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Scapegoat Arm: Twentieth-Century Cavalry in Anglophone Historiography

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Abstract

The cavalry has not been treated kindly by military historians. Portrayed as an anachronism on the twentieth-century battlefield, the arm became a convenient scapegoat for failures in war and the slow pace of modernisation in peacetime. This article traces the debate over cavalry over the course of the last hundred years, drawing both on contemporary sources and later historical analysis. It is suggested that a reassessment of the capabilities of early twentieth-century soldiers and an interest in the military history of eastern Europe has led, in turn, to a more positive interpretation of the cavalry's role in modern warfare.

Scapegoat Arm: Twentieth-Century Cavalry in Anglophone Historiography¹

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Abstract

The cavalry has not been treated kindly by military historians. Portrayed as an anachronism on the twentieth-century battlefield, the arm became a convenient scapegoat for failures in war and the slow pace of modernisation in peacetime. This article traces the debate over cavalry over the course of the last hundred years, drawing both on contemporary sources and later historical analysis. It is suggested that a reassessment of the capabilities of early twentieth-century soldiers and an interest in the military history of eastern Europe has led, in turn, to a more positive interpretation of the cavalry's role in modern warfare.

NEITHER contemporary critics nor later historians have been kind to the cavalry. Arrogant blunderers run ragged by Boer mounted riflemen; anachronistic, armoured cuirassiers staring in horror and disdain at trenches and barbed wire; foot-dragging technophobes holding back the process of mechanisation; these are the prevailing images of twentieth-century cavalymen in Anglophone historiography. The arm has served as a convenient scapegoat for military setbacks in wartime and soldiers' alleged reactionary impulses in peacetime. This dismissive attitude is deeply entrenched in military historiography. Robert Citino's recent, highly regarded study of the evolution of European warfare in the early

1. The author wishes to thank the journal's anonymous readers for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Gervase Phillips is Principal Lecturer in the Department of History, Manchester Metropolitan University. He is the author of *The Anglo-Scotts Wars, 1513–1550* (1999) and has published articles in such journals as *War and Society*, *Technology and Culture*, and *War in History*.



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