

HOMWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE

TRENCH WARFARE

KP2

BACKGROUND

When the Schlieffen Plan failed the Germans began to dig a line of trenches. The British and French did the same and by November 1914 the two sides occupied lines of trenches stretching from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. This was the Western Front and both sides remained in the same positions until 1918. All attempts to break through failed.

British trenches were in Belgium and Northern France in the regions of Flanders, Artois and Piccardy. These areas were below sea level and drainage systems had been built to allow the land to be farmed. Constant shelling destroyed the drainage and the Germans blew up the sea walls and dykes that prevented flooding. As a result British trenches were regularly flooded.

- Trenches were built in a zigzag. There were usually three lines. The firing trench, the support trench and the reserve trench - all linked by communication trenches. Trenches were 2 meters deep with duckboards, fire steps, drainage sumps, and sandbag parapets. Barbed wire entanglements protected the front line trenches.
- Trenches were difficult for foot soldiers to attack. It was impossible to go round or surprise the enemy. Battles lasted a long time (months) and casualties were high.
- Living conditions in the trenches were awful. It was cold, wet and muddy. Rats, lice and flies were everywhere. The stench from dead bodies and latrines was sickening. The daily routine - cleaning weapons, repairing trenches filling sandbags and repairing wire and night patrols. Even in quiet times snipers and shells killed many.
- Battles usually involved - artillery bombardment / gas / infantry attack. This was intended to destroy the German wire and drive the enemy out of their trenches. This did not work. The wire was not destroyed, Germans sheltered until it was safe to return and set up machine guns. British troops were cut down in no-mans land.
- The effects on soldiers of this type of war were - deaths, wounds, blindness, disease and infections, shell shock, madness. Some were shot for cowardice.
- Despite the slaughter High Command continued to order attacks. This was a war of attrition and high losses were accepted as part of the plan to grind down the enemy.
- New technology made trench warfare deadlier

Barbed Wire - Trenches were protected by barbed wire entanglements.
Machine Guns - Could fire up to 1000 bullets per minute - an ideal defensive weapon.

Artillery - Safely positioned miles behind the lines could fire shells (or gas) with great accuracy and huge destructive power

Gas - The first type of gas was phosgene gas and later the more deadly mustard gas, which could cause suffocation, burns and blisters and blindness.

Tanks

Small Arms - Rifles could fire 20 rounds per minute and new weapons for trench warfare included hand grenades, flamethrowers and trench mortars

Aircraft - **Mainly used for reconnaissance but were equipped with machine guns and 'dogfights' took place in the skies**