

Frank McDonald Memorial Prize Essay

Zoe Rogers

Word Count: 969

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?

“Over by Christmas” (The National WWI Museum and Memorial, 2015) - these infamous words, immortalised in association with the length of World War I, fail to account for the millions of lives lost after Christmas of 1914. The unprecedented length of the war has been attributed to the dominant style of warfare: trench warfare. Many believed the war would be fought gallantly on horseback and consequently would end soon after the first shot was fired. Reality was soon juxtaposed onto this ideal, the brutality and barbarism of trench warfare was incomparable to previous wars lost and won on mount. Trench warfare not only dominated World War I but prolonged the horrific event due to a culmination of different attitudes of leader, strategies and the deployment of new technology.

Trench warfare is an ancient defensive militia tactic. This style of warfare was further developed and modernised by French military engineer Sebastian Le Prestre De Vauban in the 1600s (Ray, 2019). The modern world first saw trench warfare in the American Civil War and Boer Wars, each of which were predecessors to World War I. Trench warfare is a defensive strategy, whereby opposing forces dig intricate entrenchments in order to gain protection from artillery. Trenches face each other with a stretch of land, coined, ‘no man’s land’ in the middle. No man’s land could span anywhere between 45m to 1.6km (Adams, 2004, p.15). On many fronts, in particular Gallipoli, the enemy appeared to be in close proximity, creating palpable fear. Throughout World War I, trench systems used a three-line strategy. The first trench line was the area where offensive and defensive combat would occur or originate. The second line was where soldiers could be rested and the third housed supplies. Connecting the three lines were communication trenches. Trenches were dug in a zig zag configuration. This was to prevent total decimation of troops in the event of a breakthrough by enemy forces.

By 1915 trench warfronts spanned from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps. The tactic was utilised out of expediency by both sides. Failing to execute the Schlieffen Plan with success ensured the entrance of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth forces, Germany was placed in a vulnerable position geographically and tactically. Following the defeat at the Battle of Marne in September 1914, Germany’s dreams of Paris were lost. The ‘Race to the Sea’ whereby, the Germans fled with haste to ports by the North Sea, encouraged the Allies to take

chase. This Race to The Sea resulted in the creation of the Western Front. Both sides dug trenches to provide protection from ferocious artillery. The phenomenon was detailed by a German officer, Captain Rudolph Binding November 1914, "*The war has got stuck into a gigantic siege on both sides. The whole front is one endless fortified trench.*" (Gilbert, 2004, p.10) The combat along the Western Front reached a stalemate. Therefore, trench warfare became the dominant method of fighting and as such prolonged the length of the First World War by multiple years.

While both the Allied and Central powers used trench warfare, both adopted different strategies and held opposing attitudes. Attitudes were often influenced by leadership and goals. Germany had an overwhelmingly defensive attitude and dug deeper trenches. German trenches were usually three metres deep whilst Allied trenches were two metres. Germany also chose to dig entrenchments in defensible and tactical positions. This proved crucial following the Battle of Chemin de Dames, as German troops were able to retreat and regroup at the Hindenburg Line (Hansen, 2000, p.49). Germany did, however, aim to defeat France quickly despite their predominantly defensive attitude. "*Germany's strategy was based off the fact that it had an enemy to the west (France) and a bigger enemy to the East (Russia), and that it would be impossible to defeat both at the same time.*" (Darlington, et al, 2012, p. 232)

In contrast, the Allies strategy was focused on a mobile offensive approach. One of the only ways to achieve a breakthrough in the trenches was to introduce attrition warfare (McInerney, 2014, p.364). Attrition warfare aims to overpower the enemy with pure numbers. This attitude proved effective; however, military leaders had to balance this strategy with the expendability of troops. Towards the end of the war, attrition warfare from the Allies was fruitful and was proved by the success at the Battle of Amiens following the 100 day offensive. German General Erich Ludendorff detailed the effect attrition tactics in trench warfare had on the German defensive on 8th August 1918, "*the black day of the German Army in the history of the war. This was the worst experience I had to go through.*" (Hampton, 2020).

The Industrial Revolution occurred in the 19th Century, prefacing World War I. Suddenly weapons unlike any seen before were able to be mass produced and the game changed for tacticians worldwide. New technology such as machine guns allowed troops to hold a line and defend with ease. However, "*Machine guns were very heavy. They had to be mounted on sturdy legs.*" (Dickman, 2017, p.14) Both sides were well equipped with defensive weaponry. While machine guns became the pinnacle of static defence, offensive ambushes for either side could

not be attempted without heavy casualties resulting. Therefore, the inert nature of machine guns necessitated the adoption of entrenchments.

The extended progression of the war required the Industrial Revolution to meet the demands made by desperate stalemate. Eventually it did. With the invention of technology such as the tank and the introduction of aerial offense. The first tank was used in action at the Battle of the Somme by British forces. The tank was a versatile weapon; it could take the oncoming German barrage while enduring the terrain of no man's land (Gilbert, 2004, p.26). The tank was the key to breaking out of the limitations enforced by the dominance of trench warfare.

World War I became known as the 'war to end all wars' (Milzarski, 2020); the brutality was perpetuated by the dominance of trench warfare. Trench warfare dominated the War due to opposing leadership attitudes and goals as well as the development of immobile military technology. Troops remained in the entanglement of trenches for years subject to horrendous conditions. Trench warfare was not designed to be the primary form of warfare. It was not until the Industrial Revolution progressed and armies were able to attain mobile offensive technology for instance the tank, the end of the war was in sight. The abhorrent violence was protracted by the dominant method of fighting, taking millions of lives in an effort to achieve momentary victory.

Bibliography

Adams, S 2004, *War In the Trenches*, Franklin Watts, London.

Daniels, P 2020, *History of Trench Warfare in World War I*, viewed 7 August 2021, <https://www.thoughtco.com/trenches-in-world-war-i-1779981>

Darlington, R, Smithies, G & Wood, A 2012, *History Alive 9*, Jacaranda, Milton, QLD.

Dickman, N 2017, *The Horror of World War I*, Raintree, London.

First trenches are dug on the Western Front 2020, History, viewed 16 August 2021, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-trenches-are-dug-on-the-western-front>

Gilbert, A 2001, *Armies of the past. Going to War in World War One*, Franklin Watts, London.

Gilbert, A 2004, *Weapons & Warfare*, Franklin Watts, London.

Hampton, M 2020, *8 August 1918: The Black Day of the German Army*, viewed 10 August 2021, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/battle-amiens#:~:text=8%20August%201918%3A%20The%20Black,German%20Army%20%7C%20Australian%20War%20Memorial>

Hansen, O 2000, *The War in the Trenches*, White-Thomson Publishing, Lewes, East Sussex.

Knighton, A 2017, *This Is How The Different Armies Approached Trench Warfare In The First World War*, Parliament of Australia, viewed 7 August 2021, <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-i/three-different-ways-armies.html>

McInerney, M (Ed.) 2014, *Humanities and Social Sciences for the Australian Curriculum 9*, Cambridge First, Sydney.

Milzarski, E 2020, *Why WWI was once called 'The War to End All Wars'*, viewed 19 August 2021, <https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-history/war-to-end-all-wars/>

OVER BY CHRISTMAS 2015, The National WWI Memorial and Museum, viewed 19 August 2021, <https://www.theworldwar.org/explore/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/over-christmas>

Trench warfare 2020, Britannica, viewed 7 August 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/trench-warfare/additional-info#history>

Wimble Don 2013, *Stalemate and Race to the Sea*, online video, 22 October, viewed 7 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUklpDyYkSY>