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Brian N. Hall, Communications and British Operations on the Western Front, 1914-1918. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

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The British military experience in the First World War was a watershed event which witnessed the exit of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from the war in 1918 a very different army than the one which began the conflict in 1914. One of the BEF's changes included communications at the operational level. Yet, the role and influence that communications and communication systems had on BEF operations has not been

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adequately researched until the publication of Brian N. Hall's book, *Communications and British Operations on the Western Front, 1914-1918*.

Communications and British Operations on the Western Front, 1914-1918 is well written. It is an archives-based volume on one of the support arms of the British military during the First World War, focusing on British communications and the various systems that were used during the war. It sets out to answer one specific question: "how, and to what extent, did communications influence British military operations on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918"(2)?

Hall's book was written for the academic community and students of history. Professional military education individuals or institutions will find value in Hall's book, specifically discussions on the integration of civilian personnel and technology. The depth of research on communication systems in Hall's book guides the reader to understand British operations from a communication viewpoint. Some of the highlights of the book are the sections that cover civilian technology integration, communication operations during the 1916 battle on the Somme, and the innovations of tank communications from the battle of Cambrai. Any operational specialist will find the arguments and historical information in Hall's book beneficial.

Hall's argument throughout the book is laid out empirically. Some of the more specific case studies from the book outline the integration of civilian personnel and technology, the failures on the Somme, and the innovations at Cambrai with regards to communications. Hall also has a broader argument or recurring theme throughout the chapters in the form of *command and control* with the addition of communications. Hall cites Martin Van Creveld's book *Command in War* and builds off Van Creveld's idea to add that communication systems were the organic material that helped solidify the British combined arms tactics as one system.[1] That is truly an exciting and solid argument that runs throughout the whole book, just under the historical case studies points.

Hall argues that from the beginning of the war, communications had a few organizational procedures working in its favor. First, the director of Army Signals, Sir Major General John Fowlers, remained in the same position for the entire war. Also, the

[1] Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

army copied the civilian general post office's (GPO) technical procedures. Most of the soldiers in the Signal Service were GPO engineers in civilian life. The civilians transitioned to the Signal Service seamlessly because the army ran the signalman organization the same as the GPO. This added to the stability of military communications. Hall argues that this was important because civilian soldiers' skills were an added benefit to the BEF. He further claims that no expense was spared in the purchase or use of communication technology integration from the civilian sector. The result of these points equaled stability at the highest level of the Signal Service organization. Additionally, the transformation of civilian engineers to soldiers contributed to the *total war* or home front debate that civilian sectors were being converted for military use.

Hall further describes the development of a military communications doctrine that would take shape in the form of training manuals such as SS148 and SS191. He argues that the BEF reevaluated its performance after an engagement. According to Hall, the BEF's communication doctrine was established due to its organizational flexibility and adaptability; the BEF's communication doctrine required functional system redundancy. The BEF relied on both technological communications, such as telephone and Morse code, and human resources, such as liaison officers or messenger runners. Hall claims that the development of a doctrine that capitalized on both technological communication systems and human resources proved adequate for mission success.

The author dedicates an entire chapter to the 1916 battle on the Somme. His laser focus on the communication portions of the battle makes for a refreshing engagement, and he refrains from discussing the details of the combat experience. Readers who wish to know more about combat on the Somme in 1916 should read William Phipott's book, *Three Armies on the Somme*.[2] The overall argument Hall presents here is key because it varies from mainstream academics in that BEF experienced a learning curve. He states that the failures from the communication system and the Signal Service section of the BEF were important because they became part of a "learning process" (306). One

[2] William Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

example that should be highlighted was the depth and structure of buried communication cables as a result of the BEF's self-reflection after the battle. During the battle, communication ceased when the troops moved forward. This was because buried communications cables only went to the former front lines. Communication failures ultimately were a contributing factor to the failed Somme offensive.

Hall describes the influence communication had on combined arms tactics, as communications allowed multiple weapon platforms such as artillery and infantry to operate jointly. Looking at the battle of Cambrai in 1917, the BEF proved combined arms tactics worked when communications were included at each level of the planning and execution stage. The opening stages of the battle had tanks using homing pigeons with varying levels of success and failure. Communications between battalion and brigade units were maintained more efficiently due to the cables being laid after the engagement began. The use of dispatch riders, homing pigeons and the communications system together enabled the BEF to achieve the redundancy they needed. The goal of the battle was to secure limited objectives so that the BEF's communication could be maintained.[3] The BEF successfully utilized all communication systems that were available to maintain a consistent flow of communication between frontline troops and rear echelon command units.

Additionally, Hall's book has some very interesting arguments and observations that warrant further detail. His technical articulations of each of the communications systems and how they worked is to be commended; the level of detail is significant. Both wire and wireless forms of communication and air to ground communications systems are discussed. The BEF's use of technology to the best of their ability is evident throughout the study. Hall's book also discusses the non-technological communication systems such as dogs, pigeons, motorcycle riders, liaison officers and messenger runners.

Hall maintains close focus on the topic of communications in the BEF and has produced an excellent book. There are a few topics that this book does not cover or discuss in great detail. For example, there is nearly a complete absence of regimental level operational case studies. Operational case studies were aimed at battalion and

[3] Ibid., 240-41.

brigade or divisional unit level only. This could have occurred due to the direction of the research. Furthermore, this book was written for the specialist reader in mind. A significant background in First World War history is needed. This, however, I feel is only the result of the topic and not the fault of the author.

In conclusion, Hall's book contributes much needed scholarly research on British communications at the operational level, information that has been absent from academic First World War research. He adequately proves his thesis, which is that communication is essential to operations. Hall's book also adds research on combined arms tactics with the same argument that without communication systems, combined arms tactics would not have been as efficient. Finally, *Communications and British Operations on the Western Front, 1914-1918* has a solid argument for command and control which can also be drilled down to the same statement that without communications there is no command and control. Operational historians will find that Hall's book will provide a further understanding of the dynamics of the First World War as it pertains to communication.

David Retherford has an undergraduate degree in History of Science from the University of Florida. He also has a Master's degree in War Studies from the University of Birmingham in the UK. David is currently pursuing a second masters by research at the University of Birmingham and is conducting research into the development of American combat intelligence tactics in the First World War. David lives and works in Tampa Bay, Florida with his family.