

Sounding the Somme – Somme Starts

Fact File: WW1

At the beginning of the twentieth century Germany attempted to become a super power, which worried neighbouring countries.

Between 1900 and 1914 several diplomatic treaties were triggered increasing the fear and distrust felt between European leaders. Huge monies were also spent developing armies and navies.

By 1907, Europe had split into two main camps, the Triple Alliance (German, Austria-Hungary and Italy) and the Triple Entente (Britain, France and Russia).

But a crises rapidly spread and the continent become divided.

On 28 June 1914, a Serbian-backed terrorist shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne.



Archduke Franz Ferdinand

Austria set out to punish Serbia and declared war. Leaders were willing to protect their national interests by risking war so Germany stood by their main ally. Russia then decided to stand up for the Serbs.

Germany believed it could gain an advantage by striking first and declared war on Russia and then on Russia's ally in the West, France.

The British Government agonised over whether to support France and Russia, but a victorious Germany would threaten Britain's security and position in the world.

Germany's invasion of France via Belgium tipped the balance, as Britain had promised to protect Belgium's right to be neutral.

So, on 4 August 1914, Britain (with it's global empire) declared war on Germany.

Germany needed a quick victory to stop their panicking soldiers, so civilians in Belgium and France soon became the first victims of war with thousands of deaths and the attack of cultural buildings and landmarks. Their acts were so appalling that for Britain and France, this was a war to defend civilisation itself.

Early battles in the war were centred around the Belgian town of Ypres and fought by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). As an island nation, our biggest defence at this time was the Navy.

Despite defending German attacks, the core of Britain's BEF was almost destroyed so it called upon its Empire to provide troops. It also began recruiting troops at home.

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Meanwhile, people back home not able to fight for the country looked for other ways to support their nation's cause. They donated money to war charities and provided comfort such as food, clothing and tobacco for the troops. People felt it was their duty to support the war effort, and they were scared of the events that had taken place on the continent. If the Germans won, this could happen at home as well.

Forced to protect its empire, Britain saw opportunities to win the war by attacking Germany's Asian and African colonies. This led to thousands of people dying in Africa. There were also battles in Turkey and Iraq and Gallipoli in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A European war actually meant a world war as the overseas empires of the European counties were drawn into the conflict. As the war spread, so did the suffering.



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From the outset of the war, Germany tried to distract and weaken its enemies, By 1915 its main target was Russia. If it could force Russia from the war, France and Britain might also break. Germany won victory after victory. But Russia would not crack.

Across the continent, the Allied forces and their enemy were trying to coax leaders of neutral nations to join the war. From Italy to Bulgaria, Greece and Albania, the war was being fought and more and more lives were subject to pain, suffering and death.

The war at sea was just as brutal. The Battle of Jutland off Denmark in 1916 saw 9,000 lives lost within minutes, along with ships that had taken years to build.

Widening the war did not bring victory for either side, so by late 1915 they turned their efforts back to the Western Front. This began with the Battle of Verdun which dragged on for ten months and cost over 700,000 lives.



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The Allies forces then planned to defeat the German and Austro-Hungarian forces with a series of massive coordinated offences. Britain and France would attack on the Somme, a rural region of northern France that was untouched by war and armies stood alongside each other.

Because of Verdun, Britain would now lead this 'big push' as thousands of fresh keen soldiers from the volunteer army were ready for their first 'large-scale' battle that British Commanders hoped would bring them victory. This was the Battle of the Somme.

Huge amounts of munition and supplies were sent out to France and on 24 June a week-long bombardment to smash German defences took place in preparation for the battle.

At 7.30am on Saturday 1 July 1916, British soldiers clambered from their trenches to advance on to 'no mans land' towards German lines. The battle was a disaster. By early evening 20,000 of them lay dead and just over 37,000 were listed as wounded or missing.

Although the British bombardment was the biggest yet, their shelling was scattered on a wide area and it did not destroy German guns, cut through barbed wire or smash well protected dug outs. The British attack failed on most of their fronts. The French attacks were more successful.

The Allies kept on attacking, but the Germans fought back every inch of ground. Soldiers from across the British Empire took part, and for many it was their first experience of battle.

The Battle of the Somme lasted for five months. It finally ended on 18 November with a cost of 420,000 British and Empire lives lost, 200,000 French lives and nearly 500,000 German lives.

As 1916 drew to a close, there was still no sign of victory. New leaders encouraged their weary citizens to work even harder. Total war on the battlefield meant total war on the Homefront too.

Nobody in Britain could escape the war. Women filled many jobs back home as so many men were away fighting on the front. Britain also started coming under attack from the Germans through air attacks and sea attacks stopping supplies from entering the country. America's entry into the war at this time supplied new hope to Britain and its Allies.

The events in the Somme gripped the nation. The Government employed artists to document the war.

Two cameramen were given permission to film troops on the front line and by August 1916, an official documentary film entitled *The Battle of the Somme* was shown in cinemas across the country.

An estimated 20 million people saw the film within months of its release, many trying to catch a glimpse of a loved one.

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The British military wanted to motivate the home front. They hoped that people would see how important it was to support the soldiers who were fighting and dying for their freedom.

By 1917 the harsh realities of war were wearing thin in Britain, but people were determined to win. The efforts at home continued and women were now employed in war industries, on farms and in offices. Some serviced in the newly formed Women's Military Services. This was revolutionary. But the strain was also beginning to show. A steep rise in the cost of living and long working hours in tough conditions led to strikes.



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In 1917 Germany planned to starve Britain out of the war. As an island nation, it relied heavily on imports from all over the world to support its war effort and feed its people. Germany ordered submarines to sink, without warning, any ships heading towards Britain's shores.

German leaders were taking a huge risk waging unrestricted submarine warfare, and American ships were now in the firing line. The attack destroyed millions of tonnes of goods, but Britain survived and American anger had been aroused and this changed the course of the war.

Although America was neutral, it had acted as bankers and suppliers to Britain and its Allies. It was also furious at Germany for sinking its submarines and killing its citizens.

The last straw for the US Government was a German attempt to gain Mexico as an ally. On 6 April 1917, Germany declared war on America. The allied forces rejoiced, this meant more financial and military resources for the war, but the Americans, with a large Navy, would not ready to fight for another year.

New technologies, inventions and tactics were beginning to change the way the war was fought. After three years, armies had learnt hard lessons, often from bitter experience. British commanders were learning to exploit the deadly potential of tanks and aircraft.



<http://eandt.theiet.org/magazine/2014/06/relics-of-the-great-war.cfm>

Artillery could now locate and destroy hidden enemies and obliterate barbed wire defences. Soldiers could advance into battle behind the protective storm of steel and fire. All armies successfully used innovative tactics and technologies during 1917 and many battles at the time were won using them.

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There was still no decisive breakthrough.

In July 1917 Britain launched a new offensive in Ypres, aiming to recapture vital rail links and submarine bases. Attacks were hampered by rain turning the battlefield into liquid mud. Eventually the Germans were forced back with terrible losses and victory seemed possible. But the rains returned.

British commanders felt they had pushed the enemy to breaking point but many British soldiers felt utterly demoralised. Confidence was low.

The British Government's war art scheme began to employ men who were soldiers and artists to paint the shattered world they saw around them in striking new ways. The art was hugely popular and appeared in exhibitions, magazines and postcards. Large crowds were drawn to displays of official photographs and paintings. British people wanted visual impressions of what their loved ones were going through.



John Nash: study for Over The Top
Artists Rifles – 28th (County of London) Battalion of The London Regiment

By 1917, the war was putting a great strain on all. Many leaders, soldiers and civilians were looking for a way out. Statesmen thought about negotiating an end to the war. On the battlefield, soldiers went on strike and on the home fronts there was hardship and hunger. Public calls for peace came louder.

Some nations began to crumble, then Russia broke and declared itself out of the war. By 1918, Germany concentrated its effort on the West Front for one last offensive to try and break the British and French.

As the war dragged on, some politicians and intellectuals made more public calls for peace. Governments secretly explored negotiated settlements, but compromise proved impossible.

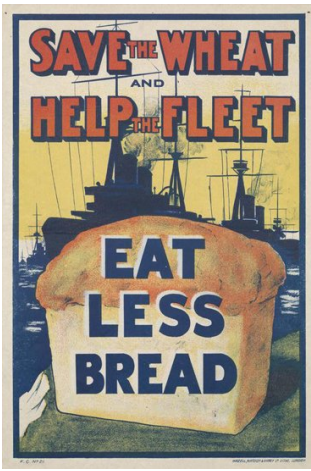
The price for the war had been paid in blood by all the fighting nations - that meant that anything but victory would mean defeat. By the end of 1917, 800,000 men from Britain and the Commonwealth had been killed and to bargain with Germany would mean that people had died for nothing.

On both sides, as long as people believed victory was possible, they were prepared to keep on fighting.

By 1917, hunger caused by sea blockades threatened a collapse on the home front. The Government introduced rationing to ease the efforts of Germany's submarine campaign which proved successful. Food was limited but people did not starve. But in Germany and Austria-Hungary, a British blockade caused real suffering and starvation. Serious shortages of food and resources led to price rises, riots and strikes. A bad harvest in 1916 turned the problem into a crisis. The supply of food was also badly managed. Whilst troops were fed, civilians over there went hungry.

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On 21 March 1918 ten thousand German guns began to pound the British lines surging through defences. They advanced up 40 miles of the Western Front and seemed on the brink of victory.

By July the attacks had broken down and the Germans were exhausted. The battle had cost them their best men, their advances so fast they could not keep guns and supplies up. With their backs to the wall, the Allies stood firm and fought back.

1918 saw the dramatic end of trench warfare as both sides used new tactics and colossal firepower to break the deadlock. The German army launched their most gigantic offensives on the Western Front since 1914 and the Allies feared defeat.

But Allies counterattacked. They had more weapons and supplies, which struck devastating blows against the Germans.

In October, Germany approached US President Wilson for an armistice. When this became public, Germans wondered why they were still fighting. To avert a revolution the Kaiser was forced to abdicate. Germany's army retreated, its allies crumbled away and its people began to revolt. Germany's army was defeated.

On 11 November 1918, a beaten Germany signed the 1918 Armistice, forcing them to leave all occupied territory, surrender weapons, aeroplanes and warships. For Germany, the Armistice was both a defeat and a bitter humiliation.

Britain and its Empire was triumphant, but the world had changed beyond recognition during the four years of war. It gave rise to new ambitions, rivalries and tensions. Old empires had fallen and new nations had been born. Revolutionary ideologies like communism and fascism emerged. Wars were still being fought.

Leaders met together in Paris to settle the peace. They were faced with exhausted people and a shattered world. People had high hopes that they would create a new, safer and better world.

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