

## **STEEL AGAINST FIRE: THE BAYONET IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

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The modern mind has demonized the bayonet as a weapon of war. Of all the popular images of the First World War, the most poignant is that of brave soldiers being sent “over the top” of their trenches with fixed bayonets for another futile charge on an enemy machine-gun emplacement. The bayonet has become, in some ways, a symbol for the frustration and futility of the war, as it seemed to be a weapon that should not have been there in the first place. Popular historians such as Pierre Berton have denounced it, claiming it to be, “as useful as a cutlass” on the modern industrialized battlefields of the Great War.<sup>1</sup> What place could or should the direct descendant of the medieval pike have in the battle order of twentieth-century armies alongside weapons such as the machine gun? Why had this simple weapon not died out alongside the Napoleonic musket or the muzzle-loading cannon, yielding to the realities of technological progress?

At first glance the survival of the bayonet as a weapon might seem like an anachronism to the historian, but here popular conceptions (or misconceptions) must be set aside. Whilst the bayonet charge may have become a symbol of the First World War, its use did not die in the trenches of northern France. Bayonet training was still a major part of infantry drill during the Second World War, and the United States armed forces continued to teach bayonet fighting up until at least the Vietnam War. Some

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Berton, *Vimy*, (Anchor Canada, 2001), p. 117.

might interpret this as a particularly enduring anachronism: historian Joanna Bourke partially attributes the survival of the bayonet to the inherent conservatism of armies.<sup>2</sup> However, the endurance of the bayonet attack is a far more complicated issue than that. The decisions to continue employing the bayonet – and, indeed, melee weapons of all kinds – during the First World War were made very deliberately by the Allied armies on the Western Front. The reason for this employment was twofold. First, the bayonet-braced frontal assault was thought to fill an important gap in the infantry tactics towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the industrial and technological revolutions of the century had conspired to pit mass infantry armies against overwhelming firepower. Second, the bayonet itself was thought to give psychological advantages to the infantry soldier in the environment of the trenches on the Western Front that made its use far more practical than the weapon's material effects would otherwise suggest. The bayonet “made the soldier into a tiger” – and perhaps just as importantly, made the enemy fear him that much more.<sup>3</sup>

Neither of these two factors behind the continued use of the bayonet was at all anachronistic, nor even irrational. The bayonet was not a useless weapon on the battlefield of the First World War, as historians have contended. Even if it did not inflict mass damage it was a potent psychological motivator and strategic tool, and the reasons for its continued application on the battlefield throughout the war were logical and understandable. In order to understand these factors, this paper will examine two experiences: the development of the bayonet doctrine up to 1914 that led to its

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare*, (London: Granta Books, 1999), pp. 92-93.

<sup>3</sup> John G. Gray, *Prophet in Plimsoles: An Account of the Life of Colonel Ronald B. Campbell*, (Edinburgh: The Edina Press, 1977), p. 28.

widespread use at the outbreak of war, and the reasons for the continued implementation of this weapon during the fighting, with a focus on the Allied combatants on the Western Front.

### **Development: Bayonets and the Assault Doctrine to 1914**

An important preliminary question to ask is why the bayonet and the doctrine of close combat continued to make up a significant part of the manuals of the western armies at the beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when war was supposedly reaching a new height of modern industrialization. It seems anachronistic in a period when machine guns, rapid-fire artillery and smokeless rifle powder had all become military mainstays, that doctrinal reliance should focus on the cold steel of melee combat. But while the bayonet may have held some aesthetic appeal to the chivalric knight in the Edwardian English male, its application during the war was considerably more involved, and this application stemmed initially from the concept of overwhelming firepower.

From the mid-point of the nineteenth century on, technological developments increased the lethality of the battlefield many times over, even if armies were slow to appreciate the transitions. Machine-guns and rapid-fire artillery in particular created “fire-swept zones” on the field that made a frontal attack extremely dangerous. Such developments acted as force multipliers for armies that chose to adopt defensive positions: a machine-gun could produce a heavier volume of fire than a platoon of riflemen, but in 1914 its size, weight, and relative immobility made it best-suited for defending static positions. Likewise, while rapid-firing artillery could lay down a mighty sustained barrage, it was difficult for even light batteries to achieve sufficient mobility to

keep up with an advance. Until the concepts of *fire* and *mobility* could be integrated, the revolution in overwhelming firepower lent impetus almost exclusively to defence.<sup>4</sup> While this integration was to gradually take place, up to 1914 and throughout the First World War this presented a serious tactical problem to all combatants. The notion that wars could not be won by armies that adopted a defensive posture was encapsulated by British General Staff appreciations in 1915, when it was argued that, "No war was ever won by troops in which this [defensive-minded] spirit prevailed."<sup>5</sup> Prior to 1914 it was not believed that a war could be won without vigorous offensive action, and accordingly new ways had to be found to mount attacks in spite of defensive strength and the creation of the fire-swept zone in battle.

It was a problem that bedeviled the future Allied military institutions in the decades leading up to the war, as both Great Britain and France experienced harsh lessons in the new realities of warfare. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870 had demonstrated the potency of Prussian firepower against French columns, and accordingly the French *Service Regulations* for infantry were rewritten in 1875 to stress dispersion, the superiority of firepower, and the transference of the fight away from heavy columns and to the skirmish line.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, during the South African War at the turn of the century, the British learned painful lessons. At the onset of that war it was widely held that the most effective tactic was that of a protracted bombardment, followed by a close-order advance with bayonets and accurate rifle fire.<sup>7</sup> As it happened, though, small groups of well-armed Boers massacred British columns

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<sup>4</sup> Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in: T.H.E. Travers, "The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation in British Military Thought 1870-1915," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 13 No. 3, (July 1978), p. 542.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph C. Arnold, "French Tactical Doctrine 1870-1914," *Military Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (April 1978), p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Knight, *Colenso 1899: The Boer War in Natal*, (London: Osprey, 1995), p. 21.

attempting such frontal assaults. As Major-General F.W. Kitchener of the 2<sup>nd</sup> West Yorks told afterwards that the effects of firepower, “cannot be exaggerated, and if understood tactically the machine-gun dominates the whole question of attack in the future.”<sup>8</sup> The British army came to the sensible conclusion that defensive fire made the frontal assault hazardous, and that therefore flank attacks, envelopment, and fire superiority should be stressed.<sup>9</sup>

However, the new focus on dispersion (if one wishes to frame the argument in terms of the mass versus dispersion debate in military history) created anxiety for both the French and British. For the French it was feared that these new tactics would doom the vaunted offensive spirit of the French army, as it was felt that any future war against Germany would involve constant offensives to recapture the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine. Yielding initiative to the firepower of the defence by dispersing one's troops was not seen as a constructive way to capture ground from the Prussian.<sup>10</sup> There was also legitimate concern about whether dispersion and the necessary delegation of small-group tactics could prove at all effective. Skirmishing was, correctly, seen as a form of warfare that required well-trained and disciplined soldiers and junior officers who possessed a great deal of imagination and personal initiative. The French tactical problem was that after 1870 an average of 70% of their army was made up of first-year conscripts.<sup>11</sup> The industrial age's creation of mass conscript armies made it difficult to envisage such green troops ever being sufficiently trained to conduct effective small-group actions, with the resultant fear that, come actual battle, they would be torn apart

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<sup>8</sup> Travers, “The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation,” p. 535.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 537.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, “French Tactical Doctrine,” p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, p. 117.

when they conducted such actions badly. As historian Hew Strachan put it, "Nobody in France ever really doubted the necessity of open order, but many did question the quality of the French soldier's training. The solidity of close order had helped to compensate for the conscript's lack of skill."<sup>12</sup> So as the immediate lessons of 1870 faded, the proponents of mass and the frontal attack, such as Colonel Ardant du Picq, began to move French tactical doctrine back in their direction. The notorious French infantry regulations of 1884 and 1895 enshrined this, commanding that attacking units should advance *coude à coude* ("elbow to elbow") not breaking formation to take advantage of cover, but assaulting *en masse* to achieve the maximum shock effect, and ride the wave of high morale, with rifle and bayonet.<sup>13</sup> This was enshrined as a way to sustain the offensive (which was exaggerated to be all-important in war), stoke the fires of morale and moral superiority of the French soldiers, and make good on the conscripts' otherwise questionable training. As du Picq explained it, the central thesis of French doctrine after 1870 had to be that French troops, "must excel all others in *élan* and personal audacity."<sup>14</sup> Soldiers had to seek to sweep the enemy from the field with the sheer impetuosity of their attack; otherwise superior German numbers would triumph, given the larger German population. While this was, perhaps, drawing on some of the wrong lessons of the 1870 war, it can be seen as a rational approach given the circumstances the French army had to contend with, rather than as a mere anachronism. These were the easiest tactics to train large numbers of men, and they allowed officers to exercise maximum control. Training soldiers for a frontal assault with

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Howard, "Men Against Fire: Expectations of War in 1914," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Summer 1984), pp. 50-52.

<sup>14</sup> Bernard Norling, "The Generals of World War I," *The History Teacher*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (May 1969), p. 15.

rifles and bayonets was also much less expensive and taxing than attempting to teach them effective small-group tactics, and given the influx of untrained conscripts every year, such a cost-benefit analysis would not have been inappropriate.

The British experienced similar problems before and during the Great War. While the British did not institute conscription until the war was well underway, military commanders possessed similar fears about the quality of soldiers. While the core of the British Expeditionary Forces would be professionals, there were real concerns about the masses of reservists who would be called up in a major conflict, and it was believed that they, like conscripts, would have their moral fiber sapped by the “enervating” influences of civilian life.<sup>15</sup> The modern army was no longer made up of predominantly of professional soldiers, and while this meant that the image of the army in society had greatly improved since the time of the Napoleonic Wars, it was cause for concern as regarded their ability and training.<sup>16</sup> There was widespread feeling that in the Edwardian army, even among the professionals, the loyalty, patriotism, and determination of soldiers was not what it might have been, simply as a reflection of the times.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the South African War had not yielded the promising performances from junior officers that would be necessary for successful small-unit tactics to work in future conflicts. There was an observed tendency amongst junior officers to hesitate in pressing the attack, no doubt as a result of the oppressive firepower they faced. At the battle of Colenso in 1899, Boer firepower had paralyzed

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<sup>15</sup> Howard, “Men Against Fire,” 52.

<sup>16</sup> Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 138. Frantzen poses an interesting argument about how the earlier image of the professional soldier as a scoundrel unfit to socialize with civilians was transformed by the advent of mass citizen armies composed of conscripts or reservists during the nineteenth century.

<sup>17</sup> Travers, “The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation,” 539.

many units, and this was to be repeated numerous times during the conflict.<sup>18</sup> The British fears, therefore, echoed those of their French counterparts: that dispersion tactics would sap the army of its offensive spirit, which could only find proper expression in the mass assault. But such anxieties themselves were not sufficient to dictate policy, and after the South African War both the British and French heavily revised their infantry tactical doctrines to reflect the “newfound” supremacy of firepower and to place more emphasis on small-unit tactics. Starting in 1902 British training manuals for all three branches of the army were revised with an emphasis on defensive firepower, and the 1904 revision of French doctrine likewise returned to dispersion, abandoning the *coude à coude* formation and prescribing advances by small groups covering each other.<sup>19</sup> Certainly the armies possessed the ability to learn, and to learn quickly at that. After the South African War, however, anxieties understandably remained high over untried dispersion tactics, and the impulse to revert to more traditional mass-based tactics was strong.

What was needed to move past the miasma of doubt left by the Boer War was a true field test of the operational capabilities of “naked” infantry through the fire-swept zone – a confirmation one way or the other. The future combatants of World War One received such a test during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. This was an absolutely pivotal moment in the development of prewar tactical doctrine, as the theorists of the time tended to read what they wanted to from the lessons it had to offer. By far the most important lesson taken from it was the general consensus that mass infantry assaults with the bayonet, in spite of the harsh trials of South Africa, were still

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<sup>18</sup> Knight, *Colenso 1899*, 52-53.

<sup>19</sup> Howard, “Men Against Fire,” 51-52.



not only possible but increasingly *necessary*.<sup>20</sup> As British Brigadier-General Kiggell remarked, after the Boer War the War Office concluded that firepower was now decisive in battle and that the sword and bayonet were out, “but this idea is erroneous, and was proved to be so in the late war in Manchuria. Everyone admits that. Victory is now won actually by the bayonet, or by the fear of it.”<sup>21</sup> During the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese infantry repeatedly relied upon the bayonet assault to break through the Russian fire-swept zone and overtake the Russian trenches, and though they sustained grievous casualties doing so, they were successful. One French observer in Manchuria described an assault, which is worth repeating:

The whole Japanese line is now lit up with the glitter of steel flashing from the scabbard...Once again the officers quit shelter with ringing shouts of “Banzai!” wildly echoed by all the rank and file. Slowly, but not to be denied, they make headway, in spite of the barbed wire, mines and pitfalls, and the merciless hail of bullets. Whole units are destroyed – others take their places; the advancing wave pauses for a moment, but sweeps ever onward. Already they are within a few yards of the trenches. Then, on the Russian side, the long grey line of Siberian Fusiliers forms up in turn, and delivers one last volley before scurrying down the far side of the hill at the double.<sup>22</sup>

Reports like this demonstrated for Europeans that the Japanese had won battles through moral superiority – their disciplined troops embodied the spirit of the offensive, allowing frontal assaults with the bayonet (supported by artillery fire) to carry them through the fire zone. It “proved” the military superiority of the *offensive* against the passive and immobile *defence* of the Russians, despite the advantages that firepower

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in: Travers, “The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation,” 531.

<sup>22</sup> General François de Négrier, Lessons from the Russo-Japanese War, (London, 1905), 69.

had provided.<sup>23</sup> If it had worked for the Japanese, then surely it would work for French or British soldiers, whose *élan* and audacity would carry the fight to the enemy, and victory would be won on the blades of their bayonets despite the fire they might face.

The lessons taken from the Russo-Japanese conflict were not taken in a vacuum: this was seen as confirmation of existing doctrines that had wavered after the Boer War, namely that superior morale was the solution to firepower. This found expression in the words of men like the British General Altham:

The assault is even of more importance than the attainment of fire mastery which antecedes it. It is the supreme moment of the fight...From these glorious examples it may be deduced that no duty, however difficult, should be regarded as impossible by well-trained infantry of good morale and discipline.<sup>24</sup>

This solution was deeply humanist and therefore possessed a rather visceral appeal to the intellectuals of the age: it depended on human free will rather than technology, a frame of mind encouraged by the reaction in late Victorian and Edwardian times against the determinism of scientific naturalism and other “fatalistic” philosophies that were common in this era.<sup>25</sup> It gave supreme importance to the power of the “national will” in motivating men to fight, as their enthusiasm for the battle became the supposed key to victory, and also placed emphasis upon the offensive, which was in line with what both British and French strategists believed would be key in any future conflict. The only serious flaw in taking lessons from the Manchurian war was that the European powers did not take them completely. The Japanese had not, in fact, sent their soldiers over the top elbow-to-elbow in a massive human charge on fixed enemy positions. When

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<sup>23</sup> Howard, “Men Against Fire,” 55.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in: *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Travers, “The Offensive and the Problem of Innovation,” 541.

they carried out a bayonet charge it was only at the end of a careful advance, and then dashing forward in small groups once they were as close as possible, moving rapidly from cover to cover.<sup>26</sup> In other words, tactics not at all unlike those prescribed in the soon-to-be-abandoned French 1904 regulations. However, these details were lost, as tactical planners chose to draw the lessons that they wished to from the war: in this case confirmation of their existing ideas. French doctrine underwent revision yet again, and by 1913 their regulations read: "The French Army, returning to its traditions, henceforth knows no law but the offensive."<sup>27</sup> Although the various staff planners were wary of high casualties, there seems to have been agreement that a defensive-minded stalemate would ultimately produce more casualties than a right-headed bayonet attack. Only by shrugging off their "abnormal dread of loss" could armies avert strategic stalemate. This was the thinking that historians would later name the "cult of the offensive," headed by men such as the French Colonel Grandmaison who would proclaim that *any* offensive was always superior to the defensive.<sup>28</sup>

The bayonet was to be the exemplary weapon for this new doctrine of warmaking, partly because of its venerable, traditional status in both armies, but also because of its nature as a convenient close-combat weapon. A melee weapon encouraged men to move forward to, as historian Richard Holmes put it, "take their steel to the King's enemies."<sup>29</sup> Choosing to fight with the bayonet left no choice but to move *towards* the enemy, whereas rifle fire or grenades encouraged men to find cover and engage the enemy from a distance – precisely the kind of tactical behaviour it was

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918*, (London: HarperCollinsPublishers2004), 27.

<sup>28</sup> Norling, "The Generals of World War I," 15.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 382.

believed would lead to a deadlock.<sup>30</sup> The high commands of the Allied nations therefore extolled – perhaps obsessively – the virtues of the bayonet, exaggerating its importance so as to convey to the soldiers the absolute necessity of forward motion through the fire-swept zone. They were not alone: German tacticians subscribed to similar ideas. The German Colonel Balck, in his 1911 treatise on infantry tactics, confirmed that the Russo-Japanese war had proved “beyond the shadow of a doubt” that cold steel was the way to dislodge determined troops. He was a believer in the moral power of the assault, and claimed that:

The soldier should not be taught to shrink from the bayonet attack, but to seek it. If the infantry is deprived of the *arme blanche*, if the impossibility of bayonet fighting is preached, and the soldier is never given an opportunity in time of peace of defending himself, man to man, with his weapon in bayonet fencing, an infantry will be developed, which is unsuitable for attack and which, moreover, lacks a most essential quality, viz., the moral power to reach the enemy's position.<sup>31</sup>

Given this evidence, it can be concluded that the application of the bayonet in infantry doctrine leading up to 1914 was hardly anachronistic. Its use was not being lauded on the grounds that it had “always been so” nor was it particularly sustained by any unnaturally conservative impulses. The generals and staff planners had very simple, logical reasons for placing emphasis on the bayonet: they wished to engender constant forward motion in their troops against the withering firepower of the defensive, but moreover they sincerely believed that victory was possible through such techniques. The bayonet was, therefore, meant to be as much a strategic tool as a tactical one: its main virtue in the eyes of commanders and theorists was its ability to move men

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<sup>30</sup> Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 92.

<sup>31</sup> Colonel Balck, *Tactics: Introduction and Formal Tactics of Infantry*, Vol. 1, Trans. Walter Krueger, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 383.

forward *en masse*, thus providing the offensive with sufficient weight to succeed in the face of heavy fire.

### **Psychological Shock: The Bayonet in Battle**

This, however, only answers part of the question. At the onset of the Great War the doctrines focused on the “everlasting offensive” were put into use, most notably by the French and most ruinously in the failed August-September 1914 offensives against Alsace-Lorraine. The result was butchery, and it was demonstrated that firepower was, in fact, more than a match for a naked infantry advance, no matter the moral power of the advancing men or the bayonets that they wielded. This was a lesson repeated many times over, but the bayonet and the bayonet charge did not disappear from the battlefield afterwards. In fact, one British battalion commander came out of the Somme battle in 1916 saying that:

The two fundamental facts which govern the modern assault are these, viz.:-

- (a) The assault no longer depends upon rifle fire supported by artillery fire, but upon the artillery with very slight support from selected snipers and company sharpshooters...
- (b) The decisive factor in every attack is the bayonet.<sup>32</sup>

The war itself saw constant appeal to the bayonet on the Allied side, even after the folly of the original *coude à coude* advance doctrine had been exposed. Regardless of what historians such as Berton might claim, it was used as a killing weapon, and quite frequently. The battalion history of the 2/Royal Welch Fusiliers described “tense moments with the bayonet” in November of 1914, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division took

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in: Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack 1916-18*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1994), 67. As Griffith points out, this particular quote is interesting in that it represents the new creeping barrage as merely a more powerful and more technological adjunct to the bayonet, since it served the same function of intimidating and suppressing the enemy at the same time that it accompanied the attacker's charge.

Mindmill Hill in the Ypres salient on 4 October 1917 in a battle that involved sustained bayonet fighting.<sup>33</sup> But as a weapon of destruction the bayonet left much to be desired compared to the other tools of modern combat: one sample of British casualties during the war showed that only 0.32% had been from bayonet wounds, though this may have reflected that the Germans placed less reliance upon it.<sup>34</sup> Similar casualty statistics for the Central Powers would likely yield higher numbers, though probably not a dramatically higher percentage. It was certainly not a decisive weapon unto itself, and officers were well-aware of the relatively limited number of men killed by bayonet during the fighting. Colonel Ronald Campbell, an instructor with the British Physical Training and Bayonet School and one of the supreme proponents of bayonet fighting on the Western Front, admitted that, "Even by 1914 the bayonet was obsolete. The number of men killed by the bayonet on the Western Front was very small..." Partly its use was sustained because the firepower problem was never properly solved during the war, and, as mentioned, the bayonet *did* represent a way to move troops forward, particularly when integrated with supporting artillery fire and creeping barrages. It was thought by commanders that speed in getting troops forward across No Man's Land and into the enemy trenches was everything, and that even having soldiers slow down or stop to do so much as shoot their rifles was a way to lose control.<sup>35</sup> So the bayonet's appeal as a spur to keep men moving forward was important. However, Colonel Campbell also

<sup>33</sup> Holmes, Tommy, 382-382. Described in the Australian Official History of the war.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 382. Although, to be fair, this is still a staggering number, assuming (which one should not, but which we will for interest's sake) that the sample is representative of all combatants. In The Pity of War historian Niall Ferguson reports British Empire casualties (killed and wounded) during the Great War to be 625,587 men. A rate of 0.32% of fatal and non-fatal wounds caused by the bayonet would be just over 20,000. For the Germans, the 0.32% would probably apply as well, possibly as a minimum since the Allies made greater use of the bayonet. But assuming a 0.32% casualty rate caused by bayonets, the Germans (with total WIA and KIA casualties at 6,244,028) would have suffered approximately 199,808 losses to the bayonet. While these statistics are not useful in and of themselves, one can use them to suggest that, at minimum, tens of thousands of men were killed or wounded by the bayonet during the war, to say nothing of those who ran away from it. See: Niall Ferguson, The Pity of War, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 295.

<sup>35</sup> Griffith, Battle Tactics of the Western Front, 69.

identified another key reason why the bayonet saw sustained use despite its limited killing potential: "...it was superb as a morale booster. Get the bayonet into the hands of despondent troops and you can make them tigers within hours. I found nothing better to introduce recruits to the terrible conditions which awaited the poor devils up the line."<sup>36</sup>

Calling the bayonet a "morale booster" understates a complicated and multi-faceted psychological phenomenon. As a weapon of moral inspiration and psychological shock the bayonet (along with other close-combat weapons) turned out to be a powerful tool because of the visceral power it carried in the minds of those wielding it and those facing it. In his manual on infantry tactics Balck observed that:

The rarity of bayonet fights does not prove the uselessness of the bayonet, but shows that opponents will rarely be found who are equally capable of making use of it. Indeed, the bayonet cannot be abolished for the reason, if for no other, that it is the sole and exclusive embodiment of that will power which alone, both in war and in every-day life life, attains its objective, whereas reason only tends to facilitate the attainment of the object.<sup>37</sup>

One of the keys to understanding the full impact of the bayonet is the concept of distance as it relates to killing: it has long been established that there is a direct link between the empathic and physical proximity of the victim and the resultant difficulty and trauma of the kill for the soldier.<sup>38</sup> As the range decreases so does the difficulty, so killing in close-combat with a bayonet is much harder to cope with than shelling an enemy you cannot see who is miles away. There was an intimate brutality about killing in hand-to-hand combat that both repulsed and appealed to the soldier. It was a source of constant, morbid fascination within the ranks. During the war inexperienced

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<sup>36</sup> Gray, *Prophet in Plimsoles*, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Balck, *Tactics*, 383-384.

<sup>38</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, (New York & Boston: Back Bay Books, 1995), 99-106.

infantrymen swapped thoughts on what it would feel like to “run a man through with a bayonet,” and swore (as one Texan did) that they were so eager for intimate struggle that they would go over the top with a penknife if necessary.<sup>39</sup> In order to fire the enthusiasm of units waiting to go into the line at the Somme, Canadian soldiers were told exaggerated accounts of the battles being mile upon mile of melee between men, hand-to-hand in the death grapple.<sup>40</sup> But as Colonel Dave Grossman, a psychologist and military historian, points out in his book entitled On Killing, the perverse fascination of killing with the bayonet, “is equal only to the enemy's horror at having this done to him.”<sup>41</sup> The terror of being bayoneted, of being subject to the “intimate brutality” of another man's cold steel, was extremely intense, probably more so than facing a hail of impersonal bullets. Grossman believes this to be directly related to the physical nearness of the kill, which is much more psychologically immediate than a phantom enemy sniping at you from hundreds of yards away, combined with powerful psycho-sexual impulses.<sup>42</sup> One account, as told by Lance Corporal F. Heardman of the 2/Manchester Pals in July 1916, is particularly indicative of this:

I came face to face with a great big German who had come up unexpectedly out of a shell hole. He had his rifle and bayonet 'at the ready.' So had I, but mine suddenly felt only the size of a small boy's play gun and my steel helmet shrank to the size of a small tin lid. Then, almost before I had time to realise what was happening, the German threw down his rifle, put up his arms and shouted “*Kamarad!*” I could hardly believe my eyes.<sup>43</sup>

This was a vivid example of what could happen when armed men met at close range:

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<sup>39</sup> Bourke, An Intimate History of Killing, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Ralf Sheldon-Williams, The Canadian Front in France and Flanders, (London: A. and C. Black, Ltd., 1920), 32.

<sup>41</sup> Grossman, On Killing, 122.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-127. Though discussing the sexual overtones of bayonet killing is beyond the scope of this paper, fascinating looks at it are made by both Grossman and Bourke. See: Bourke, An Intimate History of Killing, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Holmes, Tommy, 383.



one often surrendered or ran away rather than be bayoneted, and the determination to take those last closing steps was often the deciding factor. Bayonet training and fighting gave men the confidence to press on at such moments.<sup>44</sup>

The fear instilled in the enemy by the bayonet charge was something the Allied high command believed was worthwhile. As Grossman points out, "Units with a history and tradition of close-combat, hand-to-hand killing inspire special dread and fear in an enemy by capitalizing upon this natural aversion . . . manifested in this determination to engage in close-range interpersonal aggression."<sup>45</sup> During the war the Germans were known to be particularly afraid of Allied units that had the reputation for reliance upon the bayonet and other melee weapons. Certainly they feared the Canadian divisions, who had a propensity and skill for trench raiding and assaults, and a professed dislike for taking German prisoners unless ordered to.<sup>46</sup> Even more intense, however, was their fear of the non-white colonial troops that filled the ranks of the British and French armies, whose ferocity and "barbarism" was feared and respected. The Gurkha and Garhwal regiments of the Indian Army were equipped with rifles and bayonets, but also carried a traditional curved blade called the *kukri*, which was known as a disemboweling weapon. Although the Gurkhas were not on the Western Front for long, rumours of swift and deadly knife attacks by Gurkha warriors spread through the German lines before the Gurkhas had even reached the front.<sup>47</sup> Even more feared were the West African units that were brought into the French Army and *did* see sustained combat on the Western Front. They too carried traditional native tribal knives in addition to the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>45</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Sheldon-Williams, *The Canadian Front in France and Flanders*, 28-29. The author, a Sergeant in the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Machine-Gun Company during the war, confessed that taking prisoners was not popular.

<sup>47</sup> Frederick P. Todd, "The Knife and Club in Trench Warfare," *The Journal of the American Military History Foundation*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (Autumn 1938), 142.

bayonet, and had a reputation (perhaps deserved) for closing in and killing at close-range whenever possible. An American Marine Corps officer described one of the attacks by these “Senegalese” warriors:

These wild black Mohammedans from West Africa were enjoying themselves . . . They were deadly. Each platoon swept its front like a hunting-pack, moving swiftly and surely together. The hidden guns that fired on them were located with uncanny skill . . . They took up the matter with the bayonet, and slew with lion-like leaps and lunges and a shrill barbaric yapping. They took no prisoners.

They carried also a broad-blade knife, razor sharp, which disemboweled a man at a stroke. The slim bayonet of the French breaks off short when the weight of a body pulls down and sidewise on it; and then the knives come out. With reason the Boche feared them worse than anything living, and the lieutenant saw in those woods unwounded fighting Germans who flung down their rifles when the Senegalese rushed, and covered their faces, and stood screaming against the death they could not look upon.<sup>48</sup>

There was a “barbaric nobility” thought to be involved in the use of the bayonet that the Allied armies sought to promote in its soldiers, perhaps in emulation (conscious or not) of the supposed savagery of colonial troops, in order to bolster their morale and, simultaneously, demoralize the enemy. Instinct theory, developed by William McDougall in 1908, never lost its influence over military instructors: the “beast within” was encouraged to find expression in the bayonet drill, which was designed to promote aggression and the savagery necessary to put enemies to the blade.<sup>49</sup> In the racist parlance of the day, the colonial troops embodied this – and in a bizarre inversion of normal social circumstances, the Allied soldiers were encouraged to embrace such “savage” instincts in their fighting. Col. Campbell's *Physical and Bayonet Training*

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<sup>48</sup> Major John W. Thomason Jr., *Fix Bayonets!*, (New York, 1926), 105-106.

<sup>49</sup> Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 97.

Headquarters, which moved up and down the Western Front during the war, gave live demonstrations of combat with naked bayonets, vivid graphic details, and espoused “homicidal eloquence” in teaching Allied soldiers to adopt a “killing face” and demeanor for killing and terrifying the “Hun”.<sup>50</sup> Killing was the name of the game, and Campbell was famous for his ruthless anecdotes meant to inspire savagery and barbarism: “When a German holds up his hands and says: *Kamarad* – I have a wife and seven children.’ What do you do? Why, you stick him in the gut and tell him he won't have any more!”<sup>51</sup> After the war there was an almost universal humanitarian disgust evoked by Campbell's blood-curdling lectures – perhaps part of the reason the bayonet as a weapon has become demonized in the public eye – but during the war, training by Campbell and his contemporaries was considered valuable and great for troop morale.<sup>52</sup> Claims were frequently made, for example, that their skill and ferocity with the bayonet made British and Dominion troops “irresistible” during an attack.<sup>53</sup> “Bringing out the beast” in Allied soldiers with bayonet fighting was a way to put them in the mood to take the fight across No Man's Land to the enemy, thereby achieving the vaunted “offensive spirit” that was sought prior to and throughout the war. During the war, however, elbow-to-elbow bayonet rushes were no longer emphasized; the “spirit of the bayonet” was more frequently combined with small-unit assault tactics. Campbell was an acknowledged expert in trench raiding, and an extensive model trench system was built at his training headquarters for practicing raiding tactics and combining them with close-combat savagery.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Gray, *Prophet in Plimsoles*, 25-26.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, 70-71.

<sup>53</sup> Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Gray, *Prophet in Plimsoles*, 22.

The bayonet was, in this light, clearly as much a psychological weapon as a strategic tool to keep men moving forward. While there was no magical drawing power to the bayonet charge, the morbid fascination with melee combat in the midst of a highly impersonal war could be a powerful motivator for soldiers, and “superior posturing represented by a willingness or at least a reputation for participation in close-range killing, has a devastating effect upon the enemy's morale.”<sup>55</sup> The savagery that bayonet training was meant to instill in men was meant to both inspire and terrorize.

### **Conclusions**

Looking into the obsolescence of the bayonet during the First World War is a complicated issue. As a direct killing weapon the bayonet was certainly past its prime, though it is debatable whether or not it had *ever* accounted for many deaths on any battlefield in modern history.<sup>56</sup> At best a fraction of a percentage of total casualties were inflicted by the bayonet during the Great War, though unfortunately we will never know the true numbers.

Simple statistics, however, belie the true uses of the bayonet before and during the fighting. As discussed in this paper, bayonet assault doctrine was not the result of wistful nostalgia among the high command – though it would have satisfied traditionalists – but of deliberate strategic decisions made to overcome existing difficulties. The problem of moving men forward through the fire-swept zone dominated tactical thinking at the turn of the nineteenth century, and after the Russo-Japanese War it was sincerely believed that such problems could be overcome by morale and the mass bayonet charge. During the war itself, the bayonet found use as a psychological

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<sup>55</sup> Grossman, *On Killing*, 126-127.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.

tool, capitalizing on a natural human revulsion at the thought of being stabbed to both frighten the enemy and carry soldiers wielding it forward. Allied units with a reputation for closing with the enemy and engaging in hand-to-hand killing, such as the “savage” non-white colonial troops, were feared by the Germans out of all proportion to their success in the line.

So while doubt can (and should) be cast on the bayonet's efficacy as a killing weapon, it was never intended as an anachronistic substitute for firepower, but rather as a *solution* to defensive fire. Given the theoretical difficulty of integrating fire and movement in the doctrines of the time, the bayonet charge was a rational – if not entirely successful – solution in overcoming it in infantry doctrine. Even when the *coude à coude* formations failed, though, the “offensive spirit” engendered by the bayonet was held in high regard by commanders and military theorists during the war, and it saw frequent use as a morale-booster and component of the war's many infantry advances. Given all of this, a serious re-assessment needs to be made of how the bayonet is portrayed and demonized in the histories of the Great War, and the bolstering of the moral power of soldiers in pitting steel against fire demands broader acknowledgment in the literature.

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