



# The Western Front and the Birth of Total War

By Dr Stephen Badsey

World War One was the first mass global war of the industrialised age, a demonstration of the incredible power of modern states. Stephen Badsey tells the story of the birth of 'total war'.



Industrialisation allowed destruction to occur on an unprecedented scale

## A new kind of war

World War One was like no other war before in history. The main theatre of war, the Western Front, was deadlocked from a few months after the war's start in 1914 until a few months before its end in 1918, stretching in a continuous line of trenches from the English Channel to the Swiss frontier. By 1916 the forces of Germany, France and the British Empire, armies millions of men strong, measured advances in terms of a few miles (or kilometres) gained over several months. Casualties for each big attack or 'push' ran into hundreds of thousands on both sides, with calculations for victory based on national birth-rates to replace the losses. This was not the kind of war that anyone, including the politicians and generals who directed it, wanted to fight.

'This was... a demonstration of the prodigious strength, resilience and killing power of modern states.'

What made World War One so different was the long-term impact of the Industrial Revolution, with its accompanying political and social changes. This was the first mass global war of the industrialised age, a demonstration of the prodigious strength, resilience and killing power of modern states. The war was also fought at a high point of patriotism and belief in the existing social hierarchy; beliefs that the war itself helped destroy, and that the modern world finds very hard to understand.

More than a century before, the French Revolution of 1789 had seen the first attempts to harness citizenship and patriotism to a national war effort. In the ideology of revolutionary France, young men were conscripted into the armed forces as part of their duty as citizens, but the remaining population was also expected to make personal sacrifices for the war, blurring the distinction between civilian and soldier.

Known at first as 'People's War', this idea developed in the 19th century as part of a growing sense of national identity. By the middle of World War One it was known as 'Total War' - the organisation of entire

societies for war in a social, economic, and even spiritual sense. There were, of course, protests and debates, but the vast majority of people fought in World War One, or supported it with the 'Home Front' because they believed that victory for their own country was worth the cost.

## The age of iron and steam



Production and distribution methods were vastly improved by industrial development

The 19th century saw the industrial transformation of much of Europe, with vastly increased populations, developing urbanisation, and new scientific inventions. In particular, this was the age of iron and steam. Railways and steamships led to a revolution in transport, allowing large armies with their supplies and ammunition to be moved long distances in days rather than weeks. Developments in metallurgy, chemicals and electricity led to new forms of explosives and propellants for improved firearms and artillery, and to a revolution in communications with the electric telegraph.

'...the German system of mass peacetime conscription and a general staff to plan future wars based on railway deployment was copied throughout Europe.'

The wars of the mid-19th century gave the first indications of what these new technologies and the potential for mass armies might mean. Particularly important were those wars leading to the unification of Germany - the Austro-Prussian War (1866) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71).

The Prussian Army was a peacetime training organisation for a system of mass conscription controlled by a highly professional general staff. Soldiers returned to civilian life after two or three years, but could be recalled in the event of a war. A well-developed bureaucracy and efficient railway system then mobilised and deployed the mass army, trained and ready to fight.

After 1871, the German system of mass peacetime conscription and a general staff to plan future wars based on railway deployment was copied throughout Europe. The exception was Britain which, with the Royal Navy protecting it from invasion, relied on a long-service army of volunteers, supplemented by auxiliary forces from around its empire, including the Indian Army, the largest all-volunteer army in history.

## The balance of power



Europe was organised into a network of formal and informal alliances to create a balance of power

The major powers of Europe avoided war with each other successfully for a generation until 1914. Instead, Europe largely exported its wars, in the last great age of imperial expansion.

Within Europe, a series of interlocking alliances grew, meant to preserve stability. In 1879 the two empires of Germany and Austria-Hungary allied together, joined by Italy in 1881. This was matched in 1894 by the unnatural alliance of republican France with imperial Russia. Finally, in 1904, Britain agreed to an 'Entente Cordiale' (literally a 'friendly understanding') with France, and in 1907 with Russia.

'...an attack on any one major power by another would produce a general European war.'

The basis was that each alliance would support its members - the 'Triple Alliance' of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy against the 'Triple Entente' of France, Russia and Great Britain, so that an attack on any one major power by another would produce a general European war. In Britain's case this was not a formal alliance, but an informal military commitment with the French. The Italians also were less secure in their alliance; in 1914 they were to stand neutral, and a year later they joined the Entente powers.

Between 1871 and 1914 further institutional, technological and scientific developments, at least as great as those that had gone before, made differences to the conduct of warfare that could not be tested without a major European war. Colonial wars before 1914, and even quite sizeable wars fought outside Europe like the South African War (1899-1902) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) gave only partial clues to the future.

At full mobilisation, armies of many millions became possible, and in 1914 France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia each mobilised between three and six million men. As the 20th century loomed, electricity and chemicals joined iron and steam in industrial importance. In communications, the telegraph was followed by the telephone in 1876, and then by wireless and radio. In 1901 the first radio transmission was made across the Atlantic. By the same date, trains had exceeded speeds of 160kph (100mph), the first cars and lorries were making their appearance, and the diesel engine made the ocean-going submarine a practical weapon of war.

Two years later came the Wright brothers' first flight, potentially adding air power to the means of war. The changes also included a new generation of weapons, rifles, artillery and machine-guns, that would remain in service throughout the first half of the 20th century, and would not be entirely obsolete even at its end.

## Over by Christmas



A new generation of weapons played a significant role in total war

By 1914, it was apparent that the next European war would be terrible and destructive in a way never before experienced. Some argued that this had made war impossible, that it would bankrupt the countries that fought it, or that neither the armies nor their societies would stand the strain. Military plans were based not on being properly equipped for a stalemated and attritional war of trenches, for the excellent reason that this was not the kind of war that any country wanted to fight. Instead, each placed its hopes in winning a quick victory by rapid movement, to end the war 'by Christmas'.

'The British alone had still not introduced conscription...'

The same idea underlay the war plans of all the European powers: to call up and mobilise a large conscript army as rapidly as possible, and to despatch it equally rapidly to the front by pre-arranged railway timetables, in order to overwhelm the enemy. The British alone had still not introduced conscription, but in the decade before 1914 they also created a general staff, and reorganised their army to provide a British Expeditionary Force, small by the standards of the day, to fight alongside the French.

A major problem was that although fully mobilised armies had greatly increased in size and firepower, technology had not yet provided for two other critical needs: battlefield communications and battlefield mobility. Radio and telephones could communicate between cities, ships and higher headquarters, but they were too bulky to be man-carried. Armies made some use of lorries and staff cars, but practical cross-country vehicles, good roads and an associated infrastructure simply did not exist. Once the armies left their railheads, they moved largely at the speed of the marching man and communicated at the speed of the galloping horse or the carrier pigeon, exactly like the armies of a century before.

## Millions under arms



Industrialisation meant that mass armies could be kept under arms indefinitely

In 1914, with armies so large and powerful, even the most complete battlefield success was no longer decisive. The ambitious plans asked for too much, and each failed to win the quick victory on which their countries had depended. The result by the end of the year was the stalemate that all had feared.

A century of industrialisation meant that the Germans, French and British could each keep millions of men under arms on the Western Front - clothed, fed and free from lethal epidemic diseases, day and night, all the year round without respite. The men, although subject to strong military discipline, also had the patriotism and faith in their respective causes to stay and fight.

'What was missing was the further, often quite frustratingly small, developments in technology and tactics...'

What was missing was the further, often quite frustratingly small, developments in technology and tactics that by 1918 would allow these soldiers to advance against the enemy with a reasonable chance of success, breaking through the trench defences and restoring mobility to the battlefield.

The real answer to the traditional question 'What were the causes of World War One?' is not what caused its outbreak, but the discovery a few months after it began that it could not be fought and won quickly or cheaply. Nothing short of the organisation for 'total war' on a scale previously unknown in history would do. For the British, this meant the creation and training from scratch of new mass armies, and a national sacrifice of staggering proportions. The principal 'cause' of World War One, in this sense, was the tactical deadlock of the trenches; and the principal cause of its end was the solving of that problem over the next four years.

## Find out more

### Books

*Command and control on the Western Front* edited by Gary Sheffield and Stephen Badsey (Spellmount, 2000)

*The Imperial War Museum book of the First World War* by Malcolm Brown (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1991)

*Western Front* by Richard Holmes (BBC Books, 1999)

### Links

[First World War](http://www.firstworldwar.com/) [http://www.firstworldwar.com/] This website includes information on the origins and battles of World War One, photographs and a timeline.

[Trenches on the web](http://www.worldwar1.com/) [http://www.worldwar1.com/] This site contains a wide range of World War One material.

## Places to visit

[Imperial War Museum](http://www.iwm.org.uk/) [http://www.iwm.org.uk/]

[National Army Museum](http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/) [http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/]

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## Related Links

### Articles

- The Origins of World War One - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/origins\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/origins_01.shtml)
- Lions Led by Donkeys? The British Army in World War One - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/lions\\_donkeys\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/lions_donkeys_01.shtml)
- Battle of The Somme - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/battle\\_somme.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/battle_somme.shtml)

### Multimedia Zone

- World War One Movies - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch\\_ani\\_wwone\\_movies.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_ani_wwone_movies.shtml)
- The Western Front Animation - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch\\_ani\\_wwone\\_movies.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_ani_wwone_movies.shtml)
- World War One Trench Virtual Tour - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch\\_vt\\_wwone\\_trench.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_vt_wwone_trench.shtml)

### Historic Figures

- Herbert Asquith - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/asquith\\_herbert.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/asquith_herbert.shtml)
- Lord Kitchener - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/kitchener\\_lord.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/kitchener_lord.shtml)
- Douglas Haig - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/haig\\_douglas.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/haig_douglas.shtml)

### Timelines

- British Timeline - [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/launch\\_tl\\_british.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/launch_tl_british.shtml)

### **BBC Links**

- BBC News - The Great War: 80 years on - [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special\\_report/1998/10/98/world\\_war\\_i/197437.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/10/98/world_war_i/197437.stm)
- BBC Schools - World War One - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/>

### **External Web Links**

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission - <http://www.cwgc.org>
- First World War.com - <http://www.firstworldwar.com/>
- Imperial War Museum - <http://www.iwm.org.uk/>

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This article can be found on the Internet at:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/total\\_war\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/total_war_01.shtml)

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