

## **Trenches: Symbols of the Stalemate**

By the war's end, each side had dug at least 12,000 miles of trenches.

The first major trench lines were completed in late November 1914. At their peak, the trenches built by both sides extended nearly 400 miles from Nieupoort, on the Belgian coast, to the Swiss border. Among the Allies, the Belgians occupied 40 miles, the British occupied 90 miles and the French occupied the rest. Experts calculate that along the western front, the Allies and Central Powers dug nearly 6,250 miles of trenches by the end of 1914.

"[the bodies] we could not get from the German wire continued to swell ... the color of the dead faces changed from white to yellow-gray, to red, to purple, to green to black." Robert Graves, poet, novelist, critic

### **Organization of the trenches**

The Allies used four "types" of trenches. The first, the front-line trench (or firing-and-attack trench), was located from 50 yards to 1 mile from the German's front trench. Several hundred yards behind the front-line trench was the support trench, with men and supplies that could immediately assist those on the front line. The reserve trench was dug several hundred yards further back and contained men and supplies that were available in emergencies should the first trenches be overrun.

Connecting these trenches were communication trenches, which allowed movement of messages, supplies, and men among the trenches. Some underground networks connected gun emplacements and bunkers with the communication trenches.

German trench life was much different. They constructed elaborate and sophisticated tunnel and trench structures, sometimes with living quarters more than 50 feet below the surface. These trenches had electricity, beds, toilets and other niceties of life that contrasted sharply with the open-air trenches of the Allies.

### **Morale Booster**

On average, daily losses for the British soldiers were nearly 7,000 men killed, disabled or wounded. This figure remained fairly constant throughout the war. To keep morale as high as possible and to keep the soldiers on the front as fresh as possible, the British established a three-week rotation schedule. A week in the front trench was followed by a week in the support trench, which was followed by a week in the reserve trenches. During this third week, the men could relax with sports, concerts and plays, keeping their minds away from life on the front.

### **No man's land: The Territory Between the Trenches**

By mid-November 1914, the territory between the opposing front trenches was marked with huge craters caused by the shelling; nearly all vegetation was destroyed. Whenever possible, both sides filled this land with barbed wire to slow down any rapid advances by the enemy. The machine gun and the new long-range rifles made movement in this area almost impossible.

### **Timing of Movements at the Front**

Both sides quickly recognized that assaults against the enemy trenches were suicide if begun in broad daylight, so attacks tended to take place just before dawn or right at dawn. Poison gases tended to be more effective in the mornings, as the colder air and absence of wind allowed the gases to stay closer to the ground for longer periods of time.

Except for artillery shelling, daytime was relatively safe for the soldiers on the front line. Once the sun went down, men crawled out of their trenches to conduct raids, investigate the layout of the terrain, and eavesdrop near the enemy lines to pick up information on their strengths, weakness and strategies.

### **When Foreign Adventures Go Bad: The Case of America's Intervention in Russia During World War I**

In July 1918 World War I continued on the Western Front, with American doughboys now in the trenches.. The Russian Czar had abdicated, been arrested and executed; the Russians had abandoned the Eastern Front and withdrawn from the war; the Soviet Revolution was in full swing and civil war raged across the land.

Into this turmoil President Woodrow Wilson, bowing to the request of his Allied friends, agreed to send American troops to Russia. The 339 th Infantry Regiment, 1 st Battalion 310 th Engineers, and various support units, arrived in September 1918 in Archangel, Russia. The American Expeditionary Force North Russia (AEFNR) was to prove a dismal failure in every sense, and should be an object lesson in the pitfalls of intervening in the internal affairs of other nations.

President Woodrow Wilson had been pressured by France and Britain to join them in trying to encourage the Russians to rejoin the war and to protect North Russian ports from German invasion. There were other issues, too, as Wilson struggled with divided American advisors. The State Department was openly supportive of joining the effort, but the War Department was adamant that no troops could be spared from the fighting in France. It was with these views that the President began his *Aide Memoir*, a document that was the basis for the American Intervention in Russia. He wrote: “The American Government, therefore, very respectfully requested its Associates to accept its deliberate judgment that it should not dissipate its force by attempting important operations elsewhere.” However, in the same document this logic was reversed, using this rationale for sending troops to Russia:

- to protect Czech soldiers of the Czech Legion transiting Siberia and under periodic local attacks
- to guard war materials sent to Russia for use against Germany
- to render assistance to Russians as the Russians themselves required that assistance
- to provide humanitarian assistance to needy Russians

This was Wilson’s justification for sending two forces to Russia, one to North Russia the other to Siberia. These lofty goals were, in every sense, impossible to achieve, and only two short months after Americans entered Russia, Germany capitulated. At this point the reasons for our intervention began a “mission creep.” [a term coined by Lt. Cmdr C.J. Cwiklinski in a study for the Naval War College titled *America's Role in the Allied Intervention in Northern Russia and Siberia (1918-1920) Case Studies of Mission Creep and Coalition Failure.*] Unfortunately, President Wilson never revised his original document to define why we should stay on in Russia after the Armistice.

In his *Memoir* he cautioned “. . . it [the U.S. proposal] proposes to ask all associated in this course of action to unite in assuring the people of Russia in the most public and solemn manner that none of the governments uniting in action either in Siberia or in northern Russia contemplates any interference of any kind with the political sovereignty of Russia, any intervention in her internal affairs, or any impairment of her territorial integrity either now or hereafter, but that each of the associated powers has the single object of affording such aid as shall be acceptable, to the Russian people in their endeavor to regain control of their own affairs, their own territory, and their own destiny.” One of the tough questions was “ which Russian people?”