

Why the first world war lasted so long essay sample

War



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The First World War (1914-1918) was a war that lasted substantially longer than anyone anticipated. This was largely due to the technological developments created by the industrial revolution coupled with the sheer scale of the conflict and the huge amount of resources that the two armed sides were willing to commit. The war lasted as long as it did because of the new style of warfare employed and the fact that military leaders of the time were slow to realise the extent of the change warfare had undergone.

The war was the culmination of a chain of events in Europe involving various Empires, the alliances they sought and their desire for power and security. The rivalry created by this caused an intense rush by countries to outdo one another, specifically between the German and British empires. By the time the war itself started there was a massive technological change underway called the industrial revolution. This caused many new advances in all fields and a substantial change to the way of life for everyone alive at the time.

A product of this revolution was an arms race that led to the improvement and expansion of armed forces and their equipment. New weaponry was created on both sides of the conflict, some of which were brought in during the later years of the war, not always at the beginning. These new weapons included poison gas, flamethrowers and on a different scale late in the war, tanks. These weapons caused older military tactics to become obsolete and created a style of warfare that had never been seen in the world before.

The most notable weapon to appear was the most deadly weapon of the 20th century, the machine gun. It was designed in America in 1884 by an inventor named Hiram M. Maxim. This was the first automatic machine gun

and was approximated as being worth between 60 to 100 single shot rifles. The machine gun was showed to the British and German high commands who copied the design in 1889 to create the British Vickers gun, the German Maschinengewehr and the Russian Pulemyot Maxima. These three guns were all nearly identical copies of the original design. The fact that they had a range of up to one and a half kilometres and could shoot continuously with a large swinging arc of fire meant that infantry advances were largely ineffective and costly forced the two sides into a situation of stalemate.

By the outbreak of war German armed forces already had 12, 000 machine guns and ended up having 100, 000 by the end. Along with massive amounts of artillery barrages, machine guns made cavalry and the style of infantry advance from previous engagements suicidal. This forced a total rethink of military strategy throughout the world.

The extended length of the war can be largely attributed to the inability of either side to break through the enemy's defensive positions. The reinforcement from this new weaponry made it even more difficult for an infantry advance. This caused the two sides to create strong defensive positions in which the troops were out of the line of fire of these machine guns, these dug out positions became known as trenches.

After the initial German advance through Belgium and into France was stopped at the River Marne the two sides dug complex trench systems. These systems had a front line trench, a secondary trench, communication trenches and supply trenches running throughout. The area between the two opposing trench systems was called " no mans land." This inhospitable area

had to be crossed if an attack was going to be made using the standard “over the top” method. It was normally rough ground that had been ripped up by artillery shells and was difficult to cross. It was also in direct line of sight of the enemy soldiers and machine guns. Attempts by troops to attack across this land were often cut down in their thousands causing horrific casualty rates.

Trenches were originally supposed to be a defence tactic but as the war went on and no way was found to breach the enemy lines the trenches increasingly became where the war was fought from. This stalemate went on for years even with artillery barrages designed to destroy enemy positions. If a breakthrough was made the area taken was usually reinforced with new troops making it virtually impossible to break and hold the enemy’s positions.

The massive casualties suffered on all sides during this period of the war turned it from the expected open, moving war to a stale, slow war of attrition. It was figured that if Germany was kept isolated they would eventually run out of resources and have to surrender as they were fighting a war on two major fronts, the Eastern and Western fronts. In the end this did eventuate but at a massive cost of over three million lives and the huge disruption to the nations involved.

The leaders of the day could see no way to break this stalemate except by bleeding Germany dry to the point where they absolutely had to surrender. This meant a long wait and as warfare of this sort had never been seen before no one could definitively say how long it would take for Germany to

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become crippled to the point of surrender. When Germany finally fell it marked the end of the largest and bloodiest war in history.