



The Trench Warfare of World War I: The History and Legacy of the Great War's Primary Method of Combat

Sean McLachlan, Charles River Editors

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“God would never be cruel enough to create a cyclone as terrible as that Argonne battle. Only man would ever think of doing an awful thing like that. It looked like ‘the abomination of desolation’ must look like. And all through the long night those big guns flashed and growled just like the lightning and the thunder when it storms in the mountains at home. And, oh my, we had to pass the wounded. And some of them were on stretchers going back to the dressing stations, and some of them were lying around, moaning and twitching. And the dead were all along the road. And it was wet and cold. And it all made me think of the Bible and the story of the Anti-Christ and Armageddon. And I’m telling you the little log cabin in Wolf Valley in old Tennessee seemed a long long way off.” - Alvin C. York

World War I, also known in its time as the “Great War” or the “War to End all Wars”, was an unprecedented holocaust in terms of its sheer scale. Fought by men who hailed from all corners of the globe, it saw millions of soldiers do battle in brutal assaults of attrition which dragged on for months with little to no respite. Tens of millions of artillery shells and untold hundreds of millions of rifle and machine gun bullets were fired in a conflict that demonstrated man’s capacity to kill each other on a heretofore unprecedented scale, and as always, such a war brought about technological innovation at a rate that made the boom of the Industrial Revolution seem stagnant.

The enduring image of World War I is of men stuck in muddy trenches, and of vast armies deadlocked in a fight neither could win. It was a war of barbed wire, poison gas, and horrific losses as officers led their troops on mass charges across No Man’s Land and into a hail of bullets. While these impressions are all too true, they hide the fact that trench warfare was dynamic and constantly evolving throughout the war as all armies struggled to find a way to break through the opposing lines.

Though World War I is almost synonymous with trench warfare, that method of combat was nothing new. There had been extensive use of trenches during the later stages of the American Civil War (1864-1865), and trench warfare was constant during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). These conflicts showed that modern firepower combined with entrenched positions gave a decisive advantage to the defender, yet European observers failed to learn any lessons from these conflicts, and the scale of trench warfare in World War I far eclipsed anything seen before or since, especially on the Western Front.

Since the Industrial Revolution, arms and materiel output had increased by orders of magnitude, as had the quality and uniformity of the products. Several developments had already taken place in the years building up to the conflict, stepping stones towards the vast escalation in military innovation which took place immediately prior to and during World War I. Chief among these was the invention of smokeless gunpowder, which took place concurrently among several powers between 1890 and 1905. This was a

crucial development, as it eliminated the literal “fog of war” which in vast quantities obscured the battlefield entirely and on an individual level both gave away the position of marksmen and made it impossible for them to fire accurately unless they moved away from their own smoke-cloud. Further innovations included the adoption into service of the first belt-fed machine guns, predecessors of those which would wreak such slaughter in the trenches, and the development of cannon which did not roll backwards after each shot as 19th century pieces did, but remained fixed in place.

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