

THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

A collection of perspectives

Edited by
Gail Romano and Kingsley Baird



BULLETIN OF THE AUCKLAND MUSEUM

VOLUME 21 | 2020

Mud, Blood and Not So Much Poppycok: ‘Myth’ Formation and the British Army in Late 1917

Alex Mayhew London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

This article explores the origins of the ‘myths’ that have come to dominate popular memory of the First World War in Britain. Perceptions of the conflict as a bloody exercise in futility, orchestrated by inept generals, and fought in fields of mud are undoubtedly unrepresentative. Yet, far from pure fiction, such impressions can be historicised. Drawing on wider research into soldiers’ perception of crisis during 1914–1918, this piece argues that the kernel of many of these ‘myths’ can be found in the lived experience of the western front in 1917.

Keywords

Battle of Passchendaele; First World War; historical memory; historical myths; morale; 20th century Britain

The ‘myths’ of the Great War have been questioned and deconstructed by historians, yet, despite their efforts, they have had a limited impact on the popular memory of 1914–18 in Britain.¹ The Battle of the Somme’s centennial remembrance ceremony, which took place on 1 July 2016, provides an illustrative case study of how historical memory can be distorted and repurposed, used, and misinterpreted. Moving though it was, the event failed to capture the nuances of recent historical scholarship. Arriving at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site at Thiepval, France, attendees shuffled into the seating area that lay in the shadow of Sir Edwin Lutyens’ towering memorial to the ‘Missing of the Somme’.² Justin Welby, the

Archbishop of Canterbury, was among the speakers paying homage to the lost servicemen. ‘On this day,’ he declared, ‘we remember all those caught up by the Battle of the Somme; those who faced the terrible waste and devastation, those who fought against all the odds, who endured the clinging mud and squalor of the trenches’.³ The failure of more balanced scholarship to moderate such impressions has caused a fair amount of soul searching, not to mention frustration, among historians. Indeed, it has generated new research evaluating ‘the extent to which the range of commemorative activities undertaken since 2014 has engaged with, challenged, or changed this “myth”’.⁴ Gordon Corrigan certainly would not be pleased.

1 See, especially, H. Jones, ‘As the Centenary Approaches: The Regeneration of First World War Historiography’, *The Historical Journal* 56 Issue 3 (Sept. 2013): 857–878, and H. McCartney, ‘The First World War Soldier and his Contemporary Image in Britain’, *International Affairs* 90, no. 2 (2014): 299–315.

2 For the Thiepval Memorial see, for example, G. Stamp, *The Memorial to the Missing of the Somme* (London: Profile Books, 2006, 2007) or J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 2003), 105–108. For discussions of centenary activities see, for example, P. Cornish, ‘Imperial War Museums and the Centenary of the First World War’, *Twentieth Century British History* 27 Issue 4 (Dec. 2016): 513–517 or J. Kidd and J. Sayer, ‘Unthinking Remembrance? Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red and the Significance of Centenaries’, *Cultural Trends* 27, Issue 2: First World War Commemorations (2018): 68–82.

3 ‘Battle of the Somme: Royals at the Somme Commemoration’, BBC News Online, accessed 28 October 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-36674451>.

4 ‘Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning and Legacies for the Future’ Research Network, accessed 16 October 2019, <http://reflections1418.exeter.ac.uk/>.

For related research see C. Pennell, ‘Taught to Remember? British Youth and First World War Centenary Battlefield Tours’, *Cultural Trends* 27, Issue 2: First World War Commemorations (2018): 83–98.

His monograph *Mud, Blood and Poppycock* was a wholesale attack on these inaccurate ‘myths’ about the conflict. ‘The popular view of the Great War’, he wrote, ‘is of a useless slaughter of hundreds of thousands of patriotic volunteers, flung against barbed wire and machine guns by stupid generals who never went anywhere near the front line’.⁵

Historians should not simply dismiss these impressions of the First World War. It is more useful to ask *where* these common tropes emerged from, and *why* it is that they have become so central to public interpretations of 1914–18. Other scholars have made attempts to tackle these questions. Adrian Gregory, for instance, has examined the ways in which the commemoration ceremonies came to privilege the grieving, rather than the veterans, and became, at least to old soldiers, a symbol of the disconnect between the future they hoped for while at war and the reality of peace.⁶ Dan Todman’s compelling analysis of the historical memory of the war demonstrates how ‘myths’ surrounding ‘mud’, ‘death’, ‘donkeys’, ‘futility’, and ‘poets’ have been filtered by generational and historical context over the course of the 20th century.⁷ Todman, however, shows that ‘the modern myth of the war has its origins in events and emotions at the time’.⁸ Perhaps, then, Jay Winter’s conceptualisation of ‘palimpsests’ helps to explain the formation of these stereotypes. Winter defines the ‘word “palimpsest” as something that is reused or altered but still bears visible traces of its earlier form’.⁹ With this concept in mind, this article argues that many of these ‘myths’ are drawn from a set of experiences that befell British soldiers on the western front in 1917.¹⁰ To do so, it will explore some of the key characteristics of this year, drawing on the findings of a wider research project on morale, which

used the personal memoirs of men and particular units, as well as soldiers’ newspapers and ego-documents (such as letters and diaries) written at the time.

First, though, it is important to consider exactly what a ‘myth’ is.¹¹ Historians, with some notable exceptions, often deploy the term as the antonym of ‘truth’ and consequently something to be avoided or combated. Dan Todman, however, uses ‘myth’ as a shorthand for ‘history you can remember’. In his work a myth describes ‘a belief about the past held by an individual but common to a social group’, be it a nation, town, or family. These myths ‘simplify, reducing complex events of the past to an easily understood set of symbols’ that ‘ease communication’.¹² Other disciplines see myths as a category of analysis, a key feature of human society, and something to be studied not dismissed. They might well be misrepresentations, in part imaginary or exaggerated; but they are also commonplace. They vary by religion and nation, and their origins are often clouded by the passage of time. Nonetheless, Todman makes it clear that each of Britain’s historical myths has a purpose or function: ‘mud’, for example, is ‘used to evoke a broader myth of the horror of the First World War’.¹³ Those who espouse a functionalist explanation of myths would agree and argue that they provide a frame for social action or a worldview. Paul Radin suggested that myths direct popular perception: ‘a myth is always explanatory. The explanatory theme often is so completely dominant that everything else becomes subordinated to it’.¹⁴ In contrast, structuralists suggest that a myth provides meaning and purpose to fragmented and often conflicting cultural attitudes and perceptions.¹⁵ The truth, as William G. Doty has argued, is that myths are ‘complex’. They can ‘be attempts to explain, others may satisfy human needs, symbolize something, consist of binary

- 5 G. Corrigan, *Mud, Blood and Poppycock* (London: Orion Publishing, 2003, 2004) 1–2. For the most balanced and successful attempt to ‘pick’ at these myths see G. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2001). For the development of myths during the war itself see, especially, E. Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 2009), 115–123.
- 6 A. Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1948* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994). Also J. Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- 7 D. Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005, 2011). See also, B. Ziino (ed.), *Remembering the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); P. Grant, *National Myth and the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); G. Plain, ed., *Scotland and the First World War: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Bannockburn* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2016).
- 8 Todman, *The Great War*, 221.
- 9 J. Winter, ‘Palimpsests’, in I. Sengupta, ed., *Memory, History and Colonialism* (London: German Historical Institute, 2009), 167.
- 10 For a broader history of 1917 as a year of failure see D. Stevenson, *1917: War, Peace & Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 11 Leed, *No Man’s Land*, 118–121.
- 12 Todman, *The Great War*, xiii.
- 13 *Ibid.* 2.
- 14 P. Radin, ‘The Basic Myth of the North American Indians’ in *Eranos-Jahrbuch: Der Mensch und die Mythische Welt* (Winterthur: Rhein-Verlag Zurich, 1950), 370.
- 15 C. Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Structural Study of Myth’ in T. Sebeok, ed., *Myth: A Symposium*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974).

structures, or communicate hidden messages'.¹⁶ First World War myths are not falsehoods. They stem from the worst of soldiers' shared experiences, particularly in 1917. The memories of this terrible year were something that unified those who survived it. So vivid and raw were these recollections that, subsequently, they were overused, overemphasised, or misapplied and came to characterise the war as a whole.

1917 was, for a variety of reasons, the most disappointing year from the perspective of the men serving in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The orchestration of the third battle of Ypres (Third Ypres) has rightly been criticised by historians, yet a number of scholars have drawn more nuanced conclusions. British assault tactics had improved and, arguably, German morale took a 'battering'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, individual actors lack such holistic perspectives; it is lived experience, what one sees and what one is told, that informs perceptions. Many British soldiers felt that there was little to merit any optimism.¹⁸ The first evidence of ebbing morale seems to have emerged in August 1917. Captain M. Hardie, the censor at Third (III) Army, reported that 'for the first time there is a frequent suggestion that the war cannot be won by military effort, but must end by political compromise'.¹⁹ Illustratively, Lieutenant J.H. Johnson described Passchendaele as a 'mechanical, impersonal slaughter' and began to yearn for a life 'after the war'.²⁰ The extent to which the situation had improved by the end of the year is debatable.²¹ David Stevenson and David Englander suggest that British morale remained at low ebb even in March 1918, an argument that has been supported by recent scholarship.²² Dejection became pervasive during the summer and

(while spirits lifted a little) was still evident towards the end of the year. Importantly, it contained all of the traces of the myths that have since come to dominate British public perception. This was, in part, the product of disappointment. Despite the undoubted horrors of the Somme campaign the preceding year, soldiers ended 1916 confident that they were treading a path towards victory.²³ In fact, the year began, despite troubling news from Russia, with a series of events that seemed to confirm this. There were still small tactical successes along the old Somme front, while the Battle of Arras, particularly at Vimy Ridge, offered the impression that new tactics *could* reap huge rewards. More significantly still, the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg line in March, a sound move on their part, indicated to the average British soldier an unmistakable change in the tone of the war: men sensed that the western front was becoming mobile, and infantrymen advanced alongside cavalry for the first time in the experience of many of them.²⁴ While careful not to reflect over-optimism, unit histories written shortly after the war point to a real sense of change.²⁵ What followed—Passchendaele, Cambrai, Russia's armistice with Germany, the crisis in Italy, not to mention the BEF's shift to a *defensive* strategy for 1918—meant that these hopes were quickly quashed and many men ended the year with little sense of forward momentum.

They were, one might say, stuck in the mud. The morass at Passchendaele was, alongside the rain, a defining feature of 1917. The weather had provided a source of great frustration and (particularly in winter) discomfort throughout the war; but in the conflict's penultimate year, it became a serious impediment to victory and peace. Santanu Das has described the

-
- 16 W.G. Doty, 'What is a Myth? Nomological, Topological, and Taxonomic Explorations', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 86, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2003): 391.
 - 17 Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, especially 180, 183–184. Also N. Lloyd, *Passchendaele: A New History* (London: Penguin, 2017).
 - 18 See, especially, A. Mayhew, 'Hoping for Victorious Peace: Morale and the Future on the Western Front' in L. Halewood, A. Luptak and H. Smyth, *War Time: First World War Perspectives on Temporality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).
 - 19 IWM 84/46/1: Capt. M. Hardie, 'Report on III Army Morale': p 1.
 - 20 IWM 77/33/1: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 30 December 1917 and 6 January 1918.
 - 21 A. Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies* (Cambridge, 2008), 154–155, 184.
 - 22 D. Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (London: Penguin, 2014), 267–268; D. Englander, 'Discipline and Morale in the British Army, 1917–1918', in J. Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 141; A. Mayhew, 'Making Sense of the Western Front: English Infantrymen's Morale and Perception of Crisis during the First World War', Unpublished PhD Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science (2018).
 - 23 Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, 186. Also W. Philpott, *Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme* (London: Abacus, 2010), 403, 410–411.
 - 24 Anon., *History of 1/6th The Royal Warwickshire Regiment* (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1922), 37–38.
 - 25 H.T. Chidgey, *Black Square Memories: An Account of the 2/8th Battalion the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1924), 167, 175; F.W. Ward, *The 23rd (Service) Battalion Royal Fusiliers (First Sportsman's): A Record of its Services in the Great War, 1914–1919* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1920), 57–58.

suffering, physical and psychological, engendered by these 'slimescapes' on the western front.²⁶ The 'popular myth' of mud as an inescapable, implacable, and unwavering enemy can be found in the lived experience of mid to late 1917.²⁷ As one senior veteran recalled, it was mud, not battle, that imposed the most 'misery and hardship on the soldier'.²⁸ Major General V.G. Toft recalled that Passchendaele had been 'a muddy and bloody shambles' (in that order).²⁹ The natural world became debilitating during these months. The summer months were unseasonably wet. During the height of the third battle of Ypres the rain was incessant; in July there was 158.2 mm and a further 162.3 mm fell in August.³⁰ In late August, Major G.H. Greenwell was forced to conclude that his had been the 'worst experience of modern warfare that I have yet struck'.³¹ Such heavy rainfall on a battlefield that had already been churned and scarred by shellfire and trench digging left men dejected and pessimistic. P.R. Hall, for example, saw the 'torrents of rain' as an important part of Third Ypres' failure. He and many others were convinced that they 'were beaten by the weather of that terrible winter'.³²

The mud and rainfall became a partner to death. It was not uncommon for men to become stuck in the quagmire around Ypres. In fact, many men were terrified of drowning (and some, probably erroneously, believed that this caused more danger than the German shells and bullets). H.E. Baker recalled his first conversations with the 'few men' that remained in 9th Battalion Devonshire Regiment. 'After the terrible Ypres 3 battle' they were little interested in discussing the Germans. However, they 'had a lot to say about the appalling conditions under which they had to fight'. They described how 'many more deaths' had been caused by men drowning in the mud than by enemy action.³³ Heavy losses among many units left some men struggling to adjust to the deaths of comrades and friends. Second Lieutenant

Sydney Frankenburg, for instance, felt that the whole of his service was now a 'rotten' experience.³⁴ In one letter home the death of two flies became a tragic metaphor for those of his friends that had been 'smashed up'.³⁵

Of course, other campaigns, in many theatres, witnessed heavy casualties. However, uniquely (in the British case) the physical environment around Ypres came to symbolise death. Some men could look on the old Somme battlefields, scarred and battered as they were, as evidence of hard-earned successes. Yet, the 1917 battlefields held no such connotations: G.A. Stevens preferred St. Quentin to 'beastly old Flanders which one hates now'.³⁶ So visceral were some men's reaction that for some the smell of 'shit' was 'the smell of Passchendaele, [and] of the [Ypres] Salient'.³⁷

All of this infused military manoeuvres with an aura of futility. While this had undoubtedly been felt before, it had been limited to particular occasions and contexts. By August 1917, it had spread throughout the army. Visions of victorious peace underpinned men's morale, but the III Army censor reported that 'for the first time there is a frequent suggestion that the war cannot be won by military effort, but must end by political compromise'.³⁸ Captain G.K. Rose recalled that: 'from the strategical aspect the operations showed by their conclusion that the error had been made of nibbling with weak forces at objectives which could only have been captured and secured by strong. Moreover, the result suggested that the objectives had been made on this occasion for the attack rather than the attack for the objectives'.³⁹ Although published in 1920, an undertone of bitterness is still apparent in Rose's comments. As the summer drew to an end, the expectation of another winter in the trenches was intensified by the failure of a military turning point to materialise. The end of Third Ypres was compounded by pacifist sentiments broadcast from the home front.⁴⁰ The soldiers, the III Army censor reported,

26 S. Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35–72. For men's relationship with the landscape more generally, see R.J. Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front: Materiality during the Great War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012) and S. Daly, M. Salvante, and V. Wilcox (eds.), *Landscapes of the First World War* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

27 'More Mud Than Glory', *The B.E.F. Times*, 2, no. 1 (15 August 1917): 12.

28 Lt. Gen. E.L.M. Burns in C.E. Wood, *Mud: A Military History* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006, 2007), 77.

29 IWM 67/7/1: Maj. Gen. V.G. Tofts, Memoir: p 11.

30 Mayhew, 'Making Sense of the Western Front', 223–226.

31 LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0664: Maj. G.H. Greenwell, Letter 29 August 1917.

32 IWM 87/55/1: P.R. Hall, Memoir: p 19.

33 IWM 12/31/1: H.E. Baker, Memoir, Part 6: 4.

34 LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0583: 2nd Lt. Sydney Frankenburg, Letter 25 December 1917.

35 *Ibid.* Letter 11 January 1918.

36 IWM 06/5/2: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 4 March 1918.

37 P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, 2000), 331.

38 IWM 84/46/1: Capt. M. Hardie, 'Report on III Army Morale, August 1917': 1.

39 Capt. G. K. Rose, *The Story of the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), 125.

40 IWM 84/46/1: Capt. M. Hardie, 'Report on III Army Morale/Peace Sentiment, August-October 1917': 1.

felt that 'they were drifting into an endless destruction and sacrifice' and 'want[ed] to be shown a way out'.⁴¹ Hardie's final comments in October 1917 pointed to 'the immense value of successful advances'.⁴² The early accomplishments at the Battle of Cambrai briefly rekindled such hope, but the enemy counteroffensive made it clear this avenue for rehabilitation did not exist. This coalesced with bad news from other places and fronts throughout this year: Germany's successes, the French mutinies, the Italian collapse at Caporetto, and Russia's eventual withdrawal from the war, together painted a bleak strategic picture. It is unsurprising, then, that Sydney Frankenburg reported, in December 1917, that censoring letters had 'saddened' him.⁴³ G.A. Stevens, previously a very conscientious soldier, was 'getting awfully fed up with this jolly old war', while others simply felt they had 'come to the end of . . . [their] tether'.⁴⁴ Revealingly, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment's magazine described a metaphorical football game for its soldier-readers: they and the opposition (the 'enemy') were 'unable to pass the halfway line'. The Warwickshires, it concluded, had 'nobly upheld their record of this war, [but] a draw was the verdict'.⁴⁵ While defeat was unimaginable, it was at this stage that men began to believe the war was unwinnable.

Pessimistic about victory, men began to question the High Command's orchestration of the war. Not only this, but it is during this period that combatants began to complain more bitterly about the Home Front: particularly politicians, shirkers, and strikers. Christmas and New Year 1917–18 saw a dwindling belief that 'they [sic]' were capable of ending the war.⁴⁶ Tellingly, Captain A.J. Lord expressed his hopes that the General Staff 'were not feeling too hostile' and would not 'devise' another offensive while the weather was so poor.⁴⁷ Dwelling on the year's fighting, Lieutenant J.H. Johnson pondered, with a deep sense of irony, whether

'the crisis and danger become greater if we are "winning the war"?'⁴⁸ The year's campaigns had drawn the men through multiple horrors and they sensed that the sacrifice had been for very little. Commanders became not only the focus of bitter resentment because of their comparative comfort but became regarded as the source of injustices and hardships. While its importance should not be overly emphasised, it is no surprise that the Étaples 'incidents', or mutiny, took place in September of this year.⁴⁹ Scepticism and a desire to escape had become more prominent by 1917, emotions that easily morphed into bitterness and regret. Though unrepresentative, it is telling that one military chaplain, Reverend M.A. Bere, concluded that 'I don't think we deserve to' win the war.⁵⁰ Of course, most men stoically continued to endure and, importantly, 1918 finally brought them victory and a campaign that witnessed a faltering return to semi-open warfare.

It was, however, the atmosphere of late 1917, not the stoic determination that characterised much of 1916, nor the unadulterated relief or renewed sense of purpose many men felt in 1918, that came to dominate Britain's collective memory of the Great War. The reasons for this can generally be found in the inter-war world, something beyond the scope of this short essay. The events of 1917 on the western front do, though, play an important role. They coalesced to form a common narrative bound together by negative emotions. Memory, and historical memory in particular, is selective. So, as a brighter post-war world failed to emerge from the conflict's embers, it is understandable that veterans (and civilians) fell back on a set of memories of 1914–1918 that seemed most appropriate: those that focused on bitterness and futility. Even the men who had served in earlier and more successful (or at least less painful) years could not help but have their appreciation of the war transformed by 1917. What is more, the BEF of late

41 *Ibid.*, 2.

42 *Ibid.*

43 LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0583: 2nd Lt. Sydney Frankenburg, Letter 10 December 1917.

44 IWM 06/5/2: Brigadier G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 10 December 1917; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0273: Capt. C. Carrington, Diary 9 October 1917.

45 'The Dear Old Regiment at Play: From Horton to Hartley – A tale of travel', *The Dear Old Regiment*, (1 December 1917), 3.

46 IWM 07/02/1: S.B. Smith, Letter 29 October 1917.

47 IWM 09/34/1: Capt. A.J. Lord, Letter 29 December 1917.

48 IWM 77/33/1: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 30 December 1917 and 6 January 1918.

49 D. Gill, and G. Dallas, 'Mutiny and Etaples Base in 1917', *Past & Present* 69 (Nov., 1975): 88–112. Étaples was one of the BEF's major bases and training centres during the Great War. The arrest of a New Zealand serviceman, followed subsequently by the shooting of a corporal of the Gordon Highlanders (as well a French woman) by the military police, sparked several days' unrest in the training camp, colloquially known as the 'Bull Ring'. While this was undeniably an event of great significance, it was also a relatively limited affair, ignited by perceived injustices in the camp rather than the war *per se*, and ultimately shunned by a large number of the British troops present. Despite a spree of court martials, only one man, Corporal Jesse Robert Short (a Welshman in the Northumberland Fusiliers), was put to death for 'Attempted Mutiny'.

50 IWM 66/96/1: Reverend M.A. Bere, Diary 7 December 1917: 134.

1917 was remarkably young; populated by conscripts, many battalions' modal age was as low as 19.⁵¹ While memory is corrupted by time, it might be that these traumatic months were *the* formative experience of their young lives. This was also the year that the BEF was at its largest, with more than two million men serving in Belgium and France in August. Illustratively, Harry Patch—the last surviving war veteran of the western front in the United Kingdom—was only 19 when he crossed The Channel. Passchendaele *was* his First World War experience: having arrived in June, he was severely injured in September, and was still convalescing at the time of the Armistice.⁵² It was men such as Patch that

survived longest and were able to continue to tell their tales deep into the 20th century.

In summary, the seeds of Britain's First World War myths can be found in the common experience of 1917. The reasons that these took root are undoubtedly found in the years and decades after 1918. Yet the visceral memories of this year were the source and substance of these 'myths'. There are certainly glimpses of these myths in other campaigns, but the horrors and stresses, disappointments and dejection, that were so pervasive during this time provided an easy focal point as disenchantment came to dominate popular perceptions of the Great War in the years after it ended.⁵³

Alex Mayhew is an interdisciplinary historian and LSE Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he teaches social sciences. He completed his PhD at the LSE under the supervision of professors Heather Jones and David Stevenson. This project was awarded a Gerda Henkel scholarship by the Historial de la Grande Guerre, France, in 2017. His research focuses on the military and cultural history of the First World War, specifically the identity and morale of English infantrymen. He has published work exploring how 'hope' was a key psychological dimension of morale, as well as a recent *War in History* article discussing the use of postcards in the maintenance of relationships between soldiers and civilians. His most recent writing investigates the nature of English patriotism during the Great War. A.C.Mayhew@lse.ac.uk

51 Mayhew, 'Making Sense of the Western Front', 223.

52 H. Patch and R. van Emden, *The Last Fighting Tommy: The Life of Harry Patch, Last Veteran of the Trenches 1898–2009* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

53 A number of the arguments found in this essay will be expanded upon in a monograph the author is currently preparing. This is provisionally titled *Making Sense of the Great War: Englishness, Morale, and Perceptions of Crisis on the Western Front, 1914–1918*.