



Australian troops in the Lone Pine trenches (AWM, 2021)

FRANK MACDONALD MM MEMORIAL PRIZE

QUESTION 2:

What is trench warfare, and why was so much of World War I dominated by this method of fighting? Consider such elements as technology, strategy, attitudes of leaders, and any other factors you can think of. Did trench warfare affect the duration of the war?

Bridie Latimer, Year 9

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*“It is a wild scene... Filth and rubbish everywhere, graves built into the defences... troops of enormous rats creep and glide, to the unceasing accompaniment of rifle and machine guns and the venomous whining and whirring of the bullets which pass overhead.”*¹

This is trench warfare.

As the First World War progressed, a new system of fighting emerged from the Western Front.² Trench warfare is defined as a method of combat where opposing sides occupy an area of land, attacking, counterattacking and defending from entrenched positions.³ By September 1914, trenches were a common aspect of the war, reflecting the straightforward need for more soldiers on the front line to defend themselves from enemy fire. There was no precedent, however, for the scale and duration of the trench warfare that was such a dominant feature of World War 1. By 1915, there was more or less a continuous line of trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps,⁴ and to a lesser extent one from the Baltic to the Carpathians. The efforts of the war were heavily influenced by the development of new weaponry and the innovation of those existing.⁵ This alone, however, was not enough to affect the outcome. Following the failed execution of the Schlieffen Plan, political tensions were high between nations like Russia, Germany and France. Trenches became an effective way to shelter against heavy firepower, with political figures encouraging military officials to adopt such a method, eventually causing the stalemate on the Western Front in 1914.

The failure of the Schlieffen Plan changed the dynamic of the First World War greatly, leading to the development of trenches. The renowned German war plan sought to avoid fighting a war on two fronts by attacking France from the north, encircling Paris, quickly defeating the French, and then advancing east to face the Russians, who would not have been able to mobilise in time to support their ally.⁶ The plan, however, entailed that German troops would need to invade France via Belgium, consequently violating The Treaty of London, ensuring Belgium's neutrality.⁷ Troops encountered some resistance, giving Britain the time to organise its Expeditionary Forces, ultimately delaying Germany's invasion of France. Following the Battle of Mons, German troops

¹ Grant R.G. (2018). *World War 1: The Definitive Visual History*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, p. 94

² HISTORY. (2021). *Life in the Trenches of World War I*. [online] Available at: <https://www.history.com/news/life-in-the-trenches-of-world-war-i> [Accessed 20 Jul. 21].

³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2020). *trench warfare | Definition, History & Facts | Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/trench-warfare> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

⁴ National WW1 Museum and Memorial. (2021). *Trenches | National WW1 Museum and Memorial*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/wwi/trenches> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

⁵ Royde-Smith, G. John. (2021). *World War I – Technology of war in 1914 | Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I/Technology-of-war-in-1914> [Accessed 20 Jul. 21]

⁶ Limbach, Raymond. (2016). *Schlieffen Plan | German military history | Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Schlieffen-Plan> [Accessed 20 Jul. 21]

⁷ Wilton Park. (2014). *Commemorating 100 years since Britain entered the First World War - Wilton Park*. [online] Available at: <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/2014/08/01/commemorating-100-years-since-britain-entered-the-first-world-war/> [Accessed 20 Jul. 21]

were depleted as a result of the failed Schlieffen Plan.⁸ From there onwards, the war quickly developed into sustained trench warfare on the Western Front.⁹

Following their defeat at the Battle of Marne, the Germans retreated to the River Aisne where the digging of trenches began.¹⁰ The famed 'race to the sea' saw both sides seek to outflank each other in order to cut their enemies off from behind. None of the forces, however, were successful. As a result of this strategy, a long line of trenches were established stretching from Belgium to Switzerland.¹¹ In 1914, there were few attempts to break through the trench lines, the most notable of which were the battles of Ypres in November and Artois and Champagne in December, although, neither side were to prevail.¹²

The early war of movement in the late summer of 1914,¹¹ sought for much needed protection in the form of trenches. A typical trench system was comprised of two, three, four, or potentially more trench lines dug in a zig-zag arrangement so that no enemy standing at one end could fire for more than a few yards down the length of the trench.¹³ The trenches offered protection from small arms and machine-guns, additionally protecting against artillery bombardments; to some extent. The needed protection they offered spread their influence from the Western Front in France and Belgium, to the Eastern Front in Russia. This, however, caused more issues in the long run

As the war continued, the creation of new trenches and technological innovations by both the Allies and the Central Powers brought their efforts to a halt. With trenches surrounded by barbed wire fences, soldiers armed with machine guns and grenades, in addition the foreground was frequently subject to artillery bombardment, making proposed attacks difficult.¹⁴ The development of extensive railroads made bringing reserves onto the front line on short notice easy.¹⁵ This meant, however, that the defensive became a considerably easier task than the offensive, ensuring there would be no swift victory by either side.

⁸ Grant R.G. (2018). *World War 1: The Definitive Visual History*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, p. 48

⁹ Onion, Amanda. (2021). *Was Germany Doomed in World War 1 by the Schlieffen Plan? – HISTORY*. [online] Available at: <https://www.history.com/news/was-germany-doomed-in-world-war-i-by-the-schlieffen-plan> [Accessed 22 Jul. 21]

¹⁰ HISTORY. (2021). *First Battle of the Marne begins – HISTORY*. [online] Available at: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-battle-of-the-marne-begins> [Accessed 23 Jul. 21]

¹¹ National WW1 Museum and Memorial. (2021). *Trenches | National WW1 Museum and Memorial*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/wwi/trenches> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

¹² Duffy, Michael. (2009). *First World War.com – Battles – The First Battle of Champagne, 1914*. [online] Available at: <https://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/champagne1.htm> [Accessed Jul. 23. 21]

¹³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2020). *trench warfare | Definition, History & Facts | Britannica*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/trench-warfare> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

¹⁴ Grant R.G. (2018). *World War 1: The Definitive Visual History*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, p. 94

¹⁵ Network Rail. (2021). *WWI and the railway – Network Rail*. [online] Available at: <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/stories/wwi-and-the-railway/> [Accessed 22 Jul. 21]

Caught in a stalemate on the Western Front by the end of 1914, the war was struggling due to the creation of trenches, which hindered troops from readily advancing.¹⁶ German command proceeded to shift their attention to the Eastern Front with the hope that more progress would be made.¹⁷ The difficulty to breakthrough trench fortifications made the offensive arduous, even if successful, the aggressor usually only gained mere kilometres. On the Eastern Front, the Allies made substantial advances, however, they were often driven back by the Central Powers, essentially not much progress was made.¹⁸

Military generals eventually adopted strategies that turned WW1 into a war of attrition. The Allies and the Central Powers main focus was to wear down one another physically and psychologically, often with the use of artillery bombardments.¹⁹ The adoption of such a strategy by both the Allied forces and the German army was undeniably a key reason that the war lasted four gruelling years. From 1915 to 1918, a multitude of devastating battles were fought primarily to wear down the adversary, namely the Battles of the Somme and Verdun, which resulted in the deaths of millions of young men.²⁰ Political figures during this time supported such a method, however, the military generals had no prior experience with this type of warfare on such a scale and thus were unable to bring about a timely resolution. Furthermore, the generals were stubborn; regardless of seeing that their methods were ineffectual, they insisted on a war of attrition with the use of trench warfare.

Political leaders were responsible for deciding what war aims to pursue, supporting the continuing use of trench warfare despite the horrific casualties sustained during the war.²¹ The political leaders of the Allies and the Central Powers were intent on leaving the war victorious, the effects that such warfare had was often overlooked and undermined. It was only later that the public learnt about the truth of the war. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, confided to Charles Prestwich Scott in late 1917, regarding the appalling conditions of the trenches.²²

¹⁶ Delaware Historical & Cultural Affairs. (2021) *World War 1 Begins – Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs – State of Delaware*. [online] Available at: <https://history.delaware.gov/world-war-i/> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

¹⁷ Brind, Sam. (2017). *A Brief History of WW1: Stalemate off 1915-1916 – Owlcation*. [online] Available at: <https://owlcation.com/humanities/A-Brief-History-of-WW1-Stalemate-of-1915-1916> [Accessed 23 Jul. 21]

¹⁸ Hunt, David. (2017). *World War 1 History: Overview of the War on the Eastern Front – Owlcation*. [online] Available at: <https://owlcation.com/humanities/WW1-Overview-of-the-War-On-The-Eastern-Front> [Accessed 25 Jul. 21]

¹⁹ Boff, Jonathan (2018). *Fighting the First World War: Stalemate and attrition – The British Library*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/fighting-the-first-world-war-stalemate-and-attrition> [Accessed 27 Jul. 21]

²⁰ Imperial War Museums. (2021). *What Was The Battle Of Verdun? | Imperial War Museums*. [online] Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-was-the-battle-of-verdun> [Accessed 9 Aug. 21]

²¹ Imperial War Museums. (2021). *What You Need To Know About Leadership In The First World War | Imperial War Museums*. [online] Available at <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-you-need-to-know-about-leadership-in-the-first-world-war> [Accessed 10 Aug. 21]

²² Greenslade, Roy. (2014). *First world war: how state and press kept truth off the front page | War reporting | The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/27/first-world-war-state-press-reporting> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

*“If people really knew [the truth], the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don’t know, and can’t know.”*²³

Trench warfare was abhorrent; its barbaric and grisly nature sought the need for politicians and world leaders to shield the public from its reality with censorships. It quickly became a means for authoritative figures to strengthen their control during a potentially volatile time.²⁴ The need for the truth of trench warfare to be withheld prolonged the duration of the First World War, until an agreement for an armistice was declared.

In conclusion, trench warfare prolonged the First World War. Multiple factors relating to trench warfare had to combine to extend the duration. The Schlieffen Plan was a crucial moment; the failed execution was the beginning of trench warfare.²⁵ Following their defeat at Marne, the German forces retreated to the River Aisne where the digging of trenches started. Whilst trenches offered much needed protection, their restrictive nature eventually caused a stalemate on the Western Front. Military generals who adopted this method of warfare were often inexperienced, resulting in millions unnecessary deaths. Politicians withholding the truth prolonged its use, until the signing of the armistice. Consequently, the addition of trench warfare significantly prolonged the duration of the First World War.

²³ Greenslade, Roy. (2014). *First world war: how state and press kept truth off the front page | War reporting | The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/27/first-world-war-state-press-reporting> [Accessed 11 Aug. 21]

²⁴ Davidson, Jared. (2021). *The history of censorship and State Control During the First World War | WW100 New Zealand*. [online] Available at: <https://ww100.govt.nz/censorship-state-control> [Accessed 12 Aug. 21]

²⁵ Dr. Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius. (2020). *Military Tactics of WWI: The Failure of the Schlieffen Plan*. [online] Available at: <https://www.thegreatcoursesdaily.com/wwi-failure-schlieffen-plan/> [Accessed 12 Aug. 21]

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