

THE BOER WAR: ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE

THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR AND THE LATE VICTORIAN ARMY Ian FW Beckett

It appears to have been Robert Louis Stevenson who coined the phrase that it is better to travel hopefully than to arrive. One is reminded constantly of this when surveying British expectations of the prospects of war. 'The finest army that has ever left these shores.' 'The Army was never in better condition either as regards the zeal and skill of its officers from the highest to the lowest, the training and discipline of the men, or the organisation of all the branches of the service.' 'In every respect, ... incomparably the best trained, best organised and best equipped British Army that ever went forth to war.' The first and last of these three quotations may sound familiar. Only one—the third—was arguably true, this being Sir James Edmonds' conclusion with regard to the British Expeditionary Force in 1914. The first was the initial verdict of *The Times* on the expeditionary force being sent to the Crimea in 1854. The second, of more immediate relevance to our concern, was the judgement of the military commentator, Henry Spenser Wilkinson, at the beginning of the South African War.¹

Within a few short weeks, of course, events in South Africa suggested that Spenser Wilkinson had been all too optimistic although, in part, it had been his intention from the start to contrast the apparent efficiency of the army with what he perceived to be the inadequacy of the higher organisation of defence. By the end of the war, the generally accepted conclusion with regard to the British Army's performance accorded with that of Leo Amery. His massive and influential *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, published between 1900 and 1909, famously proclaimed that, while the army was a success judged as 'an institution or society', as 'a fighting machine it was largely a sham'. Similarly, to Amery, the home army was 'nothing more or less than a gigantic Dotheboys Hall', the allusion being to Wackford Squeers' notorious academy in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*.²

Though Amery claimed that he wished to produce a 'really accurate and impartial work', *The Times* history was always intended to be 'essentially propagandistic' in the belief not only that 'unflinching frankness of criticism was needed in the public interest', but also that 'the story of the war could be made the best instrument for preaching Army Reform'. It was Amery, of course, who orchestrated the press campaign to remove Sir Redvers Buller from the Aldershot command in October 1901. Moreover, Field Marshal Lord Roberts and his circle cooperated closely with Amery and, as Major-General Geoffry Barton revealed before the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, the normal rules with regard to communication with the press were suspended in the case of *The Times* history.³

Many contemporaries recognised the flawed nature of Amery's creation. Sir George White, for example, complained that it ascribed 'successes to accidents or to glaring failures on the part of the enemy rather than to allow any credit to those senior officers to whom blame is meted out with no grudging hand when opportunity offers'. Similarly, an anonymous reviewer in the *American Historical Review* wrote in 1907 of the inability of the author of *The Times* volumes to 'resist scourging his victims with whips steeped in acid brine'. With some irritation, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice also pointed out in the second volume of the War Office's official history, published in the same year, that it was too easy to forget that the British Army had initially been numerically inferior to a well armed and organised enemy and to 'throw the whole blame on our "ignorant generals" and our "stupid soldiers"'. As Howard Bailes has written, however, the more measured and colourless tone of the official history, published between 1906 and 1910, 'barely modified the influence exerted by the lively and readable volumes of Amery's *History*'. Indeed, Amery's conclusions continued to shape the received version of the war for almost 70 years, authors of the popular accounts that appeared when interest in the war revived in the 1950s and 1960s appearing oblivious to his motives.⁴

Thus, from an assumption of unmitigated military failure, and of obvious lessons deriving from the South African experience, the impact of the war upon the British Army has been largely seen as administering, to quote Kipling, 'no end of a lesson', ushering in a period of substantial and much needed reform. Clearly, there were major changes, not least in higher military organisation. In many ways, however, the impact of the war was not as great as sometimes supposed since the apparent lessons of war were far from unambiguous. But, then, they seldom are.

I

The war clearly had significance in that it was the first occasion on which the British Army was faced, as Maurice put it, 'as no European army has yet done, with the new conditions of war'. As will be seen, this is not entirely true, but the South African experience was on a new scale. As Maurice further commented, the effectiveness of the weapons available to both sides in South Africa was 'about in the same proportion to those which thirty years earlier the contest between France and Germany had been fought out then stood to the Brown Bess of Waterloo'.⁵

The results were early apparent, as Major-General Neville Lyttelton noted. Commanding the 4th (Light) Brigade at Colenso, Lyttelton was startled by the contrast with his experience of commanding a British brigade at Omdurman a year previously: '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'. Indeed, compared to the 25 British fatalities at Omdurman, in which only four had been killed in the main action and the remaining 21 during the charge of the 21st Lancers, 171 men were killed or died of wounds at Colenso. At Modder River, Lord Methuen suffered 102 killed or died of wounds, while Spion Kop was to cost 383 British lives, and Paardeburg, 348. As Thomas Pakenham has noted, the army had lost over 100 men killed in a single action only twice since 1857. Both circumstances had been atypical, namely Isandlwana and Maiwand. Small wonder in 1899 that, to quote Colonel FN Maude, the country 'did not know that bloodshed was a usual consequence of the armed collision of combatants. Hence, the outbreak of hysteria with which they received the news of our casualties'.⁶

Apart from the effects of firepower, South Africa was also noted for the use of railways, the telegraph, steam tractors, armoured trains, aerial reconnaissance by balloon, electric illumination, blockhouses, wire entanglements, entrenchment and so on. Most of these had already featured in other conflicts during the late nineteenth century such as the American Civil War, the German Wars of Unification and the Russo-Turkish War. Nonetheless, the war was undeniably 'modern' and JFC Fuller was somewhat more accurate in his later characterisation of the conflict as one of the 'roots of Armageddon' rather than in his earlier judgement that it was the 'last of the gentleman's wars'.⁷

How far the war was, or was not, a 'total' conflict is a rather larger question, with which this paper is not directly concerned, but the scale of the war clearly dwarfed earlier colonial conflicts in which Britain had been involved. Some 30,000 men had been despatched to the Crimea in 1854, and the next largest military effort was the deployment of a 16,000 strong field force in Egypt in 1882. By comparison, Britain sent 112,000 regulars to South Africa between October 1899 and January 1900 and, by the end of the war, had deployed over 448,000 men from Britain and the empire and also employed perhaps 120,000 blacks and coloureds in auxiliary roles. Instead of a three or four month campaign costing perhaps no more than £10 million and minimum casualties, the war lasted 32 months and cost £230 million and almost 22,000 British and imperial dead.⁸

Yet, the South African War was also clearly a transitional conflict on the cusp between the traditional and the modern although, so for that matter, was the First World War. Alongside the controversies over alleged Boer use of dum-dum bullets and abuse of white flags, which led British soldiers to dehumanise their opponents and made the adoption of 'methods of barbarism' easier, there were aspects of Boer society with which those same British soldiers could readily identify. There were instances of chivalrous conduct among enemies, such as

the obvious mutual regard between Methuen and 'Koos' de la Rey, evident both when Methuen spared de la Rey's property, and when Methuen was later captured by de la Rey. Some soldiers were uneasy with the methods being used during the guerrilla phase of the conflict and the soldiers were instrumental in forcing through a more magnanimous peace than the politicians would have imposed.

In military terms, there was still a reliance upon horses and mules for transport since there were only 5024 miles of railway line in southern Africa and much of it single track. Similarly, while the army had embraced X-rays, its handling of the outbreak of bubonic plague in Cape Town in 1901 demonstrated its unwillingness to adopt what has been characterised as the 'talisman of modernity' in medical terms, namely inoculation and bacteriology. It is, of course, a significant defence of the conditions in the concentration camps to acknowledge that the army was no better at preserving the lives of its own men than Boer civilians from disease.⁹

Notwithstanding the paradoxes, many contemporary commentators were convinced that the lessons of the war were obvious. In offering his collected articles from the *Morning Post* to the public in March 1900 under the title of *Lessons of the War*, for example, Spenser Wilkinson made the confident assertion that the war's lessons were already far from obscure for 'those whose occupations have led them to indulge in any close study of war'. By contrast, St John Brodrick, who became Secretary of State for War in October 1900, scaled down the scope of the official history begun by Colonel GFR Henderson and then taken on by Maurice after Henderson's death. Ostensibly, Brodrick claimed that 'though a great war for us, it is hardly a Franco-Prussian War in its lessons—especially after the first twelve months'.

It is apparent that financial restrictions were the real cause of Brodrick's stance, but, in fact, many other commentators believed the South African War so abnormal as to render its lessons, in the words of Major-General Robert Baden-Powell's brother, Major BFS Baden-Powell, 'hardly worth study'. Baden-Powell shared his brother's views. Henderson, who otherwise saw further evidence in South Africa of the appearance of what he characterised as the 'second tactical revolution' brought about by smokeless powder, magazine rifles and quick firing artillery, similarly believed the conditions on the veldt 'peculiar'.

Appearing before the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, Major-General JP Brabazon also declared that, 'It was a most extraordinary war, fought under absolutely different conditions (it was my sixth campaign) from those of any other war I had ever seen'. The value of Brabazon's observation, however, was perhaps offset by his advocacy of shock tactics by cavalry armed with tomahawks. As Lord Esher remarked, 'He drew graphic pictures of a cavalry charge under these conditions, so paralysing to the imagination of the Commissioners that they wholly failed to extricate the General or themselves from the discussion of this engrossing subject'. Even some external observers were struck by the unique conditions, the American naval theorist, Alfred Thayer Mahan, declaring the war an anomaly in his account of it published in July 1900, although Jean de Bloch did believe the war essentially modern.¹⁰

To some extent, these peculiarities derived from the climate and terrain. As Maude pointed out, it was almost as far from Cape Town to Pretoria as from Vienna to St Petersburg. Similarly, it was as far from the Cape to Durban as from London to Prague. Only Natal had a climate resembling any part of Europe. The area around Mafeking was, for all intents and purposes, semi-desert, while temperatures on the high veldt, between 5000 and 7000 feet above sea level, were subject to the most extreme variations. Summer months between October and March were sometimes wet, resulting in good pasture for transport animals, but flooded and impassable rivers. The dry winter months of April to September would guarantee hard tracks, but shortage of water and non-existent pasture. In any case, European-bred horses disliked the 'thin, reedy, bitter grass'. An additional factor was that deadly horse sickness was a feature of lower altitudes, and of the wet months. These aspects had particular implications for any lessons regarding the use of mounted troops. Of particular significance with regard to the assessment of firepower, whether rifles or artillery, was the atmospheric clarity of the veldt, and the lack of either large scale topographical features or natural obstacles. This enhanced the effectiveness of fire at long-range, with unaimed fire to the maximum range of magazine rifles quite capable of killing distant opponents.¹¹

If many of these conditions were unlikely to be produced in Europe, then there was also the nature of the Boers themselves. In the first edition of his celebrated *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, published in 1896, Colonel Charles Callwell had already placed the Boers in a category of their own, separate from all other colonial opponents faced by the British. The third edition published in 1906 and embracing the lessons of the second Anglo-Boer conflict, did not alter this assessment. Indeed, Callwell remarked of the methods eventually evolved to defeat the Boers that 'it would rarely happen that such heroic remedies would be necessary in operations against the class of enemy ordinarily met with in small wars'.

Nonetheless, in passing, it should be emphasised that, while common to some of those already used by the Spanish on Cuba between 1896 and 1898 and the United States in the Philippines between 1898 and 1902, the highly successful pacification methods evolved in South Africa, including the use of wire, blockhouses, mobile columns, and reconcentration, were to inform British counter-insurgency practice throughout the twentieth century. In any case, leading British military theorists like Henderson and Maurice were too pragmatic to assume that any conflict did more than add to the accumulation of practical experience. Moreover, those lessons from South Africa deemed to be applicable to a modern European war were soon to be contradicted in many cases by those of the Russo-Japanese War.¹²

II

Turning first to infantry tactics. Fuller's claim that British generals displayed a 'Brown Bess' or 'Peninsular' mentality of 'shoulder to shoulder formations, of volleys in rigid lines and of wall-like bayonet assaults' is quite ludicrous. Admittedly, peacetime training in the 1890s showed that some battalions still clung to the close formations long officially abandoned, and Fitzroy Hart's brigade was committed in close order at Colenso (15 December 1899). Part of Thomas Pakenham's attempt to rehabilitate Buller's reputation, however, was to argue that, after the reverses at Colenso, Spion Kop (24 January 1900) and Vaal Krantz (5 February 1900), the final advance of the Natal Field Force to relieve Ladysmith saw troops move in short rushes, using available cover and with the support of creeping barrages, so that it was Buller who first evolved 'the tactics of truly modern war'.

In fact, as Edward Spiers, Tim Moreman and, most recently, Stephen Miller, have all pointed out, those used to recent Indian warfare had already become painfully aware of the potentially destructive effects of modern breechloaders during the great rising on the North-West Frontier in 1897. Thus, Hamilton deployed successfully in extended order at Elandsplaagte (21 October 1899) and Methuen also deployed successfully in extended order at Belmont (23 November 1899) though, unfortunately, his troops were caught while deploying at Magersfontein (11 December 1899).

Moreover, Howard Bailes has argued that the whole thrust of British tactical thought and training through the 1890s was towards more flexibility. Thus, the 'Notes for Guidance in South African Warfare', issued by Roberts on 26 January 1900, and emphasising the need to avoid frontal attacks and to use extended order, were no more than a 'textbook summary of the advanced tactical ideas of the previous three decades'. Bailes also argued that the failures in the early part of the war were not a consequence of British tactical doctrine, but a 'failure to act in accordance with it', although he acknowledged that the war occurred at a moment when the practical application of new tactical ideas was at an early stage.¹³

The principal infantry lessons of the war, therefore, certainly appeared to be that firepower was the most decisive factor in warfare, and that manoeuvre was required to avoid its destructive effect, although the success of manoeuvre was also taken to rely upon the offensive power of modern weapons. Henderson, indeed, in stressing the importance of envelopment, argued that 'it is not always realised that anything which gives new strengths to the defence at the same time adds something to the advantage of the army which attacks'. If the war suggested the significance of infantry firepower, however, through the perceived reluctance on occasions of officers and men to face fire, there was also a new emphasis upon morale and the offensive spirit. Soldiers such as Maurice, indeed, were in the forefront of the

growing concern with the apparent deterioration of the imperial race as suggested by the physical deficiencies of many wartime recruits. The Royal Commission on Physical Training in Scotland and the Inter-departmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1903 were but two manifestations of the trend towards eugenics.

This particular emphasis was reinforced by the Russo-Japanese War, although its lessons were equally ambiguous. To quote Major-General EA Altham, the experience in Manchuria 'has wiped out the mistaken inference from South African experience that bayonet fighting belongs to the past'. Similar conclusions were reached by Major-General Lancelot Kiggell, Douglas Haig's successor as Director of Staff Duties at the War Office in 1909, who also believed that Manchuria had proven erroneous the assumptions about firepower derived from South Africa.

A greater emphasis was given to musketry training as a result of the South African War, although financial considerations led to the scaling back of the new practice ammunition allowance of 1902-3 in 1907, and also to the compromise adoption of the Short Lee-Enfield in 1905. However, the significance accorded firepower and the methodical caution in attack apparent in the new manuals, *Combined Training* in 1902 and *Infantry Training* in 1905, was reversed in *Field Service Regulations* in 1909, which downgraded firepower and subordinated the defensive to the moral effect of the vigorous offensive.¹⁴

The lessons of the war with regard to cavalry were even less clear cut. It is usually assumed that traditional cavalry, 'wedded to shock tactics', proved unsuccessful and that mounted infantry was the key to the future of the mounted arm. As is well known, Roberts and his supporters, such as Amery and Erskine Childers, the author of the fifth volume of *The Times History*, dealing with the guerrilla phase of the war, and subsequently the author of *War and the Arme Blanche* in 1910, were highly critical of the cavalry's record in South Africa. Childers, indeed, famously questioned the utility 'if any, of the *arme blanche*, in the conflicts of the future'. The new manual, *Cavalry Training*, in 1904 thus emphasised the importance of the rifle and of dismounted action rather than of the sword and of mounted action.

As Stephen Badsey and the Marquess of Anglesey have demonstrated, the limitations of the cavalry in South Africa owed most to the woeful neglect of the 'horsemastership' essential in the particular climatic conditions of the veldt. Thus, the perceived failure of the cavalry at Poplar Grove (6 March 1900) was due to the poor condition of the horses. Moreover, actual doctrine as suggested by the 1896 Cavalry Drill Book endorsed the combination of mounted and dismounted action, though without devoting much space to the latter. Indeed, British cavalry traditionalists such as Sir John French and Haig were able to argue that the principles of offensive mounted action remained unchanged as a result of the war.

Traditional cavalry action had worked well at Elandslaagte. Similarly, French demonstrated what Stephen Badsey has described as 'the immense tactical flexibility of his reformed cavalry' at Klip Drift (15 February 1900) and the combination of mounted and dismounted action proved successful at both Zand River (10 May 1900) and Diamond Hill (11 June 1900). Subsequently, there were many examples of cavalry charging successfully during the guerrilla phase of the conflict, albeit with rifles rather than swords. As Badsey has emphasised, Childers fully recognised this and, while believing the sword unnecessary, was not actually an opponent of the cavalry charge per se.

Consequently, Haig, as successively Director of Military Training and Director of Staff Duties between 1906 and 1909, and French, as Inspector-General of the Forces from 1907 to 1911, reversed the emphasis upon mounted infantry. Haig's *Cavalry Studies*, published in 1907 in collaboration with Lonsdale Hale, and French's preface to the translation of Bernhardi's *Cavalry in Peace and War* in 1910, both upheld traditional principles of offensive action. The balance, however, shifted back, towards mounted infantry in the 1912 edition of *Cavalry Training*. In fact, Badsey has argued that the cavalry was trained adequately for both mounted and dismounted action by 1914, although the combination of tactical roles ascribed the cavalry was overly ambitious, and one the more traditionally minded officers found difficult to grasp.¹⁵

As Edward Spiers has remarked, the cavalry versus mounted infantry debate 'merely confirmed that the war had not produced many self-evident lessons' since, for example, Ian Hamilton's view of Zand River was very different from that of French. Unlike the infantry debate, Manchurian experience was of little further guidance since cavalry played virtually no part in the Russo-Japanese War. The latter conflict, however, was of more significance for artillery lessons, which were obscured in the case of South Africa by the war being primarily used to justify the rearmament and reorganisation of the Royal Artillery without any regard to the actual experience.

British soldiers entered the war already believing in the need for European-style quick-firing guns. Consequently, the Director-General of the Ordnance, Sir Henry Brackenbury, persuaded the government to consider rearming the Royal Artillery in January 1900. An order was immediately placed for German Ehrhardt guns and agreement reached on a three year programme of rearmament in January 1901. It should be emphasised, however, that the Boers possessed no such quick firing guns and that the only ones actually deployed in South Africa were naval guns. These were too heavy for use in the field, and fired only an estimated two per cent of those shells discharged by the British during the war. The war was thus merely a means of justifying rearmament and, as Edward Spiers has again remarked, the only actual perceived lessons were refinements in armament characterised by 'greater mobility for Horse Artillery, increased fire power for Field Artillery, and a longer range capability for both'.

These requirements were satisfied by the adoption of the 13-pounder for horse artillery, and the 18-pounder and 4.5" howitzer for field artillery. In fact, not all artillery officers shared these perceptions, and many erroneously thought that the new quick firers would make little difference to artillery tactics. Colonel Long, of course, utilised at Colenso tactics which had worked at Omdurman. Indeed, despite the poor results of those at Magersfontein and Colenso, largely as a consequence of a misplaced faith in the effectiveness of lyddite as a propellant, an emphasis was retained on the necessity for preliminary bombardment. Shrapnel, which had also proved largely ineffective, was retained precisely because lyddite had failed as a high explosive.

Even those who grasped the importance of indirect fire, and the need to accentuate the volume of fire as a necessary precondition to movement, were haunted to some extent by the accusation that, in 'hiding behind hills', they sought to avoid delivering close support to the infantry in the firing line. Subsequently, the experience of the Russo-Japanese War, and observation of French artillery tactics, demonstrated that simply rearming, without a due consideration of the tactical implications of doing so, had been somewhat premature.¹⁶

In many respects, the least ambiguous lessons of South Africa were those relating to the army's support services. Most, with the noted exception of the Royal Army Medical Corps, had performed adequately. Indeed, despite much contemporary criticism, the Army Service Corps had done especially well when the disastrous meddling of Roberts and Kitchener in regimental transport is taken into account. All services, however, had been grossly understaffed and under-resourced. Consequently, the Royal Engineers and the RAMC were both expanded after the war, which had provided useful lessons in such areas as military railway management, military nursing, ambulance design, and hospital trains. Jay Stone has also pointed to a variety of smaller lessons taken on board with respect to equipment such as puttees, the lighter aluminium canteen, new water carts, looped cartridge belts and universal khaki service dress.¹⁷

The shortages of matériel, especially ammunition, in 1899 were also addressed following Brackenbury's dire warning that Britain was 'attempting to maintain the largest Empire the world has ever seen with armament and reserves that would be insufficient for a third class military power'. Indeed, by November 1899, there was only eight weeks' supply of .303 ammunition left and the supply of shells had been exhausted even before that. British firms were capable of producing only 2.5 million rounds a week when the demand exceeded three million. An additional problem was that the stock of 66 million rounds of Mark IV expanding ammunition, approximating to two-fifths of the reserve in July 1899, fouled barrels and could

not be used. The programme finally agreed with the Treasury fell short of Brackenbury's requirements, but it was still the case that the Director of Army Contracts was purchasing in a month supplies which would have been regarded previously as sufficient for 20 years. In some cases, the arms manufacturing companies were still two years behind completion of orders by May 1901.

Unfortunately, however, since the war ended before an even greater economic mobilisation became necessary, the lessons were not absorbed. Thus, the Murray Committee concluded in 1907 in a spirit of continued economy that government ordnance factories should be cut back since the private sector could supply future wartime needs. Moreover, reserves of ammunition continued to be predicated on the South African War experience, the lesson drawn from the Russo-Japanese War being the need to ensure fire economy rather than increasing the ammunition available. In part, this reflected continued financial restraints in the face of which, to quote Keith Neilson, the 'prudent response for the British Army was to introduce tactical reforms that did not require new technology'. Predictably, the same kind of shell shortages occurred in 1914-15. Yet, it still needs to be recognised that Britain was able to fight, and ultimately win, a war 6000 miles from the home base. By contrast, as Jay Stone has noted, the French had to rent shipping from Britain in order to invade Madagascar in 1895, the Germans were unable to contribute even a battalion to the international peacekeeping operation on Crete in 1897, and the United States experienced extreme logistic difficulties in invading Cuba, but 90 miles from the American coast, in 1898.¹⁸

The war's greatest and most important impact, however, was in what John Gooch has characterised as the 'managerial revolution', emanating from the official enquiries by royal commissions and parliamentary committees instituted as a result of the war. Two met while the war was still in progress, the Select Committee on War Office Organisation, chaired by Clinton Dawkins, reporting in May 1901, and that on the Education and Training of Officers of the Army, chaired by A Akers-Douglas, in 1902. Principally, however, organisational reform was driven by the Royal Commission on the War in South Africa, chaired by Lord Elgin, which reported in July 1903; the War Office (Reconstitution) Committee, chaired by Lord Esher, which reported in January and March 1904; and the Royal Commission on the Militia and Volunteers, chaired by the Duke of Norfolk, which reported in May 1904.

Of course, a measure of greater higher defence organisation had been instituted before the war through the establishment of such bodies as the Colonial Defence Committee (1885), Joint Naval and Military Committee (1891) and Standing Defence Committee of the Cabinet (1895) although, like changes within the War Office in 1895, these had not been notably successful. Indeed, the Elgin Commission revealed the frequent confusion as to the respective functions of such bodies. It did, however, point to the success of mobilisation in 1899, an unprecedented event, which was itself the product of the Stanhope Memorandum of 1888. The Stanhope Memorandum, of course, has often been criticised, but it was a genuine response to the demands of the military for guidance as to the purposes for which the army existed and for which they were expected to plan, even if the mobilisation was not actually sufficient for the demands of modern war.

Elgin also pointed to the accuracy of the predictions of the small and poorly funded Intelligence Department within the War Office, a new post of Director General of Mobilisation and Military Intelligence having already been created in November 1901. Despite its attention to the decision-making process, however, the Elgin Commission made few positive recommendations and it was Esher who had dissented from the majority report, and whose own committee produced what Gooch has called 'the crowning achievements in the spasm of institutional reform' which followed the war.

The general outline of the reforms are familiar: abolition of the post of Commander-in-Chief; the creation of that of Chief of the General Staff and, in due course, the creation of a General Staff; an Army Council; a permanent secretariat for the Committee of Imperial Defence established by Balfour in December 1902; the reorganisation of the Staff College; and the greater professionalisation of officer education. Some of these, of course, were old ideas, the Hartington Commission having advocated the replacement of Commander-in-Chief with a

Chief of Staff in 1890. There were also the successive attempts at organisational reform between 1901 and 1905 by St John Brodrick and HO Arnold-Forster as Secretaries of State for War. Brodrick and Arnold-Forster, however, did not succeed, and it was left to RB Haldane to effect wider reforms after 1906, which were guided more by financial considerations than either strategic calculations or lingering reflections on the military lessons of the South African War.¹⁹

Nonetheless, just as much as his two immediate predecessors, Haldane still needed to take into account the reorientation of British strategic interests, which were driven partly by the cost of the war. The process had begun in many respects with the abandonment of the traditional concern for the independence of the Ottoman Empire and the freedom of the Straits in 1896. It was accelerated, however, by the fears arising from British diplomatic isolation during the war. Concessions had to be made to the United States over the Venezuelan episode in 1901; there were the tentative negotiations with Germany in the same year; and the conclusion of the alliance with Japan in 1902. While the infant CID devoted over 50 of its 82 meetings between 1902 and 1905 to the defence of India, some soldiers were already turning their attention to strategic challenges from Europe.

The spectre of invasion had arisen once more during the war, at least in the public mind, and the army schemes advocated by Brodrick, Arnold-Forster and Haldane all addressed the effort required to meet British commitments at both home and abroad. As a whole, it is estimated that 14.2 per cent of the male population of the United Kingdom between the ages of 18 and 40 were in uniform at some stage between 1899 and 1902. By March 1900, however, only one regular infantry battalion remained in Britain, with the volunteer force the only additional defence against possible invasion. Hence, the concern to reform the auxiliary forces as well as the regular army, the process ultimately resulting in 1908 in Haldane's abolition of the militia and the merger of volunteers and yeomanry in the Territorial Force.²⁰

III

The South African War was, like the First World War, a transitional conflict and it caught the British Army at a moment when it, too, was in a state of transition. There is some debate as to the degree of real change within the army as a result of its experience. This mirrors in some respects the wider historical debate about continuities and discontinuities with respect to the effect of war upon social change. Tim Travers, for example, emphasises the persistence into the First World War of the amateurism, and of the personalised command structure apparent during the South African War. It might be added that the war had also seen soldiers seize effective control of policy in South Africa itself, in ways which would be repeated on a far greater scale during the First World War, the debt the government owed to Roberts and Kitchener in securing its political survival enabling them to dictate the peace settlement.²¹

In a sense, since the lessons were so ambiguous, what mattered most about the impact of the South African War upon the army was the general sense of the need for reform. The army was undoubtedly better for the experience and, in August 1914, the fact that the BEF was such a finely honed military instrument owed much to the South African War. Unfortunately, an assumed wastage rate of 40 per cent for the first six months of war, and between 65 and 75 per cent for 12 months, calculated as an average between those of the South African and Russo-Japanese Wars, tragically proved a considerable underestimate: the actual casualty rate was 63 per cent in the first three months. In other words, while some lessons had been absorbed, the South African experience had not fundamentally altered the limited way in which the British envisaged waging war in the future. A more profound lesson awaited them. As Cyril Falls later wrote of the BEF, '*Armées d'élite* would be invincible if wars were fought without casualties. Things being what they are, *armées d'élite* are unlikely to remain so for long'.²²

Endnotes

1. Christopher Hibbert, *The Destruction of Lord Raglan: A Tragedy of the Crimean War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 38; Henry Spenser Wilkinson, *Lessons of the War, being comments from week to week to the Relief of Ladysmith* (London: Constable, 1900), 3; Sir James Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* (London: HMSO, 1922), 1: 10-11.
2. Jay Luvaas, *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought, 1815-1940* (London: Cassell, 1964), 263; Leo Amery (ed.), *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, 7 vols (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1900-9), II: 33, 40.
3. Ian F W Beckett, 'The Historiography of Small Wars: Early Historians and the South African War', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 2: 2 (August 1991), 276-98; *ibid*, 'British Official History', in Craig Wilcox (ed), *Recording the South African War: Journalism and Official History, 1899-1914* (London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 1999), 33-42; *Royal Commission on the War in South Africa: Minutes of Evidence*, II (London, 1903), Cmd 1791, 659.
4. Beckett, 'Historiography of Small Wars', 276-98; *ibid*, 'Military Historians and the South African War: A Review of Recent Literature', *Soldiers of the Queen* 54: 1 (1978), 12-14; Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice and Captain M H Grant, *History of the War in South Africa*, 4 vols (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1906-10), II: 206; Howard Bailes, 'Technology and Imperialism: A Case Study of the Victorian Army in Africa', *Victorian Studies* 24: 1 (Autumn 1980), 83-104.
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