if they were up and running.⁵¹ "No natural or artificial strength of position will of itself

⁴⁹ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reform*, p.111.

⁵⁰ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1914* (London: HMSO, 1914), p.134.

⁵¹ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1914*, pp.109-110 and 122-127.

compensate for loss of initiative.”⁵² The use of the bayonet was given more priority and the powers of a resolute charge could not be over stressed

The resurgence of the cavalry in the thinking of British generals also found its way into the 1914 manual. Infantry, who supposedly had nothing to fear from a cavalry attack, were instructed to still be wary of their flanks.⁵³ Manuals still maintained instructions for cavalry screening of positions.⁵⁴ This was not surprising as the increased interest in movement and initiative meant that cavalry still had an important role to play in modern warfare. Haig guaranteed this with the publication of the new 1912 *Cavalry Training Manual* which placed the same priority on shock tactics as they had in 1899.⁵⁵

But attitudes about the significance and use of the machine gun had taken a step backwards. Officially designated as a “weapon of opportunity”, the gun’s best use was to “develop unexpected bursts of fire against favourable targets”.⁵⁶ Words like “fleeting opportunities” and “discretion” permeate the sections outlining the use of the machine gun. Some of this had to do with a notion present in many British officers’ minds that announcing the position of a machine gun too soon would undermining its overall effectiveness. Indeed, many British Army officers felt that machine guns made good targets for enemy and great care had been advocated even in the 1902 and 1905 training manuals to prevent this from happening.⁵⁷

Of course, much of the worry stemmed from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when machine guns were still mounted on large and conspicuous gun

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.149.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.127-128.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.157.

⁵⁵ Spiers, *Army and Society*, p.282.

⁵⁶ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1914*, p.201.

⁵⁷ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1902*, p.210. and *Infantry Training 1905*, pp.144,145 and 158.

carriages. But by 1914 a lighter tripod had enabled the weapons to be set up in much more concealed and protected emplacements. The language adopted for machine gun tactics - "discretion" and "weapon of opportunity" - was more of a coded method of expressing the High Command's anxiety over a gunner's temptation to waste too much expensive ammunition. During the ten years preceding the First World War the British Army was particularly at the mercy of a frugal government. Unlike past manuals, specific general principles of use were laid down. Machine guns were to rarely open fire except to facilitate movement of their own infantry, to prevent delay movement of the enemy, and against a favourable target.⁵⁸ As a result, when the BEF went off to France in 1914, it had not resolved problems about how to best employ the machine gun. Overall, the British Army was a force at odds in terms of its official doctrine though the extensive practical knowledge and experience of the lower ranks compensated for this to a great degree.

Baden-Powell was never one to be shy about giving out advice on all manner of subjects. Indeed, his *Scouting for Boys* contained his views on a very broad range of topics running from insects, cuttlefish, sports, smoking, the Roman Empire to even masturbation, all within an imperial context no less. It should be therefore, not surprising that he found it within himself to offer up his wisdom and experience to the British soldiers, particularly officers, going over to serve in France in late 1914. The resulting book, *Quick Training for War; A Few Practical Suggestions*, was an almost perfect synthesis of the pragmatic, reform-minded outlook of men such as Roberts, Henderson, and Hamilton coupled with those like Haig and French who embraced the newfound confidence in moral and movement over technology. With his detailed instructions on

⁵⁸ Great Britain War Office, *Infantry Training 1914*, p.207.

how to fashion proper entrenchments side by side with the “Four Cs of Soldiering”,⁵⁹ Baden-Powell summed up the character and beliefs of the senior British Army Officer Corps in the years preceding 1914.

Not meant to be an official set of rules to replace the “excellent training manuals issued by the war Office,”⁶⁰ Baden-Powell filled his book with advice on how to instill the initiative and the dash necessary to do their duty when soldiers arrived in France. Citing the Field Service Regulations, Baden-Powell proclaimed that “Success in war depends more on the moral than on the physical qualities,” adding “Skill cannot compensate for want of courage, energy, and determination: but even high moral quality may not avail without careful preparation and skilful direction.”⁶¹ Baden-Powell thus fell in line with current attitudes concerning offensive tactics. Along with the importance of moral qualities, bayonet training and aggressive cavalry tactics were endorsed. Sporting metaphors remained as when Baden-Powell discussed his views on discipline as a “sense of playing the game for one’s side”⁶² or “Anyone who has played football, polo, or cricket, or indeed has taken part in any team work, knows the value of a captain who can face the worst of games with a cheery smile.”⁶³

The combination of the lessons that were drawn from the Russo-Japanese conflict and the change in priorities of the British High Command resulted in a path of thinking that ran contrary to the original promise shown by the initial reactions to the experiences of South Africa. There were many factors at work in this change. The driving force

⁵⁹ Courage, common-sense, cunning, and cheerfulness.

⁶⁰ R.S.S. Baden-Powell, *Quick Training for War: A Few Practical Suggestions* (London: H. Jenki, 1914), p.vii.

⁶¹ Baden-Powell, *Quick Training for War*, p.12.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.75.

behind the reform efforts, Field Marshal Roberts, had retired in 1904 allowing the reactionary element of the British Officer Corps led by Generals Haig and French to commence work at undoing the reformatory measures of the early part of the decade. Their presence in very crucial positions within the most senior level of British Army hierarchy magnified the erroneous lessons retained from the Russo-Japanese War. In addition, the increasing influence of continental military thinking, especially that of the French officer corps, were used to confirm or vindicate the views of the British High Command.

Despite the erroneous conclusions being drawn, there were still a great many practical lessons to be learned from the observations of the British officers who were present in both the Russian and Japanese camps. Unfortunately, they went largely ignored. Hierarchy was one reason. The officers sent over to observe the conflict, excepting Hamilton tended to be junior officers – captains and majors - whose opinions were bound to hold little, if any stock with the generals they were reporting to due not only their junior rank, but lack of social standing. Hamilton's observations were tainted by his connections with Roberts, and the latter's resignation had removed the majority of support that may have been available. In any case, Roberts' endorsement was tempered by the fact that he had his origins in the artillery arm. Artillery and engineer officers tended to be more a pragmatic group and accepted the new realities of modern warfare more readily than their cavalry and infantry peers. In addition, they were for the most part, outside of the British Army's social elite, a clique largely composed of senior cavalry officers.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Indeed, under Douglas Haig the majority of British Army generals were fellow cavalry officers such as Allenby, Birdwood, and Gough but to name a few.

Finally, there was the financial aspect to be considered. On one hand, there was the Army Supply who were notably spendthrift in procuring anything, be it food, ammunition, or medical services for its troops. On the other hand, the British Government was reluctant to dedicate funding to the Army hence, the partial success of Haldane's reforms.⁶⁵ Upon taking office, Haldane was under intense pressure from Parliament to bring the military budget down to twenty seven million pounds,⁶⁶ a feat he actually accomplished bringing expenditure down from thirty million pounds in 1906 to the sought after twenty seven million.⁶⁷

In the end, the Russo-Japanese War which had so much to offer in the way of practical lessons instead provided illusionary evidence for the case of the offensive spirit, the human element, triumphing over technology. The strategy of defense alone could never succeed. Did those who embraced these ideas ever conceive of what would happen to the British Army if instead of Russians hiding in their trenches, it was a force similarly armed (say...the German Army) possessing far more machine guns and modern artillery, well entrenched and possessing the means and the will to launch counter-attacks?

John Ellis' book *The Social History of the Machine Gun*, has a picture which neatly illustrates the desires and hopes of British military thinking just prior to the opening of hostilities in 1914. The reader sees a British private who has defied all odds and with great pluck, has made his way right up to a German machine gun emplacement. Behind him, his comrades watch as the brave man is about to dispatch the gun crew. Just to make it clear who will triumph, the artist has rendered the British Tommy in a heroic,

⁶⁵ Neilsen, "That Dangerous and Difficult Enterprise," p.30. Governmental reluctance to spend on its military had been a recurring theme since the early Nineteenth Century if not before. It was all part of the British tradition of "Empire on the cheap."

⁶⁶ Spiers, *Army and Society*, p.270.

⁶⁷ Stone and Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.155.

athletic form, while the Germans are stereotypically chunky or overweight, not up to the prospect of a real “man’s” fight. In a sense, the Germans are also representative of those who embraced, or represented the rise of industrialism and progress such as the working classes, socialists, and industrialists. In this vein, the picture reflected British anxiety over the Germans having become the new leaders of industrialized Europe. The Tommy is the embodiment of the new soldier Baden-Powell and countless others dreamed about. He has shown the initiative to get the task done, knows his place and his job, and he knows how to play the game.

Conclusion – 1914 – The Somme 1916 – Enter the Donkeys

“Armees d’elite would be invincible if wars were fought without casualties. Things being what they are, armies d’elite are unlikely to remain so long.”¹

“Something which compels our astonishment and higher admiration was to see the enemy attack again and again over the same ground – ground that was littered with the victims of their earlier attempts, and whose bodies were fast corrupting in the heat of high summer and filled the air with their sweet stench.”²

Great Britain entered the First World War on August 4, 1914 over the German violation of Belgian neutrality. The four infantry divisions and one cavalry division of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) geared up for the first British military involvement on the European Continent since the Waterloo campaign in 1815. They were divided into two corps under the leadership of Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien while overall command was vested in the hands of Sir John French. The BEF departure proceeded in a very professional manner and in just two weeks over 100,000 British soldiers were transported and deployed in Belgium.³ French’s Chief of Staff echoed the opinions of many when he stated that the war would be over by Christmas or eight months at the very latest. Any longer than this was thought to be too much of a financial strain on the belligerents’ ability to maintain large forces in the field; thus the war would have to end one way or the other.⁴ This was a puzzling declaration given that twelve years earlier Britain had concluded an imperial conflict in which it had sustained over

¹ Edward Spiers, *Army and Society 1815-1914* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1980), p.293.

² Christopher Duffy, *Through German Eyes. The British and the Somme 1916* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006), p.272.

³ Stone, Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms* (New York: University Press of America, 1988), p.155.

⁴ Spiers, *Army and Society*, p.288.

400,000 soldiers in South Africa for three years. In 1899, many had predicted that conflict would last barely three months.

The BEF was considered by many at that time to be the most professional and experienced body of troops to enter the conflict. Indeed, despite the prejudices of the British High Command, many of the lessons garnered from previous campaigns were retained. While still not quite up to Boer standards of marksmanship, the average British Tommie was very skilled in the use of his rifle. According to some sources, he could sustain a rate of aimed fire of fifteen rounds a minute. Indeed, in the initial battles of August and September 1914, British rates of fire led the Germans to believe that the British were equipped with far more machine guns than was actually the case.⁵ British field craft was exemplary and the cavalry divisions possessed more realistic training and four times the machine guns of their German opposition. Moreover, with rifles as main armament, the British cavalry were the most formidable mounted force in Europe at the war's outbreak

As the battles were fought in Belgium and Northern France one of the last acts of the "progress versus nostalgia" conflict was played out in the ongoing struggle within the very highest level of British Army leadership. The growing rivalry between II Corps commander Smith Dorrien and his superior, Sir John French, dated back to the Boer War.⁶ But they became increasingly hostile to each other during the battles of late 1914 and early 1915. On August 26 of 1914 at Le Cateau, Smith-Dorrien disobeyed French's orders to retreat and conducted an aggressive (if costly) defense which saved his exposed

⁵ John Ellis, *The Social History of the Machine Gun* (New York: Pantheon Books), p.120.

⁶ Smith-Dorrien had gained the ire of Sir John French in the wake of the Boer war as a member of Roberts' clique who were major advocates of cavalry reform, the very reform that French steadfastly opposed. In addition, Smith-Dorrien was a great believer in the machine gun and fought hard for its expanded utilization, another point of contention with French.

command and enabling it to retire in good order although French believed his actions had jeopardized the entire BEF. In 1915, having been given command of the British Second Army at Ypres, Smith-Dorrien advocated retreating to less exposed positions, a suggestion which French used as an excuse to force Smith-Dorrien's dismissal.⁷ French did not have long to enjoy his triumph. After the disappointing and costly battles of Neuve Chapelle and Loos, he too was removed from his command at the end of 1915 by Lord Kitchener and was replaced by General Haig.

Smith-Dorrien was one of the few senior officers who displayed a realistic grasp of the tactics and strategy of modern warfare that most of his peers found wanting. With his removal, the final blow for tradition had been struck. Haig was now free to conduct matters in his own fashion with little in the way of opposition. The major offensive Haig planned for mid-1916 in the Somme valley would proceed according to his notions of how modern war should be conducted. The plan of battle looked more like a colossal and extended version of Buller's 1899 plan of attack at Colenso,⁸ a costly embarrassment during the South African War. It was almost as if Haig and generals like Hubert Gough and Edmund Allenby had learned nothing from that battle nor the spectacular failed of frontal assaults at Paardeberg in February 1900.⁹ Worse still was the fact that the forces engaged were primarily newly raised and relatively inexperienced troops of Kitchener's "Volunteer" Army. Many of these men did not possess fully adequate or realistic

⁷ Ironically enough, Smith-Dorrien's replacement General Hubert Plummer advocated virtually the same withdrawal which was accepted by French.

⁸ The battle of Colenso, December 15, 1899, began with a large but ineffectual artillery bombardment, followed by a mass infantry assault on well entrenched Boer positions with cavalry waiting for a chance to charge. British casualties exceeded 1300 dead and wounded while the Boers suffered under 40 altogether.

⁹ Battle of Paardeberg, February 18-27, 1900, was the culminating battle of the conventional phase of the Boer War in which General Piet Cronje was compelled to surrender with over 4000 Boers thus ensuring British victory. This was not before the British commander, General Kitchener had the opportunity to order a costly and ultimately futile frontal assault on Boer trenches which cost the British over 300 dead and 900 wounded earning the name "Bloody Sunday"

training nor were many able to benefit from the experience of the original BEF as at least three quarters of that force lay buried in the mud of Flanders.¹⁰ After three months on the Western Front, the British Army had lost almost 90,000 men out of a force that originally numbered 84,000. Even when allowing for the addition of three extra divisions, the scale of these casualties was such that the original BEF was finished as a cohesive fighting formation.¹¹

A week long bombardment was followed by a frontal assault by 120,000 British soldiers while Haig's precious cavalry divisions stood ready to exploit the breakthrough that surely would result. Just as Baden-Powell could have predicted, the artillery did not demolish the German positions. The futility of frontal assaults on prepared positions which had been amply demonstrated at Omdurman, Colenso, Magersfontein, Paardeberg, and numerous battles at the outset of the Great War (Loos, Arras, Neuve Chapelle, and Ypres) was duly repeated on a much larger scale as 57,000 of the 120,000 strong assault force became casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, making July 1, 1916 the very worst day ever for the British Army.¹² As for the cavalry divisions, except for one ill-advised charge¹³, they continued to wait for a moment that had actually already passed them by almost a century earlier. Total British casualties for the whole battle - July 1 to mid November - numbered 432,000 which translated to about 3,600 for every day of the battle.¹⁴

While these events are central to our understanding and [memory] of the Great War this can be understood too as reflections of late Victorian and Edwardian British

¹⁰ Stone, Schmidl, *Boer War and Military Reforms*, p.155.

¹¹ Spiers, *Army and Society*, p.294.

¹² Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p.112

¹³ Prior and Wilson, *The Somme*, p.139.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.300.

attitudes so skillfully [contrived] albeit in different contexts by Martin Wiener in *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980*. Martin Weiner outlines the eventual victory of the forces of nostalgia over those of progress.¹⁵ In the military context, this victory paved the way for the monumentally faulty decision making and strategy of the British High Command during the First World War. Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig were on the vanguard of a much larger culture of tradition, social hierarchy, and reaction. They and their peers were able to slowly dilute and marginalize the voices of experience, common sense, and progress all in the name of maintaining the status quo of their way of life which was so precious to them and under so great of a threat, that it was deemed worth the price of hundreds of thousands of British soldiers' lives.

Were it not for the efforts of Haig, French, and other like minded individuals, the experiences garnered and the lessons learned from the Omdurman and South African Campaigns would not have been largely lost along with the BEF in Flanders nor would the New Army of 1916 have had to suffer through an even more painful and arduous learning process than Buller's men had in South Africa in 1899/1900. This does not deny that the carnage of the Somme and Paschaendale would not have occurred. On the contrary, the scope of the Great War was beyond the comprehension of even the ablest generals. But given the fullest benefit of experience and realistic training that was within the British Army's grasp between 1902 and 1914, it was quite possible that the names of

¹⁵ Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.9-10. and 39-40. Actually, this victory was more of a compromise in which much of the spirit of industrialism was contained and assimilated into "aristocratic values and styles of life." This created a situation where there was "an industrial society diffidently led by men with 'mind-forg'd monocles' restraining their concepts and their actions." For the elites, the path of denial and reaction thus held little in the way of organized resistance.

battles like the Somme and Paschaendale might not be associated with utterly useless slaughter, and that Sir Douglas Haig might have avoided the nickname of “Butcher.” And as historians, we might not be left trying to explain the strange death of Dangerfield’s Liberal England just as contemporaries like Wilfred Owen and Vera Britain wrote testimonies to a doomed youth-many of whom who died at the Somme had only just been born when their forebears were marching to Spion Kop or Paardeburg.

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