

Question 2: What is trench warfare and why was so much of World War One 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?

The outbreak of World War 1 in August 1914, saw Germany attempt to invade France by sweeping through neutral Belgium. As Britain and other Allied nations joined the fight and the German advance was slowed, the battlefield became known as the Western Front. This was a huge stretch of land covering large parts of France and Belgium, extending from the North Sea down to the Swiss border. A defining feature of the Western Front were the earthworks built by both sides. These trenches faced each other across no man's land, the bleak and crater filled land separating the two armies. Trench warfare soon became the defining feature of World War 1, as men sought refuge from the devastating weapons of this new century.

Trench warfare was a new way for armies to wage war, described as “a type of warfare in which opposing armies face each other in entrenched positions” (Collins Dictionary, 2021.) Confronted by new weapons such as rapid firing machine guns and the shrapnel of high explosive shells, old tactics were rendered ineffective, and the combatants were forced to dig in, thus beginning a static state of trench warfare. Soon these trenches snaked through France and Belgium, scarring the fields of Western Europe. These trenches became home to millions of soldiers from across the globe, 295,000 of which were young Australians (Anzac Century Queensland, 2021.)

Prior to World War 1, military conflicts would often see opposing forces facing each other in open fields and farmland. In the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) the battlefields were characterized by “long ranges, clear air, and wide-open fields of fire” (Nasson, 2006). Armies would freely maneuver, rapidly moving on foot or horseback. The battlefields of the Western Front, by contrast, were often motionless. The inability of either side to advance or take ground from the enemy would undoubtedly extend the duration of the war.

Long periods of inactivity would be broken by a barrage of artillery followed by charging infantry, to be met by the machineguns of the defenders. Machineguns were a new weapon, manned by a team of soldiers and capable of a high rate of fire. British leaders such as Field Marshal Haig initially dismissed these weapons, failing to see their tactical value (Newland, 2021). World War 1 machineguns, such as the MG08 used by German forces, would fire up to 600 rounds a minute, far more than an infantryman's rifle. Machineguns were often used in defensive positions, where attacking soldiers would be exposed to this mechanized slaughter. In July 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, German machineguns accounted for approximately 60,000 British casualties (Duffy, 2009), demonstrating how devastating these weapons could be. The high explosive artillery shells of World War 1 were another of the weapons forcing the opposing armies into their trenches. These rounds would detonate where they struck the earth,

flinging deadly shrapnel through the air. Massed bombardments of shells would be fired before and in support of infantry attacks. Often there would be tens or hundreds of guns used in these attacks, firing thousands of shells (World War One Facts, n.d).

For the Allied soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front and the other theatres of World War 1, life was far from safe and comfortable. Not only were they exposed to the bullets and shells of the enemy but conditions in the trenches were often physically and mentally draining. The trenches were plagued by vermin, full of mud and disease and sanitation was deficient. Food was often tinned and generally of poor quality (Canadian War Museum, 2019). Whilst the frontline infantrymen suffered in these terrible conditions, their leaders would often be miles away, safe and warm.

Leaders such as British Field Marshal Haig have long been regarded as having little care for the individual infantrymen fighting in the trenches. The soldiers were seen as little more than a commodity, something expendable, to be hurled at the German army. Haig's attitude epitomized the prevailing attitudes of military leaders on both sides. He was seen as a man who threw the lives of his men away in futile attacks, sending them to attack the heavily fortified German trenches (BBC History Magazine, 2019). It is thought Haig's disregard for modern weapons and his earlier experiences in the horse mounted cavalry battles of the Boer war influenced his tactics (Newland, 2021). Trench warfare was a new type of war with many new weapons. Haig and other leaders fought these battles the only way they knew. Their failure to adapt was a failure of their leadership.

The tactic of soldiers being urged 'over the top', forced to charge the guns and barbed wire of the defender's defenses, was perhaps a necessary evil. The static nature of trench warfare, where the conditions favored the defender meant there were few other means for an attacking force to gain territory. Artillery barrages lasting hours and consisting of dozens of guns would precede an attack. This tactic was to 'soften up' the defenders by destroying their fortifications and killing the enemy soldiers. At the end of the barrage, infantry commanders would blow their whistles and the men would ascend ladders to charge across no man's land.

After the initial advances of German forces into Belgium and France, the war soon became a stalemate with both sides adopting defensive tactics and digging into their trenches. This slow-paced warfare meant that both sides had to pursue new ways to penetrate the enemy's lines. In 1915 at the battle of Ypres in Northwestern Belgium, to break the stalemate, Germany launched the first gas attack on allied soldiers. The poison chlorine gas killed hundreds of French soldiers (ThoughtCo, 2020). Shortly after the allied armies would produce their own chemical weapons as well as protective masks and capes. Gas would soon become one of the most terrifying weapons of the war.

One of the biggest advances came with the invention of the tank, a heavily armed and armored vehicle. These were able to cross no man's land and attack enemy lines, whilst protecting the men within. Britain deployed its first tank during the Somme offensive. These vehicles were initially dismissed as they were slow, cumbersome and considered unsuitable for crossing trenches. Despite this, tanks saw continued use and development throughout the war.

The nature of trench warfare and the horrifying new weapons it created, meant the duration of the war was much longer than anyone anticipated. The outbreak of war was met with the attitude that it 'would be over by Christmas' (History Net, n.d). As both sides struggled to meet these challenges with outdated tactics and old-fashioned attitudes, a long war was inevitable.

World War I brought terrifying new weapons to the battlefields of Western Europe. As the armies of Germany and the Allies met on the Western Front these weapons forced them into defensive trenches. Trench warfare, where men battled whilst dug into the ground, would soon become the defining image of the war. It was a horrifying experience for the soldiers, thousands of whom would die as they fought to a stalemate. The inability of either side to decisively defeat the other undeniably extending the duration of the war.

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