

*War in the Trenches 1914-1918: Why does the war become stalemated in muddy trenches? Can it be simply summed up as mass chaos with “young lions” being needlessly sacrificed by “donkey” generals?*

### **Seminar Issue: The Trenches in The First World War.**

- A. Foresight: Ivan Bloch, a writer/banker near the turn of the century, predicted modern war to be horrible and that it would result in a stalemate between the two sides with rival trench lines.
  - a. He was written off, because he was against war, a Jew, a banker and Polish.

### **Trench Warfare -> Strategic, Technological, Place**

#### 1. Strategic Origins

One of the most iconic images of the First World War is that of the trenches. We are told accurately that they were full of mice, lice, vermin, mud, stench from rotting bodies, and disease [Trench foot and gangrene]. Most people are familiar with the famous 400 plus mile trench system of the western front. However, not all of the war was fought in the trenches. Other theatres of War, such as the Asian and African theatres, saw little to no trench warfare. Moreover, even the Western front until 1915 was characterized not by trenches, but by the German movement towards Paris, notably stopped at the Marne and the slow push back of the Allies to Northern France and Belgium. This push back was called a race to the sea which both sides engaged in. The aim was to get farther north allowing an outflanking of the enemy to occur and possibly leading to a victory. The result was that they both got to the sea, which effectively meant that no outflanking could occur. Thus, it was hard for either side to push the enemy back due to exhaustion and no notable opening for a proper push. The Allies tried to break through the line throughout 1915, but ended up with the slaughter that was the Somme and other misfortunes. The only thing to do was to dig in and hold the line, and digging in meant trenches. Now one might ask, why did the French and Allies not build trenches at the start of the German advance in 1914? The simple answer was nobody knew what to expect and trench warfare used in the past had not proven effective, simply because it was not used to a great extent. Plus, there is the old adage about Generals being two wars behind. Additionally, many of the nations had not fought a war, let alone a major one, in at least 45 to 100 years.

## 2. Technological Origins

Perhaps, of more importance to the development of Muddy trenches and stalemate was the technological advancements that had occurred since the last major international conflagration of the Napoleonic Wars a 100 years earlier.

### Earlier Trenches:

American Civil War, Boer War, & Russo-Japanese War.

While trenches did play a sometimes-advantageous role in these conflicts, they did not epitomize them.

### What Changed?

- A. In two words: The Industrial Revolution [2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> phases had/were occurring]
  - a. Steam, coal, oil, chemical, electrical and internal combustible engines revolutionized energy and in term production
  - b. Mass Production had occurred
- B. Effect:
  - a. Weapons were improved and much more deadly; they could also be produced much more quickly than in the past.
  - b. This meant there now better developed quick firing rifles and more soldiers possessing them.
    - i. They could shoot 500 meters
  - c. Machine guns... although they were not of the mobile modern type, they were extremely effective and quick
    - i. 400-500 bullets a minute.
  - d. Additionally, Mortars [originally from the eighteenth<sup>th</sup> century], grenades, and explosives made killing that more effective
- C. Result:
  - a. There was simply no way soldiers could fight above land without getting hit by explosives, shrapnel, or mowed down by machine gun fire.
  - b. Trenches dug into the land were necessary.
  - c. It changed tactics and made the war extremely bloody
    - i. First time in history more deaths in a war due to dying in the field than wounds.
- D. Trench Warfare is defensive warfare
  - a. Idea
    - i. The idea of trenches is to protect oneself from the barrage of deadly fire that was made eminently more effective and dangerous due to modern technology.
    - ii. Moreover, the iconic image of the war was the machine gun. It was not overtly mobile and as such it was defensive in nature
    - iii. It was not until a protected vehicle, called the tank, was introduced that mobility reentered the war.

b. Trench Design

i. Most trenches were often staggered or there were a series of trenches stretching back over 400 plus meters. Often they switched back and forth along right degree angles to blunt the effect of explosions.

1. Both these measures were defensive.

ii. *“Trenches might be claustrophobic, verminous, smelly, wet, cold, but they offered the best protection available against blast and bullets and they saved lives.”*

Europeans fighting Europeans

Another reason was simply that Europeans were fighting other Europeans who had modern weapons and had experienced the technological sea change of the last 120 years.

While machine guns had existed before the First World War, Europeans had only used them against colonial opponents, who knew nothing about the new weapon’s potency. Additionally, the Europeans had not had to fear any machine gun fire before, because their opponents simply did not possess the weapon.

**Impact of Trench Warfare:**

Trench Warfare had a great underlying influence on War strategy:

Because the war evolved into a defensive struggle, land came to hold a sacred significance. This idea was drilled into officers’ heads. If ground was lost, officers constantly ordered counter-attacks, which were fierce and unyielding in addition to wasting many lives.

Because of this, trench warfare may appear senseless to us today. Yet, the war became one of mere meters of land; losing 400 yards or meters meant that your side was losing the war. The war was measured by loss of land in addition to men. So to the Generals of the time, it was not senseless at all. It made sense. The technology and the lack of available options until the tank [which was also to a degree insufficient] made slaughter on a mass scale a part of the war.

**Why Did Generals waste men in ‘fruitless assaults?’ Was it senseless slaughter?**

**1. Democracies and Technology: The Growth of the Press and Total War**

This was essentially the first war of democratized nations and the growth of the press meant that newspapers covered the conflict. There was a tendency to please the home front and keep up the myth of the successful boys at the front, because in a democracy it was important to maintain a certain public perception. Myths needed promulgating in an era of Total War. Propaganda helped to keep this myth alive.

**2. Stalemates do not end wars and in fact prolong them.**

Stalemates make generals seek ways to blast through them. For example, many Historians see Douglas Haig as a ‘butcher of man,’ with his fruitless assaults grinding

away his army. Moreover, to many historians, class was an issue. It was simply upper class or well-connected Generals who were sacrificing the lives of young working class boys. Modern historians have begun to take a more balanced approach to studying Haig. For instance, they ponder what other options were open to these Generals for breaking the stalemate and introducing some mobility back into the war. Moreover, Haig wanted to use tanks during the Somme and was given only 44 of the 300 he asked for. Haig also was perhaps ahead of the times, wanting to practice a lightning war. Unfortunately, he lacked the materials, because supply was low or the technology was not as developed as he needed it to be. Moreover, attrition had always been a part of military campaigns. Perhaps Haig and others get blamed to a degree because it was a more democratic world and a more reported war than ever before. Moreover, he showed the resolve of the allies to continue the fight. In other words, to the men at the time they were proving their great power status, fitness, and national resolve. So military intentions were good, but execution was flawed. Additionally, a lot of sensible ideas were tried and simply did not work, in many ways it was the trial and error that although it cost lives, was how the armies learned and helped break some stalemates in battles.

Moreover, from great failure comes great learning. The Canadians learnt the more effective technique of a creeping barrage, better planning, and tighter coordination of attacks.

What Haig can be faulted for is his single-mindedness of just throwing everything at the enemy and not reassessing his tactics or changing them as the battle unfolded. Even still, they had not learned that advancing in a line was a disastrous mistake.

So, in a way it was donkey generals sacrificing young lions, but at the time it seemed they believed it the only strategy that would prevent them from losing the war. From our perspective, the First World War General was a callous figure, which was ineffective. Yet, from the perspective of 1915 on, it seems like it was their only choice, it seems like they were in a conflict that they did not fully understand and had to make do with what they knew. It seems like they had ideas, but not the technology to implement them or the needed supply of that technology.

In a sense, the technology available at the day made the defensive too powerful, while there was not the technology to make the offensive powerful enough to introduce mobility to the war. In short, perhaps the generals had to do the best they could with what they had and sadly, not sacrificing lives meant losing the war and losing the public, and that was unacceptable.

## A Senseless Slaughter - Why did men continue to fight?

“Adrenaline, fear, discipline, and belief in their leaders carried the men forward.”

- Tim Cook

1. Sense of Duty
  - a. This is very evident in one of the most famous poems from the war, John McCrae’s *In Flanders Fields*:

“Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch, be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die...”
2. Boredom
  - a. At times there were significant lapses between fighting and soldiers became bored. Thus, a potential attack was seen as freeing them from the cold, muddy, lifestyle of the trenches.
  - b. “At daybreak we were told to ‘stand to our arms.’ I almost danced with excitement at the anticipation of the attack. And so we stood with bayonets fixed until what some Johnny called ‘the cold, grey dawn’ grew into broad daylight. I was really disappointed that no attack came off.”
3. Alcohol [Rum/Brandy]
  - a. The prospect of alcohol kept men’s morale higher than it would have been. Moreover, it helped them endure the trials of trench warfare.
  - b. Many saw it as a reward for them fighting and staying alive.
    - i. “If we hadn’t had rum, we would have lost the war”
  - c. Without rum, morale went down and it led to mutinous behavior.
4. Truces
  - a. They made the war more bearable and reveal a bit of leniency either between the command and the soldiers or in the soldiers interpretation of the commands.
    - i. Commanders had to show some leniency, because once the soldiers went over top, they needed them to follow orders and a negative relationship would have been disastrous.
5. They were not continuously at risk
  - a. Soldiers were often moved from the front lines, to support trenches, to supply/reserve trenches.
  - b. Many soldiers had a preoccupation with sleep, reading letters, hot food, and creature comforts.
  - c. Many were given warm and comfortable clothing
  - d. Games played included football, gambling with cards, etc.
  - e. When they left to the reserves, they enjoyed canteens, quasi-music halls, concert parties, etc. This helped to link them with home.
  - f. They also got visits home.
    - i. Many complained about going home and not being able to fit their experienced horrors of the war with the public’s jingoism and glorification. However, this seems to be a minority view, French mutinies were partially based on the lack of visits home in 1917.

6. Harsh military code
  - a. You fought or faced physical reprimand
  - b. Desertion, mutiny, etc. were grounds for execution.
7. High Casualty Rates
  - a. High troop turnover prevented fatigue and despair from setting in or becoming too widespread
8. Patriotism or Nationalism
  - a. Belief in one's nation or cause, despite the horrors of war, was a significant motivation to fight on
  - b. Nationalism was heightened before the war
    - i. Many Canadians saw it as a path to greater independence.
  - c. Propaganda made soldiers believe by playing with the societal belief in chivalry/morality that the other side was inhuman, brutes, etc. and that they posed a threat to women and civilization.
9. The Joy of War
  - a. Many Europeans and academics greeted a century without war as a negative, believing it made boys, society, and the nation soft.
    - i. Nietzsche: thought of Christian civilization as soft, because it was a wimp's religion
    - ii. Social Darwinism stressed struggle; the apex of struggle was war. This would be the survival of the fittest nation
      1. Led to a crisis of masculinity on a massive social scale [Leo Braudy].
      2. Furthermore, many men wanted to prove their bravery to the women of the nation. When many returned they came to resent women for questioning their manhood if they did not sign up and go to war.
      3. Culture... had a huge role
    - iii. Many Europeans greeted the declaration of war as a positive thing and celebrated it.
  - b. Many Soldiers saw war as a way to prove their masculinity, a way to become a hero, or gain glory. It was honorable to die for your country.
    - i. "The problem with war, was the honor aspect, it was the cause of the blood." Since the Iliad the idea has been a cornerstone of the western mind.
  - c. Many enjoyed hunting and saw the war as an extension of it. It was an adventure and many just loved the brawn and danger of it. It was seen as a sport.
    - i. "It was the greatest adventure of my life"

### **Debate: The gap between generals and the common soldier**

One side argues that it was the generals [usually upper crusted individuals], who filled the troops with notions of glory and who lived the high life of fine food and drink while the troops sacrificed and suffered/died in the thick of it. Added to this are dimensions of old and young, a generational conflict. Furthermore, a class conflict between the working class and aristocrats is yet another dimension. Both have elements of truth to them, yet it must be said, it's often the poor, who, forced by physical or mental force, fight the wars of the rich. Those who are given less, have to do the mess, while those who were given a lot do not.

Yet, recent historians have questioned this appraisal. Primarily due to the fact that in society the aristocratic or professional class of officer had been in steady decline during the past century due to the absence of war and socio-political evolutions. Thus, more officers were from the same socio-economic class or at least closer simply because they were needed. Thus, soldiers were more willing to fight and listen to one of their own, which they respected than the upper-crustrated individuals.

### **How the subject matter can be taught**

Outside of the one class on the topic, a student might choose it as essay topic.

There should be a better focus on how and why historical figures acted the way they did, instead of a judgment based on contemporary values. There is too much of an emphasis to depict the generals and the war as a dumb and selfish and a useless and bloody war. Equally contentious in the same vain are the origins of the war and the Versailles treaty.

Make use of War Poetry; but clarify, because to some recent historians they give only one side of the war. For instance, Hemingway was an ambulance driver and not in the trenches, making his claims a bit more tenuous.

Make use of *Black Adder's World War One*. It is black comedy that illustrates aspects of the war brilliantly. Afterwards, a discussion is a perfect fit.

Additionally, the impact of the war on Canada can be heavily debated. Did it give Canada autonomy both legally and mentally or is this just a way to justify all the deaths? The impact of the war on the world on the psyche and philosophy should be addressed as well.

## The Concept of War and Technology

### A) Cultural Aspects of the War

#### 1) Concept of War:

- ❖ War, to many Europeans, offered glorious adventure.
- ❖ Many harkened back to the glorious romantic notions of heroism
- ❖ Thought it would be over by Christmas.
- ❖ War = cavalry attacks, marches, parades and many did not want to miss out on the chance of a lifetime.
- ❖ However, there were a growing number of pacifists; many who did not want to go to war abhorred the notion.

#### 2) Reality:

- ❖ By the winter of 1914, the German Army was halted at the Battle of Marne in northern France: a stalemate ensued... Germany or the Allies could not drive the other back
- ❖ Trenches were dug to protect the troops and block offensives
- ❖ The rest of the war was fought for mere meters of land, for which 100,000s of lives were sacrificed.
- ❖ Horses were ineffective in the mud swamps, trenches and in the face of heavy artillery.
- ❖ Mass Industrialization had occurred in Europe since Napoleon.
  - Technology brought about weapons such as, mustard gas, tanks, heavy artillery and machine guns.

3) The First World War is to a huge degree responsible for the widely accepted modern notion of war being horrible/brutal and overturned the previous glorifications and romantic notions of war.

### **How did the First World War achieve this?**

#### a) New Technologies and Weapons of War:

##### i. Machine Guns:

- Recently used in colonial wars in Africa
- Could stop cold a mobile infantry attack across open ground
- 550-600 rounds/minute; twice as much by the end of the war; called the coffee grinder as it ground to pieces any attackers
- Primitive state: could not be used in a mobile fashion; defensive not offensive as it weighed 30-60 kg and was mounted on a tripod.
- Accounted for most of the deaths

ii. Bayonets:

- Developed in Bayonne, France, it is a long knife blade attached to a rifle. If in close you could stab instead of wasting a bullet.
- More psychological than practical; the jagged knife
- Also, used to toast bread, open canned goods, and pick dirt out of boots.

iii. Flamethrowers:

- Launched burning fuel out of a gun... extremely terrifying
- Could fire as far as 18 meters and was later put on tanks

iv. Grenades

- Comes from the French word pomegranate...
- It was a mini-bomb that could be thrown into an enemies' trenches/dugouts to clear them out, before 'going over the top'
- Detonated by impact or time fuse/pin.

v. Rifles

- Most widely used weapon for the average soldier in the infantry
- Used by snipers as well

vi. Tanks

- Moving armored vehicles that could withstand gunfire and attack, brought a better offense back into the war
- Developed as a result of trench warfare; to protect soldiers from machine guns, flamethrowers, and grenades and allow armies to move forward across no man's land without such a large loss of life
- At first clumsy and the morass of mud was a major obstacle of effectiveness early on. Winston Churchill pushed for its implementation.
- By 1918 after improvements, it was a contributing reason for Allied victory

vii. Trench Mortars

- Mini-cannons that would launch projectiles and later bombs into the opposing trenches
- Steep angle made it launch high and drop with sometimes-lethal efficiency.

viii. Poison Gas:

- Previously considered uncivilized... it was used as a way to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare

- First use was in Ypres, 1915... the Germans pumped out hoses full of chlorine gas.
- Effects: it would destroy your respiratory organs and choke you to death after causing initial blindness.
- To fight this: gas masks, but before these were invented soldiers were told to urinate on rags and hold over their mouths to neutralize the gas
- Both sides used mustard gas (caused huge skin blisters) and phosgene (invisible, but suffocating)
- Over a 100,000 died from gas during the war.

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