

The Remount Department: Horsing the Army in Twentieth-century Warfare

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When war broke out in 1914, the British Army owned about 25,000 horses. Motor vehicles in all British Commands totalled to only 507; more than half of these got used in Britain.¹ In 1919, the British Army owned 45,646 motor vehicles. Although mechanisation of the army increased 90-fold, the war machinery relied heavily on animal power.² By 1917, the army owned 591,000 horses, 213,000 mules, 47,000 camels and 11,000 oxen. Between 1914 and 1920, the Remount Department [RD] spent £67.5 million on the purchase, training, and transport of horses and mules to the frontlines.³

Nevertheless, the historiography on twentieth-century warfare barely mentions the army's intensive reliance on animal power for transportation, reconnaissance and raiding. It almost seems as if a fascination with the history of technology of machine guns, dreadnoughts, railways, heavy artillery, and aeroplanes has somewhat clouded the fact of just how crucial and indispensable horsepower was.⁴ Research of the remount question is thin. The Marquess of Anglesey's eight volumes on the British Cavalry are full of useful chronological detail but old fashioned, error-ridden, and without a firm analytical conception.⁵ The historian, writer, and producer Janusz Piekalkiewicz completed more methodological research on cavalry remounts and the reliance on horse-drawn transport of the German army in World War II. So did the historians, Richard L. Di Nardo and Austin Bay.⁶ The only comparable study on the British Army to-date is John Singleton's work on the use of horsepower during the South African and the First World War.⁷ Other accounts of equine warfare and the British army are limited to a narrowly defined military history.⁸

Research on army purchases of remounts is missing entirely. Thus, this paper enhances extant scholarship by analysing the dependence of early-twentieth-century warfare on horsepower in connection with the army's ability to exploit global horse markets. The RD, responsible for securing horses for the frontlines, stands at the centre of my study, focussing on the following questions. How did the Department supply the army with horses? What does this mean for the relationship between the state as an economic actor and horse markets?

The qualitative study relies on an array of unpublished governmental records. Based on these primary sources, the paper will proceed in three steps: Firstly, the RD will be described briefly. The RD as a governmental institution allows combining methodological aspects of business history, diplomatic, as well as military history. Secondly, the RD's work during the South African War (1899-1902) will be analysed, including the operation's catastrophic results. Lastly, the RD's situation during the First World War will be discussed. Not within the scope of this essay are transport logistics of the different horse types and their use during the war. Neither will I address the civil response to the use of horses.

¹ Great Britain. War Office. *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920* (London, 1922), 397, 400; TNA, WO 161/8, *History of the Department of the Senior Inspector of Mechanical Transport, 1914-1918*.

² War Office. *Statistics of the Military Effort*, 596.

³ George Charles Henry Victor Paget Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry, 1816 to 1919, Vol. VIII: The Western Front, 1915-1918; Epilogue, 1919-1939* (London, 1997), 287, 294. Remounts describe a supply of fresh horses for a regiment.

⁴ See, for example, Jeremy Black, *War and Technology* (Bloomington, 2013).

⁵ George Charles Henry Victor Paget Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry, 1816 to 1919, 8 Vols.* (London, 1973-1995). Another sentimental account is Shaw's easily neglectable work on animals in the army: Peter Shaw Baker, *Animal War Hero* (London, 1933).

⁶ Janusz Piekalkiewicz, *The Cavalry of World War II* (New York, 1979); R. L. DiNardo and Austin Bay, 'Horse-Drawn Transport in the German Army', *Journal of Contemporary History* 23:1 (1988), 129-42.

⁷ John Singleton, 'Britain's Military Use of Horses 1914-1918', *Past & Present* 139 (1993), 178-203.

⁸ Stephen Badsey, *Doctrine and Reform in the British Cavalry 1880-1918* (London / New York, 2016); Graham Winton, *Theirs Not to Reason Why: Horsing the British Army 1875-1925* (Warwick, 2013); David Kenyon, *Horsemen in No Man's Land: British Cavalry & Trench Warfare 1914-1918* (Barnsley, 2019).

Between 1887 and 1942, the RD, as a branch of the War Office, administered purchases, registrations, and maintenance of remounts for the British Army. In Britain, the Department kept up a reserve of 2,500 horses per annum. The purchase allowance for each horse was £40-55.⁹ To facilitate the quick purchase of horses, the RD introduced a Horse Registration Scheme in 1887. The scheme invited owners of large numbers of horses to provide horses for the army in case of need. In return, the horse owner received a subsidy of 10 shillings.¹⁰ The National Defence Act of 1888 eventually gave the government the power to requisition any horses in emergencies.¹¹

The RD's purchasing agents were usually men, recruited from the middle and upper-middle-classes. Some had a veterinary or army background who could make head or tail of a horse. However, many hastily hired and inexperienced purchasing officers in 1899, resulted in many mis-purchases. Horse dealers played their tricks on them. For example, they would file the horses' teeth to hide age marks.¹² Several officers stayed true to their upper-middle-class social standing and could not imagine "haggling over anything when buying it" and purchased at much higher prices than actual market value.¹³ Overall, however, the RD did not perform too poorly economically. Of the overall war cost of £200 million, £15.3 million got spent on remounts, mules, and donkeys. The average price paid for cavalry horses during the Boer War was £25 10s in the US, £28 in Canada, £15 in Australia, compared to £45 in Britain. Adding freight charges horses were delivered to Cape Town, for instance, from Australia at £30 3s per horse.¹⁴ The end of the war was an incalculable economic factor; therefore, the British government did not hand out contracts. The requests for more supplies tended to come in a hurriedly giving maybe ten days' notice. Consequently, dealers had to calculate the risk of ending up with more horses than the army demanded. To compensate, this could potentially lead to higher prices.¹⁵

The war in South Africa was pursued by the British to strengthen their hegemony in South Africa and the Boers/Afrikaners to defend their independence in the South African Republic and the Orange Free State.¹⁶ When the conflict broke out, remount services went to South Africa immediately.¹⁷ Against confident expectations that this would be a short conflict, the war dragged on, and the RD found itself utterly unprepared to operate on the required scale. Between October 1899 and January 1902, the RD had to supply 216,863 horses and 94,030 mules to the Cape.¹⁸ A lack of qualified equine personnel had devastating effects on the horse wastage. Immediately after embarkation, one shipment of 500 remounts was railed 1,400 km from Cape Town to Krugersdorp. After 11 days on the train during which they were only partly watered and fed, the horses were marched two more days without rest. As a result, 300 of these horses died from exhaustion within three weeks.¹⁹ Furthermore, combat,

⁹ See, Report on the Work of Army Remount Department: From the Outbreak of War in October 1899 to the Cessation of Hostilities in June 1902. [Secret], 5: TNA, WO 33/271, *Report on the Work of Army Remount Department (1899-1902)*; Great Britain. Army. Remount Department. *Proceedings of a Court of Enquiry Held at St. Stephen's House, Westminster, S.W., on the Administration of the Army Remount Department since January 1899, by Order of the Commander in Chief Dated 20th February 1902*. Cd. 993. [S.I.]: H.M.S.O., 1902, 2.

¹⁰ George Charles Henry Victor Paget Anglesey, *A History of British Cavalry, 1816 to 1919, Vol. III: 1872 to 1898* (London, 1982), 389; Winton, 'Theirs Not to Reason Why', 45-47.

¹¹ Anglesey, *Vol. III: 1872 to 1898*, 389.

¹² Sydney Galvayne, *War Horses Present and Future: Or, Remount Life in South Africa* (London, 1902), 55-6.

¹³ Galvayne, *War Horses Present and Future*, 50.

¹⁴ Singleton, 'Britain's Military Use of Horses 1914-1918', 181. Remount Department. *Administration of the Army Remount*. Cd. 993, 313; Report on the Work of the Remount Department [Secret], 23: TNA, WO 33/271, *Report on the Work of Army Remount Department (1899-1902)*.

¹⁵ Anglesey, *Vol. IV: 1899 to 1913*, 308 f.

¹⁶ For a historiography of the war, see Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh, and Mary-Lynn Suttie (eds.), *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Athens, O. / Cape Town, 2002). For an analysis, see: Bill Nasson, *The South African War, 1899-1902* (London, 1999). See for a more recent work yet somewhat scaled-down: John Boje, *A Microcosm of the South African War* (Urbana / Chicago / Springfield, 2015).

¹⁷ Report on the Remount Department. Rendered to the Field-Marshal Commanding-in-Chief by the Assistant Inspector of Remounts. Cape Town, July 1900, 1: TNA, WO 108/261, *Remount Department: Report (July 1900)*.

¹⁸ *Army (Remounts): Reports, Statistical Tables and Telegrams Received from South Africa, June 1899 to January 22nd, 1902*, Parliamentary Papers, 1902 (Cmd. 963), lviii; Remount Department. *Administration of the Army Remount*. Cd. 993, 311.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19

poor hygiene, underfeeding, and quickly spreading disease killed horses like flies. Each month in 1901, about 25 per cent of horses died. That means that on average, every single horse had to be replaced every four months, making this an expensive operation.²⁰

Local markets were depleted quickly. The national reserve from Britain did not last long either and replenishments were scarce. The making of a horse takes four to six years. That means that breeders cannot adapt to sudden increases in demand quickly. The RD had to enter foreign markets. To rate the diplomatic risk of government purchases in other countries, the Foreign Office [FO] began to collect relevant information in British consulates. Purchases in the Netherlands and Germany were out of the question because of Boer sympathies. Norwegian horses were too expensive, and the Swedish and Danish markets were too small. The Swiss market was too self-engulfed to be of interest. Greece, Italy, and Spain were no suppliers of horses so much as of mules.²¹ Guatemalan horses turned out to be unsuitable as did horses from Rio de Janeiro and Venezuela. The Asian and Eurasian markets did not yield many results either. Enquiries got addressed at Constantinople, Aleppo, Bagdad, Beirut, Smyrna and some other cities. Even far away countries, such as Japan and Thailand, were contacted, although their resources were practically nil. The Russian market was huge, but the RD had to proceed carefully and buy only through local dealers and as quietly as possible. There was the danger that Russian authorities prohibit foreign procurements.²² When the consulate in Algeria offered Barb-Arab horses for army purposes for £15-30 in February 1900, the FO advised against the purchases to avoid complications with France.²³

Unlike a non-state business, the RD had to take into account geopolitics, not just price. To keep cost down and avoid diplomatic complications the RD purchased mostly in Hungary, Argentina, and the USA. In January 1900, Sir Horace Rumbold, an ambassador in Austria, wrote to the Marquess of Salisbury that while the UK was welcome to purchase horses in Hungary, they should proceed more carefully and discreetly, without making it known that their purchases were government purchases. Austrian authorities feared that Austria-Hungary's neutrality in the South African War might be doubted "as the Anglophobe press have already mentioned the matter."²⁴ To preserve diplomatic relationships, remount officers operated in plainclothes to keep a low profile.

Transactions were not without prejudice either. On Southern and Northern-American markets, British purchasers preferred to trade with fellow Englishmen, seen as a "guarantee of the fairness of the rules of the Horse Association as well as the ability of the buyers."²⁵ However, the distrust of character and capability was mutual. US farmers mistrusted English buyers who, in turn, found it difficult to do business with them. To circumvent the problem remount commissioners hired American buyers and sent them to American horse owners for purchases.²⁶ Despite being a global operator, the RD often preferred dealing with Englishmen. This illuminates the presumed characteristics of English self-perception, such as fairness, on a transatlantic level.

After the war, the RD was met with public and political suspicions, and remount officials got accused of incompetence and corruption.²⁷ The Military Court and a Royal Commission investigated the South African War in 1902 and 1903 and pressed for changes. Although the army focused increasingly on mechanical traction and the use of bicycles to diminish the demand for horses whose suffering had become a sensitive moral and political issue and although the RD was better prepared in 1914 than it had been in 1899, the demand for horses far exceeded all expectations. During the war, 1.2 million horses had to be supplied. Because of the immense demand, the RD no longer sent teams

²⁰ Sandra Swart, 'Horses in the South African War, c. 1899-1902', *Society and Animals* 18:4 (2010), 348-366, here: 353-356.

²¹ TNA, FO 437/437, *War in S. Africa. Remounts (Horses and Mules). Vol. 1, 1899-1900*; TNA, FO 83/2179, *Remount Resources of Foreign Countries, 1902-1905*.

²² TNA, FO 83/2179, *Remount Resources of Foreign Countries*.

²³ TNA, FO 437/437, *War in S. Africa. Remounts (Horses and Mules). Vol. 1, 1899-1900*.

²⁴ Telegram Sir Horace Rumbold to Marquis of Salisbury, 22nd January 1900, in TNA, FO 437/437 *War in S. Africa. Remounts (Horses and Mules). Vol. 1, 1899-1900*.

²⁵ Remount Department. *Administration of the Army Remount*. Cd. 993, 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁷ For instance: Equine Aspects of the War. *The Country Gentleman: Sporting Gazette*, 23 June 1900, 773. A sitting of the House of Commons: Parliament: House of Commons, Friday, Jan 31. *The Times*, 01 Feb 1902, 8.

of remount officers around Northern America but bought from large firms and dealers. Between 500 to 1,000 horses left North America for Europe every one-and-a-half days between 1914 and 1918.²⁸

From around 1900, motorization had diminished the number of horses everywhere, and hence supply was lower than in 1899.²⁹ To protect national agricultural food production, the Department soon returned to foreign horse markets. Some markets, like the Hungarian, had become inaccessible. Instead, purchases concentrated on Australian and Canadian markets. Before long, the RD became a multinational business providing information about foreign markets and remounts to other armies such as the Canadians, Belgians, New Zealanders, Portuguese, and French.³⁰

After the steep learning curve of the South African War, the RD's efficiency throughout the Great War demonstrates three points. Firstly, Britain's ability to draw on global horse supply speaks of its economic strength and its considerable financial and naval power at the time. Secondly, although the expanding boundaries of the state during wartime might not be novel, it is worth paying attention to the RD's ability to exploit domestic as well as foreign markets. The RD span a complex economic and diplomatic network with British state officials at its centre. Thirdly, the RD challenges some taken-for-granted analyses of the quick end of the government intervention into wartime economy after 1918.³¹ Despite adaptations to a peace economy, RD officials did not leave horse markets and maintained a reserve of remounts for emergencies. Technological advance eventually ended the horses' military utility. Yet, until 1942, horses were still used alongside new technologies in the British Army.

²⁸ William George Lyddon, *British War Missions to the United States, 1914-1918* (London, 1938), 206-11.

²⁹ TNA, WO 107/17, *New Armies: Horses; statements and returns, 1914*; Keith Chivers, 'The Supply of Horses in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century', in Michael Thompson (ed.), *Horses in European Economic History: A Preliminary Canter* (Reading, 1983), 31-49, here: 40; Richard Holmes, *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford, 2001), 417.

³⁰ Singleton, 'Britain's Military Use of Horses 1914-1918', 189; Quartermaster General [QMG] Papers, Colonel Birkbeck to QMG., 18 Sept. 1914. TNA, WO 107/17, *New Armies: Horses; Statements and Returns, 1914*.

³¹ Phillip Dehne, 'The Ministry of Blockade during the First World War and the Demise of Free Trade', *Twentieth Century British History* 27:3 (2016), 333-56; John Turner, *British Politics and the Great War: Coalition and Conflict 1915-1918* (New Haven / London, 1992), 389; Kathleen Burk, 'The Treasury: From impotence to power', in id. (ed.), *War and State: The Transformation of the British Government, 1914-1919* (London, 1982), 84-107; Peter Cline, 'Winding down the war economy: British plans for peacetime recovery, 1916-19', in Burk (ed.), *War and State*, 157-181; R. H. Tawney, 'The Abolition of Economic Controls, 1918-1921', *The Economic History Review* 13:1 (1943), 1-30.