**‘*Tribute to the Fallen, 1914-1920: Men of Alnwick, Amble, Rothbury & Wooler districts*’**

**A concise overview of the First World War (*strictly from a British perspective*)**

*Summary; Belligerents; Pre-First World War Army reforms & preparations; Army organisation; Origins of the First World War; Britain’s intended strategy; Irish affairs; Britain in 1914; The spark that lit the touch paper; War aims; 1914; Mobilising the Armed Forces; Mobilising & managing the economy; Support from the Empire; Propaganda; Conduct of the war; 1915; A very different form of warfare; Life in the trenches; 1916; 1917; War weariness; The importance of the United States of America (USA) to the Allied victory; Army Training; Evolution of British Expeditionary Force (BEF) tactics; Technological advances; 1918 – German Spring Offensives, 21 March-18 July 1918; Allied ‘Advance to Victory’, 20 July-11 November 1918; Armistice; Versailles Peace Treaty (28 June 1919); Casualties; Influenza pandemic, 1918-1920; Psychological impact of the First World War on British society; Conclusions; Exhortation to those Lost*

**Summary**

* The vehemence, debate & argument continuing to surround the First World War is clear evidence of just what a momentous event it was in shaping the twentieth century, with lasting effects on international, national, local & personal levels;
* In 1914 Britain, arguably there was no real expectation of, or desire for war, & only limited preparations had been made for it;
* At the outset, the British Army was simply too small to influence events;
* British hopes that the French & Russian armies would cope with the Central Powers in the land war were soon dashed;
* Britain was quickly pressured to take more of the burden on the Western Front;
* The BEF was often forced into premature offensives before it was ready, either to display continued commitment to the Entente Alliance or to relieve the pressures under which Britain’s Allies then found themselves, notwithstanding which it was often fulfilling an important role in the war;
* A common complaint against many British commanders is that, too often, they continued offensives beyond their natural closure although, perhaps, this can be attributed, in part, to the technological problems arising from ineffective battlefield communications;
* Such technological problems cannot be over-emphasised – decisions about stopping offensives are easy to criticise with hindsight, harder to determine in context & in contact;
* Generally, the Germans held the high ground &, after the Second Battles of Ypres (*22 April-25 May 1915*), they remained on the defensive in strongly fortified, deep positions, until early 1918;
* Although the Western Front, rightly, dominated the British effort on land, Britain also had to deploy significant land forces in many other theatres, such as Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, Salonika, Palestine, Egypt, East Africa, as well as having to garrison her Empire;
* This led to internal conflicts & dissension, generally between politicians & military commanders, with many of the former, in order to lessen the horrendous manpower losses in France & Flanders, soon favouring offensives against the perceived under-belly of the Central Powers while most military commanders recognised that the main enemy (*Germany*) could / would only be comprehensively defeated on the Western Front;
* The enormous human cost of the conflict precluded Britain’s policymakers contemplating an early end to fighting which did not see the Allies as victors on the battlefield. To do so would have alienated a public left to wonder what all the sacrifices had been for, with a consequent risk of revolution;
* The German retreat in 1918 never became a rout, but a defeat it was for the German Army albeit the Allied advance was achieved only at significant cost in casualties;
* Britain failed to achieve her principal war aim, the elimination of German militarism, as the Second World War less than a generation later amply testifies;
* Belgium & Northern France were restored to their pre-war status, but Germany’s inability, & unwillingness, to meet the cost of reparations was an immediate ongoing seed of discontent, which fostered the rise of National Socialism by the 1930’s;
* The Russian threat (*to India*) was eliminated – the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution ended any lingering imperialist ambitions about India – & France too was exhausted by the war, so that she no longer posed a serious threat to the post-war British Empire;
* Eventually, Britain eliminated the German threat to her naval supremacy, but this was a pyrrhic victory as, shortly after the war ended, at the 1922 Washington Naval Conference, she accepted parity with the United States fleet, & a Japanese fleet at least equal to the pre-war German navy, which could dominate the Western Pacific rim;
* Apart from the enormous human cost of the war, Britain sacrificed her long-term economic power base to the cause of defeating the Central Powers (*a process which the Second World War completed!*);
* Perhaps, the First World War’s greatest significance was the exhaustion of Britain’s wealth, so allowing the USA to become the world’s pre-eminent economic power;
* On a wider footing, the First World War also enabled the rise of communism;
* Nevertheless, Britain achieved some of her original aims, & in doing so she acquired certain new territorial possessions,[[1]](#footnote-1) as well as considerable prestige as a world power, albeit this was not fully exploited & much of it had been lost by the time of the Second World War;
* Throughout, Britain was an important member of an Alliance of powers. However, unlike Germany’s situation within the Central Powers axis, at no stage could she dominate the Alliance & impose her will on her partners;
* Until late 1916, Britain was happy to be subservient to French military strategy;
* The burden of the war effort accepted by the French & Russians, &, to an extent, by the Italians & the Americans, cannot be over-estimated. Saying this, it would be misleading to suggest the efforts of the Entente Alliance were always well co-ordinated, & that Britain always had harmonious relations with her partners;
* Britain could never have contemplated entering what was, principally, a land war with Germany & her Central Powers partners, & she had no hope of ever defeating them on her own;
* Britain’s wealth was largely exhausted by the First World War. She loaned £1,465 million to her Allies, &, in 1922, estimates of Britain’s average daily expenditure on the war (*for the Army; Royal Navy; Munitions; Shipping; etc*) ranged from just under £6 million to just over £7.5 million. Converting these figures to sensible 2019 values is not straightforward as sources vary significantly, but a factor of fifty times, at least, might not be unreasonable, i.e., today, the average cost of the First World War to Britain would have been about £300-£375 million per day![[2]](#footnote-2) Taxation will have covered a portion but the majority was funded by borrowing, notably from the USA, national borrowing (*e.g., in the form of War Bonds*) & the sale of overseas assets;
* Contributory factors to the high cost of the war include the sheer size of the armies deployed; the length of the front they covered, which, after only a few months on the Western Front, precluded flank attacks; &, generally, the superiority of the defensive over the offensive, brought about, in part, by geography, in part by the power of weaponry, &, in part, by poor offensive tactics, more particularly in the shortcomings of methods of battlefield control & command.

**Belligerents**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **The military strengths of the European states in 1914[[3]](#footnote-3)** | | | |
| **Country** | **Mobilised strength** | **Infantry Divisions** | **Cavalry Divisions** |
| Russia | 3,400,000 | 114½ | 36 |
| Serbia | 247,000 | 11½ | 1 |
| France | 1,800,000 | 80 | 10 |
| Britain | 162,000 | 6 | 1 |
| Belgium | 117,000 | 6 | 1 |
| **Entente Allies** | **5,726,000** | **218** | **49** |
|  |  |  |  |
| Germany | 2,147,000 | 87½ | 11 |
| Austro-Hungary | 1,338,000 | 49½ | 11 |
| **Central Powers** | **3,485,000** | **137** | **22** |

**Pre-First World War Army reforms & preparations**

* Shortcomings evident during the Boer War of 1899-1902, reinforced by study of the earlier startling successes of the Prussian army against armies that had hitherto been viewed as role models (*i.e., Austria-Hungary, in 1866; & France, in 1870*), contributed to the pressure for reform of the British Army throughout the late nineteenth & early twentieth centuries;
* Nevertheless, successive Governments were reluctant reformer’s, &, despite the efforts of some notable Secretaries of State for War, reforms met with considerable resistance from within the Army, as well as in Parliament & throughout the country;
* Much of what was attempted was governed by financial criteria & utilisation of existing resources, with no attempt made to define Britain’s defence needs & priorities, or to provide a mobilisation plan for a major conflict until the later years of the nineteenth century;
* As the 1890s approached, the Government accepted a proposal that two Army Corps, with appropriate supporting forces, should become the standard for mobilisation;
* Edward Stanhope (*Secretary of State for War between January 1887 & August 1892*) provided a definitive statement of purpose for the Army, i.e., in order of priority, to:

1. Aid the civil power;
2. Garrison India;
3. Garrison the colonies;
4. Provide Home defence; &
5. What, then, was thought an improbable need, employ two Army Corps in any European war in which Britain might become involved;

* While British foreign policy strategy may have been changing, Richard Haldane (*Secretary of State for War, 1905-*1912) could not afford to ignore a possible threat to India, & he was ever mindful of the need to continue finding annual drafts for battalions overseas;
* He deserves enormous credit for reorganising the Army, to provide a credible BEF, with immediate support in the form of the Special Reserve, further supported by a second-line army, the Territorial Force,[[4]](#footnote-4) well capable of taking responsibility for home defence &, once fully mobilised & trained, of also supporting the Regular Army in the field;
* Haldane’s reforms also introduced a proper General Staff; efficient transport & medical services; & effective, & systematic, machinery for training;
* By Continental standards the British Army was small, & the BEF created by Haldane would never be able to influence the outcome of a full-blown conflagration in Europe however, increasingly, Britain needed to be seen to be able, & willing, to use a credible military force;
* Seventy-four battalions of the Militia, whose representatives initially refused to accept any change, eventually became the Special Reserve, a semi-professional force, the primary role of which was to supply ‘*parent*’ battalions with drafts, to take them to their war establishments;
* The Yeomanry (*local cavalry regiments*) & Volunteers formed the new Territorial Force, established on 1 April 1908 & comprising fourteen infantry divisions & fourteen cavalry brigades, with supports;
* County Associations were established, to organise & administer the Territorial Force;
* Territorial Force establishment was 312,000 men but this target was never achieved, & recruitment peaked, probably in June 1909, at 270,000;
* By the beginning of 1909, each Territorial Force unit had been assigned a specific role, either in coastal defence or as part of a central force;
* Much of the Territorial Force’s equipment was obsolete & the Territorial Force never fulfilled Haldane’s intention of being immediately available for service overseas;
* In 1910, its members had been invited to accept a liability to serve abroad in the event of mobilisation but barely seven per cent had made the ‘*Imperial Service*’ pledge by September 1913;
* A solution to the problem of a persistent shortage of officers eluded Haldane;
* Recruiting problems were not restricted to the Territorial Force. In May 1914, the Regular Army was nearly 11,000 men below its nominal peacetime establishment, & the Special Reserve was still 13,699 men below strength;
* The BEF was no more than a token gesture of support to Britain’s Allies at the outset, its deployment leaving Britain without significant Reserves of Regular forces to reinforce it, or for home defence.

**Army organisation**

* A battalion was, & remains, the major building block of an infantry regiment in the British Army;
* For front-line battalions, notional establishments did not vary greatly throughout the war (*except for machine guns*). However, the number of rifles put into the line was always less than notional strength;[[5]](#footnote-5)
* The organisation of a typical frontline infantry battalion of 1914 is illustrated in the Appendix;
* Infantry battalion establishments were about one thousand men;
* Transport sections were managed with about fifty men;[[6]](#footnote-6) the 1914 machine gun section would have been equipped with two Maxim guns or the more up-to-date Vickers guns;
* Signals sections used telephone communication & wireless, utilising Morse code. Primitive radio equipment was only just being introduced. Companies & Platoons sent messages by runner, signal flag, lights (*again, using Morse code*), &, later in the war, carrier pigeons;
* Yeomanry regiments were organised in ‘*Lines*’, which were equivalent of an infantry battalion although numerically smaller, their strength, perhaps, numbering 225 to 250 men (*all ranks*). In peacetime, the Line was usually divided into four Squadrons, each of 1½-2 Troops, numbering fifty to sixty men. When war was declared in 1914, the Lines of the Northumberland (Hussars) Yeomanry, for example, were immediately re-organised into three Squadrons, each of two Troops;
* Until early 1918, four infantry battalions made up a brigade – severe manpower shortages led to a major reorganisation within the BEF in February 1918, when brigade strength was reduced to three battalions;
* Three brigades formed a division – in 1914, a division comprised twelve battalions (*12,000 men*), plus divisional artillery (*76 guns & about 2,300 men*), engineers, signals, transport, reconnaissance, & medical resources, making a division number about 18,000 men, in all;
* Two or more divisions, with additional support troops, formed a Corps;
* Two Corps, again with additional support troops & units, formed an Army, normally with an additional Corps as Army Reserve.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Origins of the First World War**

* The origins of the First World War lay firmly in Europe, arising from multiple frictions & distrust; economic rivalries; militarism, especially in Germany; imperialism; nationalism; a distribution of peoples in parts of Europe which led to dissatisfaction & tension, exacerbated by the denial of the right of self-determination; & alliances that, ultimately, failed to provide the protection sought by their signatories;
* All belligerents can share responsibility, to a greater or lesser degree, for beginning, or at least for not preventing, a war of cataclysmic dimensions;
* By 1900, Britain increasingly recognised that her recent foreign policy towards Europe (*one of ‘splendid isolation’*) could not continue. Unfortunately for her, & perhaps for Europe, common ground with Germany could not be found &, increasingly fearful of isolation & with a strong desire to maintain the *status quo*, Britain was left to make a pact with France – the Entente Cordiale was signed in 1904;
* Amongst historians, there is widespread recognition of Germany’s capacity to upset the existing *status quo* in Europe;
* Further, Germany possessed a major advantage, with short, efficient lines of communication, based on an excellent railway network that enabled her to move her highly efficient, widely feared army, & its equipment, quickly;
* Her agricultural base, industrial might, & preparations for war, enabled her to field an army that was well equipped & well provisioned;
* Russia’s general mobilisation transformed what might have been a local war into a general European &, ultimately, World War;
* A Russia / Austria-Hungary conflict had inevitable consequences for Germany; France (*as the Schlieffen Plan called on Germany to first knock-out France, before turning to the East*); &, thus, Britain;
* Turkey’s entry into the war on the side of the Central Powers, in October 1914, called on Britain to defend, & secure, her Eastern Empire, with the result that additional fronts soon opened, in Mesopotamia, Persia, Afghanistan, Egypt, the Dardanelles, Salonika, & Palestine.

**Britain’s intended strategy**

* At the outset, Britain’s lack of preparedness for the conflict about to embroil her reflected not only the absence of any real expectation or desire for war, also the limitations in her pre-war strategy;
* Initially, her intended strategy was two-fold:

1. To use the Royal Navy to mount an effective blockade of the Central Powers, to deny them the materials to wage war, which strategy achieved some success;
2. To use her enormous economic strength & wealth to finance her Allies, principally France & Russia, in their campaign to eliminate the German threat to Europe, without themselves becoming a major threat to Britain,[[8]](#footnote-8) & without Britain having to commit too heavily to a land war. This strategy failed;

* At the turn of the twentieth century, Britain feared isolation in Europe. If Germany won the long-expected conflagration with France & Russia, Britain would be left alone to face a German-dominated Europe, with the inevitable threats that would pose to national security[[9]](#footnote-9) &, eventually, to the Empire. If France & Russia defeated Germany, they could dictate, & impose, a peace settlement that, perhaps, would soon see them become an even greater threat to the British Empire;
* Field-Marshal Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener, as Secretary of State for War, is often credited with formulating British strategy, which endured until early 1917, although he can only really be given credit for the final element of it, i.e., creation of the New Armies;
* Kitchener deserves his place in history as the man who had the foresight, drive & determination to prepare the British Government & people for what lay ahead, & as the man who articulated the strategy;
* He immediately set about creating the New Armies to be deployed in 1917, by which time their intervention would be so decisive that Britain could then dictate the peace settlement;
* However, as early as December 1914 there was evidence that the foundations upon which Britain’s strategy were formulated were being undermined – France & Russia demonstrated their unwillingness, or inability, to accept the scale of casualties that would allow Britain to remain remote from the land war until 1917;
* By late 1915, it was also apparent that Britain’s wealth would not last indefinitely.

**Irish affairs**

* In the build-up to war, Irish affairs undoubtedly held British Government attention more than did events in Eastern Europe;
* Their significance was in the in influence they might conceivably have had on foreign opinion immediately before the war, on the increasing influence they certainly had on American opinion as the war progressed, & on the periodic distractions caused in Britain during the war;
* What most distinguished the third Home Rule Bill from its two predecessors was the real prospect that it would become law &, therefore, it would be imposed on Ulster. Its stormy passage through Parliament, beginning in 1912, led to a constitutional crisis, which took the United Kingdom to the brink of civil war;
* Although all sides pulled back from the brink, & the immediate problem was shelved on the outbreak of hostilities, moderate nationalism began to be replaced by more extreme republicanism following the appointment of Edward Carson, the Ulster patriot hero, to the Coalition Cabinet, in May 1915;
* The situation deteriorated to the point of open rebellion & the 1916 Easter Rising. The rebellion was doomed to failure from the outset through lack of widespread support, but British handling of its aftermath, particularly the execution of its leaders, led to hardening of support for Sinn Fein, both in Ireland & the United States;
* In the aftermath, the Home Rule movement’s demise was assured. The First World War was to see Ireland transformed from an essentially domestic problem, to that of an issue holding the international stage;[[10]](#footnote-10)
* Notwithstanding the problems in Ireland, the Irish, both from the island of Ireland & from the many communities of Irish origin which existed in the UK to help meet the ever-increasing demands of industry & commerce for labour as the nineteenth century progressed, provided a significant manpower contribution to the BEF.

**Britain in 1914**

* It may be difficult, now, for the reader to fully appreciate & understand the economic, social, welfare, lifestyle & other differences there would have been for the men of Alnwick, Amble, Rothbury, & Wooler districts recorded in the database available online & which follows later in this book, their families, friends & communities from which they came;
* Britain in 1914 was very different to Britain today;
* Then, she was one of a handful of superpowers of the day, possibly she may still have held the premier position in the world order of things albeit the zenith of her power had passed & already begun to wane;
* Life was hard for a lot of people in Britain in 1914, notwithstanding socio-economic improvements before the war;
* Levels of emigration are testimony of this, with over ten million people leaving the British Isles during the nineteenth century;
* After a lull at the turn of the twentieth century, emigration picked up again immediately before the First World War;
* Well over one million emigrants left the UK in the seven years 1903-09, with another million leaving in the next four years.

**The spark that lit the touch paper**

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| **Date(s)** | **Train of events** |
| 28 June 1914 | Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir presumptive to the throne of Austria-Hungary, & his wife, Duchess Sophie, were assassinated in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, by Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip. |

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| **Date(s)** | **Train of events** |
| 23 July | After much prevarication on their part, Austria-Hungary delivered a note to Serbia listing ten demands with a deadline for acceptance of 25 July. |
| 25 July | On the morning, Serbian ministers had decided to accede to all ten Austrian demands, with slight reservations however news received later in the day that Russia was very pro-Serb emboldened them to attach conditions;  Within an hour of the Serbian note’s delivery, Austro-Hungarian officials left Belgrade by train. |
| 26-27 July | Serbia began to mobilise her small Army. |
| 28 July | Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia;  Russia announced partial mobilisation. |
| 29-30 July | The Tsar ordered mobilisation to be cancelled before being persuaded by his ministers & Army commanders to reverse that decision. |
| 31 July | Russia ordered full mobilisation;  Austria-Hungary ordered a general mobilisation (*to counter the Russian threat*);  Germany delivered an ultimatum to Russia to reverse mobilisation or risk Germany doing so (*to support Austria-Hungary*). |
| 1 August | In the absence of a satisfactory response from Russia, Germany ordered mobilisation (*against Russia*). |
| 2 August | France ordered mobilisation (*against Germany*) to meet her obligations under the terms of the 1892 Franco-Russo Convention. |

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| **Date(s)** | **Train of events** |
| 3 August | Throughout the fast deepening crisis Britain refused to declare its position;  Under the terms of the Entente Cordiale first agreed in 1904, France demanded that Britain give force to her commitments;  Germany delivered an ultimatum to Belgium demanding use of its territory in operations against France & requiring agreement within twenty-four hours. |
| 4 August | Britain’s ultimatum demanding termination of German operations against Belgium expired at midnight without response;  At midnight on 4 August 1914, Britain, France & Russia were at war with Germany & Austria-Hungary. |

**War aims**

* Sir Edward Grey, 1st Viscount Grey of Fallodon, was the main force behind British foreign policy in the era of the First World War. As Foreign Secretary (*from 1905-1916*), he argued that Britain would suffer no more going into the conflagration than she would by staying out,[[11]](#footnote-11) his argument alluding to two of Britain’s principal war aims:

1. To eliminate Prussian militarism, thereby reducing Germany’s dominance in Europe; &
2. To bring about a better balance of power on the Continent, so removing an increasing threat to Britain’s status as a world power, & to the British Empire;

* In 1914, H. H. Asquith, the Prime Minister, summarised Britain’s reasons for going to war as being to:

1. Fulfil international treaty obligations; &
2. Protect the principle that smaller nations (*for example, Serbia & Belgium*) would be safe from larger, more powerful, aggressors;

* In truth, this explanation hid Britain’s strong desire to maintain the *status quo* & avoid a shift in the balance of power on the Continent, as well as seeking to preserve world naval supremacy;
* Four features are notable about Britain’s war aims:

1. They evolved as the First World War progressed;
2. Throughout the war, politicians showed a marked reluctance to discuss, or articulate, the country’s aims, adopting the view that detailed statements about war aims would be divisive & would damage, rather than strengthen, public morale;
3. This led directly to one of the most contentious problems of the war, the lack of harmonisation of the aims of military leaders & the British Government;
4. As a member of an Alliance of powers of comparable strength, Britain could not dominate her partners, nor could she ignore their sensibilities, so a principal aim soon became one of keeping the Entente Alliance intact.

**1914**

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| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 23 August-5 September 1914 | Retreat from Mons, including the battles of:   * Mons (*23-24 August*); & * Le Cateau (*26 August*). |
| 6 September-1 October | Advance to the Aisne, including the battles of the:   * Marne (*7-10 September*), arguably the most significant Allied victory of the First World War; & * Aisne (*12-15 September*). |
| 4-10 October | Defence of Antwerp, which is relevant to the Royal Naval Division only. |
| 10 October-22 November | Operations in Flanders, including the battles of:   * La Bassée (*10 October -  2 November*); * Messines (*12 October – 2 November*); & * Armentières (*13 October -  2 November*). |
| 19 October-22 November | The Battles of Ypres, 1914 (*First Ypres*), including the battles of:   * Langemarck (*21-24 October*); * Gheluvelt (*29-31 October*); * Nonne Bosschen (*11 November*). |

* Britain was fortunate in several ways when war was declared;

1. She had the War Book, detailing, for the first few days following an outbreak of hostilities, precise instructions about who should do what, & when. Mobilisation procedures were implemented efficiently having been perfected in the years preceding war;
2. In July 1914, a combination of chance & foresight brought together the ships of the Royal Navy, fully mobilised, at maximum efficiency;
3. At the end of July, many Territorial Force battalions were in summer camp for their annual fifteen days training, so they could be recalled quickly, & deployed to their home defence stations, so releasing Regular Army formations;
4. Despite reservations on the part of many politicians & military commanders about the plan to send the BEF to France, on the grounds that it would be fighting as a junior partner, subservient to the French, in defensive mode, & leaving Britain without any reserves at home, military staff talks with the French had been going on, in great secrecy, since 1906 & efficient procedures to move the BEF were already in place;

* The BEF originally comprised six infantry divisions & one cavalry division, in all about 160,000 men, including support troops. However, the Cabinet almost immediately reversed its decision to send the whole force to France, so only four infantry divisions, plus the cavalry division & a lesser number of support troops were, at first, sent overseas, totalling 100,000 men;
* The remainder of the BEF, held back in the UK, was soon needed & soon went to France;
* At the outset, the public showed remarkable patriotism &, on occasions, enthusiasm for the war, stoked by a popular press that had been anti-German long beforehand;
* Some historians suggest the reasons for the overwhelming response to Kitchener’s call to arms might have been more to do with economic necessity (*in part, brought about by increased unemployment in the weeks immediately following the declaration of war*) & impulse, among other things, than with successful recruitment techniques;
* The Defence of the Realm Act gave the Government special powers to suppress published criticism, censor newspapers, letters & telegrams, regulate alcohol consumption & food supplies, imprison without trial, & to commandeer economic resources for the war effort;
* By the end of 1914, the BEF had sustained almost 100,000 casualties (*killed in action [KIA] or died; wounded; missing; & prisoners of war [POW]*), which almost matched the number of men first sent to France in August;

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| **BEF casualties to the end of 1914** | | | |
| **Type of casualties** | **Officers** | **Other Ranks (*OR*)** | **Total** |
| KIA | 1,029 | 12,486 | **13,515** |
| Died of wounds (*DOW*) | 234 | 3,831 | **4,065** |
| Died of disease or  accident | 15 | 579 | **594** |
| Wounded | 2,209 | 48,760 | **50,969** |
| Missing & POWs | 783 | 25,728 | **26,511** |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Total** | **4,270** | **91,384** | **95,654** |

* It is salutary to realise that French casualties to the end of 1914 numbered about 301,000 killed – France would lose a further 349,000 men killed in 1915[[12]](#footnote-12). Between 20-27 August 1914 they lost about 40,000 fatalities, of which 27,000 died on 22 August, far higher losses than suffered by the BEF on 1 July 1916, which losses are themselves so deeply etched in the British psyche & outlook towards the First World War.

**Mobilising the Armed Forces**

* In August 1914, the British Regular Army numbered 247,500 men (*all ranks*), of which 166,300 were committed to the six infantry & one cavalry divisions, & supporting troops, of the BEF earmarked to aid the French;
* At full-strength, a little over 100,000 of the BEF’s men were front-line troops, representing virtually all the Regular Army available in Britain, in 1914;
* The Regular Army had to police an Empire of 3,000,000 square miles;
* Overseas, there were another seventy-six infantry battalions, plus artillery & cavalry units, so the entire British Army worldwide did not amount to more than eleven Regular divisions;
* When war was declared, 79,000 men of the Regular Army were in India;
* Most infantry regiments comprised two Regular Army battalions, one or two Special Reserve battalions (*successors to the old Militia formations*), & several Territorial Force battalions (*successors of the old Voluntary formations*), all supported by the Regimental Depot;
* One Regular battalion would always be serving overseas, its manpower maintained at full wartime establishment;
* Its sister Regular battalion, based at home, operated on lower establishment, its strength depending on its position on the roster for overseas service;
* For example, the weakness of the Durham Light Infantry’s 2nd Battalion at the time of mobilisation, in August 1914, is evidenced by an immediate request for six hundred & eighty-five Reservists, to take it up to strength – this was typical of what all regiments had to contend with during mobilisation;
* Not only did all battalions mobilised to prepare the BEF for war rely on Reservists, many of those men would have been younger, less experienced & less hardened soldiers, probably with a significantly lower average length of service, than their colleagues serving overseas – this reliance on Reservists cannot be over-emphasised;[[13]](#footnote-13)
* The reliance on Reservists was overshadowed only by the shortage of officers;[[14]](#footnote-14)
* Short-term, this was addressed by utilising officers from the ‘*Retired*’ & ‘*Reserve*’ lists, many of whom were neither physically up to the task nor well versed in modern warfare techniques;
* All men underwent medical examination on enlistment & before departure to overseas theatres of operation. In theory, only A1 men served with front-line battalions[[15]](#footnote-15) – in practice, this was not always the case later in the war;
* In 1914, the BEF was, perhaps, the largest, most professional, & best trained & equipped army ever to leave British shores;
* The fact that it was too small to wage a war of Continental proportions &, initially, it lacked the infrastructure to do so, is simply a reflection of longstanding British antipathy towards a large standing army, rather than through any fault of the politicians or military leaders of the day;
* Kitchener was one of the few men in a senior position to foresee, from the outset, the likely course of the war. He realised that the efforts of County Territorial Associations alone would not meet the Army’s recruitment needs, so he immediately began his famous recruitment campaign to establish the New Armies;
* Kitchener’s ‘*Call to Arms*’ met with an extremely enthusiastic response, & many New Army (Service) battalions began to form in September 1914. So rapid was their formation that neither the Army nor the civil authorities could easily cope;
* On 15 September 1914, Territorial Force members were called upon to volunteer for service overseas. Once battalions so volunteered, as they were re-designated,[[16]](#footnote-16) each then formed Reserve battalions, manned by those unsuitable for overseas service, on medical or other grounds. The Reserve battalions became known as second-line battalions, distinguished from their first-line ‘*parents*’ by the figure ‘*2/*’ before the battalion number.[[17]](#footnote-17)Formation of second-line, & later third-line,[[18]](#footnote-18) Territorial Force battalions addressed a weakness inherent in the organisation of the Territorial Force , namely the absence of a supporting organisation to supply replacements & reinforcements;
* For many battalions, it took several months for them to be properly accommodated, clothed & equipped, & it was well into 1915 before those battalions raised in 1914 began to be ready for service overseas;
* The risk was taken to strip overseas garrisons & bring battalions home as quickly as shipping could be provided;
* Twenty-nine battalions came home from India – a further six British battalions would be in Indian divisions which went directly to France – other battalions withdrawn were from: Egypt & Malta (*five each*); South Africa (*four*), Burma & China (*three each*); Gibraltar (*two*); & Aden, Bermuda, Guernsey, Hong Kong & Mauritius (*one each*);
* To replace some of these withdrawals, partially trained Territorial Force battalions were sent out to India & to Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt & Aden to protect the vital Mediterranean & Suez Canal route to India & the Far East;
* ‘*Voluntaryism*’ was the key to the Liberal Cabinet’s thinking about the probable course of events & expansion of the army;
* Nationally, the total number of men of military service age during the war was about 7,550,000, which divided conveniently into three similarly sized groups: those who volunteered before conscription came into being; those conscripted; & those who were medically unfit or were granted exemption from call-up because they were in reserved occupations;[[19]](#footnote-19)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Enlistments in the United Kingdom, 1914-1918[[20]](#footnote-20)** | | | | | |
| **Enlistments** | **England** | **Wales** | **Scotland** | **Ireland** | **Total** |
| Voluntary (*to December 1915*) | 2,092,242 | 145,255 | 320,589 | 117,063 | **2,675,149** |
| Proportion of males aged 15-49 enlisted (*to December 1915*) | 24.2% | 24.2% | 26.9% | 10.7% | **-** |
| After January 1916 | 1,913,916 | 127,669 | 237,029 | 17,139 | **2,295,793** |
| Proportion of males aged 15-49 enlisted after January 1916 | 22.1% | 22.1% | 14.6% | 1.6% | **-** |
| **Total enlistments 1914-18** | **4,006,158** | **272,924** | **557,618** | **134,202** | **4,970,902** |
| Proportion of males aged 15-49 enlisted 1914-18 | 46.2% | 46.2% | 41.4% | 12.3% | **-** |
| Proportion of all males enlisted 1914-18 | 24.9% | 21.5% | 23.7% | 6.1% | **-** |

* To the above figures for the Army must be added men joining the Royal Navy, almost another two per cent;
* The following table illustrates the response of the northern Counties’ infantry regiments to the ‘*Call to Arms*’*.* The central column shows the total number of war-time battalions in a regiment & the number of them which saw active service in at least one theatre of operation. In the ‘*Fatalities*’ column, the total number of fatalities for the regiment is shown, with average deaths in the active service battalions only, in brackets. The right-hand column indicates, for all English infantry regiments, the ranking (*of 53 regiments, excluding the GDS*) held by the regiment in terms of total number of fatalities sustained:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Regiments** | **No. Battalions** | **Fatalities** | **Ranking** |
| Northumberland Fusiliers | 51 / 25 | 17,005 (667) | 2 |
| Durham Light Infantry | 42 / 20 | 12,557 (615) | 10 |
| Alexandra, Princess of Wales’s Own (Yorkshire Regiment) | 24 / 11 | 7,503 (668) | 26 |
| Border Regiment | 16 / 8 | 6,762 (828) | 32 |
| **Northern Regiments**  **Total[[21]](#footnote-21)** | **147 / 71** | **51,228 (700)** | **-** |
|  |  |  |  |
| **English Line Regiments**  **Total** | **1,305 / 650** | **437,499 (660)** | **-** |
| Foot Guards | 18 / 13 | 14,355 (1,082) | - |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Scottish Line Regiments**  **Total** | **228 / 93** | **76,191 (834)** | **-** |
|  |  |  |  |
| King’s Own Scottish  Borderers | 14 / 7 | 6,861 (961) | [[22]](#footnote-22) |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Irish Line Regiments**  **Total** | **93 / 54** | **30,433 (552)** | **-** |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Welsh Line Regiments**  **Total** | **106 / 46** | **25,048 (534)** | **-** |

* In addition to the above, approximately 1,500 (*of 2,300*) men transferred from Army to Royal Navy terms of engagement to cover a shortage of men when the Royal Naval Division was formed utilising naval Reservists for whom places could not be found on ships, were supplied by the Northumberland Fusiliers & Durham Light Infantry;
* The total strength of the BEF reached a peak for the whole war in October 1917 with 2,038,105 men – 1,720,077 British (*84.4%*); 143,974 Canadian (*7.1%*); 122,141 Australian (*6.0%*); 29,054 New Zealand (*1.4%*); 15,488 Indian (*0.8%*);[[23]](#footnote-23) & 7,371 South African (*0.4%*);[[24]](#footnote-24)
* The loss to industry & commerce of such numbers had a huge impact, yet it was some time before the Government recognised what was needed to meet the desperate shortage of labour & to mobilise what amounted to Britain’s first ‘*Total War*’ economy, an economy turned towards the single goal of destroying the enemy;
* No thought had been given to restricting recruitment & encouraging skilled men to stay in their peacetime jobs, which may have represented a better use of manpower resources, & it was almost a year before serious attempts were made to enlist the services of more women.The following table illustrates the impact of enlistments on major sectors:24

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Enlistment in the Armed Forces by Occupational Sector[[25]](#footnote-25)**  **(*As a percentage of male employment in July 1914*)** | | |
|  | **To July 1916** | **To July 1918** |
| Manufacturing & mining | 30% | 45% |
| Agriculture | 22% | 35% |
| Transport | 23% | 38% |
| Commerce, finance & services | 41% | 63% |
| Public services | 27% | 39% |
| **National average** | **30%** | **46%** |

* Despite more than three million men volunteering to serve in the Armed Forces during the first two years of the war, heavy losses on the Western Front forced the Government to introduce conscription for men aged 19 to 41, in 1916, through the Military Service Act;[[26]](#footnote-26)
* At the time, the BEF was experiencing over 50,000 casualties per month, a situation which deteriorated as the war progressed;
* Conscription was later extended to include married men, in May 1917;
* The significance of conscription was not only to supply the Armed Forces, but, perhaps more importantly, to provide the means to manage a ‘*total war*’ economy by allocating manpower efficiently between industry & the Armed Forces;
* Of a population of forty million people, 16,100 went before Exemption Tribunals as Conscientious Objectors, of whom 6,261 refused to accept any non-combatant work, exemption into work of national importance, or medical work. For those pacifists who did perform non-combat service, some became stretcher-bearers in the front-line, an occupation that had a very high casualty rate.

**Mobilising & managing the economy**

* The Government’s general approach to managing the economy was based on an expectation of a short war, which did not justify widespread intervention in industry & commerce;[[27]](#footnote-27)
* Government policy, at the outset, of restricting munitions production to long-established armament firms, exacerbated the situation.Traditional industry simply could not cope with the unprecedented demands put on it;
* This highlighted the impracticality of a ‘*business as usual*’ approach to managing the economy, & the need for change to support a ‘*total war*’ effort although, in fairness to the Government, ‘*business as usual*’ merely reflected commonly held beliefs in 1914;
* At the outbreak of the First World War, production of the standard-issue Vickers Machine Gun was only a dozen guns per week,[[28]](#footnote-28) a situation that was to change dramatically as the war progressed, as the following table shows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **British Machine Gun Manufacture, 1914-1918[[29]](#footnote-29)** | |
| **Year** | **Output** |
| 1914 | 274 |
| 1915 | 6,064 |
| 1916 | 33,200 |
| 1917 | 79,438 |
| 1918 | 120,864 |
| **1914-1918** | **239,840** |

* On the Western Front, ammunition was used at rates quite unheard of in previous wars, as illustrated, below. Note, these production figures relate to periods after the 1915 shell crisis which had such an impact on bringing about changes to the way in which the Government mobilised & managed the economy;

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **British shell production per month[[30]](#footnote-30)** | | |
| **Month** | **Shrapnel** | **High Explosive; Smoke; & Chemical** |
| March 1916 | 952,708 | 818,932 |
| September 1916 | 1,885,234 | 3,279,776 |
| January 1917 | 2,868,645 | 4,129,945 |
| June 1917 | 2,936,406 | 5,604,791 |
| December 1917 | 1,113,266 | 3,023,840 |
| June 1918 | 2,709,888 | 5,302,103 |
| October 1918 | 2,890,030 | 6,367,528 |

* Overall total production averaged about 6 million shells per month for much of the time. Peak totals were: 8,121,026 in May 1917; 8,541.197 in June 1917; 9,012,314 in May 1918; 8,001,991 in June 1918; & 9,257,558 in October 1918;
* The following table providing data on the amount of land cultivated, & production of staple foods, illustrates both Britain’s lack of preparation for war, & Germanys’ planning for it:[[31]](#footnote-31)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Production of staples** | | | | |
|  | **UK 1893** | **UK 1913** | **Germany 1893** | **Germany 1913** |
| Area under cultivation (*acres*) | 13,987,000 | 12,797,000 | 42,175,000 | 45,414,000 |
| Wheat (*quarters*) | 7,597,000 | 7,175,000 | 14,523,000 | 20,023,000 |
| Barley (*quarters*) | 9,617,000 | 7,276,000 | 13,338,000 | 19,186,000 |
| Oats (*quarters*) | 21,023,000 | 20,600,000 | 33,505,000 | 60,187,000 |
| Potatoes (*tons*) | 5,634,000 | 5,726,000 | 27,539,000 | 49,403,000 |

* Further evidence of lack of preparation for war, & the time taken to react to it, can be found in the next table:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Cultivated area & production of staples in the UK[[32]](#footnote-32)** | | | | |
|  | **1904-13** | **1914** | **1916** | **1918** |
| Total cultivated area (*Million acres*) | 47.08 | 46.76 | 46.69 | 46.27 |
| Permanent grass  (*Million acres*) | 27.63 | 27.35 | 27.19 | 25.05 |
| Arable (*Million acres*) | 19.45 | 19.41 | 19.50 | 21.22 |
| Wheat (*Million acres*) | 1.78 | 1.91 | 2.05 | 2.80 |
| (*Million quarters*) | 7.09 | 7.80 | 7.47 | 11.64 |
| Oats (*Million acres*) | 4.11 | 3.90 | 4.17 | 5.71 |
| (*Million quarters*) | 21.56 | 20.66 | 21.33 | 31.31 |
| Potatoes (*Million acres*) | 1.17 | 1.21 | 1.12 | 1.51 |
| (*Million quarters*) | 6.59 | 7.48 | 5.47 | 9.22 |

* It is interesting to note the change in the pattern of food consumption, illustrated below:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Weekly per capita consumption of essential foodstuffs**  **in the average working-class family[[33]](#footnote-33)** | | | |
|  | **1914 (*lbs*)** | **1918 (*lbs*)** | **%’age change** |
| Bread & flour | 7.33 | 7.55 | + 3 |
| Meat | 1.49 | 0.96 | - 36 |
| Bacon | 0.26 | 0.56 | + 115 |
| Lard | 0.22 | 0.17 | - 23 |
| Butter | 0.37 | 0.17 | - 54 |
| Margarine | 0.09 | 0.20 | + 122 |
| Potatoes | 3.41 | 4.38 | + 28 |
| Cheese | 0.18 | 0.09 | - 50 |
| Sugar | 1.29 | 0.62 | - 52 |

* Despite the considerable achievement of women’s voluntary work, it was not until serious shell shortages occurred in May 1915 that the Government took steps to encourage the use of female labour on a large scale;
* In part, the delay in doing so was due to reticence on the part of employers &, especially, unions to agree to use women. Eventually, they were employed in all industries & public services &, especially, munitions;
* For the unions, the key issue was whether they would permit the ‘*dilution*’ of their position by allowing less skilled workers to do jobs without the traditional union ticket;
* David Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer in Asquith’s Government, tackled the problem with the Treasury Agreements, early in 1915, securing concessions from the trade unions on ‘*dilution*’ but strictly on the understanding that the restrictive practices would be restored at the end of the war;
* While not without its tribulations, industrial relations in Britain, generally, remained good & contributed greatly to Britain’s ability to wage war;
* Industrial action that took place was, as often as not, attributable to dissatisfaction with food supplies, which eventually brought about food rationing, in January 1918;
* Ostensibly, rationing was more about guaranteeing food supplies, than reducing consumption;
* Emmeline Pankhurst was enlisted to convince women & employers of the need for female labour. The ‘*Women’s Right to Serve*’ march, held on 17 July 1915, encouraged women to come forward in large numbers, to take places on Government training schemes;
* The following table illustrates the extent to which women were employed in the war effort, & the extent to which the change was reversed immediately afterwards, as the Treasury Agreements were honoured, & men were demobilised:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Employment of women, 1914-1920[[34]](#footnote-34)** | | | | | |
| **%’age of Women to Men in employment** | **Industry %** | **Transport %** | **Agriculture %** | **Commerce %** | **All workers %** |
| July 1914 | 26 | 2 | 9 | 27 | 24 |
| July 1918 | 35 | 12 | 14 | 53 | 37 |
| July 1920 | 27 | 4 | 10 | 40 | 28 |

**Support from the Empire**

* Britain received tremendous support from her Empire;
* Canada, Australia & New Zealand immediately offered to help the mother country when war was declared;
* In all, the Empire (*excluding India*) supplied over one million men to help Britain;
* The Dominions were by no means the only source of help, with noteworthy contributions being made by Newfoundland, the West Indies, South Africa, &, especially, India;
* Approximately 1.3 million Indian soldiers served in the First World War, & over 74,000 of them lost their lives;
* The Indian contribution has often been undervalued, & history has mostly forgotten these sacrifices, which were rewarded with broken promises from the British Government of Indian independence.[[35]](#footnote-35)

**Propaganda**

* Propaganda was organised on an unprecedented scale, in the form of newspaper articles, pamphlets, posters, photographs, cartoons, lectures, & cinema;
* This was the first war in which the mass media played a vital role, the media itself being of relatively recent origin;
* The importance of propaganda, as a weapon of war, was quickly appreciated, & the British War Propaganda Bureau, which published over 1160 pamphlets, was soon established;
* Although the Government sought to control propaganda, it did not have a propaganda policy before the war, something that was to evolve as the war progressed;
* Considerable evidence exists to show that propaganda was often designed with the purpose of shaping public opinion & maintaining civilian morale, as well as at improving recruitment;
* Lying for the sake of war has a long history & this factor, linked to the apparent success of British propaganda in the First World War, goes some way to explaining why, in the 1930s & 1940s, many people were sceptical about news of Nazi atrocities.

**Conduct of the war**

* Initially, the Cabinet deferred to the experience & expertise, & to the sheer power & personality, of Lord Kitchener;
* At a practical level, Britain’s ability to field only six regular infantry divisions, plus a cavalry division, probably dictated her willingness to be subservient to France, at the outset;
* Not until 1916 was there an identifiable Allied strategy, yet it was not until the German Spring 1918 Offensives so very nearly gave the Germans outright victory that the Allies finally agreed upon a single chain of command;
* Despite an underlying goodwill amongst the Allies to support each other, the reality was often different;
* By the end of 1914, British & French politicians were already looking for less costly, potentially more successful theatres of operation than the deadlocked Western Front;
* From a military viewpoint, politicians were seen to be influencing strategy with their opinions (*not facts*), with a tendency to focus purely on political considerations over the military aspects of operations;
* For example, Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1916 to 1918, was not alone in viewing the Salonika campaign as a waste of valuable resources, to the point of it undermining any prospect of success on the Western Front;
* For military leaders, the strategic objective was to inflict a military defeat on Germany of such magnitude as to discourage her from pursuing her aim to become the dominant European power & a world power;
* This demanded that Germany be beaten in the field, which really meant Britain & France had to defeat her, convincingly, on the Western Front, especially after the 1917 Russian Revolution;
* Defeat of Austria-Hungary or Turkey might have satisfied the politicians & enabled them to bring enough pressure to bear on Germany as to cause her to evacuate Belgium & northern France, &, perhaps, to introduce internal social & political change, but such an achievement was unlikely to eliminate Germany’s military capability;[[36]](#footnote-36)
* David Lloyd George always sought to wrest control back from the military leaders, especially from late 1917 by which time he was well-established as Prime Minister. He eventually got rid of Robertson but could never generate enough political support to replace Haig, partly for want of a capable candidate willing to do take on Haig’s onerous job;
* The politicians felt their military leaders had insufficient regard to the way in which the war effort was financed, to the problems of meeting agricultural, industrial & Armed Forces manpower requirements with limited resources, & to the political considerations inevitable in an alliance;

**![A person wearing a black hat

Description automatically generated]()**

Generals Sir Douglas Haig & Joseph Joffre in discussion with David Lloyd George  
(Imperial War Museum; IWM Q1177)

* The Western Front stretched almost four hundred miles from the Belgian coast to the Franco-Swiss border. Mainly, British interest & involvement was in the area from a few kilometres north of Ypres (*today, known as Ieper*) to Amiens but, on occasions, the BEF was committed as far south as a line extending ENE of Paris.

A close up of a map

Description automatically generated

The Western Front, 1914-1918  
(Internet; ResearchGate)

**1915**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 19 February-18 March 1915 | Naval bombardments of Turkish positions in the Dardanelles & failed attempts to force the Bosphorus Straits using naval forces alone |
| 10-15 March | Battle of Neuve Chappelle |
| 22 April-25 May | 1915 Battle of Ypres (*Second Ypres*), including the battles of:   * Gravenstafel (*22-24 April*); * St. Julien (*24 April-4 May*); * Frezenberg (*8-13 May*); * Bellewarde (*24-25 May*); * Aubers (*9 May*); & * Festubert (*15-25 May*). |
| 25 April-8 January 1916 | Gallipoli campaign including landing at:   * Helles & Gaba Tepe (*Anzac Cove*); * Suvla Bay |
| 25 September-8 October | Battle of Loos |
| 5 October 1915-29 September 1918 | Salonika Campaign |

* By the end of 1914, the original BEF had effectively been destroyed;
* Nevertheless, grandiose plans for an offensive in Flanders were first drawn up in 1915;
* However, then, the BEF was simply incapable of implementing them as it was de-skilled after the loss of its cadre of volunteer professional soldiers, so 1915 was one devoted to re-building based largely on partially trained Territorial Force units & the enthusiastic but initially untrained volunteers who flocked to join Kitchener’s New Armies;
* Political pressures prompted the BEF to launch the Neuve Chapelle, Dardanelles & Gallipoli, Salonika, & Loos offensives in 1915;
* Neuve Chapelle excited the admiration of the French Commander-in-Chief (*C-in-C*), Joffre, through its introduction of meticulous planning, concealment of intent, & concentration of overwhelming force against a chosen part of enemy front;
* The intention was to break through German lines & rush to the [Aubers Ridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aubers_Ridge) &, possibly, [Lille](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lille). A French assault at [Vimy Ridge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vimy_Ridge) was also planned to threaten the road, rail & canal junctions at [La Bassée](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Bass%C3%A9e) from the south, as the British attacked from the north;
* Initially, the British attack was successful, but the success could not be exploited for insufficient reserves & artillery ammunition, disorganisation which invariably follows an attack, & loss of communications. The French part of the plan was cancelled when the British were unable to relieve the French IX Corps north of [Ypres](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ypres), which had been intended to move south for the French attack, so the French Tenth Army’s contribution was reduced to support from its heavy artillery;
* 2nd Ypres (*22 April-25 May 1915*) is notable as the first occasion on which poison gas was used as a weapon of war on the Western Front. Troops had to improvise gas masks when the Germans launched the first gas attack;
* The British first used gas during the Battle of Loos, with mixed results;
* At the outset, both sides released gas from cylinders, but the Germans went on to develop artillery shells for delivery, something the British only had available in large numbers in 1918;
* However, the British generally had the benefit of prevailing winds, to release gas clouds from cylinders emplaced in the front trenches, & they also developed an effective technique for delivering a heavy concentration of gas bombs from a massed battery of Livens Projectors (*heavy mortars*);[[37]](#footnote-37)

![A group of people in a field

Description automatically generated]()

Livens Projectors developed by the British to deliver clouds of poisonous gas.  
(Internet; Wikipedia)

* As the Western Front became deadlocked, from the end of 1914, to lessen manpower losses British & French politicians sought any new theatre of operations that offered a real chance of significant success & progress;
* Politicians over-rode military objections to the Dardanelles & Gallipoli campaign, the landings for which were launched in April 1915, ostensibly to relieve the pressure on, & provide a safe supply route to, Russia, but also with the objective of persuading Italy & the Balkan neutrals to join the Entente, & to uphold British & French prestige in the area;[[38]](#footnote-38)
* British Generals were against Gallipoli from the outset, believing it & other distant theatres simply diverted much needed resources from the Western Front;
* The Dardanelles & Gallipoli venture was an unmitigated disaster, its only redeeming features being that, eventually, Italy joined the Entente &, when the decision was taken to evacuate, despite all that had gone before, planning for, & execution of, the evacuation, was superb, with the loss of only one man killed;
* The abject failure of the Gallipoli campaign, for which the Government of the day had to take a large measure of responsibility, so weakened the position of politicians in relation to the military as to give Robertson & Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, effective control over the conduct of the war, from the end of 1915;
* The original concept behind the British policy of attrition collapsed as early as August 1915, by which time there were clear indications that she was beginning to run short of money & gold;
* Political crises in France & Russia suggested to the British Cabinet that there was a serious risk to the very foundations of the Entente, & that they would have to demonstrate their continued commitment to the alliance;
* Reluctantly, they sanctioned a British attack in what was to become the battle of Loos;[[39]](#footnote-39)
* The most important consequence of Loos was the replacement of Sir John French as Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, by Sir Douglas Haig;
* The limited battles of 1915 allowed the development of artillery tactics, which would bear fruit in 1917. The need for unprecedented supplies of ammunition, & sound tactical planning, were identified as important;[[40]](#footnote-40)
* The main lessons of 1915 were[[41]](#footnote-41) that:

1. Staff & higher command training, was inadequate;
2. Similarly, training for Territorial Force & New Army Divisions;
3. Too few experienced instructors were available to deliver training;
4. There were not enough experienced junior officers or non-commissioned officers (*NCOs*);
5. The lack of experience of the troops led to difficulty in them adapting to changing circumstances on the battlefield;
6. Artillery support was inadequate, & much closer co-operation was needed between infantry & artillery arms;
7. Reserves were held too far back, so that early tactical success was not being exploited; &
8. A key problem was ineffective battlefield communications.

**A very different form of warfare**

* The form of warfare experienced on the Western Front was very different to that in India & elsewhere in the Empire, & it was very new;
* Long periods of monotonous routine in constantly dangerous & difficult conditions were interspersed with offensives against well-prepared defences, the likes of which had never been experienced;
* When Territorial Force units entered the improvised trench line in April 1915, many trenches were not recognisable in the way that most people envisage them to have been. Often, men simply occupied shell holes in the ground, covered with branches to provide some form of camouflage;
* As they developed, trench systems became relatively complex & sophisticated, however ground conditions dictated the way in which trenches were constructed;
* Sometimes front & close support lines consisted of island breastworks, or small, disconnected posts at considerable intervals, very low, often in very bad repair & with hardly any communication from island to island;

A large farm field

Description automatically generated

Primitive shelters constructed by German troops at Passchendaele, 1918   
(Internet; source uncertain)

* As 1915 progressed, trench routines operated that were far more efficient than the ad hoc arrangements employed during the early months of the war. One battalion tended to share duties with another, each holding the front-line for four days, followed by four days in billets. The system saved considerable work, & semi-permanent billets encouraged a variety of shops to open close to the front, such as tailors & bootmakers;
* Generally, three companies would hold front- & support-lines with one in reserve. When short frontages were held, two companies might be in the front line, with the other two in the support & / or reserve trenches. This allowed inter-company relief from time to time;
* To minimise casualties from artillery bombardments, often troops would be removed from forward trenches during the day;
* Whenever a unit moved into the front-line, the departing unit provided detailed information on the trench system, including a trench map, covering such things as the condition of wire entanglements; work in progress; positions of hostile machine guns & snipers; danger points; listening posts; small arms ammunition reserves, bomb stores & trench stores; method of communication with supporting artillery; arrangements to meet an attack & launch a counter-attack; sanitary arrangements; water supply; & the best route for the transport of rations;
* German trenches could be as close as fifteen yards away, although more typically they may have been two to three hundred yards distant;
* British policy was to dominate ‘*No Man’s Land*’, by re-digging trenches closer to the enemy’s & staging frequent trench raids;
* Patrolling & wiring ‘*No Man’s Land*’ were precarious duties given considerable quantities of barbed wire, in some places up to ten belts of it just before the front-line trenches; the number of water-filled shell holes; broken & abandoned material: & large numbers of bodies which were often left for days before an attempt could be made to recover them.

**Life in the trenches**

* The degree of discomfort endured in front-line trenches varied greatly, depending on the season, the weather & the extent to which enemy artillery had damaged the trenches;
* Trenches were often waterlogged, sometimes waist-deep in mud, & they, along with the rest of the battlefields, were infested with vermin, notably rats, which contaminated food & spread disease;
* Trench warfare was so different to any that had been experienced before that several months passed before regular supplies of water could be properly organised;[[42]](#footnote-42)
* Trench life was hard, & sickness returns show a whole range of medical conditions. Apart from dental work & the well-known problems of diarrhoea & trench foot, men suffered from such as: razor rash; boils; scabies; blood in their motions; eye problems; swollen groins; & pyrexia (*fever*);
* The mental strain of forever being alert, combined with the physical strain of coping with, sometimes, dire living conditions & appalling weather, plus constant working parties, stretched many men to the limit, & beyond;

A group of people on a dirt road

Description automatically generated

The mental strain is obvious on troops of 13th (Service) Battalion, Durham Light Infantry  
in assembly trenches prior to the Battle of Menin Road Bridge, 20-26 September 1917  
(Durham Record Office)

* Heavy casualties sustained during major actions added to the anguish felt, but the effects of almost daily exchanges of artillery & trench mortar fire, together with the constant threat posed by snipers, meant that men in forward areas had little respite;
* The scale of Western Front operations demanded vast quantities of labour, to which fighting infantry units were expected to contribute. The work was hard[[43]](#footnote-43) &, on occasions, parties had to walk long distances to & from where they worked;
* Men were expected to carry a prodigious amount of equipment during an attack. In addition to his rifle & bayonet, typically a man was expected to carry or wear: his steel helmet; haversack; filled water-bottle; entrenching tool; waterproof sheet; tube gas helmet; box respirator; two sandbags; two grenades; 120 rounds of small arms ammunition; two flares; one day’s preserved meat & biscuit; one iron ration; & a field dressing;
* Every other man carried a large tool on his back, in the proportion of five shovels to two picks. Lewis gunners, signallers, & other specialists carried their own weapons & equipment. Wire-cutters, Very Pistols & cartridges, SOS rockets, also had to be taken forward;
* However, it would be quite wrong to interpret all this as meaning that all men were forever scared & depressed whenever they were in front-line or support trenches. Some relished the situation in which they found themselves, & examination of many diaries & letters examined attest to the camaraderie most enjoyed;
* British Army policy was to rotate fighting units regularly, so that men had time to relax & recuperate, as well as to receive training;
* Rarely did war diaries mention home leave for enlisted ranks, but from those which do it appears parties of fourteen to twenty men were regularly given a few days leave in the UK. This suggests other ranks may have received leave every 12-18 months or so. Seemingly, officers were allowed leave in groups of three.

**1916**

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| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 21 February-18 December 1916 | Battle of Verdun (*France only, no direct British involvement; the longest battle of the First World War; Losses have been calculated at 377,000 French casualties & 337,000 German[[44]](#footnote-44)*) |
| 31 May-1 June | Battle of Jutland |
| 1 July-18 November | The Allied Offensive & the 1916 Battles of the Somme, including the Battles of:   * Albert (*1-13 July*); * Bazentin (*13-17 July*); * Delville Wood (*15 July-3 September*); * Pozières (*23 July-3 September*); * Guillemont (*3-6 September*); * Ginchy (*9 September*); * Flers-Courcellette (*15-22 September*); * Morval (*25-28 September*); * Thiepval (*1-18 October*); * Le Transloy, including the Butte de Warlencourt (*1-18 October*); * Ancre Heights (*1 October-11 November*); & * The Ancre (*13-18 November*). |

* The Battle of Jutland was the largest naval battle & only full-scale clash between the Royal Navy’s Grand Fleet & the Imperial German Navy’s High Seas Fleet;
* The British lost fourteen ships (*including three battlecruisers*) & 6,094 men while German losses were nine ships & 2,551 men. This was enough for Germany to claim victory;
* While Germany may have been able to claim a tactical victory, for the High Seas Fleet Jutland was a strategic defeat;
* Although the High Seas Fleet occasionally sortied to sea later in the First World War, never again could / would it challenge the Grand Fleet & break the Royal Navy’s blockade, which caused severe hardship to the people of Germany & limited Germany’s ability to wage war;
* As for the land war, although Loos was a failure, the British Government could no longer avoid a heavier involvement &, at Chantilly in December 1915, it committed itself to an Allied strategy for 1916, which was to step up the economic war & for there to be a simultaneous effort on all major fronts, with co-ordinated attacks on the Central Powers, leaving a minimum of forces deployed in the secondary theatres;
* Sir Douglas Haig, in 1916 the C-in-C, favoured an offensive in Flanders that year rather than on the Somme however Alliance politics & other factors determined the latter was the focus of the BEF’s contribution to the Triple Entente’s co-ordinated efforts for that year;
* The Somme campaign had been conceived as a joint Franco-Anglo offensive as part of a huge simultaneous war-winning attack by the Allies on the Eastern & Western Fronts. That strategy was blunted by the German attack at Verdun in late February 1916, which turned French attentions to that area for most of the rest of the year, the immediate impact of which was that the BEF then had to assume primary responsibility for operations on the Somme. Until then the British had very much been the junior partner on the Western Front;
* Sir Henry Rawlinson, who was to direct the Battles of the Somme, drew up plans whereby the British would ‘*bite & hold*’, & allow the Germans to exhaust themselves in their counter attacks. Unfortunately, Haig over-ruled Rawlinson, calling for a far more ambitious scheme, which envisaged a genuine breakthrough, in line with what the French General Joffre also wanted;[[45]](#footnote-45)

A person standing in front of a building

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General Sir Henry Rawlinson at 4th Army Headquarters,  
Querrieu Chateau, July 1916  
(Wikipedia)

* The Somme campaign marked a turning point, both as the first occasion on which the British made a major contribution to the pursuit of the land war & in terms of the evolution of battlefield tactics;
* Of course, it is remembered mainly for the events of 1 July 1916, which was the worst day for casualties in British Army history when the BEF sustained 19,240 fatal casualties & 38,500 wounded;
* Fundamental causes of failure on 1 July were: Inadequate British Staff work in New Army Divisions; Inadequate allocation of artillery compared to French sectors of the Front; Poor utilisation of artillery available; Ineffective battlefield communications, especially between infantry & artillery formations, & to / from formation commanders & their attacking formations; Over-ambitious objectives; &, an effective German response;
* Despite that disaster, politically & militarily it would have been impossible for Britain to abandon the offensive. The French had incurred enormous casualties during the first two years of the war & continued to do so, so the British had to keep applying pressure on the Somme to draw German forces away from the Verdun sector;
* The strength of the German defences on the Somme was under-estimated; the likely effectiveness of the artillery bombardment was over-estimated; & the battle was, if anything, over-planned, reflecting a lack of confidence in the many New Army formations entering the fray for the first time;
* What is often overlooked is that the battle helped to relieve pressure on the French, who had been fighting at Verdun since February, &, at the end of a battle lasting 140 days, despite the great cost involved, the British inflicted their first major defeat on the Germans, which, perhaps, led to their strategic withdrawal, in 1917, to the Hindenburg Line;
* Although the pre-Somme bombardment is always thought to have been enormous, in reality the British had only 32.2 heavy guns to the mile (*compared to 25.5 at Loos, the previous autumn*), but this did not compare well against the French density of 87.5 to the mile (*which dropped a little as the French took over more of the front*);[[46]](#footnote-46)
* While a case can be made for the Somme offensive being carried beyond a natural closure date, Haig, with Robertson’s support, persisted with it because he believed that the German’s were suffering heavier casualties than the Allies, which is, possibly, understandable. Furthermore, his partners would not allow him to close-down the campaign, & there was strong pressure to continue, to keep Germany from reinforcing her Eastern Front;[[47]](#footnote-47)
* By mid-September, the British had learned much about how to use artillery more effectively & there was one heavy gun for every 29 yards of frontage with creeping barrages in common use – the availability of heavy guns on 1 July had been one every 57 yards. Objectives for the attack were limited & tanks were introduced to the battlefield for the first time;
* The Battle of Flers-Courcelette (*15-22 September*) represented a significant victory compared to what had gone before on the Somme battlefields & the British front line advanced 2,500 – 3,500 yards. However, the achievements didn’t meet Sir Douglas Haig’s expectations & the German position, although badly shaken, was not broken;
* The use of tanks was a major innovation. Haig needs praise for his willingness to embrace technology. He embraced the concept of tanks as soon as he knew about them & ordered 150 to be available for the 1 July attacks but they were not ready in time & only sixty were available for the 15 September attack. Of these, only thirty managed to cross the start line & only twenty-one seriously engaged the enemy;
* To compound matters, fears about the state of the battlefield led to a decision to use tanks in areas not so heavily bombarded, but that meant German defences in those tank lanes were largely untouched &, in consequence, supporting infantry often suffered severely;
* Nevertheless, those early tanks performed sufficiently well to encourage Haig to place an order soon after the battle for a further 1,000 of them;
* None of the senior British commanders (*Haig, C-in-C, BEF; Rawlinson, 4th Army; & Gough, 5th Army*) emerged from the Somme campaign with great credit but it’s important to remember that was the first time any of them had to conduct operations on such a vast scale. All three made mistakes with bloody consequences for men under their command, which brought misery & bereavement to so many families throughout Britain;
* However, the campaign should not & cannot be dismissed as a bloody & total disaster. The Allied victory in 1918 was made possible by the battles of attrition of 1916-1917;
* In 1916, the BEF was probably incapable of fighting anything but a battle of attrition because of the inexperience of commanders throughout & most of the troops who were largely war-service volunteers with limited training & no battle experience;
* Its logistic system was incapable of supporting a major, sustained advance. Resources available were insufficient to realistically expect cavalry to convert a German retirement into a rout. The reality is that the BEF was simply incapable of achieving a decisive victory in 1916;
* British casualties sustained during the 1916 Battles of the Somme numbered 498,021 of which 108,691 men were killed or died. Total French casualties numbered about 195,000 while German total casualties vary depending on source but are generally thought to have been between 420,000- 500,000;
* Also worthy of note, the intense battles around the fortress town of Verdun are generally estimated at 362,000 French casualties & 336,000 German;
* A simple comparison of manpower losses of the respective belligerents would risk failure to understand that Germany & her allies had a smaller manpower pool than Britain, France & their allies. More important, large numbers of experienced German soldiers & non-commissioned & junior officers were killed during the Somme & Verdun campaigns which the Germany Army struggled to replace & never really recovered from. The BEF lost mostly inexperienced soldiers while those who survived benefitted greatly, in strict military terms, by gaining experience;
* The Somme taught the BEF how to fight while it degraded the quality of the German Army;
* Similarly, large materiel losses were equally hard for the Germans to replace, partly because of the effective maritime blockade maintained by the Royal Navy, whereas Britain with its Empire was better able to afford such losses;
* In mid-1916, British industries were beginning to be on an effective ‘*Total War*’ footing to which must be added increasing support from American industries as they, too, did likewise;
* Although the British artillery bombardment prior to the 1 July attacks failed to achieve many of the goals set for it, its sheer power & Britain’s increasing ability to maintain supplies of ordnance to satisfy the voracious demands of its artillery arm & enable sustained heavy bombardments of enemy positions, forced German defenders to endure an appalling ordeal throughout the campaign;
* The increasing ability of the BEF to mount sustained attacks in 1916, & its increasing capability as an effective fighting force, shocked the Germans who quickly came to realise that, on the Western Front, Britain was fast becoming their principal enemy;
* The Somme campaign contributed directly to the German decision, in February 1917, to attempt to knock Britain out of the war by re-introducing unrestricted submarine warfare. The German’s knew only too well that such a decision was likely to eventually result in the USA’s entry into the war, but they gambled that Britain could be knocked out of the war before American resources could be fully deployed & become effective, a gamble which ultimately failed both tactically & strategically;
* Surprising as it may seem, at the end of the campaign morale within the BEF remained generally good, unlike in the French Army;
* Valuable battle experience had been gained on how to fight a modern war; lessons were being learned quickly & disseminated throughout the BEF, so that tactics improved rapidly;
* For example, it was soon recognised that the platoon, a body of 30-40 men, was the major tactical unit & platoon commanders were given much greater flexibility as well as firepower through re-organisation into semi-specialised sections of riflemen, Lewis Gunners, bombers & rifle bombers;
* Careful training & rehearsal of battles became more commonplace. Increasingly greater & more reliable supplies of artillery ammunition were available & new weapons were introduced, such as tanks, Lewis Guns & rifle grenades.

**1917**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 9 April-26 August 1917 | The Arras Offensive & Flanking Operations to the Offensive, including the Battles of:   * Vimy (*9-14 April*); * First… Scarp (*9-14 April*); * Second… Scarp (*23-24 April*); * Arleux (*28-29 April*); * Third… Scarp (*3-4 May*); * Bullecourt (*3-17 May*); & * Hill 70 (*15-25 August*). |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 7 June-10 November | The Flanders Offensive & the Battles of Ypres,  1917 (*commonly referred to as Third Ypres or*  *Passchendaele*), including the Battles of:   * Messines, 1917 (*7-14 June*); * Pilckem (*31 July-2 August*); * Langemarck (*16-18 August*); * Menin Road (*20-25 September*); * Polygon Wood (*26 September-3 October*); * Broodseinde (*4 October*); * Poelkapelle (*9 October*); * First Passchendaele (*12 October*); & * Second Passchendaele (*26 October-10 November*). |
| 20 November-7 December | Cambrai Operations, including the Battle of  Cambrai (*20 November-3 December*) |

* For Germany in 1917 the decisive battle was always going to be submarine warfare, a strategy which demanded that the Flemish coast, & the submarine bases there, be defended;
* On the Western Front, for fear of being rolled-up & losing the coast, the Germans had to stand & fight, & this resulted in introduction of a new strategy of elastic defence in depth – a lightly-held front line with sophisticated defensive systems / zones built on high points incorporating hundreds of pill-boxes / blockhouses, some estimates are as high as 2,000, often no more than 100-150 metres apart & protected by masses of barbed wire. Counter-attack divisions were held out of artillery range, perhaps 4-5 kilometres behind the front line;
* Contrary to Kitchener’ belief that Germany would be exhausted by 1917, early in that year she again took the strategic initiative, possibly reflecting her true losses during the Battles of the Somme & Verdun, & withdrew up to twenty miles to a series of prepared defensive positions, commonly referred to as the Siegfried or Hindenburg Lines;
* This move completely threw Allied preparations for a major offensive in the west, although later British efforts at Vimy Ridge & Messines Ridge were notable successes, helping to offset earlier abject French failure of the Nivelle Offensive in the Chemins des Dames area, which led to numerous mutinies & a breakdown of morale in the French Army, & the heavy losses eventually sustained by the British during the Arras Offensive, which losses for some battalions were comparable with or even worse than those sustained on the Somme ;
* By 1917, all sides limited the size & scope of their attacks, with an increasing realisation that they were unlikely to produce decisive & rapid results. However, this also meant that promising successes, as on the first day of the Battle of Arras (*9 April 1917*) & at Cambrai (*20 November 1917*), could not be fully exploited, for lack of reserves;
* The key changes were to be found in artillery fire control techniques; use of a wider range of attack & support weapons; &, increasingly, battles were planned with more limited, ‘*bite & hold*’ objectives;
* 1917 is best remembered for the Third Battle of Ypres (*Passchendaele*), the results of which, in many respects, had an even greater impact on military & civilian morale than did the 1916 Battles of the Somme;
* The 1917 Flanders Offensive lasted from 7 June to 10 November as the Allies sought to gain control of the Mid-Western Flemish Ridge, a series of highs & lows at no point more than 80 metres above sea level, running for about 25 kilometres long by 8 kilometres deep to the east & south of Ypres;
* While the strategic concept of the Offensive may have been sound, Haig ignored the fact that, since trench warfare had begun, at no time had a breakthrough been achieved on the Western Front, by either side. He also ignored warnings from Marshal Petain about having to contend with the mud, although he was, perhaps, unlucky with the degree of appalling weather encountered;
* Before the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 the artillery preparation lasted eight days & consumed 1,732,873 shells; at Messines, in July 1917, it again lasted eight days but this time managed to use 3,258,000 shells;[[48]](#footnote-48)
* At 03:10 hours on 7 June, the mines for which the Battle of Messines is so famous, began to detonate.  After the explosions, British artillery fired at maximum rate. A creeping barrage in three belts 640 metres deep began & counter-battery groups bombarded all known German artillery positions with gas shells;

A black and white photo of a tree

Description automatically generated

Explosion of one of the nineteen mines for which the Battle of Messines  
is so well known, 7 June 1917  
(Internet; Fotostock; Mary Evans Robert Hunt Collection)

* The importance of the mines & reliance on them for successful operations meant methods employed at Messines could not be replicated in later battles. Military analysts & historians disagree on the strategic significance of the battle, although most acknowledge it as a British tactical & operational success;
* Hindenburg & Ludendorff later wrote of its impact on the German Army & of the heavy losses incurred. The loss of the ridge appears to have had a worse effect on German morale than the number of casualties;
* After the success of Lieutenant General Sir Herbert (*later, Field Marshal Lord*) Plumer’s Second Army in the capture of the Messines Ridge, Haig made a big mistake in giving control of the main battle to his protégé, General Sir Hubert Gough;

![A person wearing a uniform

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Lieutenant General Sir Herbert (later, Field Marshal Lord) Plumer,  
affectionately known by his men as ‘Old Plum & Apple’ or ‘Daddy’ Plumer.  
(Imperial War Museum; IWM Q23665)

* Gough & his Fifth Army staff were not of the same calibre as Plumer & his, but, more important, the inevitable delay this caused while organising the next strike allowed the Germans to strengthen their defensive lines;
* Military historians have often puzzled over the choice of Gough, who had delivered a victory when Haig needed it at Beaumont Hamel, in November 1916*,* which Haig could report to the Chantilly Conference at the end of that year. Thereafter, Gough was viewed as ‘*his man*’, but some historians suggest he messed up most things he touched. Others will argue history may have been unkind to him with this stigmatisation for his handling of the campaign;
* Haig & Gough were also faced with the problem of prevarication on the part of the War Policy Committee, which took five weeks after Messines to confirm the next planned stage of the campaign could go ahead;[[49]](#footnote-49)
* However, the Committee was not entirely responsible for the delay, as Haig’s appointment of Gough to direct the battle inevitably led to delays. Worse, Gough also altered Haig’s original battle plan, which may have contributed to some of the subsequent problems encountered;[[50]](#footnote-50)

![A person wearing a uniform

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Lieutenant General (Temporary General) Sir Hubert Gough  
(Imperial War Museum; IWM Q35825)

* Summer 1917 turned out to be the wettest experienced in northern France & Flanders for many a year. By the time Gough’s Fifth Army was ready, the good weather broke, although a respite around the end of September allowed the BEF to demonstrate the full power of its methods;
* Gough’s failure led to Plumer’s re-appointment to direct the battle, & his limited objective tactics proved themselves successful when the Gheluvelt Plateau was eventually taken;
* Features of the later Battle of Cambrai were the absence of the usual long bombardment before the attack, & the first massed attack using tanks although their contribution to the early tactical successes gained was mainly for crushing paths through wire;
* The BEF was unable to exploit its success at Cambrai, & most of the ground gained was lost during German counterattacks on 30 November. Actions on this day demonstrated the absence of sound British defensive tactics, although simple lack of numbers & reserves also played a major part, as did the weather;
* The final Russian collapse ensured both that a decisive result from the war could be delivered only on the Western Front, & that Germany could shift substantial, largely fresh, reinforcements to that front from the east;
* Although the British could not break the German Army in 1917 the BEF’s efforts caused the German’s considerable casualties &, particularly, material losses which could not easily be replaced – so many pack animals were lost that they didn’t have enough in 1918, a situation exacerbated by failure of the fodder crop;
* Sir Douglas Haig’s conviction of collapsing German morale was wrong – it was not until after the Battles of the Lys in April 1918 that it began to break, more especially when Ludendorff then realised Germany could not win the war & sued for peace;
* In 1917, the BEF needed to be handled with care, yet Haig took an enormous risk by setting what turned out to be unrealistic & unattainable goals (*e.g., along a 30 kilometres front, objectives were set to 10 kilometres depth*) &, especially, in continuing the offensive in Flanders as conditions deteriorated. In fairness to him, it may have been difficult to justify halting without having to give up hard-won, generally higher ground better suited for winter quarters;
* The collapse of Russia following a series of revolutions & the limited involvement in the war of Italy &, especially, the USA, left the BEF as the only Allied force in the field on the Western Front capable of offensive action. Fear of America superseding Britain as the premier world power may have been an important consideration when planning Third Ypres. There was no real expectation of large & effective American forces before 1919, so the Allies needed both to survive & hang on until then;
* What was, arguably, a British defeat, at best a stalemate, left the Allies in a much more precarious state towards the end of 1917 by when nobody on the Allied side, possibly except Haig, anticipated victory in 1918;
* Reflecting on the overall outcome of the Flanders Offensive, the truth of the matter is that neither side could justifiably claim a clear-cut victory on the battlefields at the end of 1917;
* Casualties sustained during the campaign represented the loss of ten British divisions, which subsequently affected morale. In December 1917, discontent was general behind the lines, with mutinies at some training camps in the Étaples area & many drink-related offences however, unlike with the French Army earlier in the year, this never manifested itself in the front line;
* Harsh logistics realities & collapse resulted in delays. Handling the clawing mud, atrocious ground conditions & roads, was essentially an engineering matter that wasn’t dealt with properly for too long. Congestion & the lack of suitable usable roads resulted in restricted movement of supplies. Fragmented engineering resources reflected a lack of understanding, at the time, about the importance of logistics & its needs;
* Yet, 1917 saw greater delegation of command within the BEF, greater staff efficiencies at Army, Corps & Division levels, & improvement in quality of its officers & men who were fast learning ‘*on the job*’;
* The principal fighting unit focused on platoon formations rather than, as hitherto, companies or battalions;

![A group of people riding on the back of a motorcycle

Description automatically generated]()

Troops often had to endure atrocious ground conditions  
(Internet; source uncertain)

* Organisation, weaponry & tactics changed to apply the harsh lessons learnt after 1916. Pioneer battalions were kept in reserve, to follow up the attacking infantry & rebuild roads & work on defensive positions as ground was consolidated. Signals detachments were organised to advance with the infantry – observation balloons were reserved for messages by signal lamp from the front line, as insurance against failure of telephone lines & message-runners;
* The ‘*France & Belgium Volume II, Messines & Third Ypres (Passchendaele) Official History of the Great War*’ was written at a ‘*snail’s pace*’, it was the last of the First World War histories to be published, in 1948. The story of its production is littered with lots of quarrels & resignations;
* The volume’s & series editor, Brigadier General Sir James Edmonds, CB, CMG, concluded that Passchendaele was an Allied victory because of the campaign’s achievements in undermining German spirit & causing irreplaceable loss of war materials;
* The great tragedy for the BEF & the Imperial Forces of Australia, New Zealand & Canada, which suffered so many losses in the fight for the few miles from Ypres to the Passchendaele Ridge, is that only five months later almost all the ground gained in the mud & horror of the 1917 was recaptured by the German Army during its April offensive in 1918.

**War weariness**

* By the end of 1917, there were distinct signs of Britain becoming war-weary, with the populace uncertain what their enormous sacrifices were for;
* So worried did the Government become about mounting unrest that several Commissions of Enquiry were established, tasked to furnish urgent reports on the situation;
* All identified much the same things, with high food prices found to be the main cause of complaint;
* Swift action was taken to pacify the unrest, although it was six months before food rationing was, finally, introduced.

**The importance of the USA to the Allied victory**

* The importance of the USA to the Allied war effort is hard to over-estimate;
* From the outset, Britain, & her Allies, needed war supplies. Britain guaranteed Russian & Italian purchases in the USA, from September 1915, which facility was extended to France, in May 1916;
* When, eventually, the USA was directly involved in the war, the beneficial impact on morale within Allied nations, of American troops arriving in Europe at a rate of almost a quarter of a million a month from May 1918, was enormous;
* Indeed, at the time of the Armistice, there were more American troops in France than British!
* Direct American involvement in the war was brought about, primarily, by the consequences of Germany’s decision to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare, from 1 February 1917;
* Another influencing factor was the ‘*Zimmermann Telegram*’ (*in January 1917, passed on to the American Government by British naval intelligence, but also intercepted independently by the US State Department*), which represented a clumsy German approach to Mexico, proposing an alliance, baited with the offer to return Texas, Arizona & New Mexico.

**Army Training**

* In peacetime, basic training for infantry took ten weeks, before platoon & Company training began;
* After five months recruits graduated to training at battalion & brigade strength, by which time specialist training would have been well underway;[[51]](#footnote-51)
* 1914 training programmes reflected the lessons of the Boer War, with emphasis placed on, *inter alia*: musketry skills; the establishment of smaller tactical units such as sections; attack based on momentum & superiority of firepower; defence in depth, with good fields of fire; & high levels of field craft;
* Experience in the field soon highlighted shortcomings in the training delivered to Territorial Force & New Army formations, & the lack of experienced troops in these units meant that, initially, they lacked the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances on the battlefield;
* The need for closer co-operation between infantry & artillery was also demonstrated early on, although it was to be 1917 before this began to be truly effective;[[52]](#footnote-52)
* The importance of support weapons for the infantry was recognised in 1915,[[53]](#footnote-53) as increasingly was the importance of the platoon, & its leaders, as the most effective unit in an attack;
* During 1917, more limited & realistic objectives began to be set for battles &, as the year progressed, Territorial Force & New Army formations demonstrated far greater capability than before;
* Eventually, a scheme was introduced to provide progressive training for recruits who were under 19 years of age. Forty-two battalions (*of 112*) in the Training Reserve were selected for this purpose, fourteen becoming ‘*Young Soldier*’ & twenty-eight becoming ‘*Graduated*’ battalions, with two of the latter linked to one of the former;
* ‘*Young Soldier*’ battalions received recruits & delivered basic training, then passed them on as companies to their ‘*Graduated*’ battalions;
* Normally, recruits completed their training with the ‘*Graduated*’ battalions, which were organised in four companies according to age (*one company for recruits ranging between 18-18¼ years; one for those 18¼-18½; one for 18½-18¾ year-olds; & one company for men aged 18¾-19*). Every three months, a company of 19-year old men was ready for drafting &, as recruit training finished, a whole company would be drafted to the Western Front, to be replaced by another 18-18¼ company;[[54]](#footnote-54)
* The tactics employed by the British during the ‘*Advance to Victory*’, leading to the Armistice, were largely those already in place in 1917;
* Throughout the war, the British Army went to great lengths to apply the lessons of earlier actions;
* Although every effort was made to deliver training in a timely fashion, it must also be said that, often, units simply had to be thrown into battle with little or no opportunity beforehand to undertake appropriate training;
* A whole range of measures were initiated to improve efficiency, such as adding Pioneer battalions to each division; introducing the trench support weapons that were lacking at the outset, & more machine guns; operating a casualty handling & clearing system that usually worked well, often in trying circumstances; forming the Machine Gun & Tank Corps; & developing the use of air power from a reconnaissance only arm, to a genuine support & ground attack arm;
* As new weapons were developed, so tactics & techniques to use them evolved.

**Evolution of Army tactics**

* British tactics were under constant review, yet the solutions to such problems as battlefield communications were simply not available at that time;
* Army training manuals & programmes incorporated the lessons of the Boer War;
* In 1914, the British Regular Army was fully capable of undertaking an open order advance, using the classic tactic of ‘*fire & movement*’, making full use of ground cover to develop concentrated firepower from concealed positions;
* When the BEF left for France, many people believed that it was the largest, most professional, & best trained & equipped army ever to leave Britain’s shores;
* The problems soon facing the British were simply ones of lack of numbers, the absence of trained reserves, unsuitable supporting artillery, & lack of enough supplies, especially artillery shells, to wage war & to maintain an effective force in the field;
* In August 1914, Mons & Le Cateau were minor triumphs & defensive actions, where the professionalism & musketry skills of the BEF rebuffed the German advance, albeit only temporarily;
* Despite its small size, the BEF made significant contributions to help the French during the 1914 Battles of the Marne & the Aisne;
* The strategically pointless battles of Neuve Chapelle (*10 – 13 March 1915*) & Loos (*25 September to 8 October 1915*) were intended to demonstrate to her Allies Britain’s commitment to the cause;
* They also highlighted both the relatively simple tactics then employed (*an artillery bombardment, followed by a rapid infantry attack on the enemy lines*) & many of the problems that the British would take time to overcome, notably inadequate artillery support, lack of artillery calibration, inflexible battle planning, poor communications, & poor positioning of reserves;
* As conceived by the British, attrition was a way of conserving lives, by strengthening defensive lines & waiting for the Germans to exhaust themselves in the attack. However, in time, it was often the Allies who resorted to attacking the Germans in strong defensive positions, in the knowledge that, potentially, they had larger resources to call upon than did the Central Powers & that, eventually, the Germans would wear themselves out, leaving the Allies victorious;
* For some reason, which is hard to explain, other than there was a lack of trust in poorly trained & inexperienced New Army divisions, the tactic of ‘*fire & movement*’ was largely abandoned on the first day of the Somme, with many units advancing in an extended line, which offered German machine guns an easy target;
* However, it is a myth that all units advanced in this way, at walking pace. There was a large variation in both the method of advance & the speed of the attack;[[55]](#footnote-55)
* There is clear evidence that many of the lessons learnt on 1 July 1916 were applied from as early as the following day,[[56]](#footnote-56) & Rawlinson’s dawn attack on 14 July marked a notable success, reflecting many of the earlier lessons;[[57]](#footnote-57)
* Often, officers would be issued with questionnaires immediately after an action &, after assessment, their feedback would be incorporated into up-dated training manuals & programmes;
* Unlike the Germans, the British Army usually sought to apply lessons throughout the BEF, rather than just to a portion of it, although it was not until 1918 that much of this bore fruit;[[58]](#footnote-58)
* Running parallel to GHQ’s constant tactical analysis & production of training manuals, there quickly sprang up an archipelago of training schools designed to bring all ranks up to the high standards demanded by modern warfare;
* The 1916 Battles of the Somme underlined the value of trench mortars; Lewis Guns; & rifle grenades as close support weapons & prompted the decisive ‘*third generation*’ tactical reappraisal of the BEF in the winter of 1916-17;
* The results of that appraisal were crystallised in the key manuals ‘*Instruction for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*’(SS135), published in December 1916, & ‘*Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action*’(SS143), issued in February 1917;
* The main lessons incorporated into SS135 were the:

1. Need for closer co-operation between artillery & attacking Infantry, to avoid troops falling too far behind the artillery barrages;
2. Need for careful planning & preparation was re-emphasised;
3. Increasing use of hand grenades by the infantry, instead of the rifle & the bayonet, was of great concern, reflecting a known deterioration of musketry skills;
4. Importance of infantry support weapons was emphasised; &
5. Importance of the platoon, & its leaders, in the assault was acknowledged;[[59]](#footnote-59)

* 1917 saw the following general developments:

1. Semi-mobile warfare re-emerged due to the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in the spring: this included some minor mounted cavalry actions;
2. Artillery fire control & techniques increased dramatically in effectiveness & preparatory barrages could be of greater length & intensity than ever before;
3. At the same time, the philosophy of neutralisation of enemy defences through volume of fire took shape in opposition to the attempted destruction of the Somme barrages. Counter battery fire became much more important;
4. At Cambrai, in November 1917, there was no pre-attack barrage, surprise being possible due to improved target registration methods;
5. Machine gun barrages, gas attacks & mines were all used during offensives;
6. The muddy conditions of Flanders in 1917 had a profound impact on the effectiveness of the weapons used;
7. Battles started to be focused around carefully planned & prepared operations with limited objectives;
8. Successful tactics employed during the earlier Battles of Arras were repeated later in the year with variations which gave the British substantial superiority in artillery pieces – 2:1 for heavy guns; 5:1 for lighter guns;
9. Wire-cutting began in mid-May 1917. The bombardment preparatory to the main attack began on 26 May with 2,266 artillery pieces; 756 heavies; 1,158 18-pounders; 352 4.5” howitzers. 3.6 million shells were fired equating to 144,000 tons of explosives;
10. The first massed tank attack, at Cambrai, took place & showed that a breakthrough could occur, but the attack failed due to loss of impetus. Tactically the tanks got too far in front of the supporting infantry, despite a great deal of preparatory training.[[60]](#footnote-60)

**Technological advances**

* At the outset, basic equipment & weaponry were in short supply. In common with most other armies, in 1914 only two machine guns were issued to each battalion;
* Until specialist trench warfare weapons became widely available, most notably mortars & hand-grenades, troops in the front-line had to improvise, & all manner of strange devices were used, including hand-grenades based on jam jars & tin cans, sometimes thrown using catapults;
* The First World War saw, for the first time, the effective use of rail networks to move troops & supplies, & of submarines to attack supply lines;
* The widespread use of magazine rifles, air power (*the development of which in this war was significant, especially for reconnaissance, though not yet of strategic importance*), barbed wire, wireless telegraphy, poison gas, &, especially, machine guns & improved artillery, all gave armies vastly greater firepower & capability than their predecessors enjoyed in earlier conflicts;
* Universal military service, which existed everywhere except in Britain, gave the belligerents the manpower necessary to make effective use of their arsenals;
* For Britain, the arms race centred on naval matters. The launch of *HMS Dreadnought*, in 1906, rendered obsolete all previously built battleships & presented Germany with an opportunity to re-build her navy at a rate comparable with that of Britain, which she sought to take, in 1908;
* Britain eventually responded to the challenge, & there was never any serious threat to her position as the world’s premier naval power;
* Technology produced few genuinely new weapons during the war, the most significant exceptions being trench mortars, tanks &, perhaps, poison gas, but it contributed enormously to the development & evolution of many others, including transportation, aviation &, to a lesser extent, telecommunications;
* It’s important to remember that, at the outbreak of the First World War, the internal combustion engine, & aeroplanes, represented new, largely untried technologies. Britain did not have an aero-engine industry to speak of &, for the first six months of the war, she relied entirely on France for engines;
* Artillery was the dominant weapon of the First World War, although, at the outset, the British were lacking the artillery pieces needed to conduct the style of warfare for which the Western Front was to become so infamous;
* The problem was exacerbated by the Government’s ‘*business as usual*’ policy, so that, initially, production was limited to a small number of specialist firms. Furthermore, the need for artillery ammunition had been greatly under-estimated before the war, & there were also serious problems with reliability & quality control;
* The main artillery piece of the BEF in 1914, the 18-pounder field gun, was designed to fire shrapnel at close range against an enemy in the open. It was unsuitable, therefore, for the trench warfare soon to come;
* Artillery tactics changed enormously. In 1914, the effectiveness of artillery was often gauged by personal observation, with little use of maps, & no real understanding of the importance for artillery & infantry to co-ordinate their efforts;
* By its very nature, artillery devastated battlefields, & made it difficult for men & supplies, & virtually impossible for guns, to move across them;
* Consequently, even successful attacks could not be exploited once the infantry advanced out of the range of their supporting guns, a point of instruction highlighted in Training Manual SS135;
* Nevertheless, the skill of the gunners improved greatly, as did ranging techniques & instruments, explosives &, especially, fuses;
* The decisive moment in infantry- artillery co-operation appears to have come at some point during the 1916 Battles of the Somme, when the concept of the ‘*creeping barrage*’ began to be perfected, the use of which reached a high art form. Also, the first tanks were used during the battle;
* From 1916, artillery began to deliver much of what had been promised of it, such as breaking barbed wire & concrete defences, & reducing the effectiveness of the enemy’s artillery. However, it was not until 1918 that British artillery truly dominated the battlefield;
* By then, ‘*silent registering*’,[[61]](#footnote-61) better calibration of guns, the use of smoke-shell &, to an extent, tanks offered the infantry a greater element of protection;
* By then, too, barrage patterns had become very sophisticated, providing numerous co-ordinated elements, each with their own specific purpose.[[62]](#footnote-62) For example, fire plans adopted could involve a mixture of creeping, standing (*i.e., to provide protection to infantry an impenetrable curtain to deny defenders the opportunity to send forward reinforcements*) & combing (*i.e., sweeping backwards & forwards*) barrages;
* Although tanks are often cited as being one of the most decisive weapons of the war, they bore little comparison with those of the Second World War. They were slow, limited in range & capability, mechanically unreliable, easily hit by German artillery &, most important, they were lacking in enough numbers to truly influence the outcome of battles;
* Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, must be given much of the credit for the development of usable tanks. He it was who was the prime mover, utilising Admiralty resources to produce the ‘*Mother*’ (*Mark I*) tank in January 1916;[[63]](#footnote-63)
* Communications often relied on telephone lines, which were susceptible to damage by artillery fire, Morse code by lamps, flag-semaphore, carrier pigeons, dogs &, frequently at the front, by runner, which occupation was extremely hazardous. In short, there was no reliable means of communication at the front, & technology had not yet provided an answer, either because the method had not been invented or development was insufficient to allow efficient deployment on the battlefield;[[64]](#footnote-64)
* While aeroplanes made an important contribution in a reconnaissance role &, towards the end of the war, in a ground attack role, they represented too new a technology to have a strategic impact on the outcome of the war.

**1918: German Spring Offensives (*21 March-18 July*)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 21 March-5 April 1918 | Offensive in Picardy (*Operation Michael*), the First Battles of the Somme, 1918, including the Battles of:   * St. Quentin (21-23 March); * First… Bapaume (24-25 March); * Rosières (26-27 March); * First… Arras (28 March); * The Avre (4 April); * The Ancre (5 April). |
| 9-29 April | Offensive in Flanders (*Operation Georgette*), the Battles of the Lys, including the Battles of:   * Estaires (9-11 April); * Messines, 1918 (10-11 April); * Hazebrouck (12-15 April); * Bailleul (13-15 April); * First… Kemmel (17-19 April); * Béthune (18 April); * Second… Kemmel (25-26 April); & * Scherpenberg (29 April). |
| 27 May-6 June | Offensive in Champagne (*Operation Blϋcher-Yorke*), including the Battle of the Aisne. |
| 9-12 June | Extending Operation Blϋcher-Yorke (*Operation Gneisenau*). No British involvement. This was an attempt to draw yet more Allied reserves south, widen the German salient created by Operation Blϋcher-Yorke & link with the German salient at Amiens. The Germans advanced nine miles despite fierce French & American resistance. A French counterattack on 11 June caught the Germans by surprise & halted the advance. Operation Gneisenau was called off the following day. |
| 15-18 July | Peace Offensive (*Friedensturm*). Again, no direct British involvement. The last German offensive, around Reims, which had very little success against front-line French positions before the French launched a massive counterattack on 18 July. This eventually led to the Blϋcher-Yorke salient having to be evacuated on 7 August for fear troops in the salient being cut off. |

* After assessing the likely course of events in 1918, a GHQ memorandum of 14 December 1917 ordained that there should be three layers of defence in the British defence system:

1. A Forward Zone based upon well-wired redoubts whose machine guns covered the ground between them. A sprinkling of 18-pounders, sited individually, protected against tank attack;
2. A mile or two further back came the Battle Zone, with more redoubts, the bulk of the artillery, & counter-attack units to support the Forward Zone;
3. Still further back was the Rear Zone, in theory organised much like the Battle Zone, protecting heavy batteries & supply dumps;

* Tanks, it was decided, would be grouped behind the front for counterattacks, not posted as individual strongpoints;
* The new structure had two major weaknesses:

1. The new defensive doctrine had not been properly taught, & there was a good deal of consumer resistance;
2. Man-power shortages were such that many defensive positions were simply not ready when the German attack came;

* French Army weaknesses at this point resulted in the BEF having to extend its front, which exacerbated increasing man-power shortages;
* The dreadful losses of the 1917 Flanders Offensive persuaded many in Government to wait for American reinforcements to arrive &, in the meantime, to look for a new front that would not be as costly to Britain, while others were also dissuaded from actively supporting significant reinforcement of the BEF;
* Consequently, resources were diverted to Italy & Palestine, & kept from the Western Front, with near disastrous consequences when the long-anticipated German Spring Offensives were launched;[[65]](#footnote-65)
* To illustrate the impact of Lloyd George & other members of the Government withholding some reinforcements to the BEF, on 1 March 1918, Haig had available just over half a million infantry which represented only thirty-six per cent of his total strength. Six months beforehand, the infantry represented forty-five per cent of the BEF’s strength;[[66]](#footnote-66)
* In the spring of 1918, following the withdrawal of Russia from the fray, with the speedy transfer of divisions from the Eastern Front, Germany enjoyed a significant manpower advantage on the Western Front, & she was determined to exploit this before American forces arrived to reinforce the Allies;
* According to British intelligence sources, thirteen German divisions arrived on the Western Front between 21 March & 9 May 1918. German strength on the Western Front then peaked at 208 divisions;
* Of the 33 German divisions left in the East, only six were of good fighting quality. The one remaining German division (*out of 242 identified by British intelligence*) was in the Balkans;
* Relative rifle strengths on the Western Front in the spring & summer of 1918 were:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Approximate rifle strength on the Western Front in 1918** | | |
| **Month** | **Allies** | **Germans** |
| March | 1,492,000 | 1,370,000 |
| April | 1,245,000 | 1,569,000 |
| May | 1,343,000 | 1,600,000 |
| June | 1,496,000 | 1,639,000 |
| July | 1,556,000 | 1,412,000 |
| August | 1,672,000 | 1,395,000 |

* The increase in German rifle strength between March & June may appear strange, but the Germans had not finished transferring divisions from the east;
* The statistics on Allied rifle strength must be treated with caution. A high proportion of the increase from April onwards represents only partially trained American troops arriving in France; the French Army was relying on colonial, Czech & Polish troops to maintain its strength; & a high proportion of British troops were young conscripts;[[67]](#footnote-67)
* A combination of poor defensive preparations & tactics, lack of numbers, & lack of reserves led to the British Fifth Army, effectively, being destroyed at the end of March / beginning of April 1918, but the Germans, also, were not well prepared for their tactical success, & after some desperate defence, with significant French support, the impetus of their attacks petered out;
* The situation for the Allies remained precarious for several weeks, during which time the French shouldered the main burden of defence against further German attacks, which allowed the BEF time to recover, reorganise & re-equip, in readiness for their own offensive later in the year;
* Quite how the British Government could have so badly misread the strategic consequences of Russia being knocked out of the war, is difficult to explain, other than that politicians were shocked to the core by the losses suffered in 1916 & 1917, & they may have had a rather naïve belief that limiting reinforcements to the BEF would preserve the nation’s manpower;
* What David Lloyd George & others overlooked was the fact that reserves were needed for defence, as well as attack.[[68]](#footnote-68) It is hard to understand how they could not see that, by deploying large numbers of troops in other smaller theatres of operation, they were offering Germany every opportunity to achieve an outright victory on the Western Front;[[69]](#footnote-69)
* It is ironic that the movement of German forces from the Eastern Front to the Western Front led to a significant increase in Bolshevism amongst German troops, which was material in the breakdown of German Army morale.

**1918: The Advance to Victory (*20 July-11 November*)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 20 July-2 August 1918 | The counterattack in Champagne, the Battles of the Marne, 1918, including the Battles of:   * Soissonais & of the Ourcq (*23 July-2 August*); * Tardenois (*20-31 July*) |
| **Date(s)** | **Campaigns, Battles & Engagements** |
| 8 August-3 September | The Advance in Picardy, the Second Battles of the Somme, 1918, including the Battles of:   * Amiens (*8-11 August*); * Albert (*21-23 August*); & * Second… Bapaume (*31 August-3 September*). |
| 18 August-6 September | The Advance in Flanders. |
| 26 August-6 September | The Breaking of the Hindenburg Line, the Second… Arras, 1918, including the Battles of:   * The Scarpe (*26-30 August*); * Drocourt-Quéant (*2-3 September*); * The Hindenburg Line (*12 September - 9 October*); * Havrincourt (*12 September*); * Epéhy (*18 September*); * Canal du Nord (*27 September -  1 October*); * St. Quentin Canal (*29 September -  2 October*); * Beaurevoir (*3-5 October*); & * Cambrai, 1918 (*8-9 October*). |
| 9-12 October | The Pursuit to the Selle. |
| 28 September-11 November | The Final Advance – Flanders, including the Battles of:   * Ypres, 1918 (*28 September-2 October*); & * Courtrai (*14-19 October*). |
| 2 October-11 November | The Final Advance – Artois. |
| 17 October-11 November | The Final Advance – Picardy, including the Battles of:   * The Selle (*17-25 October*); * Valenciennes (*1-2 November*); & * The Sambre (*4 November*). |

* The main factor in the BEF’s final battles remained the artillery barrage followed by an infantry advance, but the infantry platoons now had the weapons to facilitate an advance, as well as support from tanks & aircraft, in some circumstances;
* Common features of the ‘*Hundred Days*’ advance were: Variable platoon organisations; New attack formations, with a move away from artillery formation[[70]](#footnote-70) to the ‘*blob*’ formation, with platoon sections in a diamond formation, to cope with threats from various directions; Infiltration tactics; Artillery barrages increasingly of the ‘*neutralising*’ type, with infantry closely following the creeping barrage; Tanks remained limited in their capabilities by the technology of the period; &, Cavalry performed valuable service, by serving as a highly mobile force;
* The BEF alone suffered 350,000 casualties during the Advance to Victory, which, for the British, began in earnest on 8 August 1918;
* Much credit for the success of the Allied offensives on the Western Front in 1918 has, rightly, been attributed to Dominion forces (*i.e., Australian, Canadian & New Zealand formations*);
* Despite widespread criticisms of British troops from some quarters, & insinuations about their effectiveness, Peter Simkins demonstrates that Rawlinson’s nine British divisions in the BEF’s Fourth Army achieved the same success as the five Australian divisions (*70.7% success; best @ 77.75%*), only slightly below the Canadian divisions (*72.5%*) & better than the New Zealand division (*64.5%*);
* Some British divisions had a much better performance in the ten or more actions in which they were involved, e.g., 19th & 66th (*both, 100%*); 9th (*93%*); 25th (*85%*); & 16th (*80%*);[[71]](#footnote-71)
* Ultimately, the British Army played a major part in the 1918 defeat in the field of the German Army.

**Armistice**

* The German collapse had come suddenly &, for many, unexpectedly;
* The sense of relief & thankfulness brought by the end of hostilities was tinged with widespread grief for those lost during the First World War;
* However, in some cases, notably those who had been badly wounded or maimed, there was a numbed indifference to the turn of events, as the Armistice had come too late for them.

**Versailles Peace Treaty (*28 June 1919*)**

* Although the fighting ended, that was not the end of the war;
* The Armistice was prolonged three times to enable tortuous peace negotiations to be concluded before the war officially ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, on 28 June 1919;
* Winston Churchill led a faction which sought to send British troops to Russia to fight on the side of the White Russians against the Bolshevik’s. This was highly unpopular & instrumental in causing widespread unrest & protests amongst British & Dominion troops who wanted to be demobilised.

**Casualties**

* Of course, it is for the human tragedy that the First World War is most remembered. The levels of human losses were previously unheard of;
* Few people in Britain did not suffer from a deep sense of loss following the war. As well as the three million people who lost a close relative, millions more lost friends or acquaintances;
* Estimates of military casualties vary enormously but, generally, they’re around thirty million killed in action, died, died of wounds received, missing (*presumed dead*), wounded & prisoners of war;
* There is no reason to believe the statistics in relation to local casualties are any different from the national experience, so a reasonably accurate estimate of Alnwick, Amble, Rothbury, & Wooler districts’ men wounded would be about 3,700-3,800;
* Adding civilian casualties pushes total world-wide casualties to something nearer 40-50 million;
* Civilian deaths, largely due to war-related famine & disease, included 30,000 Belgian; 40,000 French; 700,000 German; 1,386 British (*air raids*); & 2,000,000 Russians;
* In Britain, there has long been a sense of outrage & dismay about the First World War. Possibly, the shock of it affected the British psyche more than in other countries. Yet, British casualties killed represented 1.5% of the total population, compared to figures of 3.0% for Germany, & 3.5% for France;
* While not intended to disparage the losses, these figures suggest that Britain suffered relatively less than any other major participant;
* Also, emigration ceased, which, probably, precluded one million or more people (*of both sexes*) leaving the country during the war years, so that the net loss to the country was much less than bald statistics might suggest;
* A best estimate of First World War casualties follows:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **First World War Casualties** | | | | | |
| **Country** | **Population** | **Mobilised** | **KIA & Missing presumed KIA** | **Wounded** | **Total Casualties** |
| Australia | 4,800,000 | 417,000 | 53,560 | 155,130 | 208,690 |
| Austria-Hungary | 49,900,000 | 7,800,000 | 539,000 + | 1,940,000 | 2,479,000 |
| Belgium | 7,500,000 | 267,000 | 38,170 | 44,690 | 82,860 |
| Canada | 7,400,000 | 620,000 | 58,990 | 149,710 | 208,700 |
| France | 39,600,000 | 8,660,000 | 1,385,000 | 4,329,000 | 5,714,000 |
| Germany | 67,000,000 | 13,400,000 | 2,037,000 | 5,687,000 | 7,724,000 |
| India | 256,000,000 | 1,096,000 | 74,000 | Unknown, possibly about 177,000 | Maybe, 251,000 |
| New Zealand | 1,005,000 | 128,500 | 16,710 | 41,320 | 58,030 |
| Russia | 167,000,000 | 12,000,000 | 1,800,000 | c. 4,950,000 | 6,750,000 |
| Britain | 46,400,000 | 5,700,000 | 702,410 | 1,663,000 | 2,365,410 |
| United States | 92,000,000 | 4,350,000 | 51,822 | 230,074 | 281,896 |
| **Totals** | **738,605,000** | **53,342,500** | **6,756,662** | **19,366,924** | **26,123,586** |

* Closer examination of this data reveals the numbers of men wounded to the number killed are: Britain = 2.4; France = 3.1; & Germany = 2.8;
* Comparing the number of men killed / died / or ‘*Missing, presumed killed*’ against the number mobilised reveals the chances of men becoming fatal casualties were: British = 12.3%; French = 16%; German = 15.2%;
* In similar vein, the likelihood of a man being wounded was: British = 29.2%; French 50%; & German = 42.4%;
* When considering casualties, the continual impact of losing large numbers of men needing treatment for all manner of ailments, illnesses, & accidental injuries, should not be overlooked;
* Data from the work of Major T. J. Mitchell, DSO, MD, ChM, & Miss G. M. Smith, MBE, MA, (‘*Medical Services: Casualties & Medical Statistics of the Great War*’*; London; originally released 1931, republished in 1997; pp. 11-12*) shows the approximate number of BEF sick & injured casualties (*including Empire forces*) was 8,040,198, almost ten times the number of killed & died & four times the number of wounded;
* Despite the adverse impact such losses must have had on operational efficiency, perhaps 80%-85% of ‘*Sick*’ casualties eventually returned to duty in the front-line, while the best part of 10% returned to other duties with Lines of Communications units, garrisons or in sedentary occupations. Only about 5%-6% of casualties were discharged as medically unfit, & 1% died;
* While battle casualties in the Salonika theatre might not have been significant, the same cannot be said for the rigours of malaria & other diseases. For the British Army as a whole, the ratio of malarial cases was 325 for every thousand men. In addition, troops had to contend with uncomfortable surroundings, few proper billets or entertainment, & very little leave.[[72]](#footnote-72)

**Influenza Pandemic, 1918-1920[[73]](#footnote-73)**

* The 1918 influenza pandemic lasted from January 1918 to December 1920;
* Commonly referred to as Spanish flu, this was an unusually deadly [influenza pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Influenza_pandemic);
* It infected, perhaps, 500 million people around the world, & resulted in the deaths of 50 to 100 million (*i.e., three to five percent of the world's population*), making it one of the deadliest natural disasters in [human history](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_history);
* To maintain morale, [wartime](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I) censors minimized early reports of illness & mortality in Britain, France, Germany, & the USA;
* Papers were free to report the epidemic's effects in neutral Spain, which created a false impression of Spain as especially hard hit, thereby giving rise to the pandemic's nickname, ‘*Spanish Flu*’;
* Investigative work by a British team led by virologist John Oxford of St Bartholomew's Hospital & the Royal London Hospital, identified the major troop staging & hospital camps at Étaples, France as almost certainly being the centre of the 1918-20 flu pandemic.

**Psychological impact of the First World War on British Society**

* Much misplaced mythology surrounds the First World War, possibly traceable to perceptions created by the failure & exhaustion of the BEF at Passchendaele, quickly followed by ultimate failure at Cambrai & German success early in 1918, which, for many, implied that British tactics were found wanting;
* The perception is illusory, as the weather defeated the British at Passchendaele, & on the other occasions they were caught outnumbered, overexposed &, essentially, unprepared for defence;
* There were also political failures, as previously alluded to, which affected the BEF’s performance;
* As for the idea that the British Army was tactically naïve & badly led, one needs only consider the considerable & varied achievements of the Advance to Victory, which would have been impossible without good leadership, certainly at junior levels;
* Incompetent commanders were removed early in the war, after which tactics to cope with the situation faced on the Western Front quickly evolved & developed;
* Notwithstanding leadership problems at High Command level, which plagued the Army throughout the war, by its end the British Army was, probably, the most capable of all Allied armies, & tactics had been developed & refined, to co-ordinate effectively all arms, including tanks, aircraft, cavalry &, especially, infantry & artillery;

**Conclusions**

* In concluding, two questions must first be addressed:

1. ‘*Was it all worth it?*’, &
2. ‘*What was the war’s impact on Britain?*’;

* To most rational people, the answer to the first question is a resounding ‘*No*’, if only on the grounds of the war’s cost, especially in human lives & misery;
* German militarism & aggression meant they occupied most of Belgium & a significant part of France. The expulsion of German occupation of these countries must be remembered as a successful war outcome;
* Little was achieved to remedy the problems of mismatched political frontiers & distribution of peoples;
* Grievances (*for Germany*) were created by the Treaty of Versailles, which led to an even deadlier conflict less than a generation later. Indeed, some historians argue that, as a result of the war, Britain lost at least as much as Germany;
* The fact is Britain’s premier position in the world had been waning for many years. Whether the First World War sped this process, or hid it from view, is difficult to gauge;
* Undoubtedly, what the war did was to exhaust Britain, & much of her wealth (*to the advantage of the USA*), & disrupt economic & social development;
* Also, it cemented feelings of national identity in key components of the Empire, which may have hastened its eventual demise;
* A major war aim, at the outset, was to maintain world naval supremacy, yet shortly after the war Britain meekly negotiated this away (*at the Washington Naval Conference, November 1921 to February 1922*). She could no longer afford it;
* While Britain was able to shelve the contentious issue of Ireland for much of the war, the post-war solution failed to resolve fundamental problems in Ulster, the legacy of which remains today;
* In addressing the second question, above (‘*What was the war’s impact on Britain?*’), the war brought about socio-economic & political change. Many small towns & inner cities prospered, & there were marked improvements in infant mortality, standards of health (*at least in the British Isles*), working conditions, & the spending power of unskilled & semi-skilled labour;
* Employing women on a large scale is generally regarded as being the major factor leading to better working conditions. By the end of the war, women had demonstrated their ability to assume responsibility in skilled jobs, endure physical hardship, & master control of new technology, recognition of which began to break down barriers. This demonstration of their worth probably hastened women being granted the vote shortly after the war ended, albeit initially only for those over thirty years of age;
* However, the scale of socio-economic change was not as much as might have been expected. John Stevenson cites the much-lauded house-building programme (‘*Homes Fit for Heroes’*) more as a counter-revolutionary strategy, & its cancellation as an example of a lack of post-war commitment to social reform;
* More mundane reasons, perhaps, could explain why the programme was cancelled, namely that, after the November 1918 General Election, increasingly the Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, was faced with the political reality of being a prisoner of the Unionist Party;
* Added to this, the programme was fundamentally flawed, not least because it did not exert control over building materials, & it placed too much reliance on local authorities to finance, & manage, what were huge projects;
* As for political change, many historians see the Maurice debate as a catalyst that brought about the demise of the Liberal Party as a major political force, although others (*notably, Trevor Wilson*) casts doubts on its true significance. In the aftermath of the German spring offensive in 1918, Lloyd George came in for great criticism from Sir Frederick Maurice, who challenged the figures given by the Prime Minister, in relation to reinforcements sent to the Western Front. There appears little doubt that Maurice was correct, & that Lloyd George destroyed the relevant evidence, but he survived a vote of confidence with massive Unionist support;
* The years immediately after the war were a time of paradox. Those who served during it wanted to forget. Those who lost family & stayed at home were equally determined not to;
* A strong sense of disillusionment prevailed, especially among those who had been at the front;
* C. E. Montague was typical of many writers at the time when he emphasised, he was not arguing Britain should not have fought the war, simply that many people were greatly disappointed with its aftermath;
* British understanding of the First World War has also been distorted by the conventional assumption that, on balance, things turned out right in the end – victory was achieved, & with it the purposes for which Britain entered the contest in the first place; the Kaiser was deposed; Belgium restored; Anglo-French honour vindicated; & a good bag of territorial spoils acquired into the bargain;
* Indeed, the British experience has even received back-handed compliments as the emancipator of women, catalyst of social reform & generator of technological innovation;
* So deeply has this version influenced the stock of Britain’s modern myths that the latter-day debate focusing on the causes of her decline in the century after 1880 has a curious tendency to skip over the First World War as a neutral episode;[[74]](#footnote-74)
* Many in Germany viewed the Armistice terms as being harsh, in the extreme. Not only were the Germans forced to give up vast quantities of equipment, they had to demilitarise the Rhineland & were committed to paying huge reparations to the Allies;
* Given that the German economy had probably suffered more in the war than those of France or Britain, reparations were a bitter pill to swallow & it was something the Germans would always struggle to deliver... & never did;
* Not so well known is the fact that, long before the war ended, while the German High Command was, perhaps, making a tacit admission that total success was an elusive goal, they were also drawing lessons from the conflict & deciding how best to prepare for the next war, which, for the world at large, would prove an even more costly, & traumatic, affair;[[75]](#footnote-75)
* The futility of war is widely recognised, but it is worth considering that war has its basis in human nature & is inextricably linked with the development of mankind. While human nature remains unaltered, war will continue to exist.

**Exhortation to those Lost**

As commemoration events relating to the centenary years of the First World War come to an end, it may be appropriate to close this chapter with a verse from a poem by Robert Lawrence Binyon (*1869-1943*), published in ‘*The Times*’ newspaper on 21 September 1914, & used as an exhortation at the beginning of many branch meetings of the Western Front Association & the Royal British Legion:

‘*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old,  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn,  
At the going down of the sun & in the morning  
We will remember them.*’

**David Thompson, MLitt**  
January 2020

**APPENDIX**

# ORGANISATION OF A TYPICAL INFANTRY BATTALION, AUGUST 1914: 30 Officers & 992 Other Ranks

**BATTALION HQ**

**CO: Lieut Col  
 2 I/C: Maj**

**Sgt Maj Adjt: Capt RQMS  
Staff Sgt Armourer Assistant Adjt: Lieut & Orderlies**

**With the following Sections:**

**Transport Pioneer Signals Medical Band Corps of   
 Drums**

###### **Dvrs Sgt + 10 Sgt + 16 Stretcher Bandmaster Drum Maj**

**-bearers + 21 Sgt + 16 & Orderlies**

**Divided into**

###### **FOUR RIFLE COMPANIES PLUS A MG SECTION**

###### **‘A’ Company ‘B’ Company ‘C’ Company ‘D’ Company MG Section**

**(*6 Officers,* HQ + 5, 6, 7, HQ + 9, 10, HQ + 13, 14, OC: Lieut  
*206 ORs*) as & 8 Platoons 11, & 12 15, & 16 2 I/C: Colour Sgt  
HQ + 1, 2, 3, Platoons Platoons + Cpl + 10 Ptes  
& 4 Platoons**

**Each Company with**

**COMPANY HQ  
 OC: Maj or Capt + 2 Orderlies**

**2 I/C: Capt + 2 Drivers**

**CSM CQMS**

**Divided into**

**AND DIVIDED INTO**

**&**

**1 Section 2 Section 3 Section 4 Section  
Cpl + 11 Men Cpl + 11 Cpl + 11 Cpl + 11**

**1 Platoon 2 Platoon 3 Platoon 4 Platoon**

**1 Officer + 50 ORs 5, 6, 7, & 8 9, 10, 11, & 12 13, 14, 15 & 16   
(1, 2, 3, & 4 Sections) Sections Sections Sections**

**Each Platoon with**

**PLATOON HQ  
OC: Lieut. or 2/Lieut. + 1 Orderly**

**2 I/C: Sgt**

1. Britain gained League of Nations Mandates in Africa & the Middle East. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/infantrylation/1918?amount=100. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Niall Ferguson; ‘*The Pity of War*’; p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Territorial Force members were liable for full-time service in time of war, but only committed to home defence duties. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Battalion HQ & transport personnel were rarely in the front line as fighting infantry, & allowances had to be made for officers & ORs employed on divisional & brigade duties, those undergoing training, in hospital, or on leave. A battalion would rarely put more than 600 men ‘*in the line*’, often considerably less as the First World War progressed. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pioneer battalions had larger transport sections, numbering about one hundred men. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Usually, Commanding Officers (*CO*) of units were: Lieutenant Colonel (*Battalion*); Brigadier General (*Brigade*); Major General (*Division*); Lieutenant General (*Corps*); & General (*Army*). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Trevor Wilson; *The Myriad Faces of War: Britain & the Great War 1914-1918*; p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The threat to British national security would have arisen if Germany controlled the Continental Channel ports: David French; *British Strategy & War Aims 1914-1916*; p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stephen Hartley; ‘*The Irish Question as a Problem in British Foreign Policy, 1914-18*’; p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Robert Holland, ‘*The Pursuit of Greatness*’*,* pp. 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war\_losses\_france [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sixty per cent of the BEF consisted of Reservists, a limitation in its capabilities that is often underestimated: John Terraine; ‘*White Heat: The New Warfare 1914-18*’; p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Of 28,600 officers available when war was declared, 12,738 belonged to the Regular Army & 9,563 to the Territorial Force. The extent of the shortage of officers can best be illustrated by the fact that 229,316 combatant commissions were awarded during the war: Peter Simkins; ‘*The Four Armies*’ in Chandler & Beckett, ‘*Oxford Illustrated History*’; pp. 250 & 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A1 men were able to march, see to shoot, hear well & stand active service conditions; they were fit for despatching overseas, as regards physical & mental health, & training. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Battalions containing over sixty per cent of such volunteers were designated General Service, ordered to recruit to twenty-five per cent over Establishment, & County Associations ceased to administer them. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In October 1915, the strength of second-line battalions was fixed at twenty-three officers & 600 ORs, in consequence of which surplus personnel transferred to third-line units: Major A. F. Becke;, ‘*Order of Battle of Divisions: Part 2B…*’; p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Formation of third-line Territorial Force battalions was authorised in November 1914 but was not carried out until May 1915, consequent upon the decision to use second-line Territorial Force battalions for non-reserve purposes. Their primary role was, again, the provision of trained reinforcements for frontline Territorial Force battalions. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Reserved occupations included such as the munitions, shipbuilding, mining & agriculture industries. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. John Turner (*Editor*); ‘*Britain & the First World War*’;p. 105, crediting ‘*Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire*’. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Including the K.O.S.B. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Joint second highest figure amongst Scottish infantry regiments. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. By then, the main Indian contribution was to be found in Middle Eastern theatres of operation. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Martin Middlebrook; ‘*Your Country Needs You*’; p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Turner; ‘*Britain &…*’;p. 75, crediting the Board of Trade, ‘*Report on the State of Employment in the United Kingdom…*’(*July 1916 & July 1918*). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ireland was excluded from the Act. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. L. Margaret Barnett; ‘*British Food Policy during the First World War*’; p.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Terraine; ‘*White Heat…*’; p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Peter Dewey, ‘*The New Warfare & Economic Mobilisation*’, in Turner’s ‘*Britain &…*’, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Paddy Griffith, ‘*Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916-18*’*,* p. 139, crediting ‘*Abstract of Statistics of the military effort of the British Empire*’(HMSO, 1922)*,* p. 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Barnett, p. 14, crediting the National Unionist Association, ‘*Gleanings & Memoranda, Vol. XLIII (July-December 1914)*’, pp. 52-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid*;Appendix 4, crediting T. H. Middleton; ‘*Food Production in Wartime*’; pp. 312 & 315(*London, 1923*). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Ibid*;p. 152, crediting ‘*Report of the Working Classes Cost of Living Committee, Cd 8980*’ (*1918*). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/First World War](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/First%20World%20War) (*Women & Work*). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-33317368. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. John Gooch; ‘*Soldiers, Strategy & War Aims in Britain, 1914-1918*’; in Barry D. Hunt & Adrian Preston (Editors), ‘*War Aims & Strategic Policy in the Great War*’; p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Griffith; ‘*British Fighting Methods in the Great War’*; pp. 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. David French, ‘*British Strategy & War Aims 1914-1916*’; p. xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid*; pp. 100 & 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Jonathan Bailey; ‘*British Artillery in the Great War*’ in Griffith, ‘*British Fighting Methods…*’; p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. General Staff, GHQ, with an Introduction by Shaun Corkerry; ‘*Instructions for The Training of Divisions for Offensive Action 1916: Instructions for the Training of Platoons for Offensive Action 1917*’; pp. iv-v, crediting ‘*Military Operations – France & Belgium, Volume 2*’; pp. 22, 274 & 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. [www.British-Forces.com](http://www.British-Forces.com) (*The Trenches*). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Battalions were expected to improve trenches & defences, especially the wiring. Other tasks included carrying rations, ammunition & materials forward to troops holding the front-line, & providing labour to Royal Engineer, Pioneer or Tunnelling units. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Verdun>. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ferguson; p. 292, crediting French; ‘*The Meaning of Attrition*’; p. 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Terraine; ‘*White Heat…*’; pp. 210-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. French; ‘*British Strategy…*’; pp. 220-221. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ian V. Hogg; ‘*Allied Artillery of World War One*’; p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Approval for the second stage of the offensive was not granted until 21 June. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Neillands; pp. 387, & 390-391. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. For example, men selected for transport duties sometimes had to be taught how to ride & drive their animals! [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Artillery fire control & techniques improved dramatically in effectiveness, & the philosophy of neutralisation of enemy defences through volume of fire & the creeping barrage began to replace the destruction attempted by the 1916 Somme barrages. Counter battery fire became important, & at Cambrai (*20 November-7 December 1917*), for example, there was no barrage before the attack, surprise being possible due to improved target registration methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Examples included the Lewis Gun, Stokes mortar & rifle grenades. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Brig Gen E. A. James; ‘*British Regiments, 1914-1918*’; Appendix III to Part II; & Becke;, ‘*Order of Battle…: Part 2B*’; p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Neillands; p.241. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Griffith; ‘*British Fighting Methods…*’; p. xii [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Neillands; pp. 269-270; & Griffith; ‘*British Fighting Methods…*’; pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Griffith; ‘*Battle Tactics…*’; p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. General Staff / Corkerry; pp. iv & vi; crediting Griffith; ‘*Battle Tactics…*’; pp. 65 – 78 & 163 – 169; & Terraine; ‘*The Smoke & the Fire*’; p. 148 *et seq* [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. General Staff / Corkerry, p. vii, crediting, among others, Griffith, ‘*Battle Tactics…*’, pp. 158-169, & Tim Travers, ‘*How the War Was Won*’*,* pp. 11 & 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. This technique was based on light travelling faster than sound & relied, also, on much improved maps produced by better aerial reconnaissance. It used two processes (‘*flash spotting*’ & ‘*sound ranging*’) to calculate the position of enemy guns on accurate maps. Allowances were then made for wear & tear, & weather conditions, to calculate the correct elevation & traverse of the artillery piece(s) being used. It restored that vital element of tactical surprise. Neillands; p. 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Trial & error showed that there should be less than ten yards of friendly frontage for every gun, & four hundred pounds of shell, or more, for every yard of enemy trench within the area to be attacked. Paddy Griffith; ‘*Battle Tactics…*’; p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Others who deserve to share the credit include Lieutenant Colonel Maurice (*later, Lord*) Hankey, who, perhaps, conceived the idea of tanks, & Lieutenant Colonel E. D. (*later, Major-General Sir Ernest*) Swinton, who translated the idea into reality. Neillands; pp. 273-274. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Ibid*; pp. 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. It is also worth noting that the politicians had agreed to the BEF holding more of the Western Front lines, without prior reference to Haig or GHQ. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Richard Holmes; ‘*The Western Front*’; p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. J. P. Harris (with Niall Barr); ‘*Amiens to the Armistice*’; pp. 17-18, crediting L. Ayres; ‘*The War with Germany: A Statistical Summary*’(Washington Government Printing Office); p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Neillands; *‘The Great War Generals on the Western Front 1914-1918*’; p. 447. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ferguson; p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. An irregular formation, with men spaced every few yards, to avoid close order columns or dressed lines, which, in theory, lessened to impact of exploding shrapnel shells on the formation. ﻿﻿ [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Peter Simkins; ‘*Co-Stars or Supporting Cast? British Divisions in the ‘Hundred Days, 1918*’; in Griffith (Editor); ‘*British Fighting Methods…*’; pp. 53 & 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. War Office; ‘*Statistics…*’;pp. 744-745. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_flu>. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Holland; ‘*The Pursuit of Greatness*’; p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Germany was determined not only to rebuild her military system, but to build it upon an indestructible economic foundation: Lieutenant General Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven; *‘Deductions from the World War*’; p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)