The 'technology of power': Record keeping and British labour, 1917-18

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2014-04-28 17:00:05

From debates over the extent to which the tank or the aeroplane contributed to the Allied victory, to the introduction of chemical warfare and the prominence of high-explosive artillery shells, the role of technology in the conduct of the First World War has been a significant aspect of the conflict's historiography. Indeed, for many authors the sheer ubiquity of machines of destruction on both sides of the line demonstrate the inherent 'modernity' of the conflict, and offer ample evidence of the manner in which industrialization underpinned the fighting.

However, industrialization wasn't simply restricted to the churning out of 'instruments of death', and the role of technology was by no means limited to that of increasing the amount of firepower available to the troops. Less well known, but equally important to the functionality and effectiveness of the armies of the First World War were a series of inventions and innovations which have passed into general use and - for many decades in fact - have appeared as mundane 'tools' for those in the office. The role of telecommunications in the First World War is currently the focus of a collaborative project between the University of Leeds and the Museum of the History of Science called *Innovating in Combat*, however the technology which I am concerned with in this post is an even more mundane item of office equipment than even the humble telephone. Yet, in the context of the labour supply, it was to prove the foundation of an entirely new system of administration and one which, although it would be hyperbole to suggest it was a 'war winner', played a key role in improving the efficiency of the British war effort in the final two years of the conflict.

The Battle of the Somme illustrated to the BEF's senior commanders the importance of manual labour - frequently referred to as 'unskilled' work - to the conduct of operations on the Western Front. Before an offensive could take place many miles of roads were required to be built, railway lines laid, ammunition dumps constructed, water pipes buried alongside numerous other labour-intensive processes. Prior to the Somme, such tasks devolved in the main upon infantry soldiers at 'rest'; an inefficient use of their time (as it reduced the available time for training the volunteers to become better fighting soldiers and left them physically exhausted) and, with the soldiers largely disinterested in the tasks, it led to poor quality work which frequently required substantial improvement at a later date. The Labour Corps, established in January 1917 to coordinate the provision and allocation of unskilled labour across the Western Front, was set up to ensure that the battles of 1917 and beyond would not require the use of infantry on 'non-combatant' duties in such vast numbers again.

By the Armistice, the Labour Corps consisted of some 389,000 men. The numbers, however, do not tell the whole story. Not only did the Corps contain British soldiers too old or infirm for front line duties, but dominion troops, captured Germans and, in increasing numbers as the scale of the war continued to grow, from places as far afield as China, India, Egypt and even Fiji. Each had their own national characteristics - stereotypically recorded in contemporary accounts - their own languages and customs, each requiring different types of

supervision to ensure the most effective use of the manpower. The men with the responsibility for discharging that duty were invariably drawn from the same locations, but from a wide range of professions. The Indian Labour Corps, for example, arrived in France with officers drawn from the Indian Army, the Indian civil service, from government offices and even from among the plantations. Some had significant military experience, some had none at all. Others even had little to no experience of commanding bodies of men.

Ascertaining what such men would be capable of and therefore ensuring the right combination of officers and men involved the creation of a 'database' at the Labour Corps' HQ, consisting of a card index generated from recording the particulars of every officer despatched for duty with the Corps. Upon arrival, officers were asked to fill in a form stating their education, their possession of any relevant civil or military qualifications, and their knowledge of any foreign languages. In addition, an interview was conducted with the officers in which they could make personal requests for service within particular units, for example if a close friend or relative was employed by a specific unit, or in order to gain experience in work that could be used as the foundation for a post-war career.

This information - all of which was recorded on standardized forms to simplify the process of cataloguing (as administrators would know exactly where to look on each form for the required information) - was then added to a card index. The cards were constantly updated as new arrivals entered the labour pool and those wounded or selected for other duties were removed. The system gave the Corps' directors an accurate, efficient, centralized record of the available manpower and resources, which could be cross-indexed to allow for the identification of suitable officers for every vacancy within the Corps with arose. The senior officers of the Labour Corps did not have to rely upon memory - or a lengthy 'recruitment' process - to ensure the most suitable pairing of officer to unit, instead the card index allowed for the selection of officers based upon a comprehensive overview of the available talent.

The result was a more intelligent, systematic allocation of staff within the Labour Directorate over the second half of the war, the importance of which was emphasized in the post-war report of the Controller of Labour, Brigadier-General Edmund Wace:

> "The skill of a Labour unit, especially Coloured or PoW Units, depends largely on the skill of its officers and NCOs. The Labour Directorate, by a careful compilation of the technical qualifications of labour officers, were able to do much to give to Labour Companies officers with the best qualifications".

(The National Archives, WO 107/37 Report on the Work of Labour with the BEF during the War, p. 7)

And underpinning the whole process' The humble, ubiquitous (until the advent of computerized databases) card index.

Marketed as a tool for maintaining order within large-scale enterprises, entered into British business in the late nineteenth century having originally been developed (as an offshoot of the library cataloguing systems) as part of the ongoing movement towards 'systematic management'. The BEF during the First World War, therefore, was not just at the forefront when it came to designing and manufacturing new weapons of war. It was also taking advantage of the most modern, contemporary solutions from the industrial world to coordinate, monitor

and keep track on the work and whereabouts of the multitude of officers required to ensure the most efficient use of arguably some of its most adaptable and vital resources: the men and women who provided the foundations for the rest of the army.

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