

Toughening Up: Bullying in the British Army during the First World War

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Abstract

Hussar Trooper John Flood, Private C. Niblett and Private Jamie Benjafield are three British soldiers who had similar bullying experiences during their service in the British Army. All three men were antagonised by a fellow serviceman, were punished by the institution they served and felt aggrieved at their treatment. The only particular difference between them is that they served separately between a 150-year span from the 1860s through 2017. Bullying is a complicated and contentious issue that is as important today as it was a century ago. Within the military, the act of bullying demands particular attention as coercive and humiliating tactics, common within cases of bullying, have been actively employed by and within the ranks of the British Military for various reasons ranging from training and indoctrination to hazing and targeted abuse. Using the experiences of the three men and many other accounts, this article considers in detail the role of bullying within the experience and transformation of British servicemen during World War I by examining core areas where this behaviour was evident. This research interweaves the commonly identified aspects of bullying behaviour with enthusiastic civilian encouragement for recruitment, overzealous training regimes, enforced military discipline and barrack-room horseplay that were all visible during World War I. This focus remains central to the argument as the article concludes how British men were targeted, abused and humiliated by their officers, their compatriots and the public as part and parcel of the military experience between 1914–1918.

Keywords: soldiers, bullying, World War II, army, social interaction, masculinity, suicide, abuse, indoctrinated behaviour, humiliation.

He would scream in your face, saying abusive stuff. He said to me, 'I am going to rape your baby', and he waited a few seconds, and he spat in my face...At the time we thought what they were doing was part of the training. I was expecting it to be tough but nothing like it was.

Testimony of Former British Army Recruit, Jamie Benjafield, 2017.¹

On the witness stand in 2018, former British recruit Jamie Benjafield gave the above harrowing recollection of his treatment by an officer during training. This evidence became known as the British Ministry of Defence came under increasing public scrutiny after 28 young recruits aged 17–18 claimed that they had been abused during a training camp. One recruit told the ensuing investigation that an instructor had physically force-fed him animal manure. At the same time, another remembered a colleague being thrown to the ground by instructors in the hangar where they were sleeping. The recruit claimed, 'we got told it was all part of the training and that's what's supposed to happen, and it was just to

get us psyched up and ready for it.' Yet, the extent of physical abuse was extensive'.¹ Bullying and military indoctrination share many similarities. In both cases, there is typically a focus on humiliation and physical unpleasantness. In the 21st century, there has been an increasing focus on bringing to account those who are considered to have crossed the line between training and abuse within the British Military. However, during the early 20th century, particularly during World War I, there was a different atmosphere of tolerance and expectation from the men training to fight.

Bullying: Hazing and perception in context

Bullying typically pertains to the physical or social abuse carried out by a person or group of people intended to harass, hurt or influence someone in a less powerful position by physical, verbal, social or psychological means. Wolke and Lereya argue that the resulting impact on the recipient can result in significant behavioural changes and physiological and psychological detriments.² Ostvik and Rudmin explain that a commonly theorised criterion of the

bullying process is that the harassment must be extended over time.³ Stuart and Szeszeran support this definition by adding that as a deliberately repeated act, bullying intentionally creates a state where the target feels coerced, degraded, humiliated, threatened, intimidated or frightened with a significantly evident power imbalance between recipient and perpetrator.⁴ However, as many researchers have noted, bullying as a commonly socially-recognised phenomenon lacks a universal definition, particularly within social policy and legality. Dependent on the characteristics of the individuals involved and a variety of external socialising factors, the interpretation of the act between the line of acceptable behaviour and targeted abuse can be subjective.⁵ This is problematic in identification and research output as authority-defined categorisations of behaviour do not often match individual perspectives of intolerable behaviour.⁶

This becomes even more complicated within considerations of institutionally based organisations, including the armed forces and law enforcement. As such, indoctrination processes typically depend on a degree of unpleasant experience and conditioning to encourage conformity and obedience. Hazing is a particularly understudied aspect of military existence, with contextual research often unable to find the divide between hazing and bullying inside interpersonal relations within the military.⁷ A 2012 US Military report by Lieutenant Commander Leedjia Svec et al. on hazing and bullying begins with the statement:

*Hazing in the military began as a celebration of accomplishments and strengthening of unit bonds. However, it has in some cases transformed through time into degrading and demeaning acts with the potential for deadly consequences.*⁸

This fine line between the previously accepted conventions of hazing versus a stance against bullying illustrates the problematic process of interpreting behaviours as bullying, hazing or both. Empirically, the difference is often subjective for participants, with the defining characteristic often being one of internalised and interpreted lasting impacts of the event. Though the distinction is problematic, there is no doubt that both bullying and hazing have long associations with military service. Bourke excellently notes that hazing, as a form of 'legitimate bullying' is not only common within modern military life but in many cases, encouraged as comradery and 'toughening them up' as part of a 'masculine, militarist nationalism (that) trumped civilian discourses of human rights'.⁹ This rhetoric

fits within the considerations of the transformation of civilians into soldiers in World War I as considered in detail by Bourke, Meyer, Walker and Winter.^{9,10,11,12} However, it does not detract from the importance of reconsidering the processes of bullying as part of that indoctrination and subsequent experiences as a serviceman within the scope of World War I. As such, this article delves deeper into the experiences of those within World War I whose perception of behaviours towards them illustrate recognition of bullying behaviour. This is not to point fingers or raise moral objections but to identify applicable behaviours and consider the physical and psychological impact of these behaviours on individual recipients within the British Armed Forces during World War I.

Recruitment: Setting them straight from the get-go

Arguably, in the early years of the War, bullying was an effective tool for encouraging men to volunteer for military service. Disabled veteran Corporal Arthur Schuman wrote after the War about how the torment carried out upon men by patriotically zealous women encouraging them to enlist was a persuasive element before conscription. Writing after the War, he mused, 'had I known what was going to happen to me...I might have had second thoughts, even despite the goading of our "worked up" womenfolk. "We don't want to lose you, but we think you ought to go for your King and Country both need you so."'.¹³ This method of recruitment is a commonly analysed consideration in the history of World War I as the propagandised questioning of men's virility and viability for a relationship, made doubly profound by the recruitment of women to internalise and repeat the message. It proved to be a reasonably effective tool for filling the trenches in 1915.¹⁴ Dawson, Meyer and Woollacott have each separately considered the widespread impact of the psychological campaign contextually recognised as the 'White Feather Brigade'.^{15,16,17} Gullace explains that at the end of August 1914, Admiral Charles Penrose Fitzgerald had deputised 30 women to distribute white feathers to non-uniformed men. Fitzgerald reportedly instructed them to humiliate 'every young slacker found loafing about'.¹⁸ This is not to state that the entirety of the early enlistment for the War be attributed to such actions. The personal reasons for enlistment in 1914 and 1915 are often complex and multifaceted, driven by a combination of extensive social, economic, cultural and gender factors. Nor does this imply that women in this period occupied a position of overarching power over men in general. Yet, the temporary power they held in establishing labels of bravery or cowardice

within British culture is clear. This demands recognition that despite a plethora of individualised motivations for enlistment, some of these decisions were influenced by the coercive rhetoric espoused through emasculation. A blatant example in practice is a postcard addressed to Railway Porter EA Brooks during World War I from the Scoutmistress at the Bath Girl Scouts offering him a job as a 'washer up' with the justification 'you cannot be a man not to join the army'.¹⁹ Often acting independently, these impassioned women, encouraged by the state and justified by military sanction, sought to 'bully' men into service. Consequently, they were seemingly successful, at least in the early stages of the War.

Coercive bullying behaviour as an aid to recruitment can also be found in the treatment of conscientious objectors. In a parody of the willing recruit, conscientious objectors were often subjected to the same medical assessment, classified under their suitability for service and distributed equipment and a uniform.²⁰ However, unlike the men who chose this process, many obstinate conscientious objectors rejected the uniform and equipment to confirm their non-military status. This created a complex battle between individuals and the British Military as their resistance to joining the military countered the military's typical methods for forced acquiescence. As a devout Quaker, G Ewan was one such objector who found himself experiencing the parallel enlistment process against his will. Polite to a fault, Ewan recalled how he continually refused to dress in the uniform, leading to a young sergeant advising him, 'I should be forcibly stripped and put in uniform if I objected to putting it on otherwise.'²¹ Ewan later had a military cap roughly placed on his head after he refused to touch it. Within the private papers of H Lazenby is a short description of a conscientious objector tribunal during which an objector deflects and defends himself against an onslaught of questions from a panel. Lazenby notes how the topics quickly shift from politics to religion to hypothetical questions about potential inaction during an invasion. Lazenby concludes that the panel is incapable of bullying the man into submission as 'they realise that the flame of conscience humming within a man makes him a very hot person on whom to wage verbal warfare'.²² As an obviously biased CO himself, it is plausible that Lazenby wished to present the contrasting roles of antagonist and hero lavishly embellished for dramatic effect. Yet, the questions and arguments levied at the unknown CO on trial are to be found in similar tribunals within the period. In 1916, the *No-Conscription Fellowship*, founded in late 1914, published in their journal *Tribunal*, 'The tribunals, however, notwithstanding

that Parliament has recognised conscience, seem to take the view that a conscientious objector, whatever his statement of belief, is a person to be rebuked, bullied and condemned'.²³ In May 1916, The Lord Bishop of Oxford repeated similar claims to Parliament lambasting the deplorable treatment of conscientious objectors, citing cases of men being left naked and bullied until they were sick.²⁴ The Lord Bishop concluded his appeal by reiterating the role of indoctrinated bullying in military transformation but asserting that as COs these men should not be subject to it:

*...it is hard to believe how the military authorities could have any escape consistent with the treatment necessary for soldiers in time of war but to inflict this penalty. The kind of bullying to which I have referred, however legitimate, however necessarily involved in military discipline, is, it appears to me, exactly the kind which should not be applied to this particular kind of man.*²⁴

Bullying was not only an effective tool of recruitment and persuasion but also one considered necessary in establishing and controlling British soldiers. As the analysis shifts from those without uniforms to those serving, the spectrum of bullying and coercion, both official and social, widens dramatically.

As noted by Lord Bishop in 1916, bullying was contextually considered an effective tool in the creation and maintenance of the effective soldier. This remains a common thread within the modern military as individuals are often verbally abused and harangued throughout training. As recent as 2018, a British Army corporal faced disciplinary action after a recording surfaced of his constant verbal tirade against a female soldier during a training exercise that forced her into exhausted tears.²⁵ A century previous such actions were a common, even expected, part of the training process. For some, this process of deconstruction began even before they were in uniform. Though humiliation was a powerful tool in encouraging enlistment, as the battle for entry began later in 1914, similar bullying practices could be employed by the military officials chosen to separate the soldier from the civilian. In one such case in 1914, the soon-to-be 'Private' Brady suffered a tongue lashing during his first enlistment attempt by a recruitment sergeant who loudly dismissed his physical suitability for service, yelling 'Why don't you two lads bugger off home and tell your mother to change your nappies?'.²⁶ Brady later gained entry to the British Army. Still, seemingly his introduction to military conditioning and acerbic communication began much before his uniform and rifle acquisition.

Training, indoctrination and resistance: Whatever it takes

Within the history of the British soldier in World War I, one of the most common places to locate bullying behaviour resides within the training and indoctrination phase of men's military experience. Dennis Winter explains that from the very start of the War, the British Military faced a unique issue in that the nature of men's enlistment made traditional military discipline significantly harder to maintain as physically punitive action could actively invite resistance. As a result, the typical bullying techniques alluded to by Lord Bishop, such as verbal admonishment, physical discomfort and public humiliation that were routinely employed to break down a recruit's pride as an encouragement for him to comply, needed to be more carefully applied.¹² This resulted in a polarising response from the training men in relation to deliberate behaviour that some interpreted as bullying over-emphatic preparation for combat. One of the most striking examples remains the case in 1915 where a new regiment made up of volunteer working-class Welsh miners twice refused to fall out and partake in training in protest of the bullying of one of their fellows by an instructor.²⁶ Said instructor had a reputation for bullying behaviour and sadism towards the men. After repeated occurrences of bullying behaviour, the troop rebelled after another of their number was sentenced to Field Punishment No. 1 for daring to protest their treatment during training. The subsequent strike resulted in a stalemate between the military and their training men. Desperate for a resolution but unable to lose face, the military authorities transferred the hated instructor out of the camp in silent appeasement to the training men.²⁶ This paints a complex image of the role of bullying as a form of indoctrination. Ultimately, the military was forced to retreat against an entire training corps that took exception to the practices of a senior officer. While it may be argued that this enhanced comradeship within the men, it certainly did little for officer-man relationships going forward.

Private Goodson recalled a similar instance of 'forceful encouragement' after a training NCO decided to take a more direct approach to make Goodson's body follow orders:

The cry is from the instructors, 'brace your knees, brace your knees'. Well, you brace your knees as well as you can, but you find that you can't do it like they want it done. So, one of the young assistants, a cocky fella, comes along and whilst I'm doing it just kicks me behind the knee and I go down. I get up and I'm going to bash him...The gym bloke comes after me

and says, 'that's enough of that' and I said, 'well that man kicked me behind the knee.' He says, 'if you fancy your chance, you come over here tonight you'll be accommodated.'²⁸

In Goodson's case, again, the training officer's bullying caused issues in discipline and indoctrination. Goodson's fury at being physically attacked and humiliated led to a physical confrontation between the two men in a boxing ring. As a former boxer and athlete, Goodson's retribution was swift, winning the respect of another CO who appointed him the regimental boxer.²⁸ However, this does not negate the cause and effect of bullying treatment enacted upon Goodson. Conversely, rough and humiliating treatment of training soldiers was particularly common. Still, instead of rising against the act, many simply regarded the experience as essential to toughen them up to become soldiers in the same way they often viewed the gruelling exercise regime or loss of personal privacy. Within Private Niblett's private papers, he laments and questions his ability to fight in response to his failings in training in 1915.²⁹ In a letter to his mother, Niblett explained how his furious sergeant had humiliated him in front of the rest of the men by screaming at him during training 'What are you trying to do, tickle that man to death?'²⁹ Niblett later remarked how his training helped him to become a better soldier. Lieutenant Minnitt recounted a similar experience in his diary of a senior officer balling him out in front of the entire squadron for 'grinning' at him. Promising to 'wipe the b-----y smile off his face' the CSM forced the entire platoon to carry out intense drilling manoeuvres until they were sweating and exhausted. Triumphant, the officer then demanded of Minnitt, 'Now do you feel like grinning at me?'.³² Although the memory is one of annoyance at the injustice of the treatment by the new CO, Minnitt subsequently writes how the man 'turned out to be a really good fellow to me later on'.³² For Minnitt, the forced physical exercise and humiliation proved to be a bonding exercise with his comrades, and he held no subsequent ill will. This was not an uncommon attitude with the rigours and gruelling experiences men were put through to prepare them for future battle.

However, while some men may have considered this behaviour as par for the course of military training, others balked at the treatment. One such example was Private Heavens, who noted acerbically in his diary at the end of November 1915, that his return from convalescing to the Bull Ring for retraining before his return to the front lines entailed 'being shouted at and bullied by men who had seen nothing of the fighting'.³⁰ The Bull Ring at Etaples served as a training camp and has become infamous for the

conflict between officers and men thanks to Graves' *Goodbye to All That* and the known history of the Etaples Mutiny.³¹ In recounting the experiences of New Zealand soldiers during the War, Harper notes several occasions where the training men detested the seemingly sadistic fervour of the camp trainers and officers.³² Harper described several examples of extensive bullying including the recollections of Ralph Smith in 1915, who noted how his friend Donkin's life was made a 'torment' by two bullies.³² James expertly sums up the tumultuous climate within Etaples camp by explaining that the combination of the camps 'spiteful military police', 'strenuous battle-training' and the restriction on soldiers seeking diversion through alcohol and brothels ultimately created a toxic environment that devolved into violence and mutiny.³³ Such examples of dissatisfaction descending into insurrection lend support to the assertions of psychologist theorists such as Stanley Milgram, whereby resistance to authority often demands a figurehead or leader.³⁴ Such was the case with the Etaples 'monocled mutineer' or the Welsh miners in 1915, whose anger against their treatment expanded from one man to the entire platoon.

Another instance in which individual bodies were abused and falls within the scope of bullying is the initial treatments of suspected shellshock cases. As the British Military struggled to recognise the difference between 'treatment' and 'punishment' in cases of psychological trauma, violence towards the men's bodies was not uncommon to break them from their malaise.³⁵ Suspected shellshock cases could be slapped, have hot drinks poured on them and be throttled physically in attempts 'treat' their condition and snap them out of their malaise.³⁶ While this certainly did not occur in every suspected shellshock case, it was not uncommon to find that men suffering from mental trauma were treated with disdain and violence. However, to claim that all this behaviour fell under the category of bullying is problematic. Reid demonstrates that such behaviour is often derived from advised treatments passed down command lines and from the Royal Army Medical Corps.³⁶ Yet, the memoirs of Sergeant McKay indicate an occasion where the lack of sympathy displayed by a commanding officer towards a suicidal traumatised man tended towards bullying rather than prescribed medical care.³⁷ McKay remembered how an arrested drunken recruit had been arrested during training and become so distressed at his incarceration that he had threatened to take his own life. Bewildered on how to respond, McKay turned to the ranking officer for advice:

...to my surprise, the staff-sergeant said 'well, we

*won't stand in his way. Get a rope'. This was got, thrown over a beam and tied around Rutherford's neck. A tug was given to the rope and the victim's face went black, and he was told to go ahead and finish it, as no one would stand in his way. The result was Rutherford went over to a corner and sat down on his bed as quiet as a lamb. This example was one of the best lessons I had learned for a long time, and one which proved invaluable to me later under trench conditions when I had to deal with cases of shellshock.*³⁷

It is difficult to justify the strangulation of a troubled man to the point that his face changed colour under the guise of medical treatment. While it is possible that McKay exaggerated the account for the narrative of his memoirs, the dismissive attitude and actions of the staff sergeant remain typical of ranking officers' displeasure within this period. Furthermore, McKay, a future member of the RAMC, regarded the bullying of the arrested Rutherford as a formative learning experience on how to deal with shellshock patients later in his career. While there is no mention of McKay acting in this manner again within his memoirs, it is clear from his tone that this instance enabled him to internalise that bullying behaviour had an appropriate place within his experiences as a soldier.

Ultimately, during the training stages of men's military existence, it was essential to find ways to acclimatise them to the harsh reality of military service during the War. Physical exercise, control over behaviour, diet, clothing, residence and communal living all played a part in this process. However, it seemed bullying and bullying behaviour towards the training men by their superiors also played a role. Such behaviour was accepted by many, but not by all, as responses to such acts could spark insurrection. Beyond training, bullying behaviour continued both between the ranks and among the serving men as they found themselves serving, living and fighting in very close quarters with each other. However, it seems that the most extreme reactions to this behaviour are found in the pivotal moments during which civilians were transformed into soldiers.

Social service—Bullying men on men

It seems almost impossible to find examples of a situation where groups of people are required to live in close contact for set amounts of time without elements of bullying behaviour being noted. This certainly seems to be the case for institutional-type situations such as schools, colleges, the military and prisons.³⁸ Wertheimer claims that hazing within the modern global militaries has been dramatically

reduced as 'effective authority leads not by fear, but by respect...'.³⁹ This may be questionable within some modern militaries as cases of suicide and mental health issues reported in the media belie are a continuing undercurrent of the issues related to bullying and rank relationships.⁴⁰ This demonstrates the acknowledgement that such practice was commonplace in military history. Indeed, one of the first recorded cases of British Military bullying was the trial of 18th Hussar Trooper John Flood in 1862. Flood was sentenced to death after murdering fellow soldier John O'Dea following years of continual abuse and taunting. On the 1 June 1862, Flood claimed that he 'wished he was dead' after being thoroughly beaten by O'Dea and two others with an army belt under the guise of barrack justice.⁴¹ After brooding over his treatment, Flood got drunk and ended his tormentor's life. He was arrested after shooting O'Dea in the stomach and waiting calmly to be arrested as the man lay dying before him, only becoming agitated and trying to fight off the arresting sergeant when he feared that his tormentor might survive. Flood's case is particularly interesting as his sentence was commuted from death to imprisonment with only hours to spare thanks to Royal Mercy by the Queen under the assertion that 'this unhappy culprit [had been] goaded into an act of continuous and irritating provocation, from which he could not escape.'⁴¹

While preceding World War I by half a century, Flood's trial illustrates precedence for abhorrent behaviour between serving men transcending World War I. However, it is interesting that in the face of patriotism, bound up with the notions of what was expected of military service and training, recruits after 1914 could compartmentalise their perception of acceptable behaviour between the men to fulfil their duty. Private James Porter Murray recounted within an oral history interview of how physical appearance could inspire negative reactions from other training men. Murray explained that while bullying was not something he saw often, it did happen, typically towards those considered to be 'soft'.⁴² However, in many cases what would be considered in modern parlance as 'banter' perhaps overrode clearly defined notions of bullying for the training men. Private Albert Hurst, a middle-class enlistee who joined the 17th Battalion Manchester Regiment in 1915, recalled that as the only teetotaler in a barrack full of northern miners, he received a great deal of 'kidding' from the frequently drunk men.⁴³ However, Hurst is keen to clarify that this was 'kidding', not bullying, having already mentioned being bullied in private school as a child.⁴³ While it is possible that this is indeed true, and Hurst was happy to engage with some barrack-room mockery, the point that his

refusal of alcohol allowed for derision against his character reiterates the relevance between physical ability and conformity that was so very important during World War I for many men during and beyond their training.

Rank also served as a vehicle for enabling bullying between the serving men. Rowe explains how the 1919 published novel by Charles Morgan, *The Gunroom*, led to raised questions aimed at the Navy by concerned civilians over potential bullying activities on board ship.⁴⁴ Morgan depicted a scene within his novel commonly known in the service as 'running torpedoes' in which the chosen 'victim', appointed by the sublieutenant of the gunroom, would be hurtled down a table by six midshipmen at the command of the CO. If the 'human torpedo' managed to strike a match during the process the 'game' would end. If not, it would repeat until he managed.⁴⁵ This game was part of a series of 'evolutions' that would be enacted between the senior and junior officers within the covert confines of the gun room on board the ship. Rowe explains that these games meant carrying out the demands of the senior officer and were almost always accompanied by being beaten with sticks.⁴⁴ Many regarded this as a rite of passage and responded to any lower ranks who complained about their treatment.

Bullying behaviours such as these were certainly not unique to the Navy. Sheffield explains how the line between 'bully' and 'gentleman' was acceptable within the perception of rank and file. Sheffield quotes Private WV Tilsley, a Derby infantryman within the 55th Division who commented, 'A bad officer, that is, a bully is a -! A good officer, that is, a [sic] considerate, is a 'toff....' a 'gentleman'.⁴⁶ However, unlike training, the battlefield could offer a sinister solution to deal with such men deemed bullies by their subordinates. Within their examination of punishment in World War I, Putkowski and Sykes recount the words of Brig. Gen. Crozier, who described one such case of retribution in the field:

A British N.C.O. had been bullying some of his subordinates. As there appeared to be no way of dealing with the case there, aggrieved men decided to deal with the matter in their own way...A Mills bomb has a local but very violent explosive effect. They decided that the Mills bomb should, therefore, be their agent. They caught their victim bending, so to speak. Pulling out the pin from the bomb...one of the, - they had previously drawn lots for the job - pushed the bomb down the back of the N.C.O.'s trousers after which they made off at lighting speed to avoid the explosion...there was no trace whatsoever left of this N.C.O.⁴⁷

This case is an extreme example, as not all disgruntled soldiers would choose to use the cover of warfare to murder their officers. However, it is not an uncommon occurrence. Less than a month after the armistice, members of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIS) decided to act against the discriminatory treatment they had received both from British authorities in terms of pay and allowances and from their British commanding officers, who reportedly treated them very poorly. In retribution, members of the 10th BWIS threw a bomb into the tent of a Regimental Quartermaster-Sergeant and pelted stones at other officers.⁴⁹ Putkowski and Sykes also highlight the execution of Lance-Corporal William Price and Private Richard Morgan of 'C' Company, who became intoxicated and shot their Company Sergeant-Major on 20 January 1915. During their court-martial, it was alleged that Price and Morgan had been 'gunning' for their platoon sergeant, who purportedly had been consistently victimising the two men.⁴⁷ In these cases, the bully was punished for their misdeeds, albeit from a questionable moral standpoint. However, actions against the will of the British Military could also have severe consequences, namely in the form of corporal punishment and execution.

Dr Petra Boynton argues that the firing squad acted as a form of authoritarian bullying in conveying a 'powerful message' about behaviour and conformity. Boynton stated, 'It was an extremely powerful form of bullying, having to kill your own friends... it sent out the message that you could be next'.⁴⁹ The executions of Lance-Corporal Alfred Atkinson and Private Ernest Kirk in March 1915 for desertion provide evidence for Boynton's argument. Labour MP Ernest Thurtle was presented with the following report following the execution:

The two men I selected for the firing party went with the adjutant. [Presumably, these two men formed only part of the firing squad.] When they came back, tough characters though they were supposed to be, they were sick, they screamed in their sleep, they vomited immediately after eating. All they could say was: 'The sight was horrible; made more so by the fact we had shot one of our own men'.⁴⁷

Both Kirk and Atkinson were shot by men from their own battalion, the act of which seemed to have an almost equally devastating impact on the men as the prisoners. Another unnamed man recalled how the men were chosen for the firing squad begged and cajoled him to take their place.⁴⁷ An eyewitness to the execution of Rifleman Albert Parker in May the following year recounted how the shooting did not simply affect the members of the firing squad but many of the battalion who bore witness.

He was then marched away to the place where he was to be shot. We were then ordered to about-turn, and the Brigade Transport Officer threatened us that any man who turned round would be put on a crime. So, we stood in silence for what seemed hours, although only minutes. Then the shots rang out and one of the Yorkshires fainted, the strain was that great. [A man from the 6th Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry].⁴⁷

Boynton's argument proves to be veracious in the face of these accounts, as the definition of bullying as in to coerce or intimidate someone is directly visible in the reports undertaken by the British Military. Ultimately, many of the men who were executed chose to forgo the blindfold and were considered brave beyond measure for facing death directly. Yet, in these examples, it is the experiences of the men who were forced to participate and those who were not permitted to see but still forced to witness that bear the closest indications of systematic institutional bullying as a form of overarching control.

Different men—Serving and surviving

Until this point in the analysis of bullying in World War I, the discussion has centred on the activity of bullying for indoctrination, control or rank relationships. However, bullying also occurred due to various differences between the men as they entered and served during the War. As noted, due to the demands of the War and the numerous ways men were recruited between 1914–1918, the British Military soon contained an array of individuals who differed in numerous ways. Duncan outlines one of the primary themes within research into bullying, the aspect of 'difference'. He notes that differences allow for discount and conflict, yet further postulates that it is not simply the difference that is the issue, but the meanings ascribed to that difference that inspire hostility.⁵⁰ During World War I, there was no shortage of unique differences upon which conflict could be drawn.

World War I poet Isaac Rosenberg noted within his writings and discourse that his military experience was particularly unpleasant because of the level of anti-Semitism that he perceived he received during his service.⁵¹ Moorcroft Wilson raises issues with these feelings as she notes that Rosenberg's perceptions of victimisation do not fit with some of the other historical narratives recorded. One such case was the recollection of Corporal Harry Stansfield, who knew Rosenberg and recalled trying to befriend the 'painfully reserved man'.⁵¹ Stansfield claimed that he tried to convince Rosenberg that religion or background had little to no standing

in the relationships within the trenches stating, 'believe me, we didn't think much about a person's background one way or the other. When you were in the trenchers, all we wanted to know was if you were a reliable comrade or if you weren't. Religion or race had nothing to do with it.'⁵¹ In her exploration of British Jews in World War I, Kitching also alludes to this glossing over of racial and religious heritage in place of a trustworthy colleague on the front lines. Kitching explains that while much the same across Europe at this time, there was an undercurrent of anti-Semitism, Jewish men were not excluded from joining the armed forces in Britain before or during World War I. She notes that members of the Jewish community had joined the British Army at the turn of the century, with one Lieutenant Frank de Pass receiving the highest honour in the form of the Victoria Cross in 1914.⁵² She also notes alongside Rosenberg's unhappiness that other men felt the opposite, citing volunteer Marcus Segal who wrote about the number of new friends he made and made no reference to prejudice.⁵² The issue here may have been less about religious affiliation and more about perceived worth on the line, as noted by Corporal Stansfield. This was an issue that Army Chaplains often faced. Walker noted how poorly received Chaplain George Birmingham was in his new post at an emergency stretcher-bearers camp in 1915.⁵³ Birmingham was harshly advised by an officer, "We don't want no f—ing parsons here", a sentiment that was repeated to him multiple times and reiterated by the sergeant-major (commanding officer) who declared the padre to be an 'inefficient simpleton'.⁵⁴ Birmingham notes that he had done nothing to earn this hostility; however, he had also done nothing to dissuade it. Ultimately, he became an integral part of the team through his willingness to support the medical camp. This first meeting is like the reception many chaplains faced upon arrival at their new posting. Questions abounded about the need for such men within a warzone without a weapon or official purpose beyond hymns and prayers.

Race also provided an opportunity for friction and bullying during World War I. In his seminal book *Black Poppies*, Stephen Bourne clarifies that there was no central, single experience for every Black serviceman during World War I. While discrimination was present, Black soldiers were not segregated in the same way they were in the American forces.⁵⁵ Bourne continues that while it was unlikely for Black men to achieve commanding roles and therefore have control over White soldiers, it was not impossible; men such as Walter Tull were indeed awarded a command. Unfortunately, there are no surviving individual testimonies of Black soldiers to

turn to. However, there are apparent cases of racism against non-white soldiers, such as the case noted previously where West Indies soldiers chose to blow up a commanding officer's tent in retribution for unfair treatment. While not considerably so much more, there has been an enhanced focus on the experiences of Indian soldiers within historiography, not least within the excellent work by Kaushik Roy. Roy explains that the construction of the Indian Army owed much to the martial races' attitude that had permeated British-Indian relations for much the entirety of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Following in the wake of decades of control, interference and enforced societal class constructions, it is not surprising the inclusion of Indian men was a complicated affair, demanding detailed attention to navigate caste relationships and British-Indian relations, all under the standing British imperial tradition of *divide et impera* (divide and rule).⁵⁶ While there are several examples of discrimination of Indian soldiers, both in historiography and fiction, one of the most famous examples of overt bullying on the grounds of race lay within the diary of Indian aristocrat Thakur Amar Singh. Having trained at the Imperial Cadet Corps, Singh served as aide-de-camp to General Brunner. Despite his officer rank, Singh noted that White soldiers refused to salute him, that he was excluded from military tactical briefings and mocked for not eating beef.⁵⁷ There is much more to discuss about the inherent racism and treatment of non-whites that was systemic within the British Military during World War I. However, the point of this analysis is less about the overarching elements of discrimination and more about the reality of that differentiation in practice. Non-white serving members of the British forces during World War I were frequently required to endure an ongoing degree of exclusion and harassment that transcended rank and role. While many non-white men were respected and admired by their peers and officers, the fact remained that simply by their different racial heritage, these men were frequently singled out as victims of bullying and hazing as they served.

As always, sex remains a controversial element that must also be considered when focusing on bullying during World War I. One of the primary reasons for bullying asserted in sociological and psychological theory is the identification of behaviour deemed as deviant. To reiterate the work of Duncan, in many cases, bullying behaviour can be attributed to identifying a definable difference within which conflict and malcontent can be extrapolated. Non-heterosexual lifestyles have prompted bullying behaviours for centuries within western culture. During World War I, homosexuality could not only

be rewarded with scorn but also harsh punishments in line with societal perceptions of abnormal sexual behaviour that remained prevalent in context. As such, homosexuality is very difficult to track within any historical investigation into the early 20th century. Weeks and Porter argue that homosexuality in the military in the 19th and early 20th centuries only became visible when it occurred between ranks, and even then, the records are rare and fragmented.⁵⁹ According to Robb, 22 British officers and 270 rankers were court-martialled for homosexuality between 1914 and 1922.⁶⁰ Harvey adds that there was a significant increase in the prosecution of officers for homosexual and indecent acts in the immediate aftermath of the War. He further notes that of the 17 officers tried for homosexuality during the War, 10 were convicted in the 12 months before 30 September 1916.⁶¹ Harvey explains that this was associated with the sudden lowering of entrance rates and requirements during a period of rapid expansion under the Derby scheme and conscription.⁶¹ While this was not the case for known homosexuals, such as in the case of Captain Alfred C Boyd, whose homosexuality had earned him a two-year sentence of hard labour for eight counts of indecency and a refusal by the British Military to allow him to re-join for the war effort, despite his promise to pursue a heterosexual lifestyle.⁶¹

However, while accounts of homosexuality are scarce within the testimonies and records from World War I, there remains evidence of the abuse and humiliation men faced because of their sexuality. In one such example, Private Holbrook claimed that homosexuality was not a regular occurrence as men 'wouldn't dare', fearing reprisals from officers and other soldiers.⁶² For Holbrook and his fellows, being regarded as homosexual became a part of a bunkhouse game in which any man who failed to retain cork on his person, day or night, was declared deviant, financially fined and publicly ridiculed.⁶² According to social theorists such as Ervin Goffman, this internalisation of set behavioural norms, the process of which was at the heart of the military indoctrination experience, would ensure the validation of culturally-acceptable behaviours. In this case, the rejection, humiliation and stigmatisation of homosexuals.⁶³

In Weeks and Porter's *Between the Acts*, there are several rare accounts of homosexual men who served as soldiers in the First World War.⁵⁹ In one example, a former soldier called 'Fred' described being taunted and humiliated because of his sexual preference. 'Fred' recounted that while billeted midway through the War in crowded Cardiff barracks, his fellow soldiers decided to humiliate him. One night a very

drunken soldier openly presented his erect penis to him, demanding 'Fred' pleasure him, much to the amusement of the onlooking crowd. Scathingly, 'Fred' turned the tables on the room by demanding that he must be allowed to penetrate the drunken man before he would consent to fellate him. 'Fred' recalled the immediate shift of power in the room as the man lost his erection, much to the audience's amusement: '... his old boy went down just like that. And they all burst out laughing now, making him look like a fool.'⁵⁹

'Fred' and Holbrook's experiences of reactions to homosexuality share similarities in that the individual suspected of being a homosexual is subject to scorn and humiliation. Homosexuality within a military environment is a complicated topic, as situation, opportunity, previous inclination, social pressures and individual perceptions of sexuality all intersect within the consideration. Ward argues that depending on circumstance, many sexual interactions between men are not regarded as homosexual in nature. She considers the history of male heterosexual discourse over the action of homosexual activity within key social groups or situations, noting how homosexual-type actions often appear within bullying behaviours such as 'hazing' rituals in events common to fraternities and sports teams.⁶⁴ Nudity, penetration and eating from orifices are common events in such cases, yet Ward explains that these actions are typically exempt from the label of 'homosexual' act.⁶⁴ While Ward's argument is centred on men within a modern context, she notes Judith Kegan Gardiner's assertion that the 20th century witnessed a shift from anally-retentive masculinity in the early-to midcentury to an 'explosive anality' towards the beginning of the 21st.⁶⁴ Ward also builds on Belkin's work, whose research on American military homosexuality has done much to define the field. Belkin explains that acts of penetration could serve a dual purpose of humiliation and actualisation as '...some military practices construct being penetrated as the ultimate taboo for a warrior. Others construct it as central to what it means to be a real man.'⁶⁵

As complicated as this may be, the point remains that sexuality provided an opportunity for men during World War I to take exception to and abuse each other. Yet, bullying on the grounds of sexual activity was not limited to homosexual practice. Bourke discusses male sexual activity and proclivity during their time in military service while noting that being removed from their civilian lives and identities opened up a plethora of educational and physical opportunities for sexual exploration.⁹ She presents the testimony of young soldier John William Rowarth

who was mocked for his sexual inexperience: 'One of my mates said to me. Casey have you ever dipped your wick, what do you mean, I ain't got no wick to dip, when the laughter had subsided, they put it more bluntly had I ever made love to a girl, when I said no, oh you must be a bloody virgin then...(sic)'.⁹ Rowarth's proceeding sexual adventures proved to be problematic and lacklustre. When he finally managed to lose his virginity, he was underwhelmed by the experience telling his mates that it was the same as 'pulling your thing, but you have someone to talk to'.⁹ Bourke adds the testimony of another man, Lieutenant Gareth Smithies Taylor, who also found the practice of pursuing sex distasteful. Taylor noted in his papers that he could not enjoy the experience and only did so because of the peer pressure that expected him to do so.⁹ Cherry also argues that men often inflated or exaggerated their sexual activities to save face during barrack-room talk to prevent mockery.⁶⁶ Reiterating how sexual proclivity could provide an ample opportunity for bullying and hazing if one's personal activities deviated from the accepted norms of behaviour.

Ultimately, these separate aspects of life during service in World War I demonstrate how cases of bullying and hazing were not. These examples are often driven by a lack of tolerance for atypical behaviour. Some men laughed off the abuse and others responded in the extreme. Yet, the story remains the same: as the War progressed, those who found themselves outside the expected norm were often faced with humiliation, intimidation and discrimination.

A continuing issue

Bullying and hazing remain contentious subjects within the modern British Military, so much so that agreements on the line between the two remain inconsistent and blurred. Such treatment of individuals within the service has become a widespread moral panic, with sensationalist headlines decrying incidents of degradation and humiliation, often forcing comment from the Ministry of Defence. This was the case in 2019 when the public was made aware of the consistent bullying of serviceman Mark Holder. His treatment included having his picture used for target practice.⁶⁷ Holder subsequently claimed that the harassment he received forced him out of the armed forces. This episode is similar to the investigations into several suicides at Deepcut barracks in Surrey between 1995 and 2002, which again all inferred the involvement of bullying and abuse.⁶⁸ Evidently, despite the length of time that this has been a concern for militaries worldwide, a solution has yet to be found.

Conclusion

Bullying within the British Armed Forces is not a new phenomenon. During World War I, far from being the subject of sensational headlines, bullying was highlighted in parliamentary debate as part of the course for creating successful soldiers. As men transformed and served their country, they encountered several opportunities to endure and enact bullying behaviour, as men's close-quarter living, range of diverse backgrounds and unique individual perspectives clashed against the backdrop of brutal training, muddy battlegrounds and a uniform cramped existence between 1914–18. Still, as noted, men often experienced innovative bullying even before they received their uniforms (or refused it in the case of conscientious objectors), as the behaviour was repurposed and targeted to bring men into the military to fight for their country.

The examples in this article are varied and far-reaching. The men who bullied and experienced bullying often have very different accounts. It is important to recognise the limitations of this historical analysis in that the evidence is often one-sided and subjective, with no opportunity for rebuttal. It is also not possible within the confines of an article to consider the nuances of every case and explore each bullying motivation from all perspectives. Yet, this should not reduce the importance of the argument that bullying was very much part of World War I experience for many British men who served. Be it that they experienced it, perpetrated it, witnessed it, heard about it or some combination thereof, bullying, as classified in the opening of this article as the 'overbearing mistreatment and domination of others', can not only be located in the various histories of World War I but is surprisingly visible once those sources are collated. Bullying in the War was a form of enlistment, training and indoctrination, interrelational engagement and a recreational, social pastime. Bullying pushed men to take their own and other men's lives, leaving a lasting impact that remains striking within individual testimonies a century after the event. Post centenary, the heroic glorification of World War I has begun to wane again. It is painfully obvious that many of the issues men faced during the chaos of those four years in the beginning of the 20th century remain today, as questions continue to be levied about the nature of bullying and hazing within the makeup of the modern military.

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