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The long lines of death

From autumn 1914 to the spring of 1918, 475 miles of parallel trenches were the scene of countless battles but desperately little progress. David Stevenson reveals the truth and tragedy of the western front

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German soldiers after the battle of Verdun. Photograph: Alamy

The long and dismal annals of European military history had seen nothing comparable with the western front. British troops likened it to a "great sausage machine", consuming lives in the hundreds of thousands while remaining stubbornly in place. From autumn 1914 two opposing lines of trenches stretched some 475 miles from Switzerland to the Channel coast. Offensives staged by both sides saw maximum advances of just six miles up until Spring 1918. These events still fall - just - within the memory of human beings now living. How could they have happened?

It was not meant to be like this. We now know that many planners foresaw that a European conflict, far from being over by Christmas, would be long and bloody. Yet the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5 had demonstrated that while entrenched defenders with modern firepower could wreak havoc on advancing infantry, the attackers could still eventually prevail. Berlin's war plan - conventionally dubbed the Schlieffen Plan after the strategist who devised it, though subsequently much modified - envisaged sending most of the German army westwards and invading Belgium to outflank France's border fortresses. Its French counterpart, Plan XVII, also provided for an opening attack, yet proved disastrous. Germany, briefly, seemed closer to victory than it ever would again. In contrast to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, however, the French commander, Joseph Joffre, kept his nerve and redeployed his forces via a network of strategic railways. The Germans, conversely, were up to 100 miles beyond their railheads in September when the French counter-attacked at the Battle of the Marne. And also unlike 1870, this time the French were fighting not alone but alongside Russia and Britain. Once they had stopped the initial enemy break-in, the military balance would move their way.

Trenches saved lives

After the Marne the Germans fell back to the river Aisne and dug in. Both sides then leap-frogged towards the sea, entrenching as they went. The first months of open campaigning claimed the heaviest casualties of the entire war. Trenches - for all their

notoriety - saved lives. They also enabled Germany to hold its gains with a minimum of strength while up one-third of its army fought elsewhere.

The invaders ensconced themselves along a line of ridges, affording observation for their artillery and obliging their enemies to attack uphill. To their initial defensive position they added two more: belts of barbed wire - an import from the American prairies - protected heavy machine guns that could fire 60 rounds a minute, supported by quick-firing field guns that deluged attackers with explosives and shrapnel. As balloons and aircraft surveyed the entire complex, it was almost impossible to mount a surprise attack, and railways could shuttle in reinforcements faster than attacking infantry could pick their way forwards. The opposing armies were too large to outflank, and industrialised logistics (symbolised for British soldiers by tinned stew and apricots) made it possible to supply them all year round, with no need for retreat into winter bivouacs.

Crippling disadvantage

The Germans had overrun most of Belgium, including the coastline opposite the Thames estuary and France's richest industrial provinces. Negotiating on these grounds would place London and Paris at a crippling disadvantage. Unless they took the initiative, they would leave Germany free to do so.

During 1915 the Germans drove deep into eastern Europe. The French feared the Russians would drop out; the British had similar fears about the French. Yet to dislodge the occupiers, the Allies had no choice but to deploy mostly poorly trained and under-equipped - albeit enthusiastic - citizen armies.

The nearest equivalent to today's cruise missiles and smart bombs were howitzers and heavy guns (over six-inch calibre) firing high-explosive shells. Their manufacture was slow and intricate, and it took years before the Allies had adequate numbers of them and their crews had learned the skills required to operate them. By comparison with the second world war, 1914-18 aircraft were underpowered and had little ground attack potential, their primary functions being photographic reconnaissance and directing artillery. Poison gas, though introducing a new dimension of horror, was quickly countered by the introduction of respirators. Tanks became available in appreciable numbers only in 1917, and even then were prone to breakdown, were easily knocked out by enemy fire, and advanced at little more than walking pace. Although all these technologies eventually helped to break the stalemate, they were embryonic in the war's middle years.

The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) commanded after December 1915 by Sir Douglas Haig, rose gradually from six divisions to more than 60 (nine of them from the Dominions), and its section of the front lengthened from 25 miles to 100. But until 1917 the French took the lead in Allied strategy, attempting ever more ambitious linked attacks in the hope of destabilising the Germans' system of reinforcement. Thus in September 1915 a British attack at Loos (the battle that claimed the life of Rudyard Kipling's son Jack) led the way for a French one in Champagne, which got stuck on the second line.

A new kind of battle

For 1916 the Allies planned synchronised assaults by Russia and Romania in the east, Italy in the Alps, and Britain and France advancing side by side astride the river Somme. But it was the German commander Erich von Falkenhayn who struck first. At Verdun, between February and July, he launched a new kind of battle, which saw hundreds of thousands of men firing millions of shells at each other for weeks on end in a killing ground only a few miles square. Yet Falkenhayn's plan to commit a minimum of infantry and to "bleed white" the French with his superior guns did not pay off. German casualties soon rivalled French ones, and he was ill-positioned to meet the Allied summer offensives.

Day one on the Somme - July 1 - is remembered as one of the greatest tragedies in British history, but it marked only the beginning of months of pounding, which for the first time created a sense of crisis in Berlin. A new team of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff replaced Falkenhayn. They shortened their front by retreating to a newly prepared position (known to the British as the Hindenburg line), and unleashed a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare against Allied and neutral shipping - a fateful miscalculation that triggered America's involvement in the war.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff feared the Allies would renew their simultaneous pressure in spring 1917, but instead the coordinated strategy fell apart. Revolution in St Petersburg crippled Russia's war effort, and although in April the British attacked at Arras and the French on the Chemin des Dames ridge, the latter offensive proved one mortification too many for the French infantry. Their mutinies that summer signified not a refusal to defend their country but a protest against any further great attacks, a protest that their new commander, Philippe Pétain, heeded.

In such dire circumstances Britain arguably needed to do something, but the new offensive urged by Haig and approved by the war cabinet - the third Battle of Ypres, more usually known after its last phase as Passchendaele - made matters worse. By striking towards the Germans' coastal bases in Flanders, Haig assaulted one of the strongest sections of their line, protected by deep echelons of pillboxes. Even without the intervention of torrential rain and mud, the enterprise proved beyond his army's strength.

Historians have commented on the "short-war illusion" prevalent in 1914 among politicians and the public. This illusion proved tenacious and the conflict was prolonged by a succession of incremental choices to persevere into the next campaigning season in the hope of better fortune. Each new harvest of casualties, meanwhile, heightened the obstacles to compromise. By 1917 the short-war illusion was being usurped by a long-war one, with governments foreseeing a struggle dragging on into 1920, while the private letters of ordinary soldiers and civilians betrayed doubts it would ever end. Yet developments in 1918 actually prefigured the much more mobile operations of 1939-45. Between March and July, five great German onslaughts advanced by distances of almost 50 miles, but subsequent Allied counter-attacks advanced by up to 100, recapturing the lost territory and finally bundling the invaders homewards.

The final gamble

Ludendorff had gambled on a last attempt at victory before the Americans arrived in strength. As of March 1918, only 250,000 US troops had reached Europe, and at first the burden of the fighting again fell on the French and British. Lenin's seizure of power in Russia, followed by a ceasefire, allowed Germany to transfer enough men westwards to regain numerical superiority, and Ludendorff believed new tactics would bring him success. The key innovation was a massive bombardment - delivered not over days but hours - meticulously prepared by cover of night, fired without warning and therefore able to restore surprise. Gas shells silenced the Allies' artillery, and a rolling barrage - a curtain of fire advancing before the infantry - immobilised the defenders' machine guns until the attackers were upon them.

By 1918 both sides were abandoning continuous trenches in favour of mutually supporting strong points, which the German storm troops infiltrated before follow-on forces mopped up. These methods proved stunningly effective in breaking into the Allied positions, but after reaching more open country the Germans lost impetus, essentially because they had too few horses and vehicles to bring on their guns before the Allies could regroup and strike back. By the summer their casualties numbered more than one million - and many survivors realised the game was up.

End game

After July 1918, tens of thousands of Germans surrendered every month. Moreover, Ludendorff's offensives accelerated the nightmare he had hoped to forestall, as Americans were rushed across the Atlantic to swell the ranks. By November US troops outnumbered British, and in just two months of heavy fighting they took losses comparable with the casualties later suffered in Vietnam.

Technological and tactical innovations were coming to fruition. The Allies replicated German artillery methods, had overwhelming air superiority and hundreds of tanks. In September the British fired two million shells in 24 hours before breaking through the Hindenburg line. A supreme commander, Ferdinand Foch, now orchestrated the Allies' strategy, and they could overwhelm even the strongest defences. It was no longer conceivable that Germany might defeat them.

In these circumstances Ludendorff opted for damage limitation, appealing to President Woodrow Wilson for a peace based on the moderate American programme known as the Fourteen Points. The Allies, after hard internal bargaining, agreed, though only with the accompaniment of ceasefire terms that rendered Germany helpless. Early on November 11 the Canadians retook Mons, the Belgian mining town where the BEF had first seen action 51 months before. Two hours later the firing ceased.

Remote and alien landscape

The war on the western front was a desperate contest between evenly matched opponents, German military effectiveness offsetting greater Allied manpower and resources. Until autumn 1918 neither side wrote off hope of winning. It unfolded at a moment of transition, when battlefield mobility and manoeuvre were impeded and new technologies that would restore them were underdeveloped.

Yet strategic explanations of the deadlock only take us so far. Both sides felt that they

were fighting for enormous stakes. The German leaders aimed to carve out buffer states on their western and eastern borders, and to expand their global naval and colonial reach. They feared that even a drawn outcome would jeopardise their rule at home. The Allies fought not only over territory, but also to punish aggression and to uphold the western liberal order against the first of the 20th-century challenges to it.

In pursuit of these objectives, both sides enjoyed not merely acquiescence but also willing support from millions of their citizens, even in the face of monstrous suffering. Today the western front may seem a remote and alien landscape, but behind the military confrontation lurked a political one whose relevance continues today.

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