SECTION I

COMBAT EXPERIENCED AND IMAGINED
CHAPTER ONE

GERMAN AND FRENCH REGIMENTS ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1914–1918*

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Introduction

For the majority of First World War front line soldiers, the war was understood and experienced at the level of their regiment and below—their battalion, their company and their platoon. They only encountered the division level of army organization sporadically, and rarely interacted with the levels of command above this. An investigation of regiments and their components thus throws light on soldiers as well as on their officers at the level at which they participated jointly in the war. This focus on regiments allows us to resolve one of the most persistent problems in the historiography of the First World War. For years, the historiography has been starkly divided between an older, traditional military history ‘from above’ which focused on officers and a more recent history of the war ‘from below’ that emphasized the experiences of the soldiers. New scholarship has tended to concentrate almost entirely on the soldiers’ perspective and largely ignored that of the officers, as the idea of writing history ‘from above’ became discredited, resulting in a deficit of research on officers. A new study of officers that is not confined to the historiography of the general staffs is long overdue—one that examines officers’ experiences in a similar way to those of ordinary soldiers, using the new methods that have been developed within cultural history—in the interests of an integrated military history.¹

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