

The Battle of the Lys: Understanding How and Why its History is Distorted

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The English did not like us? That is unsurprising. They do not like anyone but themselves, and the material greatness of England nourishes powerful justifications for their national pride, which is the foundation of all such mentalities. A strong conviction is anchored in all these [English] spirits: England cannot lose the war, because it is England. When, how and when, England will win, this is inconsequential [to them].¹

(Captain André Brun, 23rd Infantry Battalion)

1. The Problem: Conjectures, Myths, and Misinterpretations

Field Marshal Douglas Haig scapegoated the 2nd Portuguese Division for the tactical defeat of the British First Army, in the 9 April 1918 Battle of the Lys. He asserted that most Portuguese soldiers ran from the battlefield, before German infantry attacked. Haig's account explained why First Army was tactically beaten – German infantry attacked the 40th and 55th British Divisions in the

1. V. Brun 1983, 196. Captain André Brun, 23rd Infantry Battalion, commanded a company, and subsequently the battalion, with distinction in the Lys Valley.

flanks, from an alleged gap created by the Portuguese – and why the attack did not fall against Arras-Vimy – where he expected it – German commanders decided to exploit this supposed breach, thereby diverting strong forces away from that place.²

In their entirety, British and Portuguese combat records – written by men who served on the battlefield – refute Haig’s narrative.³ These records establish that the Battle of the Lys began at 04.15 hours, with the most concentrated bombardment of the war at that time, which lasted for four hours, and was aimed primarily at the 40th British and 2nd Portuguese Divisions’ fronts.⁴ Shortly after 08.15, German assault troops began infiltrating First Army’s front. When the main advance began, at 08.45, one German division attacked the 55th British Division’s front, purposely pinning it against the north bank of the La Bassée Canal. Three divisions began attacking the 40th Division’s right front, and at least eight divisions, perhaps nine, began attacking the 2nd Division’s front, all advancing to the northwest, toward Hazebrouck.⁵ British and Portuguese defenders could only fight small unit actions against waves of German infantry before being overrun. Portuguese combat units acquitted themselves no worse than British combat units; some performed better.⁶ The 2nd Division was destroyed on the battlefield, facing an enemy force that outnumbered it by at least eight to one.⁷

In 1937, the British official historian, J.E. Edmonds, published his record of the battle, which bolsters and enhances Haig’s version. (vol.2,

2. V. The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), CAB 23/6/0010, War Cabinet, 388 (April 10, 1918); TNA, C. P. 223 (April 9, 1918); WO 256/29; Imperial War Museum, London (IWM), Documents and Sound Section, the Private Papers of Captain R. C. G. Dartford MC (April 17 1918); and Beach 2013, 292-295.

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3. First Army commander, General Henry Horne, and XI Corps commander, Lieutenant-General R.C.B. Haking, who were fiercely loyal to Haig, wrote after action reports that align with Haig’s narrative, but which British combat records contradict.

4. V. Zabecki 184-186.

5. V. TNA, WO 95/2905; TNA, “Reproduction of Captured Map Illustrating the Attack of the 4th Ersatz Div., on the 9th April, 1918,” WO 95/883; TNA, WO 153/69; Boff 202-203; and Stevenson 39.

6. V. TNA, General Horne, 14 June 1918, WO 158/75; IWM, *Dartford Papers*, 21 April 1918; Mardel 152.

7. V. TNA, General Gomes da Costa, WO 158/75.

156-192) Edmonds appears to have based his narrative on accounts authored by XI Corps Commander, R.C.B. Haking, who could “write a very specious report,” and other speculative commentary, little of which aligns with British combat records. (*Apud* Robbins 28-29) Indeed, Edmonds used British combat records selectively, apparently only to augment his misleading, “dense and impenetrable” tale.⁸

Moreover, Edmonds, like Haig, lied. Five of his untruthful assertions, among others, follow here. Edmonds wrote that German forces attacked the 2nd Portuguese Division’s front at 07.00 hours. Instead, German forces attacked the 40th, 2nd Portuguese, and 55th Divisions concurrently, at 08.45 hours. He wrote that only four German divisions attacked the 2nd Portuguese division. Instead, eight or nine German divisions attacked the Portuguese. He wrote that five German divisions attacked the 55th Division. Instead, only one German division attacked the 55th. He wrote that the 40th and 55th Divisions formed defensive flanks, after the Portuguese allegedly ran from the battlefield. Instead, only the 40th Division’s left front brigade, the 121st, which was not attacked frontally, attempted to form a defensive flank, once its sister brigade, the 119th, holding the 40th Division’s right front, had been overrun. And, he wrote that the 2nd Portuguese Division neglected to destroy bridges behind First Army’s front. Instead, a British unit was tasked with destroying those bridges.⁹ Unfortunately, for more than a century now, Anglophone historians and authors have uncritically cited Haig’s and Edmonds’s fictitious narratives.¹⁰

British and Portuguese combat records dispute Haig’s narrative, but do not provide the long-term political and societal context that anchored his allegations.¹¹ Most of what British officials and officers, whether they were based in London, France, or Lisbon said or wrote about the Portuguese were conjectures, based on then-scientific ideas

8. Edmonds used the same approach for his narrative about the German attack against the Third and Fifth British Armies, on 21 March 1918. Cf. Travers 238-239; and Middlebrook 10-11, 332-334.

9. V. TNA, 51st Division, “Report on the Operations on the R. Lys Between 9th – 12th April,” 1918, WO 95/883.

10. V. Harris, 455.

11. “The fact that historical meanings are dependent on context is a fundamental reason why historians continue to write and re-write history” (Heathorn 1122).

of racial preeminence that were endemic in Victorian and Edwardian culture.¹² This article identifies and evaluates the events that led Haig and several subordinates to paint the Portuguese 2nd Division in the worst possible light for a combat force, how this depiction has been treated in Anglophone and Lusophone narratives, and how using empirically corroborated evidence, along with broader historical contexts, can more accurately convey international histories.¹³

2. The Anglo-Portuguese Alliance

England and Portugal share the longest alliance in European history. When Germany declared war on Portugal, on 9 March 1916, it had been in place for 530 years.¹⁴ The alliance formally dates to the 1386 Treaty of Windsor, though various agreements between the two nations began during the twelfth-century Crusades. It began as an accord between seagoing nations, based on common interests and trade. From the beginning, the alliance included various defensive arrangements, as Portugal and Britain had common enemies: for England, France and oftentimes Spain, and for Portugal, Spain and sometimes France.

During the mid-seventeenth century, a defensive agreement became the core of the alliance. Portugal allowed British navy and merchant ships access to most of its ports around the globe. In return,

12. V. Morrow Jr. 5.

13. During the Peninsular War, 1807-1814, British and Portuguese forces fought in coalition. Along with Spanish regular and guerilla forces, they ejected French armies from Iberia. Most British accounts of the Portuguese in that war are pejorative. Some Britons offered proforma praise of Portuguese troops, which have been misunderstood. Close reading of most such narratives reveals that Britons largely reserved their commendations for Portuguese units commanded by British officers, as figureheads. V. Pyles <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL4257>.

14. Since late 1914, Germany and Portugal had been fighting an undeclared war in Africa, and Portuguese forces did not fare well in many of the battles. Some British sources, past and present, alleged that these poor performances formed the basis of British distrust of Portugal's martial capabilities. This canard discounts longstanding British ideas of their racial preeminence and of Portuguese inferiority, poor British military performances against German forces in Africa, and poor British military performances against German armies in Europe, including the Great Retreat – summer 1914, Loos – autumn 1915, the Somme – summer 1916, the German counterattack at Cambrai – autumn 1917, and the Spring Offensive – 1918, during which French commanders sent 47 divisions to rescue the BEF from strategic defeat. V. Wheeler 127; and Greenhalgh, "A French Victory" 90-91.

England guaranteed Portugal's sovereignty.¹⁵ British protection came at a high price in terms of real autonomy for Portugal.¹⁶ After the 1703 Treaty of Methuen, the alliance became an arrangement of Portuguese dependency – the cornerstone of the Portuguese state – and, by the nineteenth century, had devolved into a patron-client relationship.¹⁷ However distasteful this predicament may have been for Portuguese rulers, their choices were limited: an alliance of subordination to Britain or probable subjugation by Spain. All preferred the former option.

British commentary regarding the Portuguese brims with accusations of obstinacy and arrogance. Henry John Temple, Lord Palmerston, for example, asserted in an address to the House of Commons on 29 September 1850:

These half-civilized Governments such as those of China, Portugal, Spanish America, all require a dressing down every eight or ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive an impression that will last longer than some such period and warning is of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the stick but actually feel it on their shoulders before they yield to that argument which brings conviction. (*Apud* DeWitt 12)

Archival records, private letters, and abundant literature disclose that British officials resented any Portuguese government action against, or lack of compliance with, British interests, and often retaliated with heavy-handed political and economic policies, reinforced with harsh rhetoric.¹⁸

15. V. Brown 134; Disney 248; and Marshall 21.

16. V. Adelman 102, 115; and Newitt 12-15.

17. V. Paquette 212; Adelman 31; and Showalter xi.

18. V. Adelman 102.

3. Victorian and Edwardian Ideas

British aristocrats of the Victorian and Edwardian eras regarded Britain as a land of “history and myth”, (Connelly 22) and themselves as “heroes of their own epic”. (Sheftall 15-29) Many believed in “the idea of the divine mission of England, bastion of Christianity, the new Rome, destined to rule the world”. (Haynal *at al* 123) Chauvinistic perspectives pervade British commentary and publications during this period. This worldview, aligned closely with the ‘white man’s burden’ idea, gave rise to the then-scientific classification of races, ostensibly based upon “an immutable, biological set of observable characteristics” by which “Britons categorized (...) racial ‘types’ with what they believed to be scientific measurements and empirical evidence”. (Streets 7)¹⁹ Here is what British Imperial historian Douglas A. Lorimer has established:

We need to know much more about British racial discourse after the 1870s, and especially from 1890 to 1914, when a new and, to our ears, familiar language of race relations became commonplace (...). This scientific construction of racial types had its origins in the eighteenth century, gained academic institutional credibility in the mid-nineteenth, and suffered a retreat from the 1930s through the 1950s (...).

Cultural studies that focus on origins and identities to construct a Victorian racist other run the risk of overlooking a more potent legacy of Victorian racial discourse for our own time. To understand the historical ancestry of the racism that persists in the twenty-first century, we need to go back to the late Victorians and Edwardians who coined our language of race relations. This language, originating in a discourse of assimilation, constructed forms of racial exclusion and subordination. (“From Victorian Values to White Virtues” 129)

19. See also McGeorge 65-66.

Contemporaneous British derision of Portugal's people and culture appears to be based on beliefs of its own racial preeminence.²⁰ And, Britons ranked the Portuguese lower than most Europeans, as Lord Palmerston declared: "The plain truth is that the Portuguese are of all European nations the lowest in the moral scale". (*Apud* Hyam 77) Imperial school curricula taught that "Portuguese ugliness and intellectual laziness were the result of an infusion of Negro blood". (McGeorge 67) *The Contemporary Review* article mentioned: "the Portuguese as a degenerate race," and inquired: "whether the Portuguese people is worthy of a higher destiny (...) or whether it is to settle down definitely into an insignificant nation of political schemers whose possession of large colonies is a drag on the world's progress". (Bell 48) In plain terms, Britons based their criticisms of the Portuguese on such descriptors as degenerate, indolent, dilatory, wicked, simple-minded, hard-headed, and dark-coloured.²¹ The importance of these perspectives lies in understanding how they have tainted interpretations of British military histories.

4. Chauvinisms Within the British Army and the British Caste System

Sociocultural prejudices, along with the "myth of the pre-eminent and primordial character of Anglo-Saxon England", (Heathorn, "For Home, Country, and Race" 101) instilled in aristocratic Britons, ideas of racial, intellectual, and cultural superiority over all others.²² British officers – who regarded themselves as a class within this elite class – were particularly imbued with opinions of preeminence.²³ Thus, the

20. "One does not have to read far in the [British] (...) literature of the mid to late nineteenth century to encounter not simply prejudicial opinions about racial groups but unabashed assertions of racial superiority. The challenge for the historian (...) is the selection of evidence from this sea of commentary and opinion". (Lorimer, "Nature, Racism, and the Late Victorian Science" 369)

21. V. Shaffer 47-48; Daly 50-54; and Alstyne 315-316.

22. See also Sheftall 13, 16, 24, 30, 36; Connelly, 106-107, 132-133, 150, 166-168; Harris 405-406, 409, 453-455; and Travers 6.

23. V. Fox 21-25, 138; Bowman and Connelly 2012, 33, 75-76; and Greenhalgh, "1918: The Push to Victory", 66.

prevailing history of the Portuguese Corps, and 2nd Division, must be evaluated from the context of how Victorian and Edwardian chauvinisms influenced British officers' perceptions of themselves compared to their allies.²⁴ Historian Heather Streets has observed:

In the years between 1880 and 1914 (...) British officers wrote a series of handbooks on the merits of the various 'races' (...) and authored articles in both professional military journals and more popular mediums about their relative worth. This period was also unique for the pretensions of martial race advocates to 'scientific' knowledge about racial proclivities, and for the widespread credence with which such theories were received in both military and civilian circles (...). Thus, the racial (...) conceptions undergirding martial race ideology were sustained by more than abstract beliefs or statistical data; rather, they were backed up by (...) 'proverbial tales' of heroism which simultaneously conveyed the crucial elements of martial race ideology and 'proved' the truth of its claims. (3)

The phrase, 'wogs begin at Calais' was not a witticism, but an invective.

Wellborn officers also held enlisted ranks in low regard, ostensibly because they occupied the lowest rungs in the British caste system.²⁵ They coined the phrase 'temporary gentlemen' to depict non-aristocrat company rank officers.²⁶ Many also held low opinions of Dominion officers and soldiers.²⁷ Jay Winter and Antoine Prost have argued that "Britain was in 1914 arguably the most class-conscious nation in Europe, if not in the world", (*apud* Keegan ix) and class-based divisions were widespread in the army.²⁸ Ideas of preeminence notwithstanding, the history of modern warfare demonstrates that company rank officers and regular soldiers have adapted

24. V. Connelly 21-23; Sheftall 13, 16, 24, 28-30, 36, 39; Streets 8, 150; Heathorn 11; Travers 37-40, 43; and Morrow Jr. 5.

25. V. Winter and Prost 93-94; Bowman and Connelly 9-10; Reynolds 105; Morrow Jr. 130-131; and Sheftall 33.

26. V. Sheffield, *The Chief* 179.

27. V. Sheftall 50.

28. V. Winter and Prost 93-94.

to conditions 'at the sharp end' of war and learned how to engage enemies without didactic instructions from higher headquarters.²⁹

5. The French Example

The French army always held the lion's share of the Western Front, inflicted and sustained much higher casualties than the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), and German commanders "believed that [British] commanders were less tactically adept than the French". (French, "Failures of Intelligence" 85) Many Anglocentric histories, however, do not present these data, because, at least in part, they emphasize what British commanders wrote about the French.³⁰ For example, erstwhile BEF commander John French, wrote of French generals: "au fond they are a low lot, and one always has to remember the class these French generals mostly come from". (*Apud* Greenhalgh 8) Haig believed: "the French, being 'a decadent race', were 'bound to fail in an offensive'". (*Apud* Greenhalgh, "1918: The Push to Victory" 66)

Distinguished military historian, Hew Strachan, has written of the inclination among Great War historians to "embrace the familiar and the similar, but to ignore the exceptional and the particular", (*The First World War* 193) a concept that provides a backdrop for contrasting British views of the French Army and the Portuguese Corps. Specifically, British culture's rank of races described the French as 'decadent' and 'declining,' but British officers respected France as a traditional enemy, and France possessed a large army.³¹ Conversely, they regarded their 'ancient' Portuguese allies – who only provided a corps for service on the Western Front – as lower in the race classification than the French, namely as 'indolent,' 'dilatatory,' and 'degenerate.' This outlook helps explain why the Anglophone narrative of the Portuguese Corps is so defamatory.

29. V. Griffith 22; and Heathorn 179, 181.

30. V. Tombs 10; and Griffith 11.

31. V. Tombs 3.

6. Anglophone Histories

There has been a lack of inquisitiveness among British historians (...) accepting Haig's self-serving perceptions as 'history' rather than re-examining the events about which Haig is making brief, subjective comments, or exploring the mindset of the man recording them. (Philpott 57)

The claims of military historians to have a corner on the real meaning or the 'truth' about the war and of the men like Haig who led in it, do not hold the field unchallenged. Nor, arguably, should they. (Heathorn, *Haig and Kitchner* 190)³²

Some historians and authors, who have described themselves as revisionists, have given Haig, other senior British commanders, and the BEF overall, high marks for competence and combat effectiveness. They emphasize the importance of 'great men,' none more so than Haig, and the centrality of the BEF's role on the Western Front, based on two concepts: the 'Learning Curve' and 'the Hundred Days.' They argue for the validity of, and often rely heavily upon, Haig's and other officers' reports, letters, and diaries, above all other sources.³³ Many would agree with Gary Sheffield, who holds that in *Michael*, the "Fifth Army certainly took a battering but it was not defeated," and who portrays *Michael* and *Georgette* as "British strategic victories, albeit defensive ones". (*The Chief* 135, 205) They also tend to endorse Haig and his generals' perspectives regarding their French and Portuguese allies, sometimes disparaging them and their roles.³⁴ For example, they imply that the French army helped the BEF win the war on the Western Front. Revisionists seem to take exception to the idea that the German army was better than the BEF.³⁵

32. See also Winter and Prost 73.

33. V. Sheffield and Bourne 2-3, 9.

34. V. Bourne 110; Robbins 189-222; Michael Senior 184-213.

35. V. Keegan ix; and Simkins 32.

Other historians and authors have used the term “Haig’s version” to describe “unconvincing” differences in the preponderance of evidence in evaluating Haig’s overall decisions and actions when compared to his reports, handwritten diary, and edited typescript diary.³⁶ Elizabeth Greenhalgh has noted that some authors have “been remarkably consistent in accepting Haig’s version of events”, (“1918: The Push to Victory” 67) despite the self-serving nature of his manuscript diary and many edits to his typescript diary. Jay Winter has written of “The Haig Problem,” a “fixation,” with Haig’s perceived legacy that “looms over much scholarship like a moored dirigible”. (174) Stephen Heathorn used the term “Haigiography” to describe this approach to writing Great War histories. (Haig and Kitchner 147-190) These have rejected using the “impressions formed by participants as the basis for our historical narratives,” and have argued that Haig’s typescript diary and portions of his manuscript diary are tainted data. (Philpott 58)³⁷ Moreover, in a counterpoint to histories that analyze the character, actions, conflicts, and writings of Haig and his generals, they have argued for more meaningful studies.³⁸

Authors of this school have described histories that emphasize Haig’s version, champion the BEF’s role, and rely disproportionately on tainted British sources, as Anglocentric, nationalist, parochial, and based on “interpretation.”³⁹ They have termed the ‘Learning Curve’ and ‘the Hundred Days’ concepts “simplistic,” “reductionist,” and “binary,” which contend, the BEF won, therefore it learned and the BEF learned, therefore it won.⁴⁰ They have pointed to the fact that all armies were learning, including the German army.⁴¹ Thus, the ‘Learning Curve’ suggests that the BEF

36. V. Harris 455.

37. See also Greenhalgh, “Parade Ground Soldiers 283–312; Greenhalgh, “A French Victory, 1918” 91; Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* 284; and Mead 332.

38. V. Travers 27.

39. V. Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 151; Krause 2-3; Winter and Prost 59-60, 75; Philpott 49; Travers xix; Griffith 6, 10, 15; and Stevenson 200-201.

40. V. Fox 8-9; Harris 416-417; Winter and Prost 59, 73, 75-76, 80; and Reynolds 396-397.

41. V. Beckett, *The Making of the First World War* 228; Beckett, *The Great War* 218, 226; Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War* 62, 180; and Boff 65-66.

learned faster and more thoroughly than the German army, rather conveniently, at the beginning of 'The Hundred Days,' since the German army had held the upper hand until then.⁴² Moreover, some have observed that the 'Learning Curve' implies that countless British soldiers needed to die so their commanding generals could learn how to fight the war.⁴³

Hewing closely to combat records, and other primary sources, historians of this outlook have evaluated the German Spring Offensive's tactical successes, along with its impacts on the BEF and British society.⁴⁴ They have concluded that *Michael* blindsided Haig and the British command, overpowered the Third Army, and by no later than 25 March, perhaps as early as the evening of 23 March, Fifth Army had been destroyed.⁴⁵ Moreover, they have shown that French generals sent 21 divisions to bolster the teetering British front by 26 March, and 47 divisions in all by April, of which 41 engaged in the fighting, sustaining at least 92,000 casualties.⁴⁶ Some have pointed to events that Haig and his subordinates spun in their own favor, as found in falsified combat records, and exposed multi-faceted cover-ups, orchestrated with the apparent goal of obscuring embarrassing facts.⁴⁷ My research on the Portuguese Corps provides evidence that bolsters their arguments.

42. V. Boff 5; Beckett, *The Great War* 218; and Winter, 76.

43. V. Stamp 175; Stevenson 199-200; Reynolds xxviii, 398.

44. V. Reynolds 54; Morrow Jr. 240; Tombs 3.

45. V. Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command* 298; Reynolds 397; Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker 151; Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War* 310; and Showalter 255-256.

46. V. Greenhalgh, "A French Victory, 1918" 90-91; and Zabecki 199.

47. V. Travers 6, 13-27, 219-262; Middlebrook 10-11, 332-334; French, "Failures of Intelligence" 69; Beckett, *A Guide to British Military History* 148; French, "Official but not History?" 60; Hammond 384; Samuels 263; Robbins 7-9; and Spiers 214.

7. Charles Arthur Ker

Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Arthur Ker commanded the British Mission to the Portuguese Corps, which had been agreed upon by both parties during 1916.⁴⁸ Originally a gunner, the limited information about him indicates that he held staff positions throughout the war. In summer 1917, Haig requested that the War Office promote Ker to brigadier-general:

This officer [Ker] has a very difficult position to fill and his responsibilities are considerable. Under the guise of advice he has to exercise, through the officers of the Mission, which is necessarily somewhat large, a very real control throughout the Portuguese Expeditionary Force.⁴⁹

Contrary to Haig's claim, Ker *did not* exercise control over the Portuguese Corps, nor was he authorized to do so. Nevertheless, Ker was promoted in January 1918.⁵⁰ Although Haig apparently held Ker in high regard, his subordinates in the British Mission did not. Captain Dartford wrote, "all seem to have a poor opinion of Ker, that [he is] out on the make [and] all for giving himself a good time."⁵¹

Ker wrote many negative reports about the Portuguese, based on subjective accusations of incompetence and wrongdoing that lacked concrete evidence. In fact, Ker originally wrote much of the derisive commentary on the Portuguese that Haig, First Army commander, General Henry Horne, and XI Corps commander, Lieutenant-General R.C.B. Haking, later repeated, including many of the accusations that Horne and Haking leveled against them in their after-action reports on the Lys battle.

48. V. TNA, Military Convention between the Government of Portugal, and the Governments of Great Britain and France, WO 158/709.

49. TNA, Douglas Haig to The Secretary, War Office, London, S.W., O.B./1864/B.M. WO 158/112 (September 1917).

50. V. TNA, British Mission War Diary, WO 95/5488 (7 January 1918).

51. IWM, Dartford Papers (November 10, 1917).

Moreover, the British Mission war diary – compared to all other relevant British combat records – is conspicuously neat, typed with deep strikes, and with each entry initialed in pencil in the right margin, ‘CAK’ (Charles Arthur Ker), suggesting Ker had a strong hand in writing the war diary and that it might have been edited and retyped. The diary routinely defines prisoners taken by Portuguese troops as deserters, whereas other British and Portuguese sources identify them as prisoners. It also tersely conveys most combat actions the Portuguese fought in, giving little credit to the soldiers who fought in them.⁵²

8. Contemporaneous Views of the Portuguese

Historians have shown that Haig scorned most non-Britons that he interacted with.⁵³ How then might the prevailing narrative on the Battle of the Lys, which he established, be tainted by his attitude toward non-Britons? Haig recorded in his diary a few patronizing remarks regarding his limited interactions with Portuguese officials and senior officers, and he handwrote three contemptuous remarks regarding their role in the Battle of the Lys. To two of these, he added slanderous remarks in his edited typescript diary.⁵⁴

British officers described Portuguese dignitaries and senior officers as ‘old’ or ‘little’ though birthdates and photographs reveal that they were no older or shorter than themselves. They referred to the Portuguese as the Goose, Geese, Ruddy Geese, Poor Geese, and Pork and Beans. They belittled Portuguese officers’ accents when they spoke French or English.⁵⁵ A British captain described a Portuguese

52. Portuguese troops defeated ten or more strong trench raids – involving at least sixty attackers, no less than four of which were executed by assault troops – many smaller ones, and countless patrols throughout from April 1917 to 8 April 1918, a higher-than-average frequency in combat action for the Western Front. V. Ellis 79.

53. V. Philpott 130; Greenhalgh, *Foch in Command* 259; Sheffield, *The Chief* 288; and Doughty 436.

54. V. TNA, Douglas Haig, Typescript Diary WO 256/29; National Library of Scotland, No. 97 – Haig’s diary of the Great War, parts 7-12, 1916-19 (April 9-11, 1918). My thanks to the National Library of Scotland, and the Earl Haig, who granted permission to reproduce excerpts of Douglas Haig’s manuscript diary.

55. V. Bond and Robbins 180.

colonel as a "hairy-eared baboon."⁵⁶ Were such labels and derisions mere soldiers' banter? Broad consideration of all else that British officers wrote and said suggests otherwise.

British officers believed that the Portuguese could not succeed at war without their tutelage. Lieutenant-General Haking, for example, claimed the Portuguese required "constant driving and supervision," and that British officers "who have trained these Portuguese troops in the front line, have instilled into them as much British energy as possible." British officers also contended that Portuguese officers demonstrated a lack of concern for the welfare of their men. For example, Haking claimed, "The men are not at all bad, and if only they had good commanders who were determined and knew their work (...) they have the making of a good fighting force."⁵⁷ British and Portuguese combat records do not corroborate Haking's opinions. Instead, they demonstrate that most Portuguese soldiers were hard men, who followed their officers' combat leadership willingly.

Prior to the Battle of the Lys, no official British report claims that a Portuguese combat unit failed to do its duty in action. Subjective allegations, however, are plentiful. For example, on 10 May 1917, with Portuguese units in the line attached to the 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division, Captain Richard Charles Gordon Dartford, a liaison officer, "went up to front line posts (...) at evening stand to & showed geese [Portuguese] the job of an officer on rounds, examining sentries etc."⁵⁸ Should we conclude by Dartford's quip that Portuguese officers did not know how to perform their duties, or that Dartford was more experienced leading men in combat than his Portuguese counterparts? Major-General Nathaniel Walter Barnardiston referred to "people as vain as the Portuguese."⁵⁹ Should we take the general's opinion as evidence of Portuguese military ineptitude? Brigadier-General Charles Arthur Ker wrote of the Portuguese, "The national

56. V. IWM, Dartford Papers (March 27, 1917).

57. V. TNA, Haking, WO 106/551 (August 13, 1917).

58. V. IWM, Dartford Papers (May 19, 1917).

59. V. TNA, Barnardiston, Lisbon, WO 106/551 (November 7, 1917).

characteristic – dilatoriness – is evident all the time. There are very few people who take hold and do things, there are many who talk about doing it.”⁶⁰ Does Ker’s remark convey anything more substantive than cultural bias? May we conclude that such remarks flowed from an ideology of racial superiority endemic in British society, and systemic within the officer corps, as expressed by officer Neville Lytton, 3rd Earl Lytton: “There are some races that are natural fighters, and certainly the Portuguese are not of these”. (159)

More frequent accusations that British officers leveled against the Portuguese can be grouped into two categories. One centers on logistical problems, which have plagued armies throughout history, and cultural differences, such as hygiene and foot care. Ker, for example, reported: “the clothing of the [Portuguese] rank and file is of poor material, and of a colour which shows the dirt.” In another example, he wrote: “8 men of the 28th Battalion (of more than 1,100 men) were absolutely without socks.” Regarding foot care, Ker noted: “In the case of at least one platoon the Portuguese refused to rub their feet with the grease provided.”⁶¹ Much commentary regarding hygiene made its way into post-war writings as well, and the Portuguese were not the only targets.⁶² Accusations of poor soldiery among the Portuguese, and other allies, on account of cleanliness, however, bear little, if any, direct correlation to devotion to duty, or courage in combat.⁶³

The second category entails accusations of indiscipline and apathy, despite contextual gaps in the alleged evidence, as well as unreported instances among the BEF and other belligerent armies. For example, British officers accused the Portuguese of indiscipline, including looting, yet British soldiers regularly looted from French and Belgian civilians.⁶⁴ Ker claimed high incidences of venereal disease among Portuguese troops, writing in February 1917, of 885 men who were

60. V. TNA, Report by Ker, The Portuguese Expeditionary Force. Appreciation of the Situation March 6th 1917, WO 95/5488.

61. V. TNA, WO 95/5488.

62. V. Horne 1993, 61; Graves 1998, 182; and Stevenson 2011, 257-258.

63. V. Greenhalgh, “Parade Ground Soldiers” 298.

64. V. Beckett, 296; and Greenhalgh, 214.

treated in hospitals “out of about 6,000 troops and of these (...) 117 were venereal”, implying that other cases may have been treated elsewhere.⁶⁵ Venereal diseases, however, had a high impact on the BEF throughout the war.⁶⁶ According to Historian Alexander Watson, the BEF experienced higher infection rates than the German army, 17.32 to 29.65 per 1000 for the British, and 15 to 17.7 per 1000 for the Germans. (39) A more recent work has shown that infection rates in the British army reached 34 per 1,000 men in 1918.⁶⁷ In that context, 117 infections out of 6,000 Portuguese soldiers, 19.5 per 1000 men, is unremarkable.

By September 1917 – after Portuguese had fought several actions – British officers began alleging lacks of Portuguese efficiency and offensive spirit. Improving Portuguese “efficiency” became a buzzword in British reports during this period. No report, however, identifies the nature of the alleged deficiencies. That the Portuguese allegedly lacked ‘offensive spirit’ sounds worse than lacking efficiency, but Haig had assigned the Portuguese Corps a defensive role.⁶⁸

The 29th Battalion repulsed a strong raid by German assault troops during the early hours of 24 August. After German gunners laid down what Captain Dartford described as a “hurricane barrage,” a company-strength force attacked the battalion’s front in three platoon-sized columns. The Portuguese sustained and inflicted casualties, yielded no prisoners, and took three Germans prisoner. A British colonel named North – who had no command authority over the Portuguese – accompanied by Captain Dartford, went to the forward lines after daybreak to gather details about the raid. Dartford recorded:

65. V. TNA, Report by Ker, The Portuguese Expeditionary Force. Appreciation of the Situation, March 6th 1917, WO 95/5488.

66. V. Ellis 153-154; Strachan 236; and Bowman and Connelly, 55.

67. V. Beckett, Bowman and Connelly 144.

68. V. TNA, Douglas Haig to the War Office, London, O.B. 1864/O., WO 106-547 (July 9, 1917): “In view of the necessity of economizing horses, the [Portuguese] Force should be organized and equipped on a defensive basis, and be allotted sufficient transport to meet the requirements of trench warfare only, at any rate for the present.” TNA, Charles Arthur Ker (October 20, 1917), WO 106/551: Written to a British general in Lisbon, probably Barnardiston: “The situation here is that the 1st Division has now been holding a divisional front, and a long one at that, for over four months, thereby relieving a British, Division for the offensive.”

For about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour, North tried to get into [the Portuguese battalion commander] some lessons in tactics & advice & to get out of him something of what really happened in the raid. He wouldn't listen & didn't know & made things up (...). In fact we tried hard to point out how wrong he had been in sending up his reserve [company].⁶⁹

North and Dartford's actions typify how British officers treated Portuguese officers, and Dartford's account offers insight into why the prevailing narrative cannot be taken at face value. In this example, a Portuguese battalion soundly defeated a well-coordinated raid by assault troops in company strength. North and Dartford, however, refused to credit the Portuguese commander for repelling the attack and instead lectured him.

In a letter to Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General R. D. Whigham, a British official in Lisbon – probably Major-General Barnardiston – expressed views of Portuguese inferiority:

In dealing with the Portuguese one has to remember their vanity and extreme sensitiveness with regard to anything affecting their sovereignty, if one may use the expression with regard to a Republic. This accounts for their jealousy in matters affecting in the least degree their control over their own men. We think it absurd, perhaps, that so small a country should stand to such an extent on its dignity, but it is so, just as a small man is nearly always very touchy.⁷⁰

Herein lies the crux of the prevailing narrative. The irony here is that aristocratic officers of a leading democratic nation cherished ideas endemic in non-free societies. Moreover, they judged the Portuguese by their culturally held ideas of racial superiority and wrote these opinions into history.

69. V. IWM, Dartford Papers (August 24, 1917).

70. TNA, addressed to General R. D. Whigham, Lisbon, WO 158/709 (December 11, 1916).

9. Summary of British Accusations

The prevailing narrative of the Portuguese Corps was told by “conservative, racist, and xenophobic” officers, who posited British superiority in all matters. (Morrow Jr. 5) These men regarded the Portuguese as racially inferior to themselves and thought that the Portuguese Corps should yield its sovereignty and do things the British way. Modern interpretations of the Portuguese Corps were written from these perspectives and an outlook that claims: A British officer said it or wrote it, therefore, what reason is there to question it?

Rather than accept what these ‘great men’ wrote at face value, why not ask: What did British officers who maligned the Portuguese want? The answer: to take command of the Portuguese troops. To achieve this, they needed to be rid of Portuguese officers. How did they go about realizing this objective? They ignored abundant evidence that did not support their case and employed demeaning rhetoric anchored on cultural chauvinisms that would bolster it.

Why did British officers denigrate the 2nd Division at the Battle of the Lys? In rapid succession, *Michael* and *Georgette* – which resulted in the tactical defeat of all four British armies on the Western Front – bewildered the BEF’s command structure and jolted the British government and public.⁷¹ Haig and his commanders had no one but themselves to blame for the tactical defeats of the Third and Fifth Armies at *Michael*. At *Georgette*, however, the surviving Portuguese stood nearby, and Haig used British societal ideas to scapegoat them to mitigate the humiliation of being defeated by German armies twice in three weeks. The Portuguese who fought in the battle – those who survived, and those lost on the Lys plain – do not deserve such dishonor.

In fairness, some Portuguese held biased perspectives of the British, for example, regarding Britons as seafaring merchants, ill-suited to land warfare. Portuguese views, however, were not based on “pretensions to racial or cultural superiority”, making them benign

71. V. Bond 139.

by comparison. (Tombs 784) Put differently, the Portuguese did not write a conjecture and myth laden narrative that accused British soldiers of indolence, degeneracy, and cowardice, and alleged that they were “only fit for digging”, to justify the 2nd Portuguese Division’s defeat at the Battle of the Lys. (Robbins 274)

10. Commentary Regarding Lusophone Narratives

Modern Lusophone interpretations of the Portuguese Corps began appearing in the post-Salazarian era, notably during the late 1990s. Historians and authors who argue sociocultural and sociopolitical theories have written most of these accounts, as occurred in France, and from nationalist perspectives, as occurred in Britain and France.⁷² These interpretations accept the overarching theme of the prevailing Anglophone narrative, albeit with significant alterations.⁷³

Such works overlook Portuguese and British combat records, privileging instead reports, letters, and diaries of Portuguese and British officers, many of whom, like Haig, wrote to blame others. Some have depicted three trade books published by Brigadier-General Frank Percy Crozier during the 1930s – in which he ridiculed the Portuguese in ways that conflict with British and Portuguese combat records – as primary sources and portray Crozier as an “impartial witness”. (Meneses 335) Some have cited as military evidence, the politically charged commentary of non-combat role officers, such as medic, Jamie Cortesão. They have also cited the letters of some junior officers (*milicianos*, reservists) and enlisted ranks who wrote negatively about serving in France, and who represented a fraction of the Portuguese Corps overall.⁷⁴

72. V. Greenhalgh, 1; Tombs 8; Philpott 63; and Winter and Prost 45, 80.

73. The most important alteration to Haig’s narrative – that the Portuguese ran from the battlefield, before German infantry attacked – contends that Portuguese officers and enlisted ranks fought poorly and surrendered quickly.

74. Such men tended to be conscripts from major cities and regional industrial centers who objected to having been drafted, held views opposed to the Portuguese Republic or the non-egalitarian system under which the Portuguese Corps and other Great War armed forces operated.

Most regular soldiers were illiterate peasant farmers who were accustomed to hard work, deprivation, a traditional expectation of military service, and knew little about why the war was being fought. Many accounts also lack comparative context to how the Great War was fought and the horrors that the soldiers of all nations experienced. Such narratives also tend to obscure broader considerations regarding combat. For example, whether uneducated and voiceless peasants, educated and voting citizens, or scions of nobility – perhaps better expressed, whether soldiers understood, agreed with, or believed in the *casus belli* – when ordered to attack a position bristling with machineguns and artillery, or to defend their position against an attack, one's social condition did not matter. Bullets and shrapnel know no social status.

A common theme in many works is that Portugal's internal instability should have precluded the government from sending the CEP to France. This seems obvious, yet it is beside the point. Once dispatched, its troops transitioned to a dynamic in which what they had to do was all that mattered, and they did it. The officers and men learned trench warfare tactics and deployed the 28,000-man 1st Division to the trenches, holding five percent of the BEF's total front, four and a half months after the first units had disembarked.

Some authors stress that the Corps was deeply divided along political and social lines. The CEP was divided, as were all Great War era armies, somewhat along political lines, and certainly along social lines. There is no evidence, however, that Portuguese career officers treated *milicianos* worse than their equivalent ranks counterparts in other Great War armies. The BEF was also divided along social class lines, probably more so than the French and German armies.⁷⁵

Some authors point to governmental interference in the corps' inner workings, imply that this was unique to Portugal, and indicative of deep political and ideological divisions. Did Portuguese politicians assert themselves in the Corps' affairs? Absolutely! However, the same was true of the BEF, the French, Russian, German, and Austrian

75. V. Strachan 186.

armies, etc.. Haig, for example, complained vehemently about Prime Minister Lloyd George meddling in the BEF's affairs.⁷⁶

Another assertion: after the Battle of the Lys, the corps' leaders and members admitted to problems they had encountered. This too, is decontextualized. Political leaders the world over have routinely blamed their political rivals or military commanders when the campaigns they ordered were not successful. Likewise, British generals of the Great War noted problems, valid or contrived, with the units they commanded, their superiors, or subordinates, when writing reports, making diary entries, or writing memoirs about unsuccessful campaigns and defeats.⁷⁷ Additionally, some members of the same organizations conveyed their opinions on problems that existed, again, valid or contrived, typically based on ideology (secular or religious), political persuasion, or cultural orientation. Like the BEF, and the French and German armies, the Portuguese Corps experienced difficulties, which Portuguese social histories tend to overstate.

If the themes surveyed here are taken at face value, the sources unchallenged, and the perspectives from which they originate accepted, it is impossible to come away with any impression other than that the Portuguese troops were downtrodden, perpetually dejected, inclined to mutiny, incapable of fighting, and prone to surrender. British and Portuguese combat records establish otherwise. Portuguese troops comported themselves no differently than their confrères in other Great War armies. They followed orders and held their own in many combat actions. Thus, the topics examined here offer examples of contextual voids common to military histories written from social perspectives, particularly when myths, politically charged perspectives, and the viewpoints of a few, construed to represent the outlook of many, are used as evidence and combat records are neglected.

76. V. Greenhalgh, 181-183.

77. V. Winter and Prost 79; Lloyd 181-183, 193-196; Hammond 438-439; Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele* xviii, 105, 191; Sheffield, *Altered Memories* 271; and French, "Failures of Intelligence" 70.

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