Fritz and Tommy
Across the Barbed Wire

Peter Doyle and Robin Schäfer

The war between ‘Fritz’ and ‘Tommy’ – respectively German and British soldiers – commenced once the British Expeditionary Force, landing in France in early August 1914, took up its pre-determined position in the line in support of the French. From this point on, the armies of both nations would develop their own soldiers’ speech – Soldatensprache or ‘trench slang’ – which would be continuously shaped through four years of war. It is interesting to compare the natures of these languages, of their differences, their similarities and their emergence through the shared experience of the war. In this essay, we examine aspects of the languages of the two foes, considering both their commonality and their differences. This paper represents, as far as we know, the first attempt to compare the development of ‘war slang’ in the two armies. As such it very much represents a first step in the wider comparative exploration of two distinct ‘trench languages’. In writing this essay, we draw upon our work exploring the shared experience of the British and German troops on the Western Front (Doyle and Schäfer 2015).

Arriving on the continent, British soldiers were taken in by the sights, sounds and smells, the waving crowds, the strange accents. As regulars, many of the British troops had experienced the rigours of international duties, and had acted as guardians of empire in far-flung outposts, across India, in Africa, the Caribbean and even the Mediterranean. They were used to foreign postings; after all, over half the British army of 1914 was spread overseas. And they were well trained. In the aftermath of the disastrous opening campaigns of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, when the Boer citizen-soldiers had painfully exposed the inadequacies of the British regular army, things had been tightened up considerably. And yet that next foe would be one of the most highly organized, efficient and powerful of European nations – one that had been described by
G. W. Steevens in the Daily Mail in 1897, just seventeen years previously, as ‘a perfect machine’, a machine only too capable of defeating Britain on the field of battle. The first British soldiers to be captured in 1914 saw for themselves the power of their enemies. Lieutenant Malcolm Vivian Hay, of the 1st Gordon Highlanders, had a chance to examine it at first hand:

Once we passed a train with heavy artillery on specially constructed wagons, and we saw several trains of ordinary field artillery. These trains of troops, munitions, motor-cars, coal, and a hundred other weapons of war that were hidden from view, the whole methodical procession of supplies to the Front, were most suggestive of power, of concentration, and organisation of effort. Most impressive was this glimpse of Germany at war. It is difficult to convey the impression to those who have not seen Germany in a state of war. Men who have been at the Front see little of the power which is behind the machine against which they are fighting. (An Exchanged Officer 1916: 215)

In summer 1914, the German army in the west stood at about 1.6 million strong. This machine, programmed to win, swept through the borders of Belgium as it took its part in unleashing the Schlieffen Plan, the German war plan that had been developed in 1904. With a wary eye on revenge-hungry French to the west – allied to the Russians in the east – the plan envisaged a great arcing movement that would involve seven armies wheeling around, constrained only by the Channel coast. When the Germans crossed the Belgian border, the British guarantee to support the independence of the one-hundred-year-old state was tested. Britain was to support the French and come to the aid of ‘gallant little’ Belgium. From August 1914, the minuscule British army faced its toughest enemy in the Germans, who outnumbered it ten times and who were an unfamiliar foe. This was the first time they had met in battle.

What was the actual relationship between the Germans and the British troops? Though shaped by the virulent propaganda at home, this relationship was also born from the actions of the soldiers at the front. The armies of Britain and Germany were distinctly different. In organization, national characteristics, recruitment and logistics, the two armies moulded and shaped their soldiers in ways that would influence their attitudes, approaches and beliefs (see Doyle and Walker 2012). These would also affect the development of identifiable idioms and slang terms.

Tim Cook has discussed the nature and development of trench slang, discussing its purpose and imperatives (Cook 2013). According to him,