



Arming the Western Front: War, Business and the State in Britain 1900–1920 by Roger Lloyd-Jones and M.J. Lewis.

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Among the many histories published to mark the hundredth anniversary of the Great War (1914–18), few focus on the production of the munitions that were so crucial to Allied success in a war of attrition. Economic and business historians Roger Lloyd-Jones and M.J. Lewis¹ (both of the Univ. of Sheffield Hallam) have now corrected this oversight by examining the daunting challenges of supplying munitions specifically to Great Britain's armies on the western front. The British government had supposed their nation's role in the war would likely be limited to diplomacy, naval defense, or financial support of its allies. *Arming the Western Front* chronicles the scramble for matériel and munitions that followed the enormous—and enormously successful—army recruiting program launched in August 1914. Limiting their purview to Britain's industry and capacity to supply, the authors stress the evolving relations between the army, the government, and business interests. Based on a thorough study of Ministry of Munitions, War Office, and Cabinet records at the National Archives, as well as business and corporate tax records of major munitions manufacturers, they conclude that the constantly changing sources and methods of supply resulted in a “trade-off” between the quantity and the quality of the equipment provided to British troops (240).

In August 1914, newly appointed Secretary of State for War, Field Marshall Lord Kitchener, informed Prime Minister H.H. Asquith's cabinet that the war would last for several years and require the nation to field an army much larger than the existing British Expeditionary Force (BEF). This set into motion a vast recruiting program that greatly increased the size of the army but left it woefully under-equipped for modern warfare (89). The War Office, however, was reluctant to divulge information about military affairs to politicians and trusted only their traditional sources to fill munitions orders. Hence, when the struggle in Europe almost immediately devolved into a war of position instead of a conventional war of mobility, the BEF lacked adequate supplies of barbed wire, entrenching tools, sandbags, heavy artillery, machine-guns, and ammunition for trench warfare. Existing supplies were consumed at unimaginable rates and were depleted even before additional divisions reached France.

One major obstacle for the British army was that the approved list of domestic arms manufacturers—for example, Vickers Brothers, Armstrong Whitworth and Co., Cammell Laird, and William Beardmore and Co.—had been in the business of building and providing *naval* supplies. Any alteration in that arrangement seemed to threaten Britain's security and global interests (51). In addition, sizable increases in Britain's national debt in 1900–1904 had given the Liberals, who came to power in late 1905, an incentive to reduce expenditures on the army in favor of funding social reform programs (25).

The idea that “business as usual” could provide for wartime needs was, however, seriously ill-conceived:

1. Their previous books include *Manchester and the Age of the Factory: The Business Structure of Cottonopolis in the Industrial Revolution* (NY: Croom Helm, 1988), *Raleigh and the British Bicycle Industry: An Economic and Business History, 1870–1960* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2000), and *Alfred Herbert Ltd and the British Machine Tool Industry, 1887–1983* (NY: Routledge, 2006).

In this scenario, there would be little need for the state to intervene in the affairs of private business. The great armaments firms would provide the necessary weapons and munitions and there would be no need for a continental commitment beyond a small expeditionary force sent to France. Business as usual was attractive to a Liberal government committed to free trade and the belief that markets were the most efficient means of allocating resources between competing uses. More importantly, however, a naval strategy was Britain's traditional way in warfare, and this shaped the thinking of policy-makers. But the Great War rightly deserves its nomenclature as it set in train a series of consequences that undermined business as usual, increased uncertainty and led, albeit unevenly, to growing intervention by the state. (5)

Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George observed that War Office expenditures quickly fell short of the projected needs of an immense increase in military manpower. From the beginning of the war, his open criticism of War Office procurement methods incurred the wrath of Kitchener, who advocated rationing shells for guns at the front. This in turn crippled the war effort and infuriated Sir John French, commander in chief of the BEF, who blamed both Kitchener and the British government.

Not until 1915 did the open animosity between Kitchener and Lloyd George, as well as the horrifying reports by men returning from the front, force the British government to confront a "Shell Scandal" and correct the weaknesses of conventional methods of supply. The creation of a Ministry of Munitions under Lloyd George in mid-1915 formalized state intervention in arms procurement. The Ministry organized civilian manufacturing and addressed the problem of losing the skilled workmen who volunteered for the army. Ultimately, it assumed responsibility for every aspect of war matériel production: acquiring raw materials, promoting "dilution" of skilled workers by placing unskilled workers among them, and delivering finished goods. The campaign to supply the armies on the western front transformed British industry.

The drive to achieve a surplus output led to a trade-off between quantity and quality; some 25–30 per cent of all shells fired during the preliminary bombardment on the Somme were duds, and the country remained reliant on large imports of munitions and other supplies from the U.S.A. Lloyd George's drive to rapidly raise the quantity of output may have seriously compromised quality through the allocation of contracts to firms ill-equipped for munitions production, the lowering of inspection standards, chronic shortages of skilled labour and specialized machine tools, and the difficulties of introducing untrained dilutees to machine production systems. (383)

While no government ministry could entirely succeed in marshaling and revamping British industry in a few short years, what was accomplished remains astounding. "The Somme and Verdun in 1916 represented a new phase of the war, and, in the industrial war of attrition that followed, the economic mobilization of the home front was a decisive factor" (384).

Roger Lloyd-Jones and M.J. Lewis have written a welcome, detailed, and meticulously documented account of the problems of equipping the BEF for war. Though marred by an excess of quotations, *Arming the Western Front* is a solid work of scholarship² that students and historians of World War I will find absorbing and enormously instructive.

2. Its bibliography of pertinent primary and secondary sources runs to eighteen fine-print pages.