

The role of machine guns in the first world war essay sample



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The Battle of the Somme has again shown the decisive value of machine guns in defence. If they can be kept in a serviceable condition until the enemy's infantry attack, and are then brought up into the firing position in time, every attack must fail.

- From HQ 6th Bavarian Division, 3 September 1916

It was the fire of German machine guns which was most trying for our men. Again and again soldiers have told me today that the hard time came when these bullets began to play upon them.

- Philip Gibbs, 1917 (Quoted in Bruce 1997)

One of the most significant weapon advancements which differentiated World War I from previous armed conflicts was the machine gun. Emerging from the technological advances at the height of the Industrial Revolution, the machine gun quickly gained a reputation for the devastation it could inflict. Machine guns became the most effective weapons of the war. They also naturally affected the perceptions and conduct of soldiers, who for the first time found themselves face to face with a reliable, portable, automatic weapon of deadly power that showered a hail of bullets and killed people instantly. We will begin this essay by taking a brief look at the deadliness and limitations of these early machine guns, as well as the various types that were in use. Although, these weapons were used by all the sides, it was Germany that realized and benefited from the power of machine guns most extensively.

We will discuss the advantage Germany had over the Allies with respect to machine guns. As the war progressed, some key technological innovations took place that aimed to exploit the full potential of machine guns, we will consider what these developments were. The machine gun's effectiveness helped transform how people thought about warfare. This ingenious invention of the 19th century had a profound influence on the very strategy of warfare during the First World War, especially as regards infantry tactics. It radically changed the conventional face of armed conflict, and paved way for further dramatic changes during the Second World War — we will try to understand the basis of machine gun's critical impact on the nature of warfare.

With armies becoming more reliant on military technologies by the beginning of the twentieth century, combat began to be seen as a contest of arms more than ever. Victory was heavily predicated on supplies of ammunition. The development of high explosives and new types of gun increased the firepower of warships as well as artillery on land. At the outbreak of the First World War, machine guns were developed enough to be easily deployable and their withering fire cut down advancing troops like a gardener scything grass. The German, British, and French machine guns dominated the battlefields of the Western Front in 1914-1918, and have become one of the major hallmarks of the Great War. The following are some of major models used in the early years:

- Maxim Maschinengewehr 08
- Maxim Maschinengewehr 08/15

- Maschinenpistole MP I 8/1
- Vickers Mk I
- Lewis Mk I
- Hotchkiss Mle 1914
- Chauchat Mle 1915

All these models were based on Maxim guns, and were developed in the early twentieth century. They packed ferocious firepower. The German Maxim machine-guns could fire up to 600 rounds of ammunition a minute and accounted for 90 percent of Allied victims at the Battle of Somme (1916). Nonetheless, these devices were still heavy and relatively primitive; they had to be operated from a fixed site instead of on the move. Weighing between 30 to 60 kg even without all mountings and supplies paraphernalia that went along with them, they were not very portable (Duffy 2003). This made their operators highly vulnerable to return fire, once enemy gunners located their position. These early versions of the machine gun would rapidly overheat and could become inoperative in the absence of cooling mechanisms. Knocking out machine-gun nests later became a top priority for tanks.

When Germany declared war on France in early August 1914, it had already amassed enormous firepower in terms of machine guns. Britain and France could not match the vicious power of these new weapons of warfare. Way back in 1885, Hiram Maxim, the designer of the first true machine gun, offered use of the machine to Britain. But the British officers failed to see the efficacy of these contraptions over and above the more primitive Gaitling

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guns which required hand-cranking. The Maxim guns were requisitioned only in limited numbers and Britain had to pay heavily for such an obvious strategic mistake. The German machine guns wreaked havoc on the enemy side in the early months of the war. The number of grisly casualties on both sides was mounting uncontrollably and soon this situation made the armies take recourse to the WW-I's most characteristic feature of trench warfare. But in the defensive approach of the trench networks that ensued, the importance of massed artillery and machine guns became all the more emphasized. Men who got over-the-top in trenches stood little chance when the enemy opened their machine guns. The machine gun proved a formidable defensive weapon.

Initially, each Jaeger battalion and infantry regiment of Germany had been attached with a special company of six Maxims. They employed about 1600 to 2000 machine guns in all. (In comparison, the British and the French only used a few hundreds). After the commencement of the trench battles, the Germans were once again quick to realize that in defense one separate machine gun company could often exact as much damage on the enemy lines as an entire conventional infantry battalion. Consequently, the machine guns held in reserve were moved up to the front lines, where they were pitched in strategic positions.

The work done by these tactically concentrated machine guns was so effective that the press was compelled to greatly exaggerate the number of guns the Germans possessed. It was reported that Kaiser's armies were using as many as 25, 000 heavy machine guns in the first year of the war itself. In reaction to this, the British started creating their own machine gun
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corps. The trench warfare resulted from the machine gun and in turn demonstrated the true potential of the machine gun. But strangely, the British were still distrustful of the machine guns, and the standard infantry weapon of World War I was the Lee Enfield rifle (Ingram 2001). It remained the primary infantry weapon even in 1939. The British showed real interest in machine guns / Submachine guns only after the outbreak of the Second World War.

Submachine guns (e. g., the Thompson, or “ Tommy gun” and Beretta 1918) as well as lighter machine guns (the BAR, for example) were developed later in World War I, along with large-caliber machine guns which were all heavily used (Wikipedia 2006). As the war advanced, machine guns were adapted for use on tanks on broken ground, particularly on the Western Front (where the majority of machine guns were deployed). Machine guns were mounted in aircraft for the first time in World War I. Similarly machine guns began to be added to warships as a useful addition to naval armaments.

Machine guns forced the most important tactical change in the First World War. The biggest war prior to WW I was the American Civil War where the standard military tactic was the infantry charge. However, with machine guns that could shoot hundreds of rounds of ammunition per minute, it did not take long for both sides to realize that a different tactical approach had to be evolved (Trueman 2006). Thus emerged the defensive trench warfare, which hopelessly bogged down the war. When the war started, everyone had been under the impression it would be over “ by Christmas.” If the people involved had any idea that it would prove to be such a drawn-out

cataclysmic affair, perhaps there would have been harder diplomatic effort to <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-machine-guns-in-the-first-world-war-essay-sample/>

obviate the war. The chief culprit for blowing this conflict out of all imaginable proportions was the trench style warfare, which in turn was developed as a response to the onslaught of machine guns. In the end, the greatest impact of the machine guns on World War I was not in the number of casualties which was nevertheless stupendous by any standard, but in making the World War what it was. Without machine guns, there would have been no trench warfare, and without trench system of tactics, the war could not have dragged on for so long resulting in such an unprecedented devastation.

Machine gun invention in the 19th century marked one of the most crucial developments in military technology. The use of several versions of Maxim guns was widespread during World War I on both sides, though Germany definitely picked up an advantage in exploitation of this new weapon from the very beginning. The relentless rapid gunfire from machine guns during World War I made armies abandon conventional battlefield tactics and adopt a new system of warfare called trench warfare. Machine guns, which were first used during World War I, have become as much symbolic of that war as atom bomb has become for World War II.

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