

Combat Resilience in the First World War – a Historiographical Review

Review Number:

1039

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 February, 2011

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ISBN:

9780521881012

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

312pp.

Publisher:

Cambridge University Press

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

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The First World War was a terrible experience that most soldiers were shocked by once they became active participants. How were soldiers' able to cope with the grim realities of this war? How were they able to keep going in spite of losing close friends and comrades in one battle after another? How were they able to function as a soldier, much less a human being, in conditions that defy explanation? Trench warfare was an alien world that sapped a man's strength and wits with each passing day. In such conditions, how did soldiers' keep sharp and carry out their duties? These questions, and many others, are the subject of Alexander Watson's study titled *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*. 'The question of what constitutes 'morale', the common shorthand for military resilience and combat motivation, lies not only at the heart of this book but also at the centre of 20th-century literature on battlefield performance' (p. 140). Watson delves into the soldiers' experience in the Great War and chronicles their story and how they came to 'endure' the war. A central theme Watson continually places in front of the reader is the 'resilience' of the soldier that spanned an interminable period of four years. A soldier had to be resilient in order to 'endure' the Great War. If he did not possess those innate qualities, then he would quickly become a casualty or he would be rendered combat-ineffective. Both outcomes were detrimental to the war effort. Resilience was a common attribute shared by many soldiers and was intimately connected to morale and endurance. They are all variables that, when taken together, translate into success. But this was no ordinary war.

A picture of the living quarters of the soldiers' or of their battlefields would convey more meaning and power than any word known in the English language. A great deal has been inferred from the young soldier

gracing the cover of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* with different individuals extracting different meanings and truths. But what pictures could not illuminate were the psychological terrors and fears that deeply afflicted them. This war was unique. Due to these challenges, it is understandable to see why morale was of great concern. It worried every officer, from Field Marshal Haig down to the platoon subaltern fresh out of Sandhurst. It was considered the main ingredient for success though how to manufacture morale in wartime in such appalling conditions was less certain. The nature of the battlefields and of the trenches themselves was enough to crack the strongest man. Not having control over your own fate or those of your fellow soldiers was tough to accept. 'The notion of uncontrollability, rather than discomfort or the objective danger of the trenches, was the primary cause of stress ...' (p. 34). Knowing that the enemy lurked somewhere in the distance invisible to the naked eye heightened fears. In spite of intense fears, fatigue, and the knowledge that the war may go on indefinitely, soldiers were able to fight and fight well. Watson argues that these soldiers were more resilient than previously suggested because they fought for their homeland, their loved ones, the future, and were confident that they would achieve victory (pp. 53, 82–3). That, in Watson's opinion, was the crux. Soldiers believed they would ultimately vanquish their opponent and would then be able to return to their former lives (p. 183). Belief in a future of one's own choosing was a powerful incentive to carry on until that dream was realized.

In his most recent article, a continuation of the research undertaken for his book, Alexander Watson and his colleague Patrick Porter, of King's College London, investigate the role of sacrificial ideology and its impact on combat performance and morale.⁽¹⁾ Historians have paid little attention to the subject and its 'significance ... remains underestimated'.⁽²⁾ Watson and Porter argue that sacrificial ideology was commonplace in the trenches because officers and other ranks had been deeply ingrained since boyhood in the culture and values of Victorian Britain. Personal letters and diaries reveal colorful language indicative of sacrifice. Evocative words like 'valour', 'sacrifice', 'honour', and 'just' are examples of 'high diction' used by soldiers in communicating the discharging of their duties.⁽³⁾ These young men were keenly aware of Britain's illustrious past, her place in the world and her Empire. They possessed a profound consciousness and saw themselves as the guarantors of its preservation. This personal identification with Britain's heralded past and its relevance to young men in the present was a direct result of youth organizations like the Boy Scouts who placed great emphasis upon patriotism. Sam Pryke explores the pivotal role the Boy Scouts played in extolling virtue and character into Britain's youth while kindling an appreciation for Britain's lauded history.⁽⁴⁾ They were undoubtedly influential in encouraging British youth from every class to join and develop a healthy appreciation for the outdoors, adventure, and cultivate a sense of identity with Britain's heroic past.

Because of the success enjoyed by youth organizations like the Boy Scouts, sacrificial ideology 'reveals itself most clearly and personally' in the letters of soldiers.⁽⁵⁾ If they had not been successful, sacrificial ideology would be conspicuously absent from these letters and may have adversely affected men's morale. Some historians, however, argue that the other ranks were not likely to exhibit 'high diction' and in that point they may be partially correct. But they did have a real sense of patriotism and devotion to their homeland and the evidence says as much. 'Such sentiments were by no means as rare among the rank-and-file as is normally assumed; indeed, censorship reports compiled from the letters of tens of thousands of soldiers remarked explicitly on the continued, widespread evidence of idealistic beliefs and sacrificial willingness among other ranks ...'⁽⁶⁾ Sacrificial ideology is a logical extension of Watson's earlier work and complements his thesis that morale and sacrificial willingness were inextricably linked to the outcome of the First World War.

A complementary consideration of morale is worth discussing because morale is multi-dimensional and deserves a wide-angle lens approach to appreciate its many intricacies. S. P. MacKenzie looks at morale from a different, though complementary, angle from Watson. He draws due attention to the widening gulf between the senior staff and the front-line officer and other ranks as a factor in morale undulating throughout the war.⁽⁷⁾ Critical of their luxurious accommodations far-removed from the battlefield, MacKenzie sees the upper echelons of the British Expeditionary Force's senior officers as out-of-touch with the conditions at the front. A change of leadership, however, led to some concrete changes that had a positive effect upon morale

and the course of the war. Haig was not the creative genius behind these initiatives, but nonetheless was open-minded to new ideas that could potentially help his men. Recognizing his men had ‘undergone almost superhuman exertion ...’ and were exhausted and fatigued, Haig was receptive to programs that would help sustain his men’s morale.⁽⁸⁾ Morale was important but so was the soldiers’ welfare and mental well-being. Education programs that discussed peace and the future were helpful palliatives to the constant stress of the warfront. It helped to ‘shape soldiers’ thinking’ and keep them focused and alert rather than absent-minded or complacent.⁽⁹⁾ Success was correlated, however, to how amenable such programs were to the company CO. With his encouragement, men could freely participate knowing they had their CO’s blessing. An interesting piece of evidence that proves a reliable barometer for men’s uncensored feelings is the testimony of the Third Army’s Censor Captain Hardie. After the battle of the Somme, he reported that the men were generally speaking in high spirits and commended their ‘unfailing readiness’ and ‘dogged determination’ to keep going and fight on.⁽¹⁰⁾ Watson’s firmly-held conviction that the soldiers’ were men of resilience and endurance is corroborated by Captain Hardie’s years spent as a Censor for the Third Army.

Anticipating the extreme strain war would exact upon a man, prudent measures were taken to support men in the field and lift their spirits. Thousands of chaplains were dispatched to the front to stiffen morale and provide comfort and solace. But a directive issued at the beginning of the war kept chaplains from administering the ailing men at the front. Though the directive was rescinded in 1915, notes MacKenzie, the soldiers’ distanced themselves from the chaplains.⁽¹¹⁾ This was an opportunity that was squandered; the men were in desperate need of the chaplains but were deprived of them in their darkest hour. Moreover, when they were allowed access, the chaplains brought propaganda rather than spiritual guidance and comfort. That was what they wanted most. If the chaplains were allowed to console and provide a listening ear to the soldiers’, morale could have risen exponentially. MacKenzie, aware of the harsh criticism laid against Haig, sought to redress some of the balance by commending Haig’s actions and fast implementation of educational programs. Contrary to the picture painted by Paul Fussell of Haig as an incompetent commander lacking personality and humor, MacKenzie portrays Haig as a man perceptive enough to see his men were flagging and sought eagerly for a remedy.⁽¹²⁾ Haig was not as aloof from his men or their state of mind as Fussell insinuates but acted decisively when apprised of their condition. MacKenzie has made a small contribution in rehabilitating Haig’s memory.

A soldier’s performance in the field could be dictated by circumstances beyond his control. In a hostile environment, a soldier could encounter various trials at a moment’s notice and would need to draw upon ‘inner reserves’ of strength to safely navigate an impasse.⁽¹³⁾ Oxford historian Hew Strachan alludes to three general modes of instilling morale in the troops. These methods are the primary group, ideological indoctrination, and punishment. They all have their merits, in Strachan’s opinion, but they fail to prepare men for the realities of war. Training, however, can alleviate a great deal of uncertainty and allow men to transition to a war environment more effectively, secure in the knowledge of past experience. But, more importantly, it mentally prepares the soldier for the unknown variables of war. ‘The value of training is therefore in large part psychological: it is an enabling process, a form of empowerment, which creates self-confidence’.⁽¹⁴⁾

Simulations have great value in conditioning soldiers’ to the sound of live machine gun fire, spontaneous forced marches, privation and exposure, night offensives, and the like. This training is invaluable in preparing soldiers’ for service in combat zones. Their lives may very well depend on this training and its ability to mimic veritable battlefield conditions. There is no substitute, in Strachan’s mind, for strenuous training. The more hardened a man becomes through training, the more likely he will not only be an effective soldier but will be confident in his own abilities. Confidence is closely linked with morale. Training insures that men have the proper skill-sets to not only stay alive but carry out their duty in a professional manner. When men go through training regimens, whether basic training or anything else, they come out of that experience better men and are brimming with self-confidence in their own abilities and those of their team. Watson and Strachan are well aware that men have their limits and no amount of training will prepare them for years of grueling fighting. Men have a ‘finite stock of courage’ according to Strachan and the best way to insure combat-readiness and prevent collapse is to prepare thoroughly in advance for the

challenges ahead.(15) If the shock of combat can be minimized, morale will not suffer because the men will be familiar drawing upon their 'inner reserves' to sustain them when their minds' and bodies' are shaken. Without training, men would be unprepared for the cruelty of war and victory would be more costly.

Successful generals took advantage of every opportunity to train their men – even at the front. Strachan focuses due attention on Lieutenant-General William Slim and his transformation of the troops under his command in Burma during the Second World War. Slim's training regimen turned the tide of the war in Southeast Asia as evidenced in Tarak Barkawi's research.(16) Motivation to keep fighting in such depressing conditions against an enemy that seemed invincible is difficult to explain. Barkawi concludes that it was not loyalty to the Empire or any other national tie or ideology but the *basic training* inherent in the Western way of war that built a bond like no other among men of different races and backgrounds. Drill served as a form of rehabilitation for soldiers who had suffered a traumatic trial in the jungle and helped these soldiers to reintegrate into a combat-ready unit. Discipline, precise movements and coordination with fellow soldiers were deeply ingrained in the psyche of Indian soldiers. This training regimen, Barkawi believes, made most Indian and colonial soldiers impervious to the Japanese and the legends of their martial prowess.

A potential threat that could undermine morale and have deleterious effects upon manpower were shell shock victims. A revealing article by Edgar Jones, a clinical psychologist and historian, sheds light on the nature of shell shock and how it was treated both at the front and at home.(17) Jones concludes that effective treatment was conducted at the front where medical officers could effectively treat it. Furthermore, treatment was more therapeutic along the front because medical officers were not disassociated from the traumas suffered by these men. They, too, were subject to it and could genuinely understand their plight and were best-situated to treat them. Jones' colleague Simon Wessely, professor of Psychiatry at King's College, London and Director of the King's Centre for Military Health Research, concurs with Jones' assessment. Rehabilitation conducted near the front probably consisted of 'a couple of days rest, food, clean clothing, and sleep'.(18)

Sending men back to Britain to convalesce was a mistake according to Wessely and Jones. Statistics show that men who undertook psychiatric care back home were less likely to return to active duty. On the other hand, men who underwent treatment along the front, known as 'forward psychiatry', were more likely to return to duty and not suffer to the extent of those who were sent back home.(19) Whether it was their proximity to the battlefield or the type of treatment they received by medical officers seasoned by war and proficient in its remedy is hard to ascertain but the evidence shows that there is something to be said for the rapid recovery soldiers experienced when treated at the front. If more treatment centers were available and the Army had been more open to suggestions to treat, rather than ignore, shell shock, soldiers would have felt more confident that they would be taken care of rather than ostracized by the establishment. This only alienated soldiers who were overcome by conditions they were inadequately prepared for. Wessely disagrees with Watson arguing men fight not out of sentimentalism or ideology, but because of their buddies. 'Men fight not because of ideology, but because of their membership in the tight-knit, self-sustaining and self-supporting unit whose creation is the principal ambition of infantry training' (20) The 'primary group' theory coupled with training are factors Strachan believes are integral to morale; dismissing the key role ideology can play in sustaining morale, however, as Wessely has done is a commitment Strachan is reticent to make. But Wessely makes a candid admission that should give us pause to consider: 'There is no universal explanation why men fight, or why they break down in battle'.(21)

A more comprehensive understanding of the many nuanced shades of morale would be incomplete without discussing women's contribution to morale and the war effort. In a thoughtful article investigating the positive role women played in France, Susan Grayzel demonstrates French women fulfilled the role of mothers at home and confidantes and lovers near the front.(22) In spite of being a focused consideration of French troops and French women, Grayzel's research suggests that 'Women, seen both as a guarantee of and as a potential threat to conventional morality in the social order, were recognized to be the key to keeping up morale'.(23) But there was always tension present in the relationships between women and servicemen as well as 'platonic' relationships initiated between soldiers' who had no family and their adoptive Mairaines

or 'godmothers.' The very institution that could stabilize morale was also its greatest threat. 'Women, who might sustain morale, might also undermine it'.⁽²⁴⁾ Knowing fully the danger that women posed to the war effort in general was overruled by the basic human needs of the soldier. These personal connections gave meaning to why men fought. 'The relationship between unknown men and women gave women a role to play and men a personal reason to fight on'.⁽²⁵⁾ Long-distance relationships cultivated by men and women who had never met were a powerful lift to morale. They instilled hope that a better life was waiting for them back home. It was these deeply personal relationships that kept men fighting and believing. Combat motivation and morale were greatly enhanced by women's active involvement establishing relationships with men at the front. It was not uncommon to find romances blossoming in the midst of war-torn France though many soldiers, and women, casually tossed their morals aside in favor of pleasure and passion.

A second comparative study would be useful in comparing the dalliances of French women and men to those that frequented the diaries and letters of British troops. An insightful study full of amusing anecdotal evidence illuminates the sexual role of women in contact with the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders.⁽²⁶⁾ Gibson persuasively argues two points that challenge orthodoxy in viewing sex during the First World War. First, non-combatant troops did not 'monopolize' women at the front. Second, homo-erotic or homosexual relationships were exceptional and 'over-emphasized' by scholars like Fussell and Niall Ferguson, while ignoring the abundant literature recording heterosexual relationships.⁽²⁷⁾ Gibson wishes to redress the balance by refuting the pervasive trend propagated by Fussell and others. He tackles Fussell's contention squarely: 'Despite the claim that officers reveled in a tightly knit, masculine community and that the comradeship of the trenches was an extension of the homoeroticism of the public school, most of them were as interested in the local women as their men were'.⁽²⁸⁾ But there were serious time-constraints that left little leisure time to enjoy women. 'Troops coming out of the line needed sleep, food, and women, in that order'.⁽²⁹⁾ As Niall Ferguson notes in *The Pity of War*, it was a semblance of home-life that soldiers longed to recreate in this hellhole.⁽³⁰⁾ These sentiments are evident in a Canadian Private's reminiscences which juxtaposed sex and home-baked goods as treats to be enjoyed. It was not ordinary milk but 'a big bowl of warm cow's milk.' Not just a piece of bread but 'freshly baked brick-oven bread'.⁽³¹⁾ This soldier savored every essence that reflected a deep appreciation of creature-comforts like those taken for granted back home. At the front, anything that reminded a soldier of home and normality was seized upon. Sex features prominently in studies of combat performance and its constituent parts, discipline and morale, for instance in Kaushik Roy's recent article seeking to explain the dramatic turn-around of the Colonial armies in Southeast Asia after suffering horrendous losses during the Second World War.⁽³²⁾ A resurgence in scholarly literature encompassing both World Wars gives special attention to sex as a legitimate but overlooked factor that impacted morale. More studies following Roy's example would be welcome in Europe and the Pacific.

British soldiers were viewed by many as an occupying force little better than the Germans. Because France resembled a 'demographic no man's land', women were drawn to British soldiers because they were either short of money or they craved companionship.⁽³³⁾ It was a relationship of convenience for both parties who were denied a human connection. Soldiers' knew that women offered their services for one of three reasons: one, they were in need of cash; two, they desired sex and were not finicky about who their partner was; third, some women freely gave themselves as a reward for fighting.⁽³⁴⁾ Trouble was never far away and sex was accompanied by 'looting, drunkenness, resisting arrest, and general indiscipline'.⁽³⁵⁾ Of even greater concern to the High Command was the spread of venereal disease. Treatment typically lasted two months and threatened to compromise Britain's most precious commodity – officers.⁽³⁶⁾ Conspicuously absent from studies concerned with explaining how the troops 'kept going' is a balanced examination of the intersection between civilians and servicemen.⁽³⁷⁾ Sadly, most relationships ended with the closing of the war and even more bizarre is that most locals were glad to see them leave. These women were courageous and bold in their actions. They did their bit to give men a taste of their former lives and brought relief and relaxation in a way that no other palliative could. Indeed, for some historians they were the unsung heroes of the war.

Notes

1. Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter, 'Bereaved and aggrieved: combat motivation and the ideology of sacrifice in the First World War', *Historical Research*, 83 (February 2010), 146–64.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ibid, 147.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ibid, 148.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sam Pryke, 'The popularity of nationalism in the early British Boy Scout movement', *Social History*, 23 (October 1998).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Watson and Porter, 153.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Ibid, 157.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. S. P. MacKenzie, 'Morale and the cause. The campaign to shape the outlook of soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918', *Canadian Journal of History*, 25 (August 1990).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Ibid, 224.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Ibid, 228.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Ibid, 219.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Ibid, 231.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, 1975) p. 12.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale, and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (April 2006), 222.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Ibid, 216.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Ibid, 223.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Tarak Barkawi, 'Peoples, homelands, and wars? Ethnicity, the military, and battle among British Imperial forces in the War against Japan', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46 (January 2004); Tarak Barkawi, 'Culture and combat in the colonies: the Indian army in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (April 2006).[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. Edgar Jones, 'The psychology of killing: the combat experience of British soldiers during the First World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41, 2 (April 2006) 229–246.[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. Simon Wessely, 'Twentieth-century theories on combat motivation and breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41 (April 2006), 273.[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. Ibid, 273.[Back to \(19\)](#)
20. Ibid, 283.[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. Ibid, 286.[Back to \(21\)](#)
22. Susan Grayzel, 'Mothers, Mairaines, and prostitutes: morale and morality in the First World War, France', *The International History Review*, 19 (February 1997), 66–82.[Back to \(22\)](#)
23. Ibid, 67.[Back to \(23\)](#)
24. Ibid, 68.[Back to \(24\)](#)
25. Ibid, 70.[Back to \(25\)](#)
26. K. Craig Gibson, 'Sex and soldiering in France and Flanders: the British Expeditionary Force along the Western Front, 1914–1918', *The International History Review*, 23 (September 2001), 535–79.
[Back to \(26\)](#)
27. Ibid, 536.[Back to \(127\)](#)
28. Ibid, 541.[Back to \(28\)](#)
29. Ibid, 546.[Back to \(29\)](#)
30. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (New York, 1999).[Back to \(30\)](#)
31. Gibson, 546.[Back to \(31\)](#)
32. Kaushik Roy, 'Discipline and morale of African, British and Indian Army units in Burma and India during World War II: July 1943 to August 1945', *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 (April 2010), 1255.[Back to \(32\)](#)
33. Ibid, 552–3.[Back to \(33\)](#)
34. Ibid, 558.[Back to \(34\)](#)
35. Ibid, 566.[Back to \(35\)](#)
36. Ibid, 568–71.[Back to \(36\)](#)
37. Ibid, 578.[Back to \(37\)](#)

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