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Review of *The Darkest Year: The British Army on the Western Front 1917*  
by Spencer Jones (ed.)

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medals. The ill-feeling surrounding this perceived unfairness demonstrates how veterans of the same war vied with one another for acknowledgement in the commemorations of the combat.

Reynolds' enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, and his analysis of the variant ways in which Waterloo was commemorated is intelligent. Although no one man or group could truly claim ownership over Waterloo, during Wellington's lifetime cultural ownership of the battle shifted and spread, and by the time of his death, Reynolds shows us, it had become a truly national phenomenon.

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**Spencer Jones (ed.), *The Darkest Year: The British Army on the Western Front 1917*. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2022. Notes, Index, 514pp. + 21 maps, ISBN: 978-1914059988 (hardback). Price £35.00.**

Despite thirty years of scholarship, our understanding of the learning process that the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) underwent during the First World War remains incomplete. Though not understudied, there is much that is yet to be uncovered. *The Darkest Year: The British Army on the Western Front 1917* – the fourth in a five part series - thus seeks to in part ameliorate this by shedding new light on 'the difficulties that are often hidden behind the simple shorthand of... [that] phrase' (p. xxvii). Focused specifically on the B.E.F.'s activities in 1917, these chapters consider two fundamental themes: the complexity of operations in contrast to previous years; and the tactical improvement of the B.E.F. on the Western Front.

Various subjects are covered, including, among others a helpful, introductory overview of British strategic thinking during 1917; several case studies of individual units and their performance during important, if much-neglected, operations; an assessment of G.H.Q.'s intelligence practices; as well as an examination of the fledgling tank corps, which 'faced an uncertain future' (p. 484). The sixteen chapters concentrate primarily on the first half of the year, eschewing the infamous if overstudied first and second battles of Passchendaele. To achieve this Spencer Jones as editor has assembled a diverse cohort, including, rather refreshingly, numerous PhD students, several independent scholars as well as other familiar and prominent names from earlier monographs in this series.

## REVIEWS

*The Darkest Year* addresses several major themes. The first is the complexity of operations on the Western Front. Chapters by Simon Shephard and Alexander Falbo-Wild draw attention to the highly sophisticated nature of Royal Artillery and Royal Engineer support during 1917. Shephard concentrates on the battles of Pilckem Ridge, Menin Road Ridge and the Second Battle of Passchendaele, offering a more detailed and nuanced analysis of artillery arrangements during this campaign, than other historians. He rightly underlines the fact that Royal Artillery barrages were no longer multi-layered but instead multifunctional and in fact multidimensional affairs, designed not just to suppress and destroy enemy forces but to deceive German machine gunners into believing that the 'creeping barrage' covering the advancing infantry had yet to lift. Falbo-Wild, meanwhile, concentrates on the role of the Royal Engineers during the Battle of Arras. The author demonstrates the complexity of their operations, ranging from the more traditional tasks, to communications as well as the management and maintenance of the logistical infrastructure to the rear. Indeed, Falbo-Wild is at pains to emphasise that this prodigious undertaking was achieved in spite of limiting factors, including inadequate supplies of building material required for the construction of roads and the subordinate role of the R.E. to the demands of the other arms. However, he also recognises that the Royal Engineers' success was in part due to advantageous pre-existing geological and geographical features that facilitated their operations.

The tactical improvement of the B.E.F. permeates across *all* sixteen chapters. None more so than Nigel Dorrington's assessment of III Corps and Andy Lock's analysis of the 8 British and 2 Australian Divisions' actions during the pursuit of the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line: immortalised, if poorly, in the blockbuster film, *1917*. Despite focusing on several different units, comparable conclusions are drawn by each author. Firstly, that the B.E.F.'s development was neither exponential nor uniform, but rather of an 'uneven' (p. 255) and inconsistent nature. This is an important consideration, for although historians have established that the tactical transformation of the B.E.F. cannot be viewed as a steady parabola, limited attention has been afforded to how learning varied between the different elements of that organisation. Comparative studies such as these therefore go some way towards ameliorating this shortfall. Secondly, it was not senior commanders but in fact the infantry who adapted most readily to the transition from trench to semi-open warfare. As Dorrington argues, the men acted like 'highly trained troops' (p. 228). Overall, these and other operational studies in *The Darkest Year*, significantly add to our understanding of learning and innovation within the B.E.F. on the Western Front.

Both chapters stand in stark contrast to Harry Sanderson's analysis of the disastrous Third Battle of Scarpe; the failure of which he attributes to the overly optimistic and reckless approach of British senior commanders. In a blistering, yet balanced

assessment, he demonstrates that the plan was hastily conceived, while the commanders of First and Third Armies failed to appreciate that operations during April had drained the fighting capabilities of their manpower. Sanderson also rightly recognises that other factors militated against success, including strong German defensive positions; a reduction in the quality and quantity of manpower; and the deleteriously weak position of the Royal Artillery following the Battle of Arras.

It is important to note the non-operational studies, such as Tom Thorpe's consideration of cohesion within the London Regiment and Charles Fair's ground-breaking research, concerning the development of the Officer Cadet Battalion. Both compliment the otherwise combat and tactical-centric approach of *The Darkest Year*, offering colour to the drier operational studies, while affording a voice to the lower ranks, who are unfortunately noticeably absent.

Given the breadth of the British army's operations during 1917, it is hardly surprising that limitations were imposed on subject matter. It is, however, unfortunate that the contribution of the Machine Gun Corps at Messines, as well as the creation and subsequent work of the Labour Corps were not addressed. Both subjects remain much neglected, in spite of their importance and overall contribution to the B.E.F.'s war effort. The Labour Corps, in particular, was vital to maintaining the rear logistical infrastructure and thus the tempo of operations.

Notwithstanding these minor reservations, *The Darkest Year* is an important contribution to the First World War historiography. This engaging, thought-provoking and indeed insightful collection of essays is a must for *all* military historians, but particularly those interested in a more nuanced understanding of the disjointed nature of learning that occurred across the B.E.F.'s different arms, as well as the manifest difficulties that were encountered and the fractious nature of Allied cooperation during 1917.

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