The Monstrous Anger of the Guns

The Development of British Artillery Tactics
1914 - 1918

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the development of British artillery tactics on the Western Front and how these developments affected the course of the major British offensives. It also examines why these changes and their significance have not had a central part in the post-war historical debate concerning the conduct of Britain’s campaigns on the Western Front. It begins with a review of the Royal Artillery’s tactical doctrines, weapons and organizational structure at the outbreak of war. During the course of 1915 all of these would be found to be inappropriate for the conditions of the Western Front. During 1916 the first significant steps towards solving these problems were taken. The centralization of artillery command was begun with the appointment of army artillery commanders, and the formation of heavy artillery groups. Tactical innovations such as the creeping barrage were developed and refined. But none of these improvements brought more than partial success. For the Royal Artillery still lacked a large body of effective long-range heavy artillery pieces that could make a preparatory bombardment effective. During 1917 this body of heavy artillery was finally arriving on the battlefields. Correspondingly, debate amongst the high command of the British Army concerning how best to use them intensified. During the course of the year the Royal Artillery attempted three distinctly different types of artillery preparation, with varying degrees of success. The thesis then concludes with an examination of the role of the artillery in the British offensive of 1918. In this campaign the Royal Artillery, now out-gunning their German rivals in sheer numbers and range, and with greater tactical flexibility and more advanced techniques of gunnery than their rivals, proved to be a decisive force in dislodging the German armies from the Hindenburg line.