Introduction

Studies of the British Army's role in the Great War started long before the Armistice as instant histories were produced of the great battles, but as might be expected, these were driven by largely propagandist aims and so provided little in the way of analytical insight. During the 1920s, the role of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was covered in various works but was mostly dominated by the view from the top, which occasionally took the form of overt point-scoring, as was most famously seen in the memoirs of Lord French and David Lloyd George. A significant contribution was made by Basil Liddell Hart. A former officer who had experienced the war on the Western Front, albeit very briefly, he largely condemned the British war effort as unimaginative and ill conceived in his influential 1930 work, *The Real War*.

These works competed against the exhaustive official histories of the war, which provided an overview of the army's global military operations in a project that was not completed until the 1940s. Often condemned as rather dry and anodyne accounts, recently the Official Histories have been rehabilitated by Andrew Green, who has argued that they contain a wealth of critical insights deliberately designed to be accessible to those who study the texts closely.[1] A welter of divisional and regimental histories was also produced providing robust narratives of their subjects. As most served the dual function of celebratory record and memorial, few of these took highly analytical approaches, although the ability of the writers to access ephemeral materials that have long since disappeared from the archive means they retain value and should never be dismissed lightly.

At the other end of the spectrum were the memoirs of individuals and fictionalised accounts based on actual experience. Although these rarely sought to examine the army and its performance, they nonetheless gave a flavour of life at the sharp end and provided important support for

[1] Andrew Green, *Writing the Great War: Sir James Edmonds and the Official Histories, 1915–1948* (London: Routledge, 2004).

Liddell Hart's thesis. During the 1960s, literary scholars and critics helped to solidify a canon from these works, which often tended to obscure the sheer diversity and complexity of the army's demographic, attitude and roles.

The arrival of the fiftieth anniversary cycle in 1964 combined with a less deferential attitude towards class and rank saw the emergence of a different approach which privileged the voices of the ordinary man in the army. Demography assisted this development, for by the 1960s the great players were largely dead, and the only available form of direct testimony came from those who were junior officers or rank and file during the conflict. At the same time, there was also the growing realisation that the recollections of these men had to be captured before it was too late. The BBC's 1964 television series, *The Great War*, then pioneered the large-scale application of oral history techniques to veterans. By the 1970s, these processes had matured and resulted in studies that made a deep impact on the wider interested public, with the works of Martin Middlebrook and Lyn Macdonald being particularly successful. The highly valuable work of the oral history–based studies made obvious the immense diversity of the army's personnel in terms of socio-economic rank, regional background and identity. These added a further insight into the army and society approach that had developed since the 1950s and matured with Arthur Marwick's influential book, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (1965). Using similar research methods and questions, historians such as Ian Beckett and Keith Simpson in their edited collection, *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (1985), and Peter Simkins in his *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914–1916* (1988) analysed the demographic of the army closely and led the way to further examinations of discipline and morale.[2]

From the late 1980s and 1990s, cultural history emerged as a new way of looking at the huge mechanism that was the British Army and took the questions of social historians in a new direction. Although intimately concerned with the internal structures and dynamics of the army and its roles, this approach is largely unconcerned with the issues of overall performance and effectiveness foregrounded by many military historians. Instead, cultural historians have sought to understand how concepts such as masculinity and gender affected the way soldiers viewed their tasks and positions within the army, the wider conflict and post-war

[2] For examples, see Timothy Bowman, *Irish Regiments in the Great War: Discipline and Morale* (Manchester University Press, 2003); and Helen McCartney, *Citizen Soldiers: The Liverpool Territorials in the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

identity.[3] Such methodologies have seen studies of ex-servicemen move from investigations of their internal organisation and degree of political activism towards issues such as coping with disability and the extent to which it caused marginalisation within society.[4] A further development stemming from cultural history is the greater attention paid to the cultural construction of technology and its use for military purposes. Popular military history of the British Army has often been fixated on the identification of 'war-winning weapons', with tanks and aircraft often given starring roles. By contrast, academic military history has tended to contextualise weapons development far more closely and is highly suspicious of identifying any particular piece of hardware as the key to success.

In fact, the modern military history of the British Army in the conflict is often a blend of many different approaches and has challenged many of the myths that accumulated around the army partly as a result of the over-emphasis placed on a narrow range of literary works. The development of the contemporary historiography really commenced in the early 1960s *before* the main archival collections of state papers were fully accessible. John Terraine's *Mons: The Retreat to Victory* (1960) remains a very fine study based upon a close comparison of the sources available at the time. Indeed, from this initial study, Terraine went on to become a leading proponent of what can be labelled the 'revisionist school'. Determined to place the experience of the Western Front in context, Terraine's subsequent studies emphasised the imbalance between weaponry, transport and communications technologies experienced during the conflict. By arguing that few armies foresaw the awful potential for stalemate created by these inequalities, Terraine sought to reveal that the performance of the BEF and its high command was by no means as incompetent and unimaginative as was popularly believed, an opinion he expressed strongly in his 1963 work, *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier*. In pursuing this thesis, Terraine clashed with Liddell Hart particularly over the scripts for the BBC's monumental twenty-six episode series, *The Great War*. Commissioned to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the conflict's outbreak, *The Great War*'s narrative thrust was driven by the team of Terraine and Correlli Barnett. Although their treatment of the war was indeed a departure from the

[3] For examples, see Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996); Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012).

[4] For examples of the two different approaches, see Niall Barr, *The Lion and the Poppy: British Veterans, Politics and Society, 1921–1939* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005); J. P. Anderson, *War, Disability and Rehabilitation in Britain: Soul of a Nation* (Manchester University Press, 2011); Fiona Reid, *Broken Men: Shellshock, Treatment and Recovery in Britain 1914–1930* (London: Continuum, 2011).

popular view of the British Army's prosecution of the war, viewers often failed to detect it, and ironically, most came to conclusions very similar to those of Liddell Hart.

Nonetheless, Terraine's influence was pervasive and influenced a whole new generation of popular historians who took a similar line arguing that Haig's insight into the realities of war on the Western Front and his commitment to the protracted attritional central phase of the conflict were vital prerequisites of victory.[5] Since the mid-1960s, there has been a profusion of macro and micro operational and strategic histories dedicated to this core theme. The vast majority of these studies were sympathetic to elements of Terraine's interpretation as they stressed the difficulty of expanding the army's entire infrastructure during the course of a conflict against a well-organised enemy. In effect, these works explored the meaning behind Lord Kitchener's comment, '[W]e must make war as we must and not as we would like.'[6] Others have been less convinced; while historians such as Tim Travers, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson accepted that the performance of the British Army had to be judged against a whole range of factors, they highlighted weaknesses in the culture of the army and its understandings of modern warfare.[7] Nonetheless, by the mid-1990s, the dominant orthodoxy emphasised the immense improvement made by the British Army during the course of the war, particularly in its conduct of operations on the Western Front, and deemed it the deciding force in 1918. More recently, an element of post-revisionism has set in, questioning the idea of progressive, improving steps towards military effectiveness. Instead, the patchiness of the British Army has been identified, revealing its inconsistencies as a force containing a strange mixture of excellent and indifferent elements, many of which were reflections of its pre-war strengths and weaknesses.[8]

[5] For examples, see Gordon Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock: Britain and the First World War* (London: Cassell, 2003); and Charles Messenger, *Call to Arms: The British Army, 1914–1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005).

[6] For examples, see Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry, 1880–1918* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001).

[7] For examples, see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson, 1914–18* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele, The Untold Story* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare* (London: Unwin, Hyman, 1987); Tim Travers, *How the War Was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917–1918* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[8] For examples, see Jonathan Boff, *Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and*

Despite the outpouring of popular and academic investigations, certain aspects remain under-researched. New work is furthering our understanding of the general staff and military administration, command below the army level is likewise coming under great scrutiny and there is still much to be done on the impact of conscripts on the British Army and the influence it may have had on combat effectiveness.[9]

This study examines the British Army in the First World War drawing upon the full breadth of the historiography and intimate knowledge of the primary sources. Its central focus is the pursuit of the conflict on the Western Front, which was the army's overwhelming priority throughout the war. Despite commitments to other fronts, most notably in 1915 and 1917, the army's high command and many of the most influential politicians never wavered from the centrality of France and Belgium as the determining theatre of war. Where the Germans attempted to distract the British with the intention of drawing resources from the Western Front to other theatres, most notably Africa, they failed entirely as locally raised colonial and Indian forces shouldered the burden. This is not to diminish the arduous nature of these campaigns, nor to ignore a key British strategic concern – the overall security of the Empire – but the extent to which that aim was pursued in France and Belgium.

The imperial commitment to the war provided Britain with immense support in terms of money, raw and manufactured materials and human resources.[10] Over the last thirty years, studies of the imperial contribution have proliferated. Of particular importance to this work are the military histories of the Dominion and Indian forces. Popular histories have tended to play up concepts of invincible Australian, Canadian and New Zealand units, with the secret of their success identified in their peculiar national atmospheres. Much recent academic research in the former Dominions has tended to revise such simplistic concepts, stressing the importance of continuing intimate links with British forces, particularly staff officers, and common lines of development and thinking despite the

Deploying the British Army, 1902–1914 (Oxford University Press, 2012); J. P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[9] For examples of these approaches, see Ilana Bet-El, *Conscripts: The Lost Legion of the Great War* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1999); Aimée Fox-Godden, '"Putting Knowledge in Power": Perspectives on Learning and Knowledge Sharing in the British Army of the First World War', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2015; Peter Hodgkinson, *British Infantry Battalion Commanders in the First World War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914–1918* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006).

[10] For a summary of the imperial war effort, see Robert Holland, 'The British Empire in the Great War 1914–1918', in Judith M. Brown and William Roger Louis (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, Vol. IV (Oxford University Press, 1999), 114–37.

growing isolation of Australian and Canadian forces in their own corps.[11] Studies of Indian forces have also expanded significantly and in the process have escaped many of the old clichés about the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian Army.[12] In terms of this work, the role of imperial troops is commented upon, but only in the wider context of the British Army and, in particular, the BEF on the Western Front, as detailed examinations of their particular attributes would significantly expand the scope of this study. For the same reason, detailed examinations of the roles of female service in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps and colonial peoples in labour units have been excluded. Both played vital roles, but without both deploying a distinctly different methodology and exploring distinctly different questions, it is impossible to accord them the depth they deserve.[13]

This exploration of the British Army in the Great War places the fighting on the Western Front at its core, but it is contextualised by examinations of the social history of the army, the wider strategic framework and a survey of the war it pursued in other theatres. When taken together, it demonstrates that the British Army was the single most important component of the British Empire's immense war effort between 1914 and 1918.

[11] For examples, see Geoffrey Hayes, Andrew Iarocci and Mike Bechthold (eds.), *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007); Robert Stevenson, *The Centenary History of Australia and the Great War: The War with Germany* (Sydney, NSW: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[12] Most important for this study is George Morton-Jack's, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[13] For good examples of these kinds of studies, see Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Tim Winegaard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

1 The Pre-War Army

During the period between the end of the South African War in 1902 and the outbreak of the First World War, no government made a clear statement of what they saw the priorities of the British Army to be in terms of a focus on home defence, imperial policing or a continental commitment.[1] Contemporaries still referred to the memorandum compiled by Edward Stanhope, then Secretary of State for War, in December 1888. Stanhope had listed the priorities of the British Army as being, in order, maintaining civil order at home, providing soldiers for India and the Imperial garrisons, home defence and an ability to send a sizeable number of troops overseas in the event of war. Stanhope noted the low priority given to an expeditionary capacity and explained that any European war was highly improbable, which accounted for this assessment.[2] R. B. Haldane introduced a sweeping range of reforms while Secretary of State for War between 1906 and 1912, but despite the generally positive reception these reforms received from contemporaries and the generally favourable treatment of Haldane by historians, his reforms did little to resolve this fundamental issue of what the British Army actually existed to do.

In brief, Haldane's reforms sought to reorganise the elements of the British Army that were in the United Kingdom into the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of six infantry and one cavalry divisions. He

[1] For a wider discussion of the topics discussed in this chapter, see Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training and Deploying the British Army, 1902–14* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] The Stanhope memorandum is reproduced in full in E. M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army, 1868–1902* (Manchester University Press, 1992), 337. See also I. F. W. Beckett, 'Edward Stanhope at the War Office, 1887–92', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 5, 2 (1982); and I. F. W. Beckett, 'The Stanhope Memorandum of 1888: A Reinterpretation', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, LVII, 136 (1984). See also John Gooch, *The Plans of War: The General Staff and British Military Strategy, c.1900–1916* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in Two World Wars* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972); and Hew Strachan, 'The British Army, Its General Staff and the Continental Commitment, 1904–1914', in D. French and B. Bond (eds.), *The British General Staff: Reform and Innovation, 1890–1939* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 75–94.

further sought to organise the auxiliary forces into a Territorial Force (TF) of fourteen infantry divisions and fourteen cavalry brigades, with the supporting logistical and medical services, all enlisted for home defence only. Haldane also formed the Officer Training Corps (OTC), which brought together a number of Volunteer units at, mainly, public schools and universities and was meant to provide a trained officer corps for the new TF.[3] While many of the Haldane reforms were to endure, the celebration of Haldane as one of the most intellectual Secretaries of State for War rather ignores two uncomfortable facts. Firstly, the post of Secretary of State for War was not regarded as one of the leading offices of state, and most of its holders brought little intellectual dynamism to the post, so Haldane's reputation is being measured against a rather low bar. Indeed, it is worth reflecting that H. O. Arnold-Forster, Haldane's immediate predecessor, was, supposedly, the sixth or seventh choice for this post.[4] Secondly, the driver behind the Haldane reforms was financial, to bring in the army estimates below £28 million per annum. To this end, it is often forgotten that the Haldane reforms actually saw cuts in the regular army, with nine infantry battalions and some elements of the Royal Field Artillery and Royal Garrison Artillery disbanded.[5]

Nevertheless, Haldane's appointment as Secretary of State for War received widespread support from contemporaries. The warmest reception came, predictably, from the liberal press. In the *Manchester Guardian*, an editorial welcomed Haldane to the post, referring to his 'aptitude for thinking out a problem from first principles' which was much needed as the chief cause of the difficulties with army reform 'has been want of clearness' exacerbated by H. O. Arnold-Forster, 'the least successful

[3] I. F. W. Beckett, *Rifleman Form: A Study of the Rifle Volunteer Movement 1859–1908* (Aldershot: Ogilby Trust, 1982); Hugh Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History 1859–1908* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1975); John Gooch, 'Mr. Haldane's Army', in John Gooch (ed.), *The Prospect of War* (London: Frank Cass, 1981); John Gooch, 'Haldane and the "National Army"', in I. F. W. Beckett and John Gooch (eds.), *Politicians and Defence: Studies in the Formulation of British Defence Policy 1845–1970* (Manchester University Press, 1981); Michael Howard, 'Lord Haldane and the Territorial Army', in Michael Howard (ed.), *Studies in War and Peace* (London: Temple Smith, 1970); A. J. A. Morris, 'Haldane's Army Reforms, 1906–1908: The Deception of the Radicals', *History*, 56, 181 (1971); and E. M. Spiers, *Haldane: An Army Reformer* (Edinburgh University Press, 1980).

[4] Ian Beckett, 'H. O. Arnold-Forster and the Volunteers', in Ian Beckett and John Gooch (eds.), *Politicians and Defence: Studies in the Formulation of British Defence Policy 1845–1970* (Manchester University Press, 1981), 50; and A. Tucker, 'The Issue of Army Reform in the Unionist Government, 1903–5', *Historical Journal*, 9, 1 (1966), 92–3. For a different view, see Rhodri Williams, *Defending the Empire: The Conservative Party and British Defence Policy 1899–1915* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 42–3.

[5] 1908 (Cd. 3798), *The General Annual Report on the British Army for the Year Ending 30th September, 1907*, 2–3; and H. C. Wylly, *History of the Manchester Regiment (Late the 63rd and 96th Foot)* (London: Forster Groom, 1925), 63–4.

Secretary of War that this country has ever had'.[6] The *Westminster Gazette* and the *Daily News* rejoiced that the War Office and army had finally gained a calm, reflective and intelligent political head.[7] The *Observer* took a similar line, condemning the haste with which Brodrick and Arnold-Forster had commenced their poorly judged army reforms.[8] The *Pall Mall Gazette, Illustrated London News, Daily Express* and the *Times* all stated that Haldane's desire to keep the question of army reform free from political partisanship and in the best interests of the nation was an impressive commitment, and the *Times* added that his position among his colleagues was much higher than that commanded by Arnold-Forster.[9]

Critical comment appeared on the Haldane reforms fairly quickly, and it was reform of the auxiliary forces which proved the most divisive issue. This was a subject which polarised the press, but it did not occur instantly, with some papers moving their positions only gradually. The *Pall Mall Gazette* was one of the few papers unconvinced from the start, and it referred to Haldane's Territorial Force scheme as 'playing at soldiers'.[10] By contrast, the firmly Conservative *Morning Post* remained remarkably impartial.[11] The *Times* was the main heavyweight paper to shift its position. Initially it supported Haldane's scheme, and its editorial line persisted in this even after Charles Repington, the paper's military correspondent, had declared his scepticism. Geoffrey Buckle, editor of the *Times*, was prepared to allow this division of thought as part of the newspaper's dialogue with its readers.[12] An editorial on the 22 March 1907 reported on Haldane's plans to reform the Militia and gave him wholehearted support in this endeavour. Repington, however, pursued a different line and, while never wishing to undermine Haldane nor his plans for the new Territorial Force, expressed his doubts that it would prove an effective answer to Britain's military problems.[13] A year later the editorial line was still at variance from Repington's, with a leading article reporting enthusiastically on the quality of Territorial Force training and preparation.[14] Gradually, however, the two approaches came

[6] *Manchester Guardian*, 7 March 1906.
[7] *Westminster Gazette*, 17 February 1906; *Daily News*, 5 January 1906.
[8] *Observer*, 11 March 1906.
[9] *The Times*, 5 January 1906; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 June 1906; *Illustrated London News*,. 130, 3541 (2 March 1907), 322; *Daily Express*, 9 March 1906.
[10] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 26 February 1907.
[11] *Morning Post*, 24 January 1906, 24 February 1907, 1, 2 April 1908, 13 February 1913.
[12] See Morris, *Repington*, 16–17.
[13] See, for example, *The Times*, 26 June 1907. See also W. Michael Ryan, 'The Invasion Controversy of 1906–1908: Lieutenant-Colonel Charles à Court Repington and British Perceptions of the German Menace', *Military Affairs*, 44, 1 (February 1980), 8–12.
[14] *The Times*, 4 August 1908.

closer together, and by 1912, under the new editor, Geoffrey Robinson, the editorial line switched to an outright support for compulsory service in a home defence force.[15]

Supporting the idea that Britain needed a large home defence force, the *Manchester Guardian* was suspicious of the Imperial Service Obligation (ISO), which it believed revealed that Haldane's real plan was not to create a sustainable home defence force but a pool of personnel for the regular army. Such allegations of militarism and imperialist ambitions levelled against Haldane were not allayed by creation of the Special Reserve.[16] More broadly, the radical left in British politics feared that Haldane was endorsing the views of Lord Robert's National Service League and that the TF set the basis for universal and compulsory military service.[17]

Much of the unionist press moved towards opposition and outright hostility to the TF. The *Daily Express* condemned creation of the TF unreservedly, believing it to be an ill-thought-out solution dictated by Liberal Party pressure for a quick, cheap solution. This paper went on to accuse Haldane of introducing a class element into the officer corps by reserving commissions for the gentry, who would essentially serve without pay or allowances, rather than offering them to the more motivated urban middle class.[18] Among the unionist press, the *Observer* under Garvin's firm editorial hand moved rapidly from an initial welcome of the Haldane reforms to implacable opposition. As soon as Haldane announced his scheme for reform of the auxiliary forces, the *Observer* vented scepticism. The entire structure was condemned as unworkable, particularly the county associations, which were meant to introduce a local and democratic element into the TF. A fortnight before the TF came formally into existence, the paper's editorial strongly supported Lord Robert's call for conscription.[19]

The most vocal opposition to the Haldane reforms came from the National Service League (NLS), which was formed in 1902 and claimed to have 270,000 members by the summer of 1914. The League proposed a very mild form of conscription compared to that in use in most of continental Europe. In their plan, conscripts would serve for two to four months of full-time training, followed by a further fifteen days in each of

[15] *The Times*, 10 December 1912.
[16] *Manchester Guardian*, 15 September, 26 November 1906, 15 January, 26 February, 10 April, 20 June, and 30 November 1907.
[17] Matthew Johnson, *Militarism and the British Left 1902–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 134–43.
[18] *Daily Express*, 13 July 1906, 26 February 1907, 1 April 1908.
[19] *Observer*, 15 July 1906, 15 March 1908.