



Building The Old Contemptibles: British Military Transformation And Tactical Development From The Boer War To The Great War, 1899-1914

Major Andrew J. Risio

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Impressed with the tactical lessons of the Boer War, the British Army reformed its doctrine and training from 1899 to 1914, deploying a combat ready force, the “Old Contemptibles” of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1914. Because of these changes, the BEF played a crucial role in Belgium and France in 1914. The lessons of the Boer War guided the British Army and its interwar reforms. The doctrine and training developed from 1902-1914 was a significant improvement over the pre-Boer War British colonial warfare tactics. With Haldane’s organizational reforms and Robert’s new doctrine, the British Army built the Old Contemptibles of the BEF. The battles of 1914 showed the BEF was the equal of any European contemporary in quality of its tactics and doctrine. The comparison of the BEF to the other combatants in 1914 does not stand in stark contrast. The BEF performed well but no better or worse than comparable German or French units did. What does stand in stark contrast is the BEF in 1914 when compared with the expedition to South Africa in 1899. The years of reform between these two expeditions were truly a crucible that built the Old Contemptibles.

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