

The somme as a
turning point in world
war one and warfare



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The Somme: A turning point in World War One and its change on warfare

World War One was never short on the brutality of war. With around 40 million casualties, both civilian and military, it was one of the bloodiest wars in human history. One of the bloodiest battles to take place during World War One was the battle of the Somme, where at its end, the allies had lost 615, 000 men, and the Germans lost 650, 000 men. This battle would also mark a change in warfare, as the introduction of the tank would make its mark upon the world and by the battle's end, the British high command would realize that in the future, they would have to mobilize for war in a shorter amount of time, and to have more supplies than their enemy.

By 1915, both sides were at a stalemate; as each side would look for solutions to bring this supposed 'skirmish that would be over by Christmas' to an end, or at least to gain the upper hand. During the Chantilly Conference in December of 1915, the Allies agreed to mount on a major offensive. Joffre, commander of the French forces wanted the assault to happen on the Somme River. However, Germany looked towards Verdun, as General Erich Von Falkenhayn knew how the French mind operated. He knew that the French would throw every man that they had in order to keep the Germans from taking it. His plan was not to take Verdun, but instead to keep the French pre-occupied so that they would have less men across the front line. His plan didn't work as well as he had hoped, as the "Voie Sacree" (Sacred Way) was bringing in thousands of tons of war materials and soldiers, as well as raising France's patriotism. However, this only meant that the British (led by General Douglas Haig) would fill in as the major force fighting over the Somme, rather than the French. Due to the events of <https://assignbuster.com/the-somme-as-a-turning-point-in-world-war-one-and-warfare/>

Verdun, Joffre requested that Haig start the offensive early, as a means of drawing away German reserves.

On July 1, 1916, after one week of dropping 1, 500, 000 shells on 20 miles German lines in an attempt to clear barbed wire and destroy German machine gun emplacements and trenches as well as explode mines that were dug under strategic positions, did the battle start. “artillery barrage so enormous that they would just have to get out of their trenches and walk”. 100, 000 British soldiers went over the top, standing shoulder to shoulder, as they marched to the awaiting German lines. Britain suffered the single greatest loss in all of Britain’s history; of the 100, 000 soldiers, 19, 240 died, and 40, 000 were wounded on the first day of fighting.

Due to the industrial revolution, Europe was able to produce large amounts of bullets, rifles, canon, uniforms, and equipment such as tents and mess-kits. Guns were more reliable and more accurate than before. Troops were able to be ferried to greater distances quicker and in greater numbers. Advancements in chemistry led to improved high explosives. When the war started, each country was pressured to invent new tactics and machines so that they could achieve ‘military advantage’ over their enemy. Old designs and tactics were improved upon, such as trench construction, artillery and the way it was used, as well as further development of the new plane and submarine; while new innovations were created, such as the tank.[1]

Britain’s deployment of man-power was nearly complete, but its fire-power had barely started. Its arsenal was produced by the economy and by its factories, as every government experimented with their economies. Prices

for food was changed, as well as rent. It was this mobilization of economies that would eventually decide the war, as each side tried to gain a foothold above the other. (Industrialization of War) Starting from July 1916 to February 1918, British and Coalition soldiers deployed on the western front rose by 30% (1.4 million to 1.9 million), and shell stock in France rose by 150% (6.5 million to 16.5 million). While at home, the shell stock rose by 10% (1 million to 11 million)[2]. After the Somme, the British army was supplied with more firepower than before. It had more tanks, planes, rifles, and canons than the Germans. Every kind of weapon was made more available after the battle. They had learned what the United States did during the American Civil War; that the more industrialized you are, the better off you'll be over your opponent.

It wasn't only the economy of Britain that had an impact on the war. Tactics had changed by the war's end as well. And it was at the Somme where these changes had started to occur. One innovation that would be perfected and used during the final attacks on the German lines at the Somme would be the creeping barrage. The creeping barrage would come into great affect at the Somme, starting half-way into no man's land, killing any German scout lying in wait before moving forward into enemy lines at a rate of 100 yards every four minutes, thus forcing the Germans to tuck away from the open, allowing the British to get in close to their trenches. With the help of the RFC (Royal Flying Corps) taking photos of the German lines, did Allied artillery become increasingly accurate.[3]

Troop tactics had changed since the start of the Somme as well. Where it started as each company marching as if they were marching in a military

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parade, each soldier marching abreast from the man next to him. As the official British history of the war put it: “ There is more to be learnt from ill-success—which is, after all, the true experience—than from victories, which are often attributable less to the excellence of the victor’s plans than to the weakness or mistakes of his opponent.” Haig was clearly conscious of the losses they were suffered on the first day. It wasn’t too long before he launched new tactics and promoted new officers who would implement change. (Norfolk, Andrew Roberts Simon. “ A Bold New History of the Battle of the Somme.” Smithsonian. com. July 01, 2016). Troops were told to make dashes, moving from cover to cover as they went while allied support gave them covering fire. At the start of the conflict, troop attacks were based upon companies of men, “ ranging around 200 men. By November, it was based around platoons, ranging around 40 men that were highly interdependent and effective specialists, with an ideal strength per platoon of one officer and 48 subordinates.”. After every engagement post July 1st, British forces would be required to submit a post-battle report. This would lead to two new manuals that talked about tactics surrounding barbed wire, fortifications, and enemy fields of fire. By 1917, every soldier received new papers teaching on what to do if/when his commanding officer or NCO was killed[4]

It was argued that Haig rushed what few tanks that the Allies had into battle, blowing the secrecy of their new ‘ wonder weapon’ prematurely, as was written down cogently in Churchill’s memoirs Book 3 armies on the Somme, – before they could produce a larger number of them and only having their first battle be used to take “ some destroyed hamlets”. Generals who

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opposed Haig argued that it would have been much better for the tanks to have been a secret; to have accumulated a large number of tanks for a full-scale surprise attack (as was to happen at Cambrai in 1917 and in Amiens in 1918), then to give it away in a moribund offensive. Haig had pointed out in his defense, that the offensive was not moribund, but instead reaching its climax. That given the circumstances, anything and everything that could contribute to a victory in the war should be done so, and the MK1's did prove themselves useful[5]. The Mk1's were responsible for the British advance 2,000 yards on a five mile front between Flers and Courcellette, including High Wood. And while most of the conservative generals were still skeptical, Haig was thoroughly impressed. Ten days later, Britain would achieve another victory, taking Comblès on the 25th, and taking Thiepval (which had been under fire since July 1st, that beginning of the battle). It was captured with the aid of 13 MK1s. And at Geudécourt, with British planes spotting enemy units, Britain managed to take 500 prisoners with only five men lost[6]. Having the same effect that the elephants used by Hannibal did. The Germans retreated out of their trenches and leaving behind their machine guns, having a major impact on the finale battle of the Somme-on the Ancre. Basil Rackham said:

" Then we heard that they were going to assault in the morning with tanks. Tanks were in their infancy then, they'd been used in September in the battles of the Somme. We were given six in our division to be used if we got into trouble. Well, we were in trouble! So, they were to come up and assault the strongpoint. Only two arrived on the strongpoint mobile but, when they did arrive on strongpoint, up came white flags. It was alleged it was four

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hundred—I would say about two or three hundred at most - Germans surrendered like that. The tanks just frightened them; they couldn't do really much themselves. They were very thinly armed, they just arrived on the strongpoint and up came all these white flags and the Germans surrendered."

It was during the battle of the Somme that tanks made their debut. On the 15th of September, at the battle of Flers-Courcelette, Britain deployed 48 MK1 tanks. However, many broke down to the primitiveness of early tank designs and only 21 made it to the front line. The MK1 tank was not a total failure though. They gave a moral boost to the infantry that were assigned with them and inspiring some to even enlist as new volunteers in becoming tank operators themselves, like Norman Dillon.[7]

" I was sitting with my platoon, waiting to go up to follow the front-line troops who'd just advanced into the village of Flers. I was sitting with my sergeant by the roadside. This enormous thing crossed the road in front of me and ambled on behind the troops. I realise now that I'd seen one of the first tanks going into action. That's what it was. I saw the potential straight away. I thought, ' That's the very job for me!...I thought that straight away and later when the demand came for volunteers to join this new organization, I put my name down."

They were not invincible, however. With only 6mm-12mm of armor, the MK1 tanks could resist small arms fire and shrapnel, however they fell victim to direct hits from artillery and mortars, as well as Germany's new armor-piercing K bullets. However, it was undeniable that without the development

and their use at the Somme, warfare would have been vastly different, as many generals on both sides doubted the usefulness of tanks.

Most people today consider not only the Battle of the Somme a great tragedy spurred on by stupidity and patriotism, but World War One as a whole.

However, looking at it from the perspective of what was accomplished – new tactics, new weapons that were improved upon or brought about, and if German forces hadn't been let up on Verdun, then the war could have taken a drastically different turn, and the French's moral would have been crushed.

This is not to sway anyone from thinking otherwise. War was never pretty.

However, instead of looking at it from one angle, it's best to look at not only this conflict, but every conflict from different angles. What was accomplished with what had happened? What wasn't? It was here, at the Battle of the Somme, that sparked a turning point in warfare, and in the tactics used by European countries.

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