

THE GREAT WAR and the Shaping of the 20th Century

Lesson Plan Two: Symbols of the Stalemate

Student Handout

World War I

Phase Two: Deadlock

By the end of 1914, the two sides settled into trenches and faced each other across no man's land, the area between the trenches on the western and eastern fronts. A war of attrition was underway, with each side trying to wear down the other. This harsh reality had a devastating effect on the morale of the soldiers on both sides. At the beginning, most people expected that the war would be over by Christmas 1914. This expectation prompted an outburst of patriotic enthusiasm on the part of the soldiers headed to the front as well as on the part of the civilians left behind. Young men eagerly signed up to achieve the type of glory that was associated with fighting for one's country.

However, when the early offensives failed and the casualties mounted, a widespread sense of despair developed in the trenches. The public did not know the extent of the despair because governments concealed it from them by imposing rigid censorship. Governments prevented news reporting of the slaughter at the front and intercepted mail from soldiers that contained messages of gloom and doom.

The Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz once defined war as an extension of politics. But the political purposes of World War I had been lost amid the enormous death and destruction. The assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in the Balkans were but distant memories with no relevance to the traumatic experience of soldiers on the battlefield. As the two sides confronted each other in trenches and periodically engaged in suicidal attempts to break the deadlock, the soldiers lost their original enthusiasm for the war effort. By 1917 the growing sense of despair and lack of purpose resulted in widespread discontent in the French and Russian armies.

Causes of the Deadlock

For three years of continuous warfare, neither side succeeded in gaining a decisive success on either of the main European fronts, in spite of the millions of lives sacrificed. By the end of 1914, the western front had solidified into two deeply entrenched systems of fortifications running west to east from the English Channel to the border of Switzerland. The fortifications consisted of numerous parallel lines of interconnected trenches protected by lines of barbed wire. The leaders on both sides thought that the way to achieve a breakthrough was to penetrate enemy lines and gain access to open country. In the open country, they believed that they could regain the ability to maneuver. They also thought that the only way to penetrate enemy lines was to start a massive artillery bombardment of a chosen sector and to follow it up with a massive infantry assault.

However, both sides had equal forces, so they could repel enemy attempts to overwhelm entrenched defensive positions. The tragic equilibrium, as it has been called, caused continued assaults. With each assault, both sides attempted to improve upon the

preceding one, chiefly by adding more artillery shells to the bombardment and more men to the attack. As more soldiers were killed in futile efforts to overrun enemy positions, leaders continued the same pattern because they felt that they had to prove that it would succeed, thus justifying the slaughter of their troops.

The reason that the leaders continued using this suicidal strategy for the remainder of the war was that no alternative appeared to exist. Maintaining fixed positions in the trenches was no solution, since it produced only boredom and eventually despair. In addition, as each army appointed new leaders, they resumed the deadly offensives to try to earn a place in history by masterminding a breakthrough that would end the war.

Another factor in the deadlock on the western front was that Germany had occupied almost all of Belgium and parts of northern France since the beginning of the war. The French people and their government did not want to entertain any war aim other than recovering the occupied territory and its inhabitants. France's preoccupation with this goal hampered British-French strategy.

The French commander in chief on the northeastern front in France considered that area the only front worthy of French resources, and he also felt that the British should loyally accept the same viewpoint. The British, however, had developed other war aims to break the stalemate that did not always coincide with those of their French allies. For example, officials in London wanted to concentrate on the British war effort against the Ottoman Empire. To the French, the war in the Middle East was much less important than the struggle to liberate the occupied portions of northeastern France. As a result, the two allies continually disputed military priorities.

On the eastern front, there was also stalemate, although geographically the armies had plenty of room to maneuver. The Russians followed a strategy that had brought them success against previous invasions from the west in other wars. Russian armies would withdraw eastward deep into Russia's interior, fighting bloody defensive battles as opportunity offered. Then, as the invading armies wasted away, Russia's vast reservoirs of manpower would refill the Russian ranks.

In World War I, however, the strategy did not work. Russian industry could not furnish enough weapons or ammunition to supply the reserve of manpower. On the other hand, the periodic British and French offensives in the west prevented Germany from transferring sufficient forces to the eastern front. Without these troops, the Germans could not shatter the Russian armies and achieve victory. Thus, the exchange of fighting continued, and neither side gained a decisive edge on the eastern front until the Russian Revolutions of 1917.

Source: Encarta

http://encarta.msn.com/text_761569981___31/World_War_I.html