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Two Battles at Le Cateau, 1914 and 1918: The Transformation of War

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ABSTRACT

This article compares two battles for the town of Le Cateau, in August 1914 and October 1918, to highlight the changes in the character of war which had occurred over the four years of the First World War. These changes, it argues, extended beyond the technological, tactical, and operational ones often discussed by military historians. For instance, the kind of men doing the fighting, and the objectives for which they contended, were both radically different by 1918, with important consequences for the way the war was fought.

Gary Sheffield has pointed out that while Napoleon might have felt at home on the battlefields of August 1914, he would not have recognised the way war was fought a mere four years later.¹ That the First World War transformed the nature of warfare is in no doubt. It was certainly clear at the time that much had changed. In his preface to the first edition of the first volume of the British official history of the army on the Western Front, written in 1922, James Edmonds speaks of his desire 'to leave a picture of what war was like in 1914, when trained soldiers were still of greater importance than material, and gas, tanks, long-range guns, creeping barrages and the participation of aircraft in ground fighting were unknown.'² A considerable body of literature has grown up charting the technical changes that occurred, and

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¹Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001), p. 107.

²James E. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1914 Volume I: Mons, the Retreat to the Seine, the Marne and the Aisne August–October 1914* (3rd Revised edition, originally published 1933, reprinted London: Imperial War Museum, 1996) (hereafter *BOH 1914 Vol. I*), p. vii.

especially the British response to them, primarily in terms of technology, tactics, operations and command.³ By December 1945, however, when his last volume dealing with 1918 finally began to move towards publication, Edmonds seems to have moved towards a broader view of the Western Front, seeing it as ‘the opening stage of a great phase of transition in land warfare... from wars of manoeuvre, conducted with professional armies of medium size, to a war of attrition with million-strong armies lined up without a gap... [it shows] the change from wars of soldiery opposed to soldiery to wars of material.’⁴ In other words, alongside technical change went social and cultural transformation. This essay attempts to address both aspects. It first compares two battles at either end of the war and draws out the technical differences between the two. It then goes on to suggest that there were important changes in the composition and nature of the armies, and the purposes for which men fought, which not only contributed to the transformation undergone in 1914–1918 but also set the tone for the rest of the twentieth century. This cultural and

³Some important contributions include: John Terraine, *White Heat: The New Warfare 1914–18* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1982); Shelford Bidwell and Dominic Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904–1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982); Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914–18* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack 1916–18* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Jonathan Bailey, *The First World War and the Birth of the Modern Style of Warfare* (Camberley: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute, 1996); Paddy Griffith (ed.), *British Fighting Methods in the Great War* (London: Frank Cass, 1996); Ian Malcolm Brown, *British Logistics on the Western Front 1914–1919* (Westport: Praeger, 1998); British Commission for Military History, ‘Look to your Front’: *Studies in the First World War* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 1999); Albert Palazzo, *Seeking Victory on the Western Front: The British Army and Chemical Warfare in World War I* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Jonathan Bailey, ‘The First World War and the birth of modern warfare’ in MacGregor Knox and Williamson Murray (eds), *The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300–2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Nikolaus Gardner, *The Beginning of the Learning Curve: British Officers and the Advent of Trench Warfare, September–October 1914* (Salford: ESRI Working Papers, 2003); Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army’s Experience 1914–18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004); Simon Robbins, *British Generalship on the Western Front 1914–18: Defeat into Victory* (London: Frank Cass, 2005); Andy Simpson, *Directing Operations: British Corps Command on the Western Front* (Stroud: Spellmount, 2006).

⁴Sir James E. Edmonds and R. Maxwell-Hyslop, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1918 Volume V: 26th September–11th November The Advance to Victory* (first published London: HMSO 1947; reprinted London: Imperial War Museum 1993) (Hereafter BOH 1918 Vol. V), p. 580.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

strategic shift, it will suggest, is crucial to a rounded understanding of the transformation in the nature of war on the Western Front.

The First Battle of Le Cateau, fought on 26 August 1914, is well known, at least in Great Britain.⁵ Retreating from its first clash with the Germans at Mons, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien's II Corps of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) turned and stood against *Generoberst* von Kluck's *First Army* on a low ridge west of Le Cateau. German attempts to envelop both British flanks were prevented by an early afternoon withdrawal and the BEF was able to continue its retreat relatively undisturbed thereafter. The battle has long been controversial, not least due to an unseemly and long-running dispute between the BEF's Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Sir John French and Smith-Dorrien.⁶ Nonetheless, John Terraine described it as 'not only the most brilliant exploit of the BEF during the Retreat, but one of the most splendid feats of the British Army during the whole war.'⁷ The first attempt at a professional history of the battle was A. F. Becke's *The Royal Regiment of Artillery at Le Cateau of 1919*, based on war diaries and interviews with survivors.⁸ An artillery officer himself, although unfit for active service, Becke had published a study of the Waterloo campaign in 1914 and drew many parallels between the two battles in his account.⁹ He later joined the team under James Edmonds compiling the official history of the Great War. The first volume of this likewise picked up on the parallels between combat in 1914 and that of earlier eras. On the Aisne in September, for instance, 'the fighting resembled that of Waterloo or Inkerman, except that the combatants, instead of being shoulder to shoulder, controlled by their officers, advanced in open order and in small parties, and fought usually behind cover or lying down.'¹⁰ Edmonds, himself a veteran of Le Cateau, where he had served as chief of staff of 4th Division, covers the battle in considerable detail over nearly sixty pages. Briefer, but useful summaries can be found in John Terraine's *Mons* and David

⁵Nigel Cave and Jack Sheldon, *Le Cateau: 26 August 1914* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2008) offers an excellent tactical account of the battle.

⁶See Viscount French of Ypres, *1914* (London: Constable and Company, 1919); Richard Holmes, *The Little Field-Marshal: Sir John French* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), pp. 223-5; Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Judgement of History: Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, Lord French and 1914* (London: Tom Donovan, 1993).

⁷John Terraine, *Mons: The Retreat to Victory* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1991; first pub. 1960), p. 143.

⁸Archibald F. Becke, *The Royal Regiment of Artillery at Le Cateau, Wednesday 26th August 1914* (Woolwich: Royal Artillery Institution, 1919).

⁹Archibald F. Becke, *Napoleon and Waterloo: the Emperor's campaign with the Armée du Nord, 1815; a strategical and tactical study* (London: Kegan, Paul & Co., 1914).

¹⁰BOH 1914 Vol. I, p. 395.

Ascoli's *The Mons Star*.¹¹ Terence Zuber's *The Mons Myth* offers a more modern account, particularly valuable for its painstaking reconstruction of German movements during the day. Its depiction of the confusion in British ranks on the morning of 26 August rings truer than Edmonds' neat and possibly sanitised version. Unfortunately, these strengths are partly compromised by unrealistic assumptions about the ability of armies to reproduce training-field tactics under fire, a failure to apply the same critical eye to German sources as British ones, and an over-exuberance of argument which can become wearisome.¹²

The Second Battle of Le Cateau, in contrast, never happened – officially, at least. On 8 October 1918 the British Fourth and Third Armies, together with the right wing of First Army, attacked German positions in the Beaurevoir–Masnières Line, the rearmost fortifications of the vaunted Hindenburg Line, into which the British had broken in a series of operations beginning on 27 September. The German defenders, men of *Second* and *Seventeenth* armies, were quickly overrun and over the next few days fell back over the 1914 battlefield and behind the River Selle, up to which the British had closed by 12 October. This fighting is what Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig referred to as the Second Battle of Le Cateau, although the official historians later chose to designate it instead as 'the Battle of Cambrai 1918' and 'the Pursuit to the Selle'.¹³ The town of Le Cateau itself was cleared by 198th Brigade (66th Division) on 17 October, and the east bank of the Selle was captured on 20 October.¹⁴

The first and most obvious contrast between 1914 and 1918 was an increase both quantitative and qualitative in the use of mechanical means of warfare. Take motor transport, for instance. The BEF of September 1914 had 1,200 lorries, or about 60

¹¹*BOH 1914* Vol. I, pp. 152-211; Terraine, *Mons*, pp. 140-55; David Ascoli, *The Mons Star: The British Expeditionary Force 5th August-22nd November 1914* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1981), pp. 95-114. For a German account, see Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918 Band I Die Grenzschlachten im Westen* (Berlin, E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1925) (Hereafter *GOH 1914* Vol. I), pp. 517-32. Note the discrepancy between the attention paid to the battle between the two official histories.

¹²Terence Zuber, *The Mons Myth: A Reassessment of the Battle* (Stroud: History Press, 2010), pp. 211-259.

¹³John H. Boraston (ed.), *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches (December 1915 – April 1919)* (London: J. M. Dent, 1919), p. 287; *BOH 1918* Vol. V, pp. 185-247; H. Stewart, *The New Zealand Division, 1916–1919: A Popular History Based on Official Records* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1921) also refers to a Second Battle of Le Cateau (pp. 517-63).

¹⁴See Peter E. Hodgkinson, *The Battle of the Selle: Fourth Army Operations on the Western Front in the Hundred Days, 9–24 October 1918* (Solihull: Helion, 2017) for a detailed account of the fighting in and south of the town of Le Cateau itself.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

per mile of front. By November 1918, there were 26,809, or 450 per mile.¹⁵ The weight of firepower available grew exponentially too. BEF infantry divisions in 1918 had 64 Vickers and 336 Lewis machine guns, compared with just 24 Vickers in 1914. While the original BEF had no mortars, by the end of the war divisions had 36 each.¹⁶ Smith-Dorrien commanded a total of 216 Royal Field Artillery (RFA), and 12 Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) medium, artillery tubes. The heaviest were 60-pounder guns and 6-inch howitzers.¹⁷ Four years later, the attack of the 6th Division alone was supported by 254 RFA and Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) pieces plus 144 8-inch and 9.2-inch howitzers and a further five siege batteries of 6-inch and 12-inch guns.¹⁸ The artillery density of II Corps in 1914 was thus 21.6 field, and 1.2 medium, pieces per mile of front, while that of Third Army in 1918 was 76.8 and 42.5 respectively, with 425 heavy guns and howitzers, and another 768 field pieces.¹⁹ The front in both cases was about ten miles long. Artillery became a much more flexible, efficient and accurate instrument as the war went on, aided by new techniques in manufacture, calibration, survey and meteorology. For instance, on 26 August the field artillery of 5th Division, mainly deployed in close support to the infantry on the forward slopes of the ridge, fired primarily shrapnel in close support. The guns were positioned as little as 2–400 yards in rear of the infantry.²⁰ The 108th Heavy Battery 'took up positions of observation' only slightly to the rear and also fired on advancing German infantry. The only aid to counter-battery fire was the enemy's muzzle flashes.²¹ In October 1918, on the other hand, the artillery carried out a variety of roles, largely by indirect fire, and displayed considerable flexibility. On 6 and 7 October field artillery cut wire, before firing a creeping barrage to cover the attack on 8 October. When resistance proved light, as on 10 October in the 37th Division sector, the creeping barrage was cancelled impressively quickly, within forty minutes.²² A smoke screen was fired to protect the left flank of XVII Corps, and

¹⁵A. M. Henniker, *Transportation on the Western Front* (London: HMSO, 1937), p. 148; War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War: 1914–1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), p. 595.

¹⁶BOH 1918 Vol. V, p. 596.

¹⁷BOH 1914 Vol. I, pp. 476–80. 246, according to Becke, *Royal Regiment of Artillery at Le Cateau*, p. 17.

¹⁸BOH 1918 Vol. V, p. 189.

¹⁹BOH 1918 Vol. V, pp. 622–4.

²⁰The National Archives (TNA), WO 95/1521A, 5th Division CRA War Diary, General Account of the Work of the 5th Divisional Artillery from its Concentration in France to the Battle of Le Cateau, dated 2 October 1914, p. 19; Becke, *The Royal Regiment of Artillery at Le Cateau*, pp. 27–33.

²¹BOH 1914 Vol. I, pp. 154, 159–60.

²²TNA WO 95/2515, 37th Division General Staff War Diary, Narrative of Operations, 29 September–13 October 1918.

heavy artillery provided counter-battery and interdiction fire into enemy rear areas.²³ Use of gas was relatively light. VI Corps heavy artillery fired just 545 gas shells on 8 October 1918 (less than five per cent of the total) compared with 2,850 (22 per cent) on 21 August. As the Germans fell back, each infantry battalion also had a battery of 18-pounders moving up with it to provide close support.²⁴ Likely German strongpoints in villages were bombarded with incendiary shells.²⁵ Table 1 below shows the broad range of uses to which was artillery was put on 8 October.²⁶

Table 1: Artillery Ammunition Expended, 8 October

	Total Shells Fired	Percentage Shrapnel	Percentage High Explosive	Percentage Smoke	Percentage Gas
Field	58,077	39	48	13	0
Heavy	13,243	14	82	0	4

In addition to increased use of old and upgraded technology, of course, another obvious difference between the two battles was increasing deployment of new technologies such as the aeroplane and the tank. In 1914, the BEF had four squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) attached, totalling 48 unarmed machines. Their role was reconnaissance and liaison. On 26 August II Corps had one aircraft attached to it for reconnaissance, while another five performed the same function for GHQ and two others were used for carrying messages.²⁷ By 1918, on the other hand, the Royal Air Force (RAF) had over 1,700 aircraft carrying out a wide range of roles.²⁸ David Jordan has concisely described the broad development of British air

²³TNA WO 158/422, XVII Corps Operations, Narrative of Operations, 27 September–11 November 1918.

²⁴TNA WO 95/1200, Guards Division CRA War Diary, Narrative of Operations from Artillery Point of View, 8–22 October 1918.

²⁵TNA WO 95/1381, 3rd Division General Staff War Diary, Report on Operations, 8–9 October 1918; TNA WO 95/775, VI Corps General Staff War Diary, VI Corps Artillery Narrative August 21st to November 11th 1918, 'The incendiary shell fired on Seranvillers did not set fire to the village but provided a useful line to the infantry and is said to have caused considerable moral effect on the enemy'.

²⁶TNA WO 95/775, VI Corps General Staff War Diary, VI Corps Artillery Narrative, Appendix 3, Approximate Expenditure of Ammunition, 21 August to 11 November 1918.

²⁷TNA WO 95/1, GHQ General Staff War Diary, Air Reconnaissance, August 1914, August–December 1914.

²⁸H. A. Jones, *The War in the Air: Being the Story of the Part played in the Great War by the Royal Air Force*, Appendices Volume (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 123. Figure for 8 August.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

power.²⁹ On 8 October itself, Third Army was supported by III Brigade RAF with 261 aircraft in fifteen squadrons, plus a special flight of three Bristol fighters equipped for long-range artillery observation. One squadron was directly attached to each corps for contact patrols, reconnaissance and artillery observation.³⁰ Of the rest, one squadron of Sopwith Camels was directed to drive down enemy balloons and then join three others in a ground attack role.³¹ Other fighters flew air superiority missions, while a squadron of day bombers targeted enemy headquarters and road junctions behind the lines. In all, in the week ending 10 October III Brigade flew over 2,800 hours of combat missions, took 613 photographs, dropped 2,312 25-pound and 129 112-pound bombs, and claimed twelve enemy aircraft and four balloons downed.³²

A striking feature of 8 October was the use of tanks, not only by the British, but also by the Germans. Third Army was allocated 32 Mark IV and Mark V tanks, of which 28 made it to the start line.³³ In the V Corps sector, their use proved very helpful: 115th Brigade (38th Division) successful attack was 'due to prompt action and glorious co-operation of the tanks, great praise is due to them.'³⁴ VI Corps, however, faced a German counterattack spear-headed by some ten captured and reconditioned British Mark IV tanks, which achieved considerable surprise and temporarily broke up the advance of 2nd, 3rd and 63rd Divisions near Niergnies. Four German machines fought a tank duel with 12th Battalion Tank Corps, knocking out two British machines for the loss of one. A British-operated, but captured German, anti-tank gun knocked out a second German tank, whereupon the survivors withdrew. Another two German-operated female Mark IVs were destroyed further south.³⁵ The use of both

²⁹David Jordan, 'The Royal Air Force and Air/Land Integration in the 100 Days, August–November 1918', *Air Power Review* 11/2 (Summer 2008), pp. 12-29. For more detail on the RAF in late 1918, see Jonathan Boff, 'Air/Land Integration in the 100 Days', *Air Power Review* 12:3 (Autumn 2009), pp. 77-88.

³⁰TNA AIR 1/677/21/13/1887, The Western Front – Air Operations May–November 1918, p. 244.

³¹TNA AIR 1/1518/204/58/75, III Brigade Operation Order, 7 October 1918.

³²TNA AIR 1/1518/204/58/65, III Brigade Weekly Summaries of Work 28 December 1917–11 November 1918.

³³TNA WO 95/95, Tank Corps General Staff War Diary, Report on Operations, 8–10 October 1918.

³⁴TNA WO 95/2560, 115th Infantry Brigade War Diary, Entry for 8 October 1918.

³⁵TNA WO 95/95, Tank Corps General Staff War Diary, Report on Counterattack by Anglo-German Tanks, 8 October; TNA WO 95/1370, 99th Infantry Brigade War Diary, Narrative of Events, 7–9 October 1918; TNA WO 95/1381, 3rd Division General Staff War Diary, Report on Operations, 8–9 October 1918; TNA WO 95/1431, 4th Royal Fusiliers War Diary.

tanks and aircraft in these manners by 1918 had been barely imagined four years previously, much less a century before.

Technology is only useful in so far as it is properly used, which leads us on to a comparison of the tactics of 1914 and 1918. The first and most obvious impact of technology was that firepower emptied the battlefield. A German staff officer, Major Alfred Wirth, described the first battle of Le Cateau as 'like being on manoeuvres; one could actually still see the troops taking part. In the later fighting that all disappeared.'³⁶ When II Corps wrote up lessons learned from the fighting of August–September 1914, it stressed the importance of being positioned out of sight on reverse slopes. Due to the 'most unexpected feature of the present war... the arresting power of modern artillery, and especially of howitzers and heavy artillery' the choice of defensive positions 'is now almost entirely governed by this artillery question'.³⁷ By 1918, consequently, 'in daylight the battlefields themselves seemed nearly empty; for it was fatal for bodies of troops or tanks to be seen'.³⁸

In both offence and defence, successful integration of new weapons into combined-arms tactics could greatly increase combat efficiency. Greater complexity, however, made this considerably more difficult to achieve. At the First Battle of Le Cateau both sides made use of artillery and machine guns to support their infantry both directly and by neutralising enemy guns.³⁹ German infantry advanced by bounds using fire and movement tactics.⁴⁰ German cavalry fulfilled a dismounted infantry role, while the British Cavalry Division played no part at all. There were problems, of course, especially caused by communication difficulties. For example, the 1st Battalion East Lancashire Regiment complained that they received insufficient artillery support from guns which were too far back and out of touch with the situation.⁴¹

At the second battle, artillery again operated in a close support role. Some British battalions, such as those in the Guards Division, had a battery of 18-pounders attached to be used against enemy strongpoints.⁴² Others, however, even in the

³⁶Quoted in Richard Holmes, *Riding the Retreat: Mons to the Marne 1914 Revisited* (London: Pimlico, 2007; first published 1995), p. 167.

³⁷ TNA WO 95/629, II Corps General Staff War Diary August–December 1914, Notes based on the Experience gained by the Second Corps during the Campaign, 12 October 1914, pp. 3-4.

³⁸*BOH 1918* Vol. V, p. vii.

³⁹See, for example, TNA WO 95/1528, 52nd Battery Royal Field Artillery War Diary

⁴⁰TNA WO 95/1510, 5th Division General Staff War Diary.

⁴¹Zuber, *The Mons Myth*, p. 225.

⁴²TNA WO 95/1195, Guards Division General Staff War Diary, Orders No. 223, 224, 8 and 9 October 1918.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

same corps, did not: 2nd Battalion Suffolk Regiment, for example, complained that artillery was kept under brigade control and hence was not available when required.⁴³ Debate continued also about the precise nature of combined arms in the context of 1918. By now, although some saw infantry platoons as themselves combined-arms units capable of independent action using integral assets if higher level combined arms broke down, others remained unconvinced. For instance, 115th Brigade pointed out that the best way to cross the fire-swept zone was to follow a creeping barrage. Second best was a standing bombardment, but even in this case, or if there was no artillery support at all, 'it remains for the infantry to fight their way forward under cover of their own weapons and the principles laid down in *Infantry Training [1914]* hold good, except that now infantry have light machine guns, rifle grenades and trench mortars to assist as well.'⁴⁴ The 13th Battalion Royal Fusiliers put this into practice when they lost the barrage in front of Hurtebise Farm: aided by covering fire from four machine guns: 'the last 300 y[ar]ds, however, were crossed without the assistance of artillery, sections and platoons giving each other mutual support with rifle and Lewis gun fire'.⁴⁵ According to Major-General Cyril Deverell, commanding 3rd Division,

it is not practicable to provide elaborate artillery barrages for every operation – rifles, Lewis guns and machine guns must be used. Subordinate commanders must learn to use ground intelligently and dismiss the idea for ever from their heads that the only thing to do is to go forward to a direct attack following an artillery barrage. It is often possible to engage a troublesome position with fire from the front and at the same time to use the bulk of the force available to move round and engage the position from the flanks or rear – capturing it with small loss of men and time.⁴⁶

On the other hand, however, 5th Brigade (3rd Division) on 11 October argued that when facing strong resistance from enemy machine gun strongpoints,

in theory the way to deal with them is for the company, or platoon, concerned to make a small attack employing the different arms at their own disposal – rifle grenades, smoke grenades and Lewis guns. In practice I have

⁴³TNA WO 95/1437, 2nd Battalion Suffolk Regiment War Diary, Report on Operations, 8 October 1918.

⁴⁴TNA WO 95/2560, 115th Infantry Brigade War Diary, BM 1429, 11 October 1918.

⁴⁵TNA WO 95/2538, 13th Battalion Royal Fusiliers War Diary, Narrative of Operations, 7–11 October 1918.

⁴⁶TNA WO 95/1381, 3rd Division General Staff War Diary, Lessons, 19 October 1918.

been convinced that the better way is for the infantry to stick tight to their barrage – which I assume – and to go straight for the M[achine] guns.⁴⁷

IV Corps went further, formally laying down that ‘infantry cannot successfully attack organised resistance without the combination of either artillery or tanks.... The attack... against a properly consolidated enemy will always be carried out by the combination of artillery, machine guns and infantry, and frequently with tanks.’⁴⁸

In fact, effective artillery support was often considered crucial. The failure of the attack of 99th Brigade (2nd Division) on 8 October, for instance, despite being accompanied by British tanks, was partly due to the German armoured counter attack mentioned above, but partly, according to one of its battalions, because ‘the barrages throughout the operations were below the usual standard, being of uneven nature and not thick enough to meet the opposition.’⁴⁹ In general, ‘it was found impracticable to advance by day against organised resistance without the support of an artillery barrage.’⁵⁰ Such creeping barrages could by now be arranged relatively quickly: 19th Division reckoned that three hours would suffice for arranging a simple barrage, if phone communications were in place, whereas a more complex one might take eight, although inevitably short-notice barrages were more prone to error than those carefully planned in advance.⁵¹ Further, in the relatively mobile warfare of the Hundred Days, counter-battery fire became harder, since it was more difficult to maintain an updated intelligence picture of enemy gun positions and to move up heavy artillery and ammunition.⁵²

Other arms could, as we have seen, prove helpful but they were optional extras rather than essentials. Edmonds tended to dismiss the cavalry: ‘...the cavalry had done nothing that the infantry... could not have done for itself at less cost’.⁵³

⁴⁷TNA WO 95/1346, 5th Infantry Brigade War Diary, G.S. a/40/18a.

⁴⁸Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King’s College London (LHCMA), Montgomery-Massingberd 7/33, IV Corps Notes on Tactics and Training, September 1918, p. 4.

⁴⁹TNA WO 95/1370, 1st Battalion King’s Royal Rifle Corps, 99th Infantry Brigade War Diary, Narrative of Events, 8 October 1918.

⁵⁰TNA WO 95/719, IV Corps General Staff War Diary, Notes on Recent Operations by the IV Corps, 25 October 1918.

⁵¹TNA WO 95/2057, 19th Division General Staff War Diary, Narrative of Operations, 20–24 October 1918.

⁵²Albert Palazzo, ‘The British Army’s Counter Battery Staff Office and Control of the Enemy in World War I’, *Journal of Military History* 63 (January 1999), pp. 55-74 (pp. 73-74).

⁵³BOH 1918 Vol. V, p. 235.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

However, they seem to have played a useful role following up the German retreat.⁵⁴ Tank support declined as 1918 wore on. Heavy losses in personnel and machines, increased demand across the whole front for tanks, logistic difficulties, and the growing realisation that the use of armour required extensive pre-planning and liaison, all came together to limit the numbers of tanks available for operations.⁵⁵ The average Third Army division, which in August might have been supported by twelve machines, could expect only five by October. Some formations, such as 42nd Division, employed no tanks at all in the autumn of 1918.⁵⁶ In addition, deteriorating autumn weather reduced the impact of air power, increasingly preventing operations.

The increased complexity of combined-arms warfare in 1918 relative to 1914, and the co-ordination required, is summed up in a comparison of II Corps' orders for its advance during the Battle of the Marne in September 1914 with those of the Canadian Corps for attacking the Hindenburg Line on 27 September 1918. The former briefly outline the situation, gives objectives and timings, allocates roads to divisions and sets supply and reporting points. A reproduction of the order occupies less than two pages of the official history.⁵⁷ The equivalent four years later takes up no less than thirteen, including sections on bridging, artillery, tanks, machine guns, the RAF and signalling.⁵⁸

So, just in terms of the range of tools to be integrated, the British army of 1918 faced a more complex tactical problem than the original BEF. The changed nature of the defence also made things more difficult. The linear defences of 1914 had been replaced by a flexible defence in depth. The attacker's impetus would be sapped in a firepower-swept killing zone, several thousand metres deep, studded with barbed wire, machine guns, pillboxes and dug-outs, covered by pre-registered artillery. Once weakened, he would be thrown back to where he started by counterattacks. British offensive methods by late 1918 were geared to, and most of the time capable of,

⁵⁴David Kenyon, 'British Cavalry on the Western Front 1916–1918' (unpublished PhD thesis, Cranfield University, 2007), pp. 270-8; Simon M. Justice, 'Behind the Lines: Sir Douglas Haig and the Cavalry Corps, September–October 1918', *Records: The Journal of the Douglas Haig Fellowship*, 14 (November 2010), pp. 36-55.

⁵⁵On this, see also Tim Travers, *How the War was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917–1918* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 140-143 and John P. Harris with Niall Barr, *Amiens to the Armistice: The BEF in the Hundred Days' Campaign 8 August–11 November 1918* (London: Brassey's, 1998), p. 296.

⁵⁶TNA CAB 45/185, Official History Correspondence: Third Army, Letter from A. Solly-Flood, 15 November 1937.

⁵⁷BOH 1914 Vol. I, pp. 549-50.

⁵⁸BOH 1918 Vol. V, pp. 625-37.

overcoming this style of defence. As it happens, by 8 October the German army was too weak to operate a flexible defence effectively. The Beaurevoir–Masnières Line itself was incomplete: merely a single line of trenches, incompletely wired, with no tank obstacles.⁵⁹ Front-line units were much reduced in numbers. The average *Seventeenth Army* battalion ration strength on 11 October was 450 men, down from over 800 in February. Fighting strengths were lower still.⁶⁰ Merely to prevent enemy infiltration required the deployment of a disproportionate number of companies in the Forward Zone, but as *II Bavarian Corps* told *Seventeenth Army*, ‘one cannot count on battalions which retreat from the Forward Zone under enemy attack coming back fit for combat. Divisions must remain strong enough to ensure a successful defence discounting those elements deployed in the Forward Zone. This was not the case’.⁶¹ The morale of forward garrisons, widely dispersed in small groups with little supervision and, if attacked, less prospect of relief from non-existent counterattacking comrades, inevitably suffered and contributed to high surrender rates.

Operationally, indeed, in some ways 8 October 1918 marked the end of a phase of the First World War. With the fall of the Beaurevoir–Masnières Line, the days of the British having to fight their way forwards through fixed fortifications were left behind for good. The war became more open, and there were several similarities between the nature of operations in 1918 and 1914. For example, German defensive positions after 8 October were exclusively improvised at short notice. They were linear and static, with few available reserves, much as Smith-Dorrien’s had been in 1914. The aim of defence in both cases was primarily to buy time. *II Corps* hoped to force the Germans to deploy and to inflict casualties to cover a further British retreat. In late 1918 German attempts to stand similarly were designed to: cover the evacuation of sick, wounded and rolling stock; buy time for demolition of infrastructure and the construction of rearward defences; if possible force the Allies to a negotiated peace; and certainly to try to maintain control of a rapidly unravelling domestic political situation. A second similarity was that communications, despite technological advances for example in wireless, remained extremely poor. Not only did this lead to high levels of Clausewitzian ‘friction’ in both battles, but it also greatly limited the role senior commanders could play. In 1914, for example, Smith-Dorrien’s orders to stand and fight rather than retreat, issued at about 03.00 on 26 August, arrived at 4th

⁵⁹Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (BA-MA) PH 5 I/48, *Heeresgruppe Boehn* War Diary, Ia/Ie Nr 1646, 4 October 1918.

⁶⁰Bayerische Kriegsarchiv, Munich (BKA), *Heeresgruppe Kronprinz Rupprecht* Bund (Bd) 112 Zusammenstellung der Gesamtstärke an Offz., Uoffz. und Mannschafter der Armeen, 11 October 1918.

⁶¹BKA *II. bayerische Armee-Korps*, Bd 20/2, *Erfahrungen aus dem Großkampf bei 17. Armee*, 10 September 1918.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

Division headquarters six miles away at 05.00, at the same time as the Germans opened fire. 1st Battalion King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment was surprised by German artillery and machine-gun fire and lost 'some four hundred casualties'.⁶² That afternoon, 1st Battalion Gordon Highlanders never received orders to withdraw with the rest of II Corps and was consequently cut off with 500 men taken prisoner. The battalion ceased to exist.⁶³ German *First Army* headquarters, set up in a cottage north of Solesmes, had no communications links with its corps in the evening of 25 August and only received news of action next morning at 10.00., five hours after fighting began.⁶⁴ Things were better by 1918, but problems continued. As Brian Hall has observed, 'even though the BEF was employing a much more robust, flexible and sophisticated communications system than it had ever done before, tenuous communications were still having a detrimental impact on its operations'.⁶⁵ In particular, the shift away from trench warfare, with its established wire networks, after August 1918 caused problems. As 188th Brigade remarked, 'accustomed as we are to the telephone, when removed from it we become somewhat helpless'.⁶⁶ In semi-open warfare, the median time taken for a message to reach division from a battalion, by whatever means of transmission, was 64 minutes.⁶⁷ This introduced a long, and highly unpredictable, lag into decision-making. Indeed, Major-General Torquill Matheson (GOC, Guards Division) observed that:

During the last two days I have noticed that information regarding the situation in front has been sent in only at long intervals, and when it is sent in it is two or three hours old. I have often received information about the position of the Guards Division from flank divisions long before I have heard the same information from my own brigade commanders.⁶⁸

On 21 August, in the midst of a major set-piece attack, Lieutenant-General Sir Aylmer Haldane commanding VI Corps had so little to do while he awaited reports

⁶²BOH 1914 Vol. I, pp. 143-9, 164-5. Becke times the message's arrival to 07.20.

⁶³BOH 1914 Vol. I, pp. 194-6.

⁶⁴GOH 1914 Vol. I, pp. 520-523.

⁶⁵Brian N. Hall, *Communications and British Operations on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 270-97 (p. 270).

⁶⁶TNA WO 95/3109, 188th Infantry Brigade War Diary, Narrative of Operations, 1–8 September 1918.

⁶⁷Samples from 33rd Division on 29 September 1918: TNA WO 95/2407, 33rd Division General Staff War Diary; TNA WO 95/2429, 100th Infantry Brigade War Diary.

⁶⁸TNA WO 95/1195, Guards Division General Staff War Diary, GD No. 1/813/G, 10 October 1918.

from the front that he spent much of the day reading the memoirs of Marshal Oudinot.⁶⁹

At the operational level, however, in at least four respects the 1914 and 1918 models of 'open warfare' were very different. First, and most technically, long-range artillery and airpower had increased the depth of the battlefield. Heavy artillery, controlled at Army level and guided by long-range Bristol fighters equipped with wireless, targeted enemy headquarters and communications from 10,000 yards to twenty miles behind the German front line, while the RAF attacked targets up to twelve miles deep.⁷⁰

Secondly, the nature of the intelligence problem had changed. In August 1914 simply finding the enemy was tricky. The Germans spent much of 25 August zig-zagging across country in pursuit of contradictory cavalry and aerial reconnaissance reports of the direction of British retreat, and the next day's efforts to cut off that retreat were prejudiced by poor information.⁷¹ In 1918, for the British at least, the standard of operational intelligence was considerably improved and, although touch was occasionally lost during pursuit phases, in general enemy positions were clear from RAF reports and small-scale cavalry patrols. Strategic intelligence, such as how many divisions the enemy held in reserve, was also detailed and good.⁷² What was most needed now, however, was tactical intelligence about enemy front-line strengths, morale and intentions, and these were the focus of British intelligence work. On 9 October, for instance, Third Army discovered from prisoner-of-war interrogations that 6th Division had a total fighting strength of only 459 men.⁷³ The previous week, it had circulated a captured German document, dated 21 September, which spoke of poor morale and riots behind the lines in Cambrai.⁷⁴ On 6 October, based on 'reports', the intelligence branch estimated (correctly) that the Germans would hold in the Beaufort–Masnières Line for as long as possible before pulling back twenty

⁶⁹National Library of Scotland (NLS), General Sir Aylmer Haldane Diary, Entry, 21 August 1918.

⁷⁰TNA AIR 1/677/21/13/1887, The Western Front – Air Operations May–November 1918, p. 9; TNA WO 95/783, VI Corps CRA War Diary, Third Army Artillery Instructions No. 42 (G 3/338), 14 September 1918; *BOH 1918* Vol V, p. 200.

⁷¹*GOH* Vol I, pp. 517-9, 525-7.

⁷²Jim Beach, *Haig's Intelligence: GHQ and the German Army, 1916–18* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 303-19.

⁷³TNA WO 157/166, Third Army Intelligence Summaries October 1918, Third Army Intelligence Summary No. 1177, 9 October 1918.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, Third Army Intelligence Summary No. 1170, 2 October: Annex: Order of 187th Infantry Regiment, 21 September 1918.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

kilometres to a new defensive position.⁷⁵ This was a level of detail neither necessary nor possible four years earlier.

Thirdly, more complex armies required more logistic support. The BEF went to France in 1914 about 160,000 strong all told. In August 1918, half as many, nearly 80,000 men, were employed merely keeping the railways moving to support the British army in France.⁷⁶ The pre-war assumption had been that the maximum practical distance from supply railheads at which armies could operate was 50 miles. In fact, Kluck, by dint of improvisation and living off the land, was able to maintain his advance and fight 60–80 miles forward for a time.⁷⁷ By 1916, with greatly increased needs for supplies of all kinds, the British reckoned that the maximum had fallen to 25 miles.⁷⁸ In the autumn of 1918, railway and road construction struggled to keep up with the British advance. By 8 October, supply railheads which had been fifteen miles back in August were now up to 25 miles behind the front, and the attack had to be postponed 24 hours because of ammunition supply problems.⁷⁹ Third Army was unable to launch its assault crossing of the River Selle before 20 October as it had to wait for supplies to come forward. The follow-up breakout operation, originally planned for the 22nd, then had to be put back a further 24 hours 'owing to the arrival of ammunition trains being delayed by accidents on the line'.⁸⁰ The material-intensive warfare of 1918 compromised operational mobility.

This leads us on to a fourth difference between 1914 and 1918. The open flanks which permitted a war of movement in August and September 1914 were long gone. The First Battle of Le Cateau was typical of operations in a war of movement: a meeting engagement characterised by both operational and tactical attempts at envelopment. The Germans not only tried to drive in both flanks of the overall British position in the course of 26 August; at the tactical level they also successfully took the defenders in flank and enfiladed them on several occasions.⁸¹ By 1918, although movement had returned to the battlefield, increased force to space ratios (and the logistic constraints discussed above) ensured that operational manoeuvre

⁷⁵Ibid., Third Army Intelligence Summary No. 1174, 6 October 1918.

⁷⁶War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War: 1914–1920* (London HMSO 1922), p. 598.

⁷⁷Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (2nd ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 123–140.

⁷⁸J.E. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1916*, Volume I, *Sir Douglas Haig's Command to the 1st July: Battle of the Somme* (London, Macmillan, 1932), p. 274.

⁷⁹TNA WO 95/727, IV Corps AQMG War Diary, entry for 1 October; TNA WO 256/37, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig Diary, entry for 6 October 1918.

⁸⁰TNA WO 158/228, Third Army Operations, GS 76/294, 20 October 1918.

⁸¹Most obviously, 14th Brigade from the high ground above Le Cateau station.

did not. Smith-Dorrien deployed ten brigades (40 battalions) to defend a ten-mile-long position. Third Army in October 1918 used 48 brigades (144 battalions) to attack along a similar frontage. Warfare now primarily consisted of serial, set-piece, direct frontal assaults which resulted in a form of rolling attrition, aimed at killing and capturing large numbers of enemy. As Brigadier-General Hanway Cumming wrote in his memoirs:

There had been little scope for tactical manoeuvring during these last three months. Big movements were certainly made, but they appertained more to strategy than to tactics, and the role of the fighting troops could hardly be called open warfare as flanks were still, in the big sense, “un-get-at-able”.⁸²

Any psychological dislocation of the enemy was a desirable, but secondary consideration, to be achieved by presenting him with multiple high-tempo frontal threats which overloaded his capacity to react, rather than by administering J. F. C. Fuller’s ‘shot through the brain’.⁸³

We shall return to this shift from a war of movement to one of rolling attrition below. First, the change in who was fighting the war needs to be examined. One striking contrast between the British armies of 1914 and 1918, which reflected the changed nature of the war, was the global nature of the manpower pool drawn on. In 1914 almost all the men of the BEF had been born in the British Isles. In 1918, one New Zealand Division served in Third Army. 66th Division contained a South African brigade. Three companies of 1st Battalion King’s Royal Rifle Corps were commanded by Rhodesians.⁸⁴ The Canadian Cavalry Brigade took part in the pursuit to the Selle. The Australian Corps had just been pulled out of the line and replaced in Fourth Army by II American Corps. Other Americans flew in the skies above Le Cateau or worked as medical officers in British battalions, and the Chinese Labour Corps worked behind the lines. The British army, as did the French, pulled in manpower from all over the world: a source of strength on which the Central Powers could not draw.

The men who fought the first battle of Le Cateau were trained peacetime soldiers. Both armies at this stage consisted exclusively of peacetime trained soldiers brought up to strength by the mobilisation of recent reservists. In the BEF, reservists

⁸²Hanway R. Cumming, *A Brigadier in France 1917–1918* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1922), pp. 264-5.

⁸³J. F. C. Fuller, *Memoirs of an Unconventional Soldier* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1936), p. 325.

⁸⁴TNA CAB 45/185, Official History Correspondence: Third Army, Letter from Charles Howard, 23 June 1938.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

constituted up to 60 per cent of the strength of some infantry battalions.⁸⁵ All men were of course originally volunteers. In the largely conscript German Army, the proportion of reservists was lower in active infantry battalions (39 per cent) although two of *First Army's* six army corps were reserve formations with a much higher proportion of men from the Reserve and the *Landwehr 1st Ban*.⁸⁶ Not surprisingly, by 1918 few of the original men were still serving. Benjamin Ziemann points out that in the Bavarian Army the average length of active service during the war was fifteen months and only 2.7 per cent of those applying at Munich after 1918 for pensions for nervous ailments had been on active service all the way through.⁸⁷ Of 16,470 German soldiers taken prisoner by Fourth Army in August 1918, just 9.7 per cent were active soldiers of the classes of 1913 or before who would have been with the colours in 1914. A further 7.4 per cent had been Reservists of the classes of 1907-11 when war broke out and so would have been called up at once. Over half (54 per cent) of the 1918 army was under 24 years old: their only military experience, therefore, was in wartime.⁸⁸ Most officers, too, were wartime appointments. Thus, in *24th Infantry Regiment* for example, men who in 1914 had led half-sections were commanding companies by 1918. Battalion commanders at the end of the war had been section leaders at the beginning, and the regimental commander had gone to war leading a company.⁸⁹ Of the 87 officers of *1st Guards Reserve Regiment* in August 1918, 18 (21 per cent) had been with the regiment since 1914, although only six had been officers then, with the balance promoted from the ranks. 28 had served since 1915, 7 from 1916, 14 from 1917 and 20 had joined in the course of 1918.⁹⁰

The British Army, of course, was in a similar situation by 1918. Some regular formations, such as 3rd Division, managed to retain a kernel of 1914 regulars: 9.2 per cent of its August 1918 all-ranks strength had been members of the original BEF.⁹¹ Territorial and New Army formations, however, are unlikely to have had such high

⁸⁵Entry for 8 August 1914, John Terraine, ed., *General Jack's Diary 1914–1918: The Trench Diary of Brigadier-General J. L. Jack, D.S.O.* (London: Cassell, 2000; first published 1964), p. 22.

⁸⁶Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 174; *GOH* Vol. I, pp. 667-9.

⁸⁷Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923* (Alex Skinner, trans.) (Oxford: Berg, 2007), pp. 31-2.

⁸⁸TNA WO 157/197, Fourth Army Summary of Information, 22 August, Data from an analysis of 16,470 German prisoners captured in August 1918.

⁸⁹Cordt von Brandis, *Die vom Douaumont: Das Ruppiner Regiment 24 im Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Tradition Wilhelm Kolk, 1930), p. 451.

⁹⁰Brederlow, *Geschichte des 1. Garde-Reserve-Regiments*, pp. 351-60.

⁹¹Imperial War Museum (IWM), IWM 71/13/3, Colonel John H. Boraston Papers, Northern Division Report to GHQ, G. 8269, 28 April 1919.

levels of pre-war regular representation. In the (Kitchener Army) 6th Battalion the Dorsetshire Regiment on 28 August 1918, for example, the longest serving officer had gone to France in August 1915. By 30 September, nineteen of the twenty-two officers on regimental duty had joined the battalion within the previous five months, and the other three dated back only to 1917.⁹² As Gary Sheffield has said, 'by January 1918, although many wartime volunteers and even a few pre-war Regulars and Territorials remained with the colours, the British army was largely a conscript force' and heavy casualties in the course of the year only increased the proportion of conscripts.⁹³ In 1914 the average age had been 27; in the last months of the war it fell to 25, with 36 per cent of the dead 21 or younger.⁹⁴ Although at higher levels there was greater continuity, the old BEF had largely faded away.⁹⁵

This was of more than statistical significance, because it meant that a different generation was doing the fighting in 1918, one composed of men which had, in some cases personally, in others at second hand, been exposed for up to four years to what Alan Kramer has called the 'dynamic of destruction', the vicious cycle whereby ever more unlimited objectives spawned new ways of fighting which themselves led to increasingly extreme war aims.⁹⁶ If there was any chivalry on the 1914 battlefield, it did not last long amongst reports of atrocities against both combatants and civilians. John Horne and Alan Kramer have shown that German violence against civilians began at once.⁹⁷ Captain Sir Edward Hulse's letter home of 21 September 1914 contains an apparently convincing description of German soldiers shooting

⁹²TNA WO 95/2001, 6th Battalion Dorsetshire Regiment War Diary.

⁹³Gary Sheffield, 'The Indispensable Factor: The Performance of British Troops in 1918', in Peter Dennis and Jeffrey Grey (eds.), *1918: Defining Victory: Proceedings of the Chief of Army's History Conference held at the National Convention Centre, Canberra 29 September 1998* (Canberra: Army History Unit, Department of Defence, 1999), pp. 72-95 (pp. 75-6).

⁹⁴Data based on a sample of men named Roberts, Robertson and Robertshaw on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.

http://www.cwgc.org/debt_of_honour.asp?menuid=14, accessed 6 November 2008.

120 such men died. The ages of 59 are known. Field-Marshal Lord Roberts, who died aged 82, is excluded.

⁹⁵In Third Army in 1918, for example, commands at brigade level and above were almost exclusively held by pre-war regulars and nearly three-quarters of battalion COs, likewise, had seen service before 1914: *Army List*, July 1914 and December 1918.

⁹⁶ Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 2-5, pp. 328-9.

⁹⁷John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 13, 435.

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

over 30 wounded and helpless British soldiers.⁹⁸ It is not easy to reconstruct what motivated the men of the original BEF. Most of them did not have the self-consciousness or articulacy of the later recruits who have so coloured our perceptions of the inner life of the First World War British soldier. For many, no doubt 'the common denominator may... be described as passive acceptance, a willingness to do one's duty'.⁹⁹ There were some for whom 'war was their job. Active service was to be welcomed as a picnic change from the monotony of soldiering in England. Also, to the man keen on his profession... it meant the chance of promotion and of showing what he was made of.'¹⁰⁰ Perhaps patriotism, honour and glory played a part for some. By 1918, though, 'a willingness to do one's duty' seems to have predominated as other illusions faded away. As Hubert Essame, a subaltern in 1918, put it, the war poets' outlook was unrepresentative of the men with whom he fought, who 'saw their situation in a different light: admittedly war was evil; nevertheless it was their duty to their country to fight, if necessary to the end, hoping rather pathetically, that this would be "the war to end all wars"'.¹⁰¹ War was in no sense their job. In fact, the war was getting in the way of their jobs and lives. If grinding patiently through the German lines offered the quickest route home, then that was the way Tommy would go.

War in 1918 was also very different because the objectives for which it was being fought had changed. In part, this was driven by the terrible logic of war itself, where heavy sacrifice could only be justified by further sacrifice and violence could only be trumped by yet greater violence.¹⁰² As Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have asked, 'could the term "field of glory" be applied after Verdun or the Somme? An aesthetic and ethical code of heroism, courage and battle violence

⁹⁸Edward Hulse, *Letters written from the English front in France between September 1914 and March 1915* (privately published, 1916), p. 14,

<http://archive.org/details/letterswrittenfr00hulsrich>, accessed 6 April 2012.

⁹⁹ Strachan, *To Arms*, p. 162.

¹⁰⁰ Arthur Corbett-Smith, *The Retreat from Mons: by one who shared in it* (London: Cassell, 1916), pp. 1-2.

¹⁰¹ Hubert Essame, *The Battle for Europe 1918* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1972), pp. 107-8.

¹⁰²The extent to which this was entirely predetermined remains disputed: for Isabel V. Hull, fault lines within the German military and state made radicalisation inevitable, while Alan Kramer emphasises that humans retained the power of choice: Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Military Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*.

vanished in the immense cataclysm of 1914–18.¹⁰³ This cultural change, however, was closely related to strategic developments. Germany went to war possessing inchoate objectives in 1914. In so far as she had a coherent strategy, it was to knock France out of the war quickly to enable concentration on the threat in the east. The army's planning gave much attention to the mechanics of defeating the French army but little if any consideration to the strategic aim of doing so.¹⁰⁴ 1870, however, had shown the danger involved in bringing down the whole French regime. To do so would risk tying up troops needed against Russia in a long and frustrating *Volkskrieg*. It would be better by far to win fast, decisive victories, leaving in place a government with whom to negotiate French non-intervention and, perhaps, access to the resources of the industrial north-east and Longwy-Briey basin. The German assault in 1914 was as violent as it was, both in the field and against non-combatants, not because its objectives were unlimited – if anything, the opposite was the case – but precisely because speed was of such essence. From the German perspective, the opening battles *must* be decisive and therefore must be fought without restraint. Germany had to beat France in 1914, while the British and French had merely to stay in the game. This would allow their economic and naval muscle to wear down the Central Powers as they struggled to keep up a two-front war. This was most obviously true for Britain, but also applied to France. Of course, there was a political and economic imperative to minimise the amount of French territory occupied by the enemy. This restricted Joffre's freedom of action. Nonetheless, he could – and indeed after the defeat of his eastern offensives, must – trade space for time as Moltke and Falkenhayn could not. All three belligerents were fighting for essentially limited objectives in 1914.

By 1918, this had all changed, and both time and space had become less critical than numbers. President Wilson's Fourteen Points of January 1918 were seen as relatively moderate because they made no claims for reparations or directly on the territory of the Central Powers beyond the return of lands occupied since 1914 and Alsace-Lorraine. Nonetheless, by speaking of independence for Poland, for ethnic minorities in Austria-Hungary and the non-Turkish parts of the Ottoman Empire, they threatened the integrity of Prussia, Austria-Hungary and Turkey and would have required a German admission that all the sacrifices of the war were for naught. The treaties of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest in any case went against the Fourteen Points and showed how little quarter any country defeated by Germany could expect. It was also increasingly clear that neither the German army nor the *Kaiserreich* would

¹⁰³Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *1914–1918 Understanding the Great War* (Catherine Temerson, trans.) (London: Profile, 2002), p. 28.

¹⁰⁴The best recent study is Robert T. Foley, *German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1874–1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

TWO BATTLES AT LE CATEAU: THE TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

survive anything perceived as a defeat. The inability of Ludendorff and Hindenburg in October 1918 to admit that, even if her army had not yet been finally destroyed at the operational level, Germany nonetheless strategically had been defeated, gave rise to the possibility of incorporating a *levée en masse* into an *Endkampf* which threatened heavy Allied casualties and the self-immolation of the Fatherland.¹⁰⁵ From the Allied point of view, the best way both to break down conventional resistance and to forestall any possible new *Volkskrieg* was to round up – or kill – as many German soldiers as possible while using material superiority to minimise British and French casualties. The only time constraint in 1918 was that the longer the war continued, the greater American influence at the peace negotiations would be. A manoeuvrist proto-Blitzkrieg along the lines of J. F. C. Fuller's 'Plan 1919' was not only never considered as seriously as Fuller liked to pretend, and was technologically impossible with the tanks and transport available; it also would have done little to prevent a German insurgency. The campaign of rolling attrition fought by the Allies in the last months of 1918 was the result. It destroyed the enemy's will to fight in the most direct manner possible, by destroying his citizen army. It was, in the event, the most appropriate means of achieving Allied ends, much as it would be at the end of the next war, too.

This article has considered the transformation of war between 1914 and 1918 by comparing the two battles of Le Cateau and drawing out the similarities and differences between them in terms of technology, tactics and operations. The pace and scale of technical transformation was remarkable. There has not been space here to consider how armies on both sides managed to adapt, but the ability to do so was clearly central to battlefield outcomes. This essay has also argued, however, that by 1918 a largely new generation of soldiers, tempered in the crucible of war itself, were in the line. They brought to the task a grim determination which was reflected in the way they fought and which proved well suited to the kind of war it had become.

Napoleon might have recognised the First Battle of Le Cateau. But by the second, not only the face of battle, but also the shape of war, would have been beyond him.

¹⁰⁵See Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 309-319 and Michael Geyer, 'Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918', *Journal of Modern History*, 73/3 (September 2001), pp. 459-527.