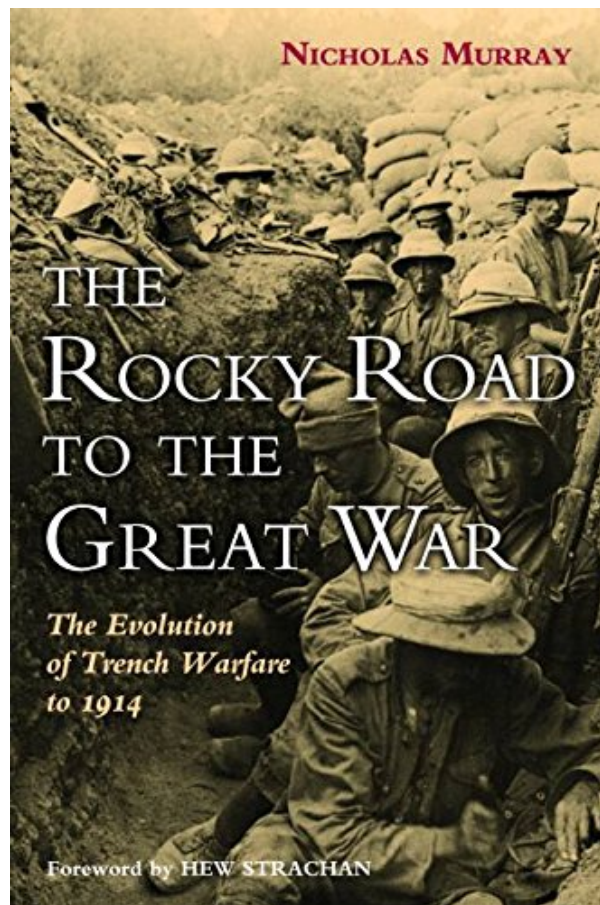
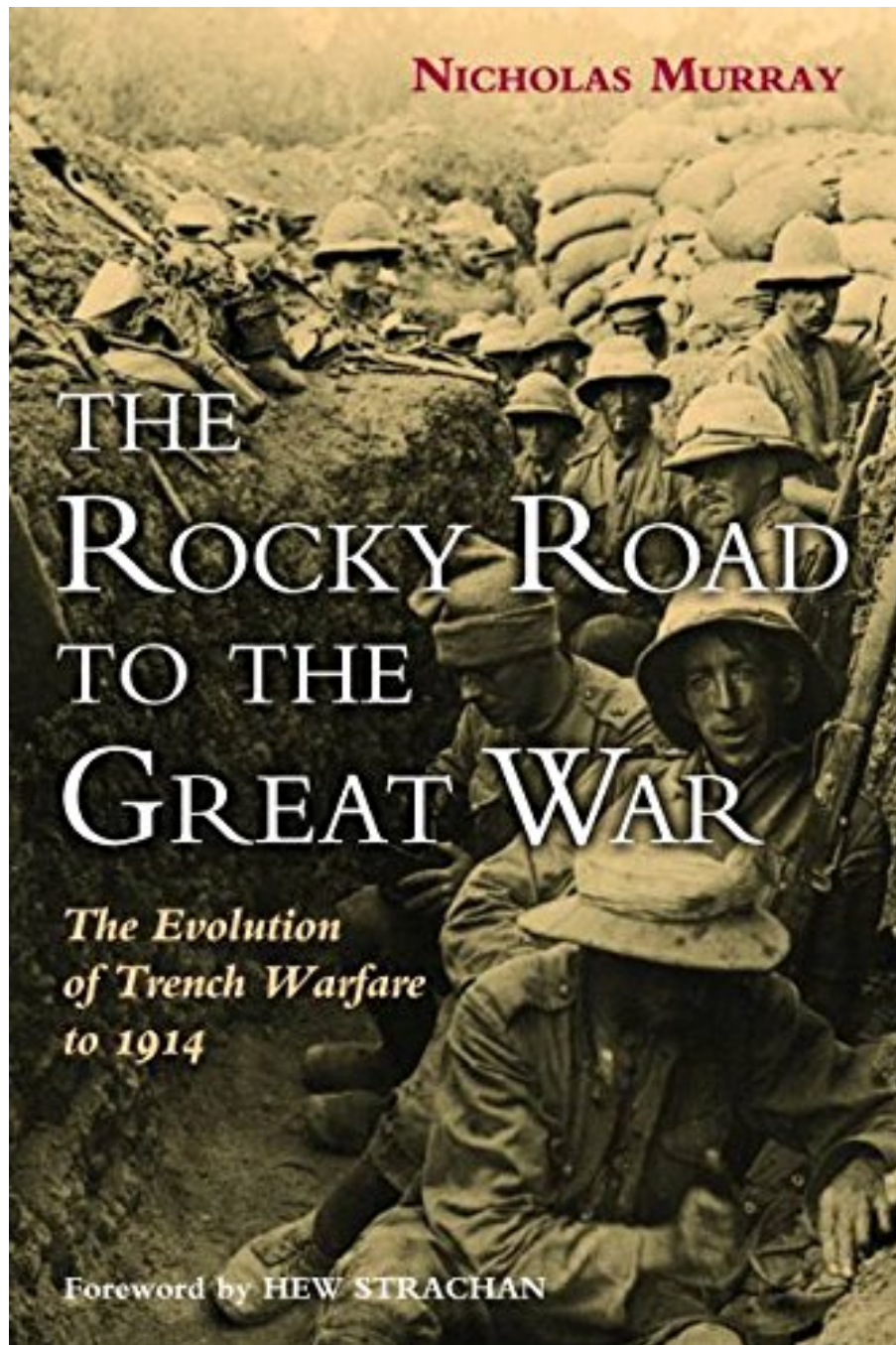


THE ROCKY ROAD TO THE GREAT WAR: THE EVOLUTION OF TRENCH WARFARE TO 1914 BY NICHOLAS MURRAY



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Nicholas Murray's *The Rocky Road to the Great War* examines the evolution of field fortification theory and practice between 1877 and 1914. The technical and intellectual developments during this period were critical to the nature of the First World War. It is well known that the technology of the defensive (machine guns, barbed wire, and artillery) had become much more powerful in the decades prior to 1914. The challenge this combination of enhanced defensive technology presented to the offensive is familiar to us today. What is less well known is the evolution in the design of field fortifications, from above to below ground, which massively enhanced the power of the new defensive technology. Study of the evolution of field fortification construction has largely been neglected despite the fact that the battlefield landscape of the First World War, indeed industrial warfare in the twentieth century, owes its existence to the changes that occurred therein. It was the combination of new technology and new types of field fortification that was to reach a bloody dénouement in the Great War. Based largely on primary sources—including French, British, Austrian, and American military attaché reports—Murray's enlightening study is unique in defining, fully examining, and contextualizing the theories and construction of field fortifications before World War I.

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Sets a new and higher standard

By Mark Hull

The historical literature about the First World War is vast – beyond counting, perhaps; there are biographies, campaign studies, unit histories, personal narratives, books for specialists written by specialists, broad overviews that necessarily rely on generalities (and not a few myths), while others promise to capture lessons learned from 1914-1918 for modern military application. For perhaps the first time, we now have a painstakingly researched and highly readable history that is not a subjective and distilled version of what we should learn but rather on what the pre-WWI militaries actually learned and believed they knew when that war began.

Murray presents a sound case which draws heavily (and for the first time) on the military attaché reports from what are today little-studied conflicts: The Russo-Turkish War, the 2nd Boer War, The Russo-Japanese War, and the Balkan Wars. Officers from every major nation were present to witness, report, and draw informed conclusions from what they experienced – in a sense, to recognize trends that would impact their country's ability to make war. The book follows a central theme – the constant interplay between entrenchment and firepower, as so accurately communicated by those attachés, propelled the Great Powers down a path which ultimately led to the stalemate on the Western Front – and eventually to the firepower breakthroughs which resolved the same problem.

Modern war made entrenchment necessary. Developments in chemistry and metallurgy produced more accurate and lethal small arms and artillery, and protection from those weapons – while still attempting to keep tactical and operational initiative - was the obvious counter. While the nature and design of the entrenchments varied due to geography, climate, number of combatants, technology, military culture, etc. they were an integral part of what military commanders anticipated by 1914. That said, the offensive-minded leaders never let go of the idea that the fixed-bayonet spirit of the offensive could still produce decisive results (demonstrated time after time by the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War), but accepted that for offensive operations to succeed, they must be accompanied by devastating and accurate bombardment. On the other hand, empirical evidence also showed that a well-fortified position would make the defenders almost impervious to all but the most lethal artillery. The leaders never completely resolved this obvious paradox.

Murray seems to appreciate that any good history must first be a good story; he's an able storyteller who does not sacrifice narrative for trivia. For anyone even tangentially interested in the larger topic, this is simply a fun read. He writes with humor and with an obvious mastery of the multi-lingual sources; his analysis and conclusions are unfailingly logical. Most of all, what he writes is important and should shape the way that WWI is understood – not from our distanced and jaundiced perspective but instead as a window to the minds and methods of those who had every reason to believe that their war would be short and decisive, and that they had correctly described the shape of things to come. As Murray notes, "Perhaps the military officers of the day simply learned the lessons too well."

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

An Insightful Look at the Origins of Trench Warfare

By A. A. Nofi

A summary of the review on StrategyPage.Com:

'Prof. Murray (Leavenworth) opens with a reminder that field fortifications are an age-old feature of war, especially in sieges or where terrain favored their use. But from the mid-eighteenth century they began to become more common, as gunpowder almost totally dominated the battlefield and as armies grew ever larger, which tended to reduce maneuvering room. He then examines the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), with an appendix on the American Civil War (1861-1865). Each war began with field operations, but the combination of modern firepower and, in most cases, larger and larger armies, soon led to the development of extensive field fortifications, i.e., trench lines. Murray's final chapter, "The State of Military Thinking in 1914" examines what the various European armies thought war would be like. Reviewing recent history, they believed that if the war could be won quickly during the opening phase of field operations, trench warfare could be avoided. They were wrong, of course, as the armies of 1914 were so large, there was almost literally not enough maneuvering room. All armies soon resorted to increasingly elaborate field fortifications, greatly reducing casualties, but then spent the most of the next four years trying to figure out how to break the stalemate. This is essential reading for those interested in the events of the

early weeks of World War I.'

For the full review, see StrategyPage.Com

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The logic of trench warfare

By Chris Pringle

As we approach August 2014, the generals of 100 years ago can expect renewed criticism of their stupidity, both for creating trench lines and for attacking them. Although by no means unchallenged, the popular view of the First World War typically favours the "lions led by donkeys" caricature, according to which out-of-touch commanders mindlessly sacrificed their men's lives in futile battles.

Dr Murray provides evidence to support a contrary view. In the half-century prior to 1914, developments in weaponry led to widespread use of ever more sophisticated field fortifications. Several major wars in that period offered plentiful opportunities for European armies to observe how these technological changes adjusted the firepower-protection-mobility equation and consequently affected battlefield tactics. The conclusions they drew influenced military thinking and were reflected in official doctrine and training. As professional soldiers, the generals of 1914 were taught by the lessons learned from the preceding conflicts.

What were those lessons? Dr Murray convincingly explains how, of the numerous functions performed by field fortification, protection and force multiplication became especially important. He describes technical changes in fortification in response to improved artillery, such as digging in deeper, overhead cover and greater emphasis on concealment. In the face of modern firepower, constructing extensive trench systems was entirely sensible.

A key point made by Dr Murray is this: "Despite all of the improvements to the defense, the strategic aggressor was victorious in all of the wars studied." In other words, it was still possible for the strategic offensive to win, or indeed - it could even be concluded by our scientific professional soldiers of 1914 - victory was only possible through strategic offensive. Their faith in the attack was therefore founded on reason, and however flawed the conduct of individual operations may have been in practice, the principle was ultimately vindicated by the well-executed and victorious offensives of 1918.

The author has drawn heavily on primary sources such as field service regulations, contemporary military manuals and military attaché reports. The work is well illustrated with plentiful photographs and pleasingly clear maps and diagrams. His analysis is thorough, systematic and persuasively argued, with a light touch that makes his book readable without sacrificing rigour. As Professor Strachan says in his foreword, Dr Murray "has filled a massive gap in the history of war".

This book is invaluable reading for anyone wishing to understand why the trench warfare of the First World War took the shape that it did, and is recommended for any reader interested in the major wars of the later nineteenth century or in the First World War.

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