



2013-035

Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914*.

Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 2012. Pp. xvii, 290. ISBN 978-0-8061-4289-0.

Review by William Stewart, Ottawa, Ontario (adk46bham@gmail.com).

Lessons learned on the battlefield are seldom as straightforward as they appear 110 years later. Variables of place, climate, and foe complicate the translation of interpreted knowledge into tactics, doctrine, weapons, and training. In *From Boer War to Great War*, Spencer Jones (Univ. of Birmingham) explores this difficult and vexed process, specifically how the British extrapolated and applied the lessons of the Boer War at the brigade level and lower, instituting needed reforms in tactics and training. The central thesis is that the British Army's excellent tactical performance in 1914 on the Western Front resulted from lessons painfully learned in the opening stages of the war in South Africa.

Jones carefully examines changes to tactics, doctrine, ethos, and training in the infantry, cavalry, and artillery. He feels broader issues of army organization, general staff, and operations have already been studied extensively. A major concern of the book is the effect of external influences on the British understanding of the war's lessons. The result is that his appraisal of British successes and failures is judicious and nuanced.

The author uses a variety of official and unofficial sources, including inspection reports, accounts of military observers, service regulations, minutes of general staff meetings, army council decisions, and discussions in professional journals and other secondary sources. Particularly valuable is his explanation of how revised tactics were reflected in regulations and training, in contrast to previous works on the higher-level operations and organization at senior levels of army command. Jones identifies not just intended but actual outcomes at the unit level, registering both successes (for example, in marksmanship) and failures (for example, in entrenching).

The book's five chapters address the Boer War, the doctrine and ethos of the British Army, and modifications of infantry, artillery, and cavalry. There is also a historiographic discussion at the end, a welcome and effective aid to scholars if not general readers. (Literature reviews are not the stuff of stirring narratives.)

The first chapter outlines the course of the Boer War, highlighting actions that figured critically in postwar assessments of the war's lessons. These consisted of the initial engagements that led to the encirclement of major garrisons of the British and their failure to relieve the surrounded positions, British victories in the conventional war that caused the surrender of the main Boer army at Paaderberg and the capture of the major cities and capitals of the two Boer republics, and, finally, the phase of prolonged, very difficult guerrilla warfare. The challenge for the British in extracting the lessons of the relatively brief conventional portion of the war was that it entailed two distinctly different experiences of hard fighting: driving the Boers out of entrenchments in Natal and Lord Robert's attempted encirclement operations in the Boer republics.

The second chapter covers army-wide tactical changes. The British Army of the Boer War was a colonial force that fought disparate enemies in disparate climates and terrain, without a unified direction on tactics and operations. No single overall doctrine could possibly cover all eventualities. In addition, it was felt that a rigid doctrine would lead to stereotyped tactics and stifle initiative. In any case, Jones writes, the early leaders of the General Staff were incapable of pushing through doctrinal change even if they had wanted to.

Jones spotlights throughout the forces blocking or impeding reform. The lessons of the war were ambiguous and their interpretation subject to service, social, and personal biases. Another complicating factor was the apparent precedent of the Japanese defeat of entrenched Russians during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). This suggested that properly motivated troops led by officers disdainful of losses could defeat a

dug-in opponent, albeit at a heavy cost. The continental embrace of the “Cult of the Offensive,” arising in part from the lessons of Manchuria, and the putative dominance of will power over firepower had their effect on the British Army as the terrible lessons of the Boer War faded and its relationship with the French Army deepened. Jones, however, points out that the British were more cautious than the French in adopting *offensive à outrance*, and it did not impinge unduly on the tactical sphere. The British, overall, still had a healthy respect for firepower.

Jones astutely identifies failings in the British Army of this period: in particular, “the failure to create a true doctrine for all arms cooperation was a serious weakness” (53). This was not an issue in small-unit engagements with the typical colonial foe, but fielding larger formations was another matter, requiring diverse tactical approaches; each arm tended to focus on its own task, making all-arms cooperation difficult.

In chapter 3, Jones contends that the Boer War taught the infantry sharper lessons than it did the cavalry or artillery, especially the value of more extended formations moving from cover to cover toward the enemy, improved fire tactics and marksmanship, and effective entrenchments.

To the successful deployment of extended formations, inter-arm cooperation was indispensable:

Although extension would allow the men to close with the hostile position, it did not provide enough strength at a point to actually overwhelm the enemy, either with firepower or via close combat assault. Indeed, for fire superiority to be gained over the foe, it was widely believed a ratio of at least one man per yard was necessary. How to cross the ground to get into a good fire position without suffering prohibitive casualties and then have enough strength to win the firefight and final assault was a paradox the British Army struggled with throughout the period. (83)

While Jones quite effectively describes how improved training produced the remarkable fire effect of the British Army in 1914, one lesson that went unlearned was the importance of entrenchments, owing not to any problem with regulations, but poor equipment and attitude, dependence on Royal Engineers, unsuitable training grounds, a tendency to favor the offensive, and fading memories. This is a salient example of the need to look beyond regulations to what was occurring in the field and on training grounds to uncover the reality. In the case of entrenchments, the regulations were not altered, but the attitude toward them and resulting training did change for the worse.

According to Jones in chapter 4, the Boer War was a great shock to the inexperienced British artillery, with its reliance on obsolete German doctrine stemming from the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). He focuses on three subjects of debate: firing from concealed positions, the potential of long-range artillery, and support for the infantry. He judges that the British made solid progress in these areas, but the lack of clear doctrine allowed individual artillery officers to reach different conclusions, as did the commanders of the 3rd and 5th Divisions in deploying their batteries at the Battle of Le Cateau in 1914. Jones argues that reforms laid the groundwork for the later success of the British artillery, but not very convincingly. Even in spring 1915, there were complaints about artillery support by officers like the commander of the Regular Army 27th Division.<sup>1</sup> At Festubert in May 1915, the artillery bombardment ceased when the infantry attacked, repeating the mistakes made early in the Boer War.

Jones argues in chapter 5 that the British Regular Army cavalry entered the First World War as, tactically speaking, the best trained and most effective mounted force on the Western Front, in part because of lessons learned from the Boer War. The challenge for the cavalry had been properly interpreting those lessons and implementing appropriate reforms in, for example, reconnaissance and horse mastery; another question was whether to train cavalry to fight as shock forces or a form of mobile firepower. Jones argues that the differences between the two schools of thought were only a matter of degree. In the event, British cavalry troops shot to infantry standards and were both better trained in reconnaissance and better horsemen than their continental counterparts.

---

1. Dan Snow and Mark Pottle, *The Confusion of Command: The Memoirs of Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas D'Oyly “Snowball” Snow, 1914–1918* (Barnsley, UK: Frontline Books, 2011) 115.

I have a few minor caveats about this readable and mostly convincing work. Its introduction buries the lead: the reader must wade through nine pages on the opening battles fought by the British Expeditionary Force before coming to a statement of the book's purpose. The book would also have better served a North American audience by briefly introducing early on the key players in the reform process, such as the Duke of Connaught and Michael Rimington, who are much less familiar than men like John French, Ian Hamilton, and Douglas Haig. Although Jones takes pains to clarify terminology that has changed subtly since the period under study, unfortunately, he does not define one critically important and frequently occurring word—ethos—as it has come to be used by recent British historians.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there is no mention of the influence the Balkan Wars (1912–13) on tactical developments. This is odd, given the attention paid to the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War.

Overall, *From Boer War to World War* is a cogent demonstration of the earlier war's effect on developments in the British Regular Army leading up to the Great War. Particular strengths are its account of the transformations at the tactical level and the judicious evaluation of British successes and failures. Jones also perceptively traces how abstract policy debates over the lessons of war translated into concrete regulations and training regimens.

The book will appeal to both scholars and casual readers interested in the British Army of 1914 and the period from the Boer War to the Great War. It constitutes an instructive case study of the factors that make the process of army reform so complex, confusing, and subject to many forms of error.

---

2. See, e.g., Albert Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I* (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 2000), and Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front 1914–18* (Stroud, UK: Spellmount Publ, 2006).