

# THE WORLD'S WAR

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## CHAPTER 1

# 'WELTKRIEG'

*A new concept – the world's war*

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THE ENVIRONS OF YPRES, FLANDERS, 22 APRIL 1915. It is, in the words of the British Official History of the First World War, 'a glorious spring day' on the West Flanders Plain. Reports coming in from reconnaissance planes flying missions over the great arc of trenches to the east of Ypres describe considerable 'liveliness behind the German lines' but nothing that is particularly out of the ordinary.<sup>1</sup>

At about 4pm, German artillery begins shelling British and French lines, but then at 5pm exactly, a sudden and ferocious bombardment opens up against the small villages in front of Ypres, which up until now have largely escaped the attentions of the enemy guns. At that same moment, all along a four-mile stretch of the German front line, thousands of hands scramble to open thousands of taps that are attached to rows of metal canisters. Each canister weighs 90 pounds, and 6,000 of them have recently been hauled into place behind the German parapets. Their collective contents weigh 160 tons. The artillery bombardment stops abruptly at 5.10pm, and it is around now that troops from the French 45th and 78th divisions – Algerians and Moroccans, including both white colonialists and North Africans – notice two strange clouds moving inexorably towards their trenches. Some men also report hearing a 'hissing' noise coming from the German lines. The clouds will later be described as being 'green', 'yellowish-green' or 'grey green'. British observers, who are watching from their own lines to the south, report

that from a distance they resemble a 'bluish white mist, such as is seen over water meadows on a frosty night'. The *Daily Mail*, in a dispatch published four days later, will tell its readers that the clouds looked 'like a yellow low wall', which advanced slowly across no man's land, pushed by the prevailing winds.<sup>2</sup>

Even as the clouds approach, the French and African soldiers remain in their positions. Interpreting the clouds as smoke to cover an impending German assault, the troops peer through mist, looking for the silhouettes of attackers. They do not realize that the vapour itself is their most deadly enemy. As the miasma reaches the French lines, being heavier than air it slides down the sides of their trenches and snakes around the boots of the now panicking soldiers. There is an acrid smell in the air. Men notice a metallic taste at the back of their throats. Then the gargled screams and desperate splutters begin.

On this day, many of the 6,000 French casualties of this, the first poison gas attack on the Western Front, simply collapse, slipping beneath the sea of green at the bottom of their trenches. Others cough up a burning yellow fluid – as one Canadian captain observes, they 'literally cough their lungs out'.<sup>3</sup> The membranes of their eyes are similarly damaged, resulting in temporary blindness. The weapon they have been attacked with is chlorine gas. On contact with the moisture of the lungs, it forms hydrochloric acid and hypochlorous acid, which burn the soft membranes and tissue. What is left of the victims' lungs rapidly fills with fluid. Frothing at the mouth, the afflicted men begin to drown, literally, in their own bodily fluids.

The French and North African troops who leave their trenches to escape this new weapon are struck down by old ones – machine guns and rifles. The Germans have carefully halted their own artillery fire to avoid blast waves from the explosions disrupting the westward progress of the gas clouds, and they now pour bullets into the stumbling panicked men, many of them already rendered sightless and choking. There is, by now, a great flight of men rushing backwards through the gas and the hail of bullets. Ian Sinclair, a Canadian lieutenant colonel whose lines are

behind those subsumed by the gas clouds, later reports that Algerian troops 'started to pour into our trench coughing and bleeding and dying all over the place, and then we realised what it was'.<sup>4</sup> The British, still watching from their positions to the south of the French lines, suddenly see French North African troops fleeing into the areas behind their lines. Those who have been hit the hardest are in terrible distress. Desperate and insensible, they struggle to communicate in broken French and in their own languages. They are without officers, and many are without weapons. In uncharacteristically vivid terms, the British Official History later describes how:

*It was impossible to understand what the Africans said, but from the way they coughed and pointed to their throats, it was evident, if not suffering from the effects of gas, they were thoroughly scared. Teams and wagons of the French field artillery next appeared retiring, and the throng of fugitives soon became thicker and more disordered, some individuals running.*<sup>5</sup>

An anonymous eyewitness account from the British lines leaves little to the imagination:

*Utterly unprepared for what was to come, the [French] divisions gazed for a short while spellbound at the strange phenomenon they saw coming slowly toward them. Like some liquid the heavy-coloured vapour poured relentlessly into the trenches, filled them, and passed on. For a few seconds nothing happened; the sweet-smelling stuff merely tickled their nostrils; they failed to realize the danger. Then, with inconceivable rapidity, the gas worked, and blind panic spread. Hundreds, after a dreadful fight for air, became unconscious and died where they lay – a death of hideous torture, with the frothing bubbles gurgling in their throats and the foul liquid welling up in their lungs. With blackened faces and twisted limbs one by one they drowned – only that which drowned them came from inside and not from out. Others, staggering, falling, lurching on, and of their ignorance keeping pace with the gas, went back. A hail of rifle*

*fire and shrapnel mowed them down, and the line was broken. There was nothing on the British left – their flank was up in the air. The northeast corner of the salient around Ypres had been pierced. From in front of St. Julien away up north toward Boesinghe there was no one in front of the Germans.<sup>6</sup>*

As the effects of the gas spread, birds literally fall from the skies. The fresh green shoots of early spring that have erupted on the still-standing trees of the Ypres Salient turn brown and wither. Even the rats that swarm and multiply in the fetid trenches succumb to the poison, dying in their thousands.

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In the trenches next to the French, on 22 April 1915, was the 3rd Canadian Brigade, which now rushed men into position to cover the gap in the front lines caused by the shock of this new German offensive – the Second Battle of Ypres. To their right were units of *Tirailleurs* (Riflemen) from French Algeria, who had so far escaped the gas and held their positions. Together, they faced the inevitable German attack through the breach in the lines. On this day, in this war that many were still calling the 'Great European War', few among the desperate defenders on the Allied side were men whose homes were now in Europe.

Canada was, in 1914, a nation of both immigrants and indigenous peoples. Two-thirds of the Canadian Expeditionary Force may have been born in Britain, but there were also Japanese Canadians, French-speakers from Quebec, and Canadian Flemings whose forebears were from Belgium and who, in effect, were fighting for their ancestral homeland in the trenches of Flanders; some were now within miles of their parental homes. Among the Canadian ranks were also Native Canadians. It is likely that the first man from the indigenous peoples of the American continent to die in the First World War was killed on 22 April 1915. Angus Laforce had come from his home in Kahnawake, Quebec, to fight on the Western Front. A man from



the Mowhawk people, he was reported missing on the night of 22 April. His remains were never found. Another Native Canadian, Lieutenant Cameron D. Brant of the Six Nations people from the Grand River, died in one of the counter-attacks at Ypres.<sup>7</sup> For him, fighting for Britain was in effect a family tradition. Lieutenant Brant's great-grandfather had fought against the French in the Seven Years War and taken up arms for the British during the American Revolution one-and-a-half centuries earlier, and now the same warrior tradition had led Brant to the trenches of Ypres. Among those who survived the attacks of 22 April was Albert Mountain Horse, from the Blood Indian reserve in Alberta. One of three brothers, Albert wrote to his brother Mike just after these events:

*As I am writing this letter the shrapnel is bursting over our heads. I was in the thick of the fighting at Ypres and we had to get out of it. The Germans were using the poisonous gas on our men – oh it was awful – it is worse than anything I know of. I don't mind rifle fire and the shells bursting around us, but this gas is the limit.*<sup>8</sup>

Despite the prompt actions of the Algerians and Canadians, the Germans forced their way through the four-mile-wide gap opened up by the gas attack. They overran the abandoned French trenches and advanced two miles, capturing a considerable portion of the Ypres Salient, including the shattered village of Langemarck and territory near the village of St Julien. French artillery had been seized and for the first time since November 1914, before the Western Front had solidified, the Allied forces faced the prospect of Ypres itself being overrun and the British driven back towards the coast. Yet the Germans, having severely underestimated the power of their new terror weapon, failed to amass enough troops to fully take advantage of the situation, and their first attacks were halted by nightfall and by the effects of British artillery. Allied counter-attacks were launched on 23 April, in which the Canadians were again heavily involved, and there was a second gas attack by the Germans on 24 April.

Among the divisions now rushed to the Ypres sector was the Lahore Division of the Indian Corps. Between 24 and 25 April, the Indians endured a gruelling march north from their recently won positions around the French village of Neuve Chapelle. They marched with heavy loads, sometimes over a hundred pounds in weight, over muddy, shattered roads; some suffered from the effects of 'trench foot' after so long in the front lines; others had been hobbled by frostbite. They had little food and almost no rest *en route*. On the next day, 26 April 1915, at 2.05pm a combined Allied force was assembled to attack. It included Englishmen from the hills of Northumbria and the ancient cities of Durham and York; Irishmen of the Connaught Rangers; Indian sepoy from the Punjab, Afghanistan and Nepal; men from across France; and 'Turcos' of the French Colonial Army – Algerians and Moroccans. Together, this unlikely multiracial force, still without gas masks, attacked a dug-in enemy of whose exact positions they were unsure and whom they knew to be equipped with chemical weapons. After enduring heavy losses from well-targeted artillery, which was directed from above by German spotter planes, and facing concentrated rifle and machine-gun fire, their attack was halted. No units of this highly variegated Allied army reached the German front lines; they became mixed up in the chaos – men from four continents trapped a maelstrom of incoming fire. The 47th Sikhs, who were in the first wave, lost 348 men out of an attacking strength of 444. In all, there were 2,000 men killed, wounded or listed as missing from the Indian regiments alone.

Twenty minutes into the attack, at around 2.30pm, with the assault having effectively stalled and the troops struggling to secure any viable defensive positions, a series of nozzles was raised above the parapets of the German trenches, and again the green clouds of chlorine gas poured forth. Carried by the wind, the mist moved silently towards the attackers. They had been instructed to tie to their faces handkerchiefs or the ends of their turbans, dipped in chloride of lime or, more distastefully, urine: the ammonia in urine went some way to neutralizing the effects

of the gas, which had now been identified by a Canadian chemist as a form of chlorine. This improvised measure offered some protection; but it was no guarantee:

*The most they [Indian troops] could do was to cover their noses and mouths with wet handkerchiefs or pagris [turbans], and, in default of such a poor resource, to keep their faces pressed against their scanty parapet. It was of little avail, for in a few minutes the ground was strewn with the bodies of men writhing in unspeakable torture, while the enemy seized the opportunity to pour in a redoubled fire.<sup>9</sup>*

The casualty rate – those killed, wounded or ‘missing’ – among the Indian regiments at the Second Battle of Ypres reached over 30 per cent, slightly higher than the rate for the British soldiers fighting with them.<sup>10</sup>

Among the Indians struggling for breath within the clouds of gas was Mir Dast, then a *jemadar* (officer) assigned to the 57th Rifles of the Ferozepore Brigade. An Afridi Pathan, from the Maidan Valley in Tirah, on the North-West Frontier of the British Raj, he was a decorated career soldier of long experience. After all other officers in his vicinity had been killed, Mir Dast attempted to hold his position against German counter-attacks. Gathered around him were the survivors of the gas attack, many of whom were severely weakened by the effects of the chlorine. They managed to hold their trenches until nightfall, when they were able to retreat under the cover of darkness. Withdrawing across the body-strewn battlefield, Mir Dast encountered small groups of survivors who, sick and terrified, were huddled in abandoned sections of trench or cowering in shell holes. He and his unit gathered up these unfortunates and led them to safety. Although himself wounded and weakened by gas inhalation, Mir Dast then repeatedly left the British lines and ventured back out into no man’s land to bring back a further eight injured officers, both British and Indian. For this act of extraordinary bravery, Mir Dast received yet another wound from German gun fire – and a recommendation for the Victoria Cross.



It was on the afternoon of 22 April 1915 that Europe – so it is said – entered a new age of barbarism. Gas was the weapon that more starkly than any other stripped soldiers of their ancient position of warrior and reduced them to mere victims. It was not a weapon that was wielded in any finely targeted way but merely ‘released’ or ‘deployed’. Death was carried by the wind, and although there was skill in its use, it was the skill of the chemist and the meteorologist rather than the craft of the soldier. No weapon made men feel more vulnerable, and no weapon was more of an equalizer. Debilitated, blinded and haggard, its victims were literally forced to hold onto one another, irrespective and unaware of rank, race or nationality. That moment of history is one that we think we know well, yet our image of it – and so many others – has been shaped and influenced by historiographical traditions that have tended to marginalize the role of, and even overlook the presence of, colonial and non-European soldiers. Although most of the men who fought and died in defence of the Ypres Salient in April and May 1915 were white Europeans, many thousands were drawn from distant lands, the colonial subjects of two empires.

Speaking to the House of Lords five days after 22 April, Lord Kitchener, Britain’s Secretary of State for War, reported that:

*The Germans have, in the last week, introduced a method of placing their opponents hors de combat by the use of asphyxiating and deleterious gases, and they employ these poisonous methods to prevail when their attack, according to the rules of war, might have otherwise failed. On this subject I would remind your Lordships that Germany was a signatory to the following Article in The Hague Convention – ‘The Contracting Powers agree to abstain from the use of projectiles the object of which is the diffusion of asphyxiating or deleterious gases.’<sup>11</sup>*

The Dutch city of The Hague, where the Convention of 1907 had been held, is only about 100 miles to the north of Ypres. Both



The Hague and Ypres are ancient cities steeped in the highest traditions of European culture. The chlorine gas used in the attack had been produced in the factories of the great German chemical firms of the IG cartel, clustered around the Ruhr, less than 200 miles away from Ypres. The development of chlorine as a weapon had been masterminded by a German Nobel Prize-winning chemist, Fritz Haber, who worked in the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute set in Dahlem, a leafy suburb of Berlin. Haber was one of the academic stars of one of the most cultured nations in Europe. In the weeks that followed the attack, the French would turn to their own Nobel Prize-winner, Victor Grignard, to help them develop their own terror weapons. Everything about the gas attack on 22 April 1915, other than the range of races and ethnicities among the victims, was firmly European.<sup>12</sup> Yet when searching for a precedent, or an act of comparable 'frightfulness' against which Germany's newest crimes could be compared, Kitchener felt compelled to look beyond Europe to Africa, where he had spent much of his military career. In the same speech, the old colonial soldier suggested that in using chemical weapons Germany 'has stooped to acts which will surely stain indelibly her military history, and which would vie with the barbarous savagery of the dervishes of Sudan.'<sup>13</sup>

It was, in truth, artillery that most profoundly de-skilled the profession of soldiering in the First World War. It was the guns, not gas nor even the machine gun, that killed the most men. But while the calibre of the guns that appeared on the Western Front was new and the explosive yield of their shells vastly increased, the weapon itself was seemingly familiar. Poison gas was suitably novel to be shocking in a way that artillery was not. And despite Kitchener's condemnations, gas would not stay an exclusively German affair for long. The British, within months, had synthesized their own gas weapons and used them against the Germans at the Battle of Loos in September 1915 – another attack in which thousands of men from India were to fight and die.

At Loos, those Indian troops at least had primitive gas masks to defend them. This piece of personal protection evolved at an

incredible pace over the course of the conflict, soon taking on its modern configuration. In doing so, it became the emblem of total war, other-worldly and hyper-modern, the face of Europe's home-produced barbarism. The gas mask became, ultimately, the European equivalent of the ceremonial war masks of tribal societies, which so fascinated early twentieth-century European ethnographers, who regarded them as symbols of the supposed backwardness and savagery of the peoples ruled over by the imperial powers. The innovation and use of poison gas on the Western Front made a nonsense of the supposed superiority of white, European civilization over the subjects of empire.

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In the storage vaults of the Esplanade Museum in Medicine Hat, Canada is a century-old, decorated calfskin. It was once the property of Corporal Mike Mountain Horse, younger brother of Albert who was gassed at Ypres. After being exposed to the effects of chlorine gas on two further occasions, Albert was invalided home, but he died one day after reaching Quebec in November 1915, succumbing to tuberculosis. Generations earlier, Albert Mountain Horse's people, the Bloods, had been encouraged to denounce their warrior culture by the Canadian authorities. Albert had been drawn into the army and then into the First World War through the influence of Samuel Henry Middleton, a local missionary who had encouraged him to leave his reserve and go to war. After receiving the news of her son's death, Albert's mother took a knife and attempted to kill Middleton. She was dragged away by her remaining sons. At Albert's funeral, the Blood men followed the procession on horseback, and the older men voiced the ancient war chants as the coffin approached them.<sup>14</sup> Mike Mountain Horse, who later wrote an autobiography, described how the effect of his brother's death on him was to awaken long-suppressed warrior traditions:

*Reared in the environment of my forefathers, the spirit of revenge for my brother's death manifested itself strongly in me as I gazed down*

*on Albert lying in his coffin that cold wintery day in November 1915. Soon after the funeral I obtained leave from my work as an interpreter and scout for the Royal North-West Police at Macleod, and with my brother Joe Mountain Horse and a number of Indian boys from neighbouring reserves, I enlisted in the 191st Battalion for service overseas.<sup>15</sup>*

As he followed in his brother's footsteps and prepared to depart for France, Mike Mountain Horse went through the traditional ceremonies given in honour to a warrior leaving to go to war – as his ancestors had enacted for generations. Arriving in France in 1917, he fought at Vimy Ridge, in a battle that – according to war-time legend – was the event that made Canada into 'a true nation' rather than a mere dominion of the British Empire. His description of the battlefield is as powerful, literary and evocative as any passage in one of the great European war memoirs:

*Lying on top of Vimy Ridge one night along with a number of the other Indian boys, the scene before our eyes might best be described as that of a huge stage with lighting effects – Verrey lights from the Hun lines, and flames from bursting shells in the city of Lens. The red glare thrown back appeared like a great fire in the sky all the time. The trenches ran through almost to the heart of the French coal mining city. Here a brigade of the Germans had entrenched themselves so well that incessant bombardment by artillery and bombing from the air did not aid the boys from the Dominion to any great extent ... Along the miles of trenches one could see planes dropping bombs on German lines, followed by geysers of smoke and dirt shooting skywards like volcanoes in eruption. One could witness houses bursting suddenly into flame as projectiles from heavy artillery of the enemy struck them. One could walk past Canadian howitzer batteries about a mile from the trenches and hear the 57 inch shells from these guns screaming overhead on their errands of death and destruction.<sup>16</sup>*

After surviving the great fiery cauldron of Vimy Ridge, Mike Mountain Horse fought again at the Battle of Cambrai in

November 1917, the first massed tank attack in history, and was buried under the ruins of a shelter for four days after it was covered by rubble thrown up by explosions. Before one offensive, he and his fellow Bloods gathered in a small clearing in the shattered woods behind the front lines to pray together. Under the trees, beyond the easy reach of artillery, they made their offerings. 'Some made supplication for the successes of the allies while others prayed for a happy return to their fathers and mothers or to their families.'<sup>17</sup> One of the Bloods, the unforgettably named George Strangling Wolf, took a knife and cut off a strip of his own flesh from around his knee. Holding up the bloody offering towards the sun, he prayed aloud: 'Help me, Sun, to survive this terrible war, that I may meet my relatives again. With this request, I offer you my body as food.'<sup>18</sup> He then buried his flesh in the mud of northern France. Strangling Wolf, whose official army records list his religion as 'Church of England', survived the war under the gaze of the Sun Spirit of his ancestors.

Mike Mountain Horse also survived, and in 1919 he returned to the Blood Reserve with the Distinguished Conduct Medal on his chest. Years later he dictated his *Great War Deeds* to his friend the artist Ambrose Two Chiefs, which the latter painted onto calfskin in the traditions of the Indians of the Great Plains.\* Between them, the two men created an object that seems out of time, not of the early twentieth century or the modern, industrial age. The *War Deeds* is an attempt at a realistic depiction of war, yet it also contains traditional symbols. The black, stick-like figures painted onto the skin fight with rifles; they are shown in what are clearly the trenches and the dugouts of the Western Front. Lines of artillery are shown, high-explosive shells detonating over the heads of the simple figures. The Germans wear their pointed *Pickelhaube* helmets. Each of the twelve panels is a representation of a real event, ordered not chronologically but ranked in order of importance to Mike Mountain Horse. One panel records

\* The *Great War Deeds of Mike Mountain Horse* was probably painted sometime in the 1930s.



those four days in 1917 that he spent buried in a collapsed bomb shelter at Cambrai; another depicts an attack on a German position, where the Canadians captured the artillery. The figures fire at one another, the bullets marked as black dots. There are panels that tell of trench raids in 1917 and some that relate to the Battle of Amiens in August 1918. *The Great War Deeds of Mike Mountain Horse* is a work of art in the tradition of those painted by his forefathers, whose war deeds recorded mounted skirmishes between men armed with bows and arrows or the trade muskets of the nineteenth century. They celebrated the taking of horses and the capture of knives and European guns, recording the events through which men could lay claim to status and chieftaincies. But Mike Mountain Horse took that tradition into a kind of war his ancestors could never have imagined.

There are other objects that have a similar capacity to challenge our impressions of the First World War and the men who fought in it. In Belgium and France a handful of specialist collectors and eagle-eyed experts have unearthed brass shell-casings that were engraved with dragons and ancient poetry by the Chinese men who came to Europe to work as labourers on the Western Front. Far removed from these collectors' pieces is a simple concrete dug-out, which is slowly subsiding under its own weight in the corner of a cow-field in Belgian Flanders. Inside is an Arabic arch, on which an inscription from the Koran has been carefully engraved: 'There is no greater God than Allah. If you believe in Allah you will be Victorious like the Victory of Tadmor and Namar.' Behind the walls of the bunker, Muslim soldiers once sheltered from the thunderous guns that were the masters of the Western Front. We know almost nothing about these men – who they were or where they came from. They might have been subjects of the British Raj or just as plausibly North Africans from the French colonies, or even Muslim troops from French Senegal. All we know is that they were here, and that they found a way to leave behind the mark of their faith. On the outskirts of the Côte d'Azur town of Fréjus is a mosque built in the Malian style, from red, ferrous mud. It was constructed for West African soldiers

who served in the French Army and were stationed here during the winter months of the war. It now stands closed and padlocked to protect it from vandals, a mute victim of the swirling ethnic tensions of twenty-first-century France. That this place of worship was built for men who fought and died for France a century ago seems to little deter today's 'culture warriors', who see it as the unwelcome intrusion of an alien culture; in March 2014, Fréjus became one of only two French towns to vote in a mayor from Marine Le Pen's *Front National* party.

In 2005 the historian Santanu Das came across another treasure of the war in the National Archives in Delhi. In an envelope marked 'His Majesty's Office', which had not been opened since it was deposited with the archivists long ago, Das discovered the trench notebook of Jemadar Mir Mast, the brother of the heroic Mir Dast. Mir Mast's notebook was the tool of a resourceful man, an experienced soldier who had, in just a matter of weeks, been transported from a world he knew and understood in India and thrust into a war on another continent – a war that was incomprehensible to him, as it was to much of the rest of the world. Caught between empires, cultures and languages, as well as between life and death, Mir Mast clearly struggled to make sense of the Western Front. Alongside maps and sketches on one page of the notebook is a long list of Urdu words with their English equivalents – the words Mir Mast felt were worth remembering. Many are clearly practical: 'haversack', 'blanket', 'hungry', or 'please'. Others like 'testacles' [*sic*], 'breasts', 'nephew' and 'honeymoon' have no obvious relevance to the battlefield. As Santanu Das has pointed out, the trench notebook raises more questions than it answers. Why *those* words? An Indian Urdu-speaking soldier, whose units had been thrown into battle alongside English soldiers, was he adjusting to the rough argot of the English Tommies he fought alongside? How much contact did he and other Indian soldiers have with French and Belgium civilians, and with women? Mir Mast left behind him a paper trail matched by few other colonial soldiers, and he is to re-surface repeatedly in the story that follows, in the most unexpected ways.

And yet, despite leaving so large an archival footprint, we know little about who he was or what the war meant to him, and in that respect he is like most of the men who came from distant lands to fight in the World's War.



There had been other, so-called 'world wars'. Both the Seven Years War (1754–63) and the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were – as many historians have pointed out – global conflicts, fought out in Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas. Likewise, England's earlier confrontation with Hapsburg Spain took place on the shipping lanes of the English Channel, on the fields of the Netherlands, off the jagged coast of Ireland and in the harbours and on the islands of the New World. However, while they ranged over vast areas, none of these earlier conflicts were 'world wars' in the sense that emerged in the early twentieth century. In these previous struggles, great powers and empires had fought one another across distant continents and over open oceans, but they had involved the indigenous peoples of those territories only marginally. In a purely geographic sense, they were world wars. But in the demographic sense they were better understood as European quarrels writ large across the globe.

The Great War of 1914–18 was the first true world war in that it was the first in which peoples and nations from across the globe fought and laboured alongside one another, rarely in equality other than equality of suffering. Yet, even in the years and months leading up to the conflict, few in Europe were capable of envisaging that the coming war would bring black and brown peoples from the European empires, and the citizens and subjects of independent non-white nations, into Europe itself. Even those who took it upon themselves to speculate as to the shape of future conflicts got it wrong. Military planners, in Britain, Germany and to a lesser extent France, largely failed to foresee this, just as they failed to grasp that profound changes in military technology had silently made wars of sweeping movements and great cavalry manoeuvres almost obsolete. To most, the idea that armies of

black Africans, and Asians from the Indian subcontinent and beyond, would march *en masse* to war in France and Belgium was just as unimaginable as the tank or poisoned gas.

Writers of fiction fared little better. However, the term 'world war' first emerged not in the reports of the pre-war military but as the title of a rather trashy German novel. Written in 1904, *Der Weltkrieg: Deutsche Träume* ('The World War: German Dreams') was the dubious work of August Wilhelm Otto Niemann, a German nationalist. Niemann's novel accurately predicted how, a decade later, the alliance system would drive Europe into two armed camps, and that when war broke out the conflict would range across the world. While he envisaged rebellions of Indian soldiers in the British Indian Army, he failed to make the imaginative leap that Britain, in the event of war with Germany, would transport 850,000 men from that army to France, Africa and the Middle East to fight against Germany and its allies.

What was inconceivable in 1904 became almost instantly necessary in 1914. Within forty-eight hours of Britain's declaration of war on 4 August 1914, the War Cabinet made the decision to dispatch two divisions of Indian troops first to the Middle East, but with an eye to deploying them in Europe. By November 1914, Indian soldiers were aiming their brand new Mark III Lee-Enfield rifles at the grey enemy figures in *Pickelhauben* who emerged through the late-summer fields around the small Belgian city of Ypres. Alongside them were thirty-seven battalions of French troops from Senegal, Algeria and Morocco, who had taken up their positions in the emerging front. By the time the manoeuvrings of 1914 had fizzled out and the Western Front had stabilized, the fantasy of a 'white man's war' had, like all the other assurances about the war (that it would be short and decisive, decided by rapid advances, and 'all over by Christmas'), been exposed as naive.

From the comfortable viewpoint of a century later it seems obvious that it was always going to be a global conflict, and also one inevitably fought for imperial gain. Four decades before 1914, during the final stages of the Franco-Prussian War in



February 1871, British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli prophesied in the House of Commons as to what the emergence of a unified Germany would mean for Europe. The Franco-Prussian conflict, he warned:

*... represents the German revolution, a greater political event than the French revolution of last century ... Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs, accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago, any longer exists. There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope ... The balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most, and feels the effects of this great change most, is England.*<sup>19</sup>

In 1907, the nature of that great change was frankly summarized by Viscount Esher, then a member of the British Committee of Imperial Defence. He too reached for the metaphor of revolutionary France, warning that:

*The German prestige, steadily rising on the continent of Europe, is more formidable to us than Napoleon at his apogee. Germany is going to contest with us the Command of the Sea, and our commercial position. She wants sea-power and the carrying trade of the world. Her geographical grievance has got to be redressed. She must obtain control of ports at the mouths of the great rivers which tap the middle of Europe. She must get a coastline from which she can draw sailors to her fleets, naval and mercantile. She must have an outlet for her teeming population, and vast acres where Germans can live and remain Germans. These acres only exist within the confines of our Empire. Therefore, l'Ennemi c'est l'Allemagne.*<sup>20</sup>

The colonies, and particularly those in Africa, were in the late nineteenth century regarded by the more optimistic observers as Europe's safety-valve, an arena in which international tensions might be defused, thereby avoiding the risk of military

confrontations breaking out between the great powers in Europe itself. The colonial world was a great repository of territories, coaling-stations, spheres of influence, trade concessions and treaty-ports, which Europeans diplomats could use to sweeten any deal or appease any disgruntled nation. More cautious voices, however, had long understood that the age of empire could easily end in war, and probably would once the available stock of unclaimed colonial real estate has been exhausted. The nations who had done poorly in the scramble for territory would seek to redraft the map of the world, while those who had done well – most notably Britain – would seek to preserve their empires and maintain the status quo.<sup>21</sup> In 1914 the British Empire – the greatest of them all – ruled over 400 million subjects and covered a quarter of the land surface of the Earth. The French Empire had over 200 million subjects. Germany, the colonial late-comer, had an empire that although territorially vast was, in economic and strategic terms, in no way commensurate with the country's growing military and economic power. The enormous extent of colonial possessions held in Africa by tiny Belgium and by chaotic, near bankrupt Portugal, were regarded by some in Berlin as almost a standing insult to German prestige and power.

Despite all these tensions it was not in the end colonial rivalries that took Europe to war in 1914 but rather the continent's own internal divisions, both ancient and modern. Amplified by the alliance system, as well as by accident and miscommunication, a Balkans crisis mutated into a global war in a way, and at a velocity, that even a century later remains hardly credible. However, the Balkan conflict that began with Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia, on 28 July 1914, became a world war not on 3 August when Germany marched into Belgium, but on 4 August when Britain entered the fray. If there had ever been realistic hopes that the world outside Europe might have been largely spared involvement, they were dashed by London's declaration of war. At that moment, farmers in Bengal and the Punjab, Pashtuns from the North-West Frontier, Hausas and Yoruba from the villages of Nigeria, along with the Ashanti and Fante of the Gold

Coast, the Boers, Zulus, San and Shona of southern Africa, and the peoples of New Zealand, Canada and Australia (ancient Aborigines to the newest arrivals) – all became subjects of an empire at war: 'My empire ... united calm and resolute, and trusting in God', as King George V proclaimed it to be in early August 1914.<sup>22</sup>

In one sense the German High Command was alert to the likelihood that Britain's entry would globalize the conflict – perhaps more aware than many in London. In the early hours of 31 July 1914, which was Germany's own deadline for either mobilizing or standing down its army, Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke – a man perhaps already on the brink of some sort of nervous breakdown – was awoken by his adjutant Hans von Haeften. Appraised of the situation and of new rumours of full Russian mobilization, Moltke, standing on the precipice of a fateful decision, warned with remarkable prescience and insight: 'This war will turn into a world war in which England will also intervene. Few can have an idea of the extent, the duration and the end of this war. Nobody today can have a notion of how it will end.'<sup>23</sup> The British saw the threat of a 'world war' rather differently. Their empire was still, memorably, a vast swathe of intercontinental pink on most maps – a substitute for British scarlet, against which the names of cities, rivers and mountains might become illegible – all held to the motherland by thick black shipping lines. Indeed, the British Empire appeared, in some respects, all the greater for the geographical distortions produced by the favoured Mercator Projection used by cartographers. In what the historian Linda Colley has described as this 'single, insufficiently examined image', whole territories in Africa, appearing as solid blocks of pink, concealed the reality that on the ground British influence gradually faded away with each mile travelled from the coast or away from the British centres of colonial power. This map, which was famously hung in every school classroom in Britain, disguised the 'territorial fragility' of the whole complex, unlikely structure. It exaggerated both the real extent and the global reach of British power, distortions and vulnerabilities to which Britain's ruling elite was fully awake when war came.

The two armed blocks of Europe in 1914 both sought a globalization of the war, but in diametrically opposite ways. France went to war for its territories lost to Germany in 1871, for revenge, and for national security; Britain fought now in order to avoid having to confront a victorious, expanded Germany at some later date. But when it came to empires, both were fighting to maintain the status quo. Neither went to war in order to expand their colonies at the expense of Germany. However, both the British and the French did seek to draw men, money and resources from the 600 million peoples of their combined empires. France more energetically and enthusiastically than Britain aimed to deploy colonial manpower in Europe – men who were to serve as both soldiers and labourers. Both allies set out to exploit the wealth and natural resources of the colonies in the war effort. But they had no ambitions to see the war spread to the theatres outside Europe, beyond the necessary campaigns to capture the German colonial holdings in Asia and Africa and to neutralize the German navy. Germany's leaders sought the exact opposite: genuinely and viscerally resenting the deployment of colonial soldiers of 'non-European stock' on the Western Front, they expended huge sums of money and vast amounts of energy attempting to spread the war into the lands from which those combatants had been drawn. Germany sought to turn the British Empire into the British Achilles heel, forcing Britain to deploy men and resources to maintain its colonial grip around the world, and to this end Germany drafted strategic plans to globalize the war. The German alliance with Ottoman Turkey was intended, in large part, to achieve exactly that. This was part of a wider global strategy of using revolution and religious discord as weapons to change the balance of power in a post-war world.

These divergences of perspective and strategy were summed up in the war's nomenclature. While the British and French called the war of 1914 the 'Great War' and '*La Grande Guerre*' respectively, the Germans almost from the start called it by the name echoed in the country's Official History of the conflict: the *Weltkrieg*.<sup>24</sup>





While the British did not go to war in order to seize German colonial territories, they were quite happy to do so when the opportunity arose. The far bigger concern was the defence of the pre-war empire in the face of the German and Ottoman efforts to stoke the fires of nationalism, anti-British sentiment and religious unity. Yet, the outbreak of war was met with a genuine and hugely appreciated wave of pro-British, pro-imperial sentiment. The empire of the 'white dominions' and India was perhaps never so united as in August and September 1914. Indian nationalists, including Gandhi (who was then in London), passionately advocated support for the British war effort, partly in the hope that loyalty in the moment of crisis would lead to the granting of greater autonomy once the danger had passed. The South African Native National Congress – precursor of the African National Congress – made the same calculation. However, local tensions between Boer and Briton in South Africa led to a muted reaction among the white population there. Africans in the dependencies had no power and therefore no choice as to whether to support the war or not, while white British settler communities tended to support the war with great impromptu demonstrations of nationalism and support for the ideals of empire as they perceived them.

British propagandists built on this moment by painting a picture of the empire as a great family of peoples, paternally led by Britain and joined together in some supposedly moral mission for civilization. Wartime propaganda used the image of the Indian and African soldier, fighting in a war against Germany, as firm evidence of the superiority of the British Empire. The hierarchies of race that underpinned and informed imperial rule were encoded into wartime propaganda posters. Thus, white troops from the dominions of Australia, Canada and New Zealand were given centre stage, alongside the British, with Indians behind them, and black Africans positioned usually in the background – an imperial, but not an equal, community.

While a few wartime writers repeated the old mantras of the nineteenth century, which claimed the British to be a race of born rulers ('God's chosen people' echoed the words of one 1916 writer), others followed the official line that presented the empire as a brotherhood of humanity, one that was being brought closer together by the shared experience of war.<sup>25</sup> In his religious tract *Brothers All: The War and the Race Question*, Edwyn Bevan, the Christian philosopher and classicist, began his opening chapter 'The Meeting of the Races' with a simple statement:

*The war which we are witnessing marks an epoch, not only in the history of England or of Europe, but in the history of mankind. If there were any spectator who, through the unnumbered ages, had followed the course of the creature called Man upon this planet, he would ... never have seen a war which engaged so large a part of the men upon earth, which affected, directly or indirectly, the whole world, as this war does.*<sup>26</sup>

For a pamphlet written so early in the war, before America had entered the fray, Bevan's work was insightful. With the Indian Corps fighting in France alongside French troops from North Africa and West Africa, with British forces fighting side-by-side with the army of Japan in China, and with black British soldiers on the march against the Germans in Africa itself, Bevan reflected on the meaning of this new phenomenon:

*... we find brown men and yellow men and black men joined with ourselves in one colossal struggle, pumping out their treasure, pouring out their blood, for the common cause — Japanese and English and Russians carrying on war as allies on the shores of the Pacific, Hindus and Mohammedans from India coming to fight in European armies on the old historic battlefields of Europe, side by side with Mohammedans from Algiers and black men from Senegal. We had often spoken of the wonderful drawing together of the world in our days, but we never knew that it was to be represented in such strange and splendid and terrible bodily guise.*<sup>27</sup>

While there was nothing particularly controversial in this, Bevan also attempted to explain why so many men, from so many nations and races, had taken up arms or grasped the labourers' spade in the war effort. He genuinely believed that:

*What gives the moment its significance is that the presence of these Indian troops does not represent solely the purpose of England. It represents in some degree the will of India ... We may speak truly of co-operation in the case of India, as in the case of Japan. It is the promptitude, the eagerness and the unanimity of this voluntary adherence which has seemed to England almost too good to be true.<sup>28</sup>*

... which of course it was. For Japan was fighting to build up its leverage in East Asia and to establish its place among the ranks of the great powers. The men of the Indian Corps fought because they were highly professional soldiers who obeyed orders. Their attitude was lauded by an Indian middle-class and an aristocratic elite, both of whom hoped that the loyalty and the blood of the sepoys would buy influence and gratitude later on.

In truth, the deployment of Asians and Africans to the battlefields of Europe in 1914, and their mobilization and recruitment for service elsewhere, was loaded with problems. It was a phenomenon that challenged the central tenets of colonial theory and went against powerful taboos of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the war in Europe, black and brown men were ordered to fight and kill white men. All the colonial powers worried that once armed and once shown that the myth of white supremacy was just that, soldiers from Africa and Asia would prove the greatest threat to the long-term futures of their empires. There were those in Britain who were appalled by the sight of Indian troops in British uniforms, fighting in a European war against a European enemy. Lord Stamfordham and Sir Valentine Chirol, the celebrated pro-imperial journalists of *The Times*, were both concerned by the equal treatment of Indian troops, and they feared what one writer to the newspaper called 'the passionate love of battle which is now stirring in the hearts of the warlike races of Hindustan'.<sup>29</sup>

The challenge facing the British and French in deploying their imperial manpower was that in doing so they might find they had won the war but, in the process, rendered their empires ungovernable in the future. How might they put the genie back in the bottle? Both countries were to prove extremely adept at doing just that, though they started the war unsure of how far India and the African colonies could be pushed – both in terms of recruitment and wartime taxation – before serious opposition emerged. The French showed themselves willing to push their African colonies into open rebellion if it gave them more men with which to fight the Germans. Colonial uprisings could be dealt with later if they could not be avoided completely. The image of the First World War as the graveyard of empires is only half the story. Defeat, bankruptcy and revolution destroyed the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire and the ancient Ottoman Empire. But the victorious imperial powers – despite localized rebellions and the rise of nationalist sentiment in some colonies – ended the war with their empires intact and the subject peoples maintained in positions of inequality and subordination. Not only this, the British and French empires in 1919 became *larger* than they had ever been. Both were bloated, having feasted upon the carcass of the Ottoman Empire, and engorged, after having absorbed Germany's former colonies in Africa. Although some of their new colonies were disguised as League of Nations 'mandates', this was little more than a ruse to keep the Americans happy. No 'wind of change' blew across Africa (or Asia) in 1919. The peoples of the British Empire did not become 'Brothers All', as Bevan had quaintly dreamed.

Nevertheless, more than any preceding event the First World War did expose the complexities and hypocrisies that surrounded race and colonialism in the early twentieth century. There were huge differences in the behaviour of the Allied nations towards non-white peoples, and war itself changed those attitudes further. Different races were treated differently, at different times, and in different theatres of war. The French put Algerian, Moroccan and West African troops into the



trenches from 1914 onwards, whereas the British recruited thousands of Africans but never permitted them to fight in Europe. Black British troops from the West Indies were sent to the Western Front, but only allowed to labour behind the lines. (Yet a handful of black men, from Britain's own small black community – among them Northampton Town FC's star forward Walter Tull – slipped through the military colour bar and fought with distinction.) The British organized the Maoris of New Zealand into a Pioneer Corps, who fought in the Middle East, while Aboriginal men from Australia were reduced to labourers. White South Africans fought in the front line, while black South Africans could only hold the status of labourers. The Americans only allowed a handful of their black regiments to enter combat, and half of them were placed under the command of French officers rather than white Americans. This led the US Army to issue a secret order that asked French officers to treat the African-American soldier as 'an inferior being' to avoid offending white American sensibilities. The French quietly refused for fear of offending their African troops. In the war in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine, Muslim Indians were allowed to fight the Turks, while Muslim Egyptians were tasked with digging trenches and driving camel trains. The official reasoning behind this overall jumble of illogic and prejudice was complicated in the extreme, and shaped by local concerns, colonial practice and the vagaries of war.



To an enormous number of people, the First World War arrived suddenly, out of a clear summer sky and following a crisis seemingly too small and insignificant to have generated such epic consequences. The war euphoria that erupted across Europe during the first days of August 1914 was so convulsive as to have almost obscured the briefer moment of shock that preceded it. Since Prussia's defeat of France in 1871, most of Europe had been free of war. The British had to look back to Waterloo in 1815 to their previous entanglement on the continent (unless one counts

Crimea in the 1850s). However, throughout that near half-century of peace on the continent, Europe's armies had been involved in another kind of warfare – the series of wars, invasions, expeditions and punitive raids in their colonies. Those colonies – pre-industrial societies in Africa and Asia – had provided the testing grounds for new weapons and new tactics. Indeed, some of the new weapons had become virtually *synonymous* with colonial wars. It seems difficult to understand why the lessons of these 'small wars' were not applied to military thinking and planning in 1914; but they were not to any meaningful extent.

Advances in artillery had been enormous, but such heavy and cumbersome weapons had not been suitable, or necessary, in the small wars of empire, so their fearsome evolution had remained largely concealed from the great mass of the population. But it was the Maxim heavy machine gun, more than any other weapon, that had transformed warfare in ways whose lessons were not absorbed.<sup>30</sup> There were soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force of 1914 who took the Maxim gun with them to war, and who had themselves used the devastating weapon against tribal peoples in the colonies. They at least knew the potential of the Maxims and their variants, yet their commanders seemed unable to comprehend that the 'Devil's Paintbrush' – the ultimate tool of colonial domination – now ruled the battlefields of their *own* continent.

If there was one group for whom both the power of modern weapons, and the experience of multiracial armies, should have been apparent, it was the British and French generals, a high proportion of whom had built their careers fighting for empire. General, later Field Marshal, Sir Douglas Haig had fought against the Mahdists in Sudan, the Boers in South Africa and had campaigned in India. Earl Kitchener (of Khartoum) had commanded British forces in Sudan and also served in India. The career of Sir John French, who led the British Expeditionary Force of 1914, had taken him to Sudan, Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Eritrea and South Africa. Horace Smith-Dorrien, who led British Imperial forces in the Second Battle of Ypres, had fought in the Anglo-Zulu War,

under Kitchener against the Mahdists in Sudan, in the Second Anglo-Boer War, and in the campaign to tighten British control of the Tirah Valley on India's North-West Frontier. On the French side, Joseph Joffre had fought in China and Tonkin (Vietnam), while Robert Nivelle had made his name in Tunisia, Algeria and China, during the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion. Philippe Pétain had served in Morocco, while Charles Mangin – the army's great colonial expert – had served in Sudan, Mali, Senegal and across French North Africa.

While most of these men had had considerable experience of the power of industrial weapons, particularly fast-firing rifles and the variants of the Maxim machine gun, they struggled in 1914 to understand the extent to which such weapons had transformed warfare. At the Battle of Omdurman (1898), British rifles, field artillery and the mile-long range of the Maxim gun meant that none of the enemy – Sudanese Dervishes under the Mahdi's successor – got within 800 yards of the British lines.<sup>31</sup> It was for his role in this one-sided contest that Kitchener had been elevated to the peerage. Yet the centrality of machine guns to his triumph in Sudan was not something Kitchener was ever able to fully acknowledge. Nor was he capable of fully grasping that the devastation the Maxim gun had wrought upon Africans would befall *all* attackers, of whatever race or nationality, who attempted an assault over open ground against similarly equipped defenders. Omdurman did not lead Kitchener to use his new status as peer of the realm and hero of empire to call for radical rethinking of what the British still called 'musketry' in the years before 1914.

The Germans – often claimed to be ahead in this respect – were, at first, almost as prone as the British to see the machine gun as a colonial weapon that was of little relevance to a 'real' war in Europe. But in Germany lessons were sinking in. In 1908, a deputy in the Reichstag was pleased to report a noticeable change in attitudes. 'A year ago,' he informed the chamber, 'people in military circles were not so conscious of the value of machine guns as they are today. Then there were many people,

even in the German Army, who still regarded the machine guns as a weapon for use against Herero and "Hottentots".<sup>32\*</sup>

The small wars of empire made sense to Edwardian Britain, Third Republic France and Wilhelmine Germany – they seemed to represent the proper order of things. The modern weapons were in white hands, the enemies were black- and brown-skinned men of 'lower races', and the wars themselves were fought in the enemy's homelands, all of them reassuringly distant from Europe's shores. European casualties were generally light, the costs of campaigning modest (especially in the case of the parsimonious British), and the emerging narratives easy to convert into heroic ~~adventure~~ stories. These wars were in reality, as the historian Correlli Barnett has pointed out with reference to the British Army, not a picture of warfare as it really was but merely vivid examples of a very 'specialized form' of warfare, utterly divorced from that which would be fought 'between great industrial powers'.<sup>33</sup> Yet it was all the British public knew. Despite all the interconnectedness of the pre-1914 world, what took place in the imperial realm was widely regarded as being of marginal significance to any war in Europe. Europe was, conceptually speaking, not only a separate continent but a separate realm, its borders regarded by many as the frontier between the civilized world and the rest of humanity. It was believed – both consciously and subconsciously – that European conflicts belonged to another, distinct tradition, one with its own history that stretched back to Agincourt and Waterloo, for which wars against 'savages' could offer few lessons.

In a similar manner, before 1914 the manpower of the empires was deemed of only marginal importance by most. Armies raised in the colonies – or armies that might yet be raised there – were of little interest to most pre-war military planners, though there were some notable exceptions. In the British case, the War Office

\* A reference to Germany's genocidal campaign against the Herero and Nama people of its South West Africa colony (modern Namibia), which was just concluding in 1908.



in London had only limited interactions with the Colonial Office, and the interests of the government in Delhi and the government in London were divergent when it came to the training, recruitment and equipping of Indian soldiers. The views of the few men among the French and the British ranks who foresaw a role for Indian and colonial troops in a European war were sidelined.

The First World War represented the breakdown of all these barriers. Weapons once dismissed, or falsely categorized, as tools of colonial conquest were demonstrated to have silently and universally transformed the balance of power between defender and attacker, favouring the former. The awesome capacity of the machine gun to kill thousands of men in hours, or even minutes, had been concealed by geographic distance and the racial difference of its first victims. But the fields of dead who lay scattered in 1914 were largely white men, Europe's own, and no longer the 'lesser' peoples of Africa and Asia. Preconceptions that had sealed Europe off from the realities of its own destructiveness and latent barbarism suddenly gave way in the summer and autumn of 1914. For the French, British and Germans, the myth of the transformative power of the individual hero, along with notions of 'spirit', *élan* and 'pluck', collapsed under the weight of the 400 rounds that spewed from the heavy machine guns every minute, or were demolished by the effects of shells filled with shrapnel and high-explosive TNT and Melanite. That Africans, Indians and others were present in Europe in 1914 to witness the belated homecoming of the weapons and fallacies of the age of empire seems apposite – as well as tragic.

Yet even as it was happening, the generals still struggled to comprehend the sudden interconnectedness of these phenomena that had long been conceptualized as being separate. Despite Moltke's premonitions of the war's dimensions, the Germans were slow in 1914 to fully realize the potential significance of the manpower of the British and French empires, even when the first of those soldiers were on the battlefield facing German troops. All the armies were slow to accept that the fully automatic machine gun and barbed wire had rendered obsolete great

swathes of military doctrine, especially the existing doctrine of the attack. While the French, for many reasons, had enormous difficulties coming to terms with the futility of frontal assaults, the British were particular resistant to increasing the number of machine guns per battalion. As late as the summer of 1915, Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War by 1914, was confronted by Sir Eric Geddes of the Ministry for Munitions over why so few orders had been placed for new machine guns. Despite constant reports from front-line officers calling for additional heavy machine guns, Kitchener remained adamant that the British Army would not require more than two per battalion and that the absolute maximum should be four per battalion; any more he regarded as 'a luxury' – to the disgust of the energetic Minister of Munitions, David Lloyd George.\* The minister went on to order over 100,000 new machine guns for 1916. Yet it was Kitchener and not Lloyd George or Geddes who had seen thousands of men killed before his eyes by Maxim guns. Kitchener's inability to recast the weapon, in his mind, as being central to the war in Europe was, under the circumstances, astonishing.

One who understood, clearly and early, the new age and the links between the current war and the bloody history of colonial conquest was not a soldier but a writer. H.G. Wells was a man as schooled in recent history as he was astute at projecting possible futures. In 1916 he published one of his best, most important, and most forgotten novels, *Mr. Britling Sees It Through*. In this quasi-autobiographical work, the eponymous hero is, like Wells himself, a celebrated writer. Cultivated, cosmopolitan and well-informed, Mr Britling watches as society around him is forced to confront 'Prussian Militarism'. His international friendships are

\* Geddes, who was then deputy to Lloyd George, was so shocked by this assessment that he asked Kitchener to sign a memorandum stating his views. Geddes then presented this to a suitably horrified Lloyd George, who almost ripped the document in two. As C.J Chivers notes in *The Gun* (2011), p.130, Lloyd George's response was: 'Take Kitchener's maximum, square it, multiply that result by two; and when you are in sight of that, double it again for good luck.'

put under intolerable strain, and his little part of England changes under the effects of war. Surveying the first few months of the conflict, Mr Britling acknowledges that the horrors that have befallen the people of Britain, France and Belgium are little different to those inflicted upon colonial peoples in Africa and Asia, by those same imperial powers.

*The Germans in Belgium were shooting women frequently, not simply for grave spying but for trivial offences ... Then came the battleship raid on Whitby and Scarborough, and the killing among other victims of a number of children on their way to school. This shocked Mr. Britling absurdly, much more than the Belgian crimes had done. They were English children. At home! ... The drowning of a great number of people on a torpedoed ship full of refugees from Flanders filled his mind with pitiful imaginings for days. The Zeppelin raids, with their slow crescendo of blood-stained futility, began before the end of 1914 ... It was small consolation for Mr. Britling to reflect that English homes and women and children were, after all, undergoing only the same kind of experience that our ships have inflicted scores of times in the past upon innocent people in the villages of Africa and Polynesia ...*<sup>34</sup>

In *The War of the Worlds*, published sixteen years earlier, Wells had compared the rout of humanity at the hands of the Martians to the near extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines by British settlers and soldiers in the early nineteenth century. He clearly understood that as well as bringing to Europe the peoples of their empires, Britain and France and Germany were importing the barbarism that had been used to conquer their imperial subjects' homelands and subjugate their forefathers.

★

The machine gun proved to be one way in which technology interacted with empire to help make the conflict a world war. Sometimes the technologies of the war have been overlooked in their impact, as in the case of Marconi's radio, which played a

part in spreading the war to the colonies.<sup>35</sup> It was the existence of German radio transmitters that made it necessary for the British and French to so-rapidly attack remote German colonial possessions in Africa – territories that might otherwise have been merely blockaded or pounded into submission from the sea at some later, more convenient, date. However, the bulk of the new technologies in the war had a much heavier, distinctly *industrial* imprint. The machine gun was exactly what it described, the literal fusion of the 'machine' and the 'gun', which translated into the mechanization of killing and the reduction of the craft of its soldier-operator to the repetitive labour of the factory worker.<sup>36</sup> The heavy artillery that obliterated the forts of Belgium and the 'Paris Gun' that crashed shells down on the French capital in 1918 were the products of the great industries of the Ruhr. The name of Krupp, the renowned German armaments company, is as essential to any telling of the story of the First World War as the name of any general.

The war was industrial in another sense, too. The weapons might have been high-tech, but many required vast amounts of manual labour. To move the guns, and feed them with shells, was a giant logistical and labour-intensive operation. Their emplacements had to be dug by hand and the dedicated railways that delivered their shells had to be built, maintained, operated and repeatedly moved and re-established elsewhere. The German artillery men who built the platforms using quick drying cement, from which the guns were to be fired, were as essential to their successful operation as the men who fired the shells. Each offensive launched on the Western and Eastern fronts required huge numbers of men to prepare the war materials needed if the attack were to have a chance of success. The lessons both sides took from their failed offensives of 1915 were that the attacks of 1916 would have to be bigger and better supplied than those attempted so far.

Equally labour-intensive was the defensive war. At the heart of the First World War on both the Western and other fronts was the low-tech phenomenon of the trench, one of the emblems of the conflict. The machine gun and the rifle forced armies into



siege warfare on a continental scale. General Haig in 1915 advised his government and his fellow commanders to think of the Western Front as 'a fortress' that could not easily be breached. The creation, extension, reinforcement and maintenance of such fortifications, and the construction of new lines and reserve trenches behind the front lines, required the skills of the engineer and the muscle of vast armies of soldiers and labourers. The unglamorous history of labour and labour migration is an essential, if often unwritten, aspect of the First World War, and here again those powers that could draw on the resources of their empires – and those of nations beyond.

Perhaps the most useful precedents for understanding how the search for this labour necessarily globalized the war are not earlier conflicts – pre-industrial, semi-industrial or localized as they were – but the great engineering projects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The French attempt to build an inter-oceanic canal across the Isthmus of Panama in the last years of the nineteenth century, and the successful American project to do the same in the first years of the twentieth, along with the construction of the Union Pacific Railway and various British railway projects in East Africa – all had required huge pools of cheap, non-white, migrant labour, which drew on the great reservoirs of poor men in the European empires and in states such as China and Japan, where there were large numbers of impoverished rural people. These were the men who answered the call for labour, seeing such projects as a chance to make some money and advance in life. The enthusiasm in the Caribbean, for example, at the outbreak of war in 1914 was inspired not only by a genuine sense of being part of the British Empire, but also by the rapid appreciation that the war offered men of the Caribbean, as soldiers or labourers, a route out of the stifling, atrophying unemployment that had blighted islands like Jamaica and Barbados ever since the completion of the Panama Canal, which drew heavily on Caribbean labour, had severed that life-line of employment and remittances. Put simply, the First World War now represented the greatest employment opportunity on earth.

The Western Front itself was an epic engineering feat, greater than an inter-oceanic canal or a trans-continental railway. It required the movement of more earth, the laying of more railways, the building of more camps and depots, and the felling of more trees than any project known to date. Men from the colonies and beyond worked not just behind the lines, but in the factories and the ports too, in the enormous enterprise of manufacture and distribution that the war necessitated. And like all great labour-intensive projects of the age, the workforce was made up of poor men from everywhere and anywhere. The two fronts together, the Western and Eastern, were among the largest structures human beings have ever made, their temporary nature perhaps having obscured that fact.\* The mobilization of colonial labour, alongside the mobilization of the women of Europe on the home fronts in munitions factories and much else, was the only viable means to keep such a war machine primed.

If the movement of labour for the war effort was a wartime imperative, and for thousands of people an economic opportunity, it was also a vestigial, ironic, reflection of the global economic interconnectedness of the pre-1914 world, of the kind that had convinced many that a general war on a global scale was an impossibility. That optimistic assumption was, in retrospect, fanciful. Perhaps we can see that today better than contemporaries could. The pre-war world of 1914 was the age of world fairs, expositions and trade-missions – and those extravaganzas were merely the most exciting manifestations of an economic reality that we in the twenty-first century have largely forgotten. The pre-1914 world was one built upon a system of integrated global trade. Raw materials and finished goods pulsed around the world on arterial shipping lanes, through which sailed vast merchant fleets, armadas that dwarfed the world's navies, even at the height of the Anglo-German arms race to build the largest number of the most powerful dreadnought-type battleships. Global trade

\* Although generally a more fluid and mobile war, the conflict on the Eastern Front did see the construction of hundreds of miles of trenches.

brought about a global integration of capital, raw materials and industrial goods, and also of labour. The First World War was therefore not simply a human tragedy; it was also a catastrophic rupture, which ripped apart this interwoven global economy. So great was that rupture, and so deep the divisions that it left behind, that it was not until the 1970s that the world returned to the levels of international trade and economic integration that it had known in 1914.<sup>37</sup> Today we fret about the positive or deleterious consequences of globalization, a seemingly recent phenomenon. But our modern age is best understood as the *second* age of globalization, the first beginning sometime in the 1870s and coming to an abrupt and shuddering halt in the autumn and winter of 1914, as world trade turned to world war.



The replacement of economic globalization with an unprecedentedly global war forced Europeans into closer contact with peoples of other races, and in new types of relationships; it forced them to confront and question what it was they meant by 'race' – a term which, as in the designation 'British race', seemed capable of loose applicability to almost any people who shared a culture, background, kinship or colour. Nationalism and its close cousin, ethnic nationalism – the idea that it was natural for every distinct people to occupy its own nation state – seeped into the bloodstream of Europe.

Inherent within the process of defining or demonizing the enemy as some kind of alien 'other' was a process of defining one's own national characteristics, and it was here that the fluid border between cultural characteristics and racial traits became even more vague, allowing it to be crossed on a daily basis by propagandists and writers of all hues. In Britain, the Germans were depicted in numerous propaganda campaigns as a people whose cultural progress had atrophied, leaving them culturally stuck somewhere in the fifth century when – or so British writers claimed – their Hunnic ancestors under Attila had brought down the Roman Empire. So the Germans were the 'Huns' (or even more dehumanized, in the

singular 'Hun'), a people whose debased *Kultur* had given the world not Goethe or Beethoven but rather militarism, or 'Prussianism' as some writers preferred to pointedly call it. Germans were by nature rude and crass, lacking in discretion and liable to behave in ways that were dishonourable. They transgressed every rule and had no truck with fair play or sportsmanship. They were also guttural of language and coarse of habit. In the boys' adventure story *With Haig on the Somme*, written in 1917 by D.H. Parry, a German agent is uncovered when his deplorable table manners and gluttony are witnessed during a communal meal.<sup>38</sup> In another wartime epic, the heroes come across an exquisite French château in which Germans have been billeted:

*Empty wine bottles lay beside a priceless marquetry table, whose top had been burned with cigar ends; and as the men scattered rapidly through the adjoining rooms, they found everywhere traces of German 'kultur' which the vandals had left behind them. Upstairs it was the same thing; hangings torn and slashed for the mere lust of destruction, smashed china, objectionable caricatures scrawled upon the walls, and upon the open grand piano in the salon a copy of the Hymn of Hate, with a half-smoked cigarette beside it. 'The beasts!' exclaimed young Wetherby, hot with indignation.*<sup>39</sup>

But if German-ness was innate, congenital, ordained by race, could the 'Hun' be reformed? Was the problem German *Kultur* or the German 'race' itself? The more forward-thinking propagandists of the Second World War could draw a distinction between the ideology of National Socialism and the culture of the German people.\* In the First World War the racialization of

\* In the Second World War, the theme music to the BBC's European Service, broadcast into occupied Europe, was the opening bars of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* – a phonic emblem of the 'real Germany' that had been temporarily overcome by the bacillus of Nazism. It was appropriate, for Beethoven himself had been a romantic champion of personal freedom and a critic of his former hero Napoleon, the last European tyrant against whom Britain had been forced to fight on the continent.



the Germans had no equivalent counterbalance, and so the Kaiser and the Prussian military elite were not seen as a junta who were holding captive a cultured European people, but rather as an accurate reflection of the characters and inner drives of 67 million Germans. It was the 'Huns' who had sacked Rome and, so it was said, plunged the world into darkness, and now their supposed descendants were ready to repeat the same crime one-and-a-half millennia later. Britain, France and their allies were now all that stood between Europe and a second Dark Ages.

Anti-German sentiment became ever more racialized, influencing the wartime attacks on the homes and property of Germans or suspected Germans living in Britain. But it did not stop there. There were occasions on which this flood of ethnic nationalism spilled over into attacks on any foreigners, and not specifically enemy nationals. As non-Europeans were few and conspicuous in a Britain with only a tiny black population, they were a clear and easy target. There was a chaotic feel to Britain's wartime riots and attacks on foreigners, motivated as they were by ignorance, opportunism and a frenzy of rage. The country, especially the capital, became palpably more anti-Semitic, and any minority suspected of not doing its bit was treated with mistrust and even hostility. But there were contradictions aplenty. While black Britons, the Chinese, and the Russian Jewish communities all faced attacks by mobs, pride in the empire, and pride and relief that the non-white men of the empire were at arms in defence of the motherland, became to some extent a balancing force. While black Londoners could be attacked, black and brown soldiers from the colonies felt their treatment in Britain was warm and hospitable. This was not always the case, but it was often enough to be commented on in letters and memoirs.

The propensity among the British to racialize the Germans and distrust racial foreigners went hand in hand with an increasingly racialized understanding of themselves. The war took place not just at the zenith of empire but near the high water mark of the race idea. It erupted at a moment when Social Darwinism exerted a powerful grip on high ideas and the popular imagination, from

the lecture hall to the beer hall. Ideas of the degeneracy of races, their contamination by the polluting blood of other, lower races, were gaining ground. Social Darwinists in Britain worried that indolence, sloth and decadence had shaken off the harsh hand of nature and allowed the British to fall into the stupor of the lotus eater. The classically educated ruling classes feared that Berlin was Sparta to London's Athens, the home of a people who were better fed, better disciplined and hardened by the constant preparation for war. Were the British working classes puny weaklings compared to the men of the Ruhr and the Rhine? Was Britain faced not just with an economic and military rival but by a fitter and more virile race? And might defeat not just roll back the frontiers of the British Empire but cast the British race into decline, as the stronger Teutons spread into new territories and multiplied? And what might that mean for the world and the 'lower races' if the paternal hand and wise council of the British race, supposedly a race of natural rulers and born colonists, were forced off the world stage? All of these neuroses spiralled around the Edwardian imagination. As the boundaries between race and nation became all the more fluid under the colossal pressures of the new phenomenon of 'total war', these potent fears and preoccupations became the nightmares of Britain's ruling elite and their colleagues in the white dominions.

In the end, the political and military leaderships of Britain and France – if they were to mobilize the human resources of their empires – had to reach an accommodation between assumptions and ideas about race on the one hand, and the imperatives of war on the other. One response was the complex paraphernalia of ethnic distinctions that informed colonial recruitment – in the British case the 'martial races' theory, and in the French case the concept of *les races guerrières*. But in their actions they exacerbated the Germans' own Darwinian fears. The German government and press feared that their enemies, by infusing their armies with the life strength of primitive but virile peoples, had loaded the Darwinian dice against Germany. German wartime propaganda tended to present the country as the victim of a racial betrayal by

the Entente powers and stressed the imagined racial homogeneity of the German and Austrian armies against the racial and cultural diversity of their enemies. Sven Hedin, a pro-German Swedish explorer who wrote a propagandistic account of life behind the German lines in 1914, described a dying German soldier in a field hospital:

*Here is a reservist. What a tremendous figure of a man. What can Latins, Slavs, Celts, Japs, Negroes, Hindoos, Ghurkas, Turcos, and whatever they are called, do against such strapping giants of the true Germanic type? His features are superbly noble, and he seems pleased with his day's work. He does not regret that he has offered his life for Germany's just cause.<sup>40</sup>*

Such inflation of the racial prowess of the 'Germanic type' hints at a deep and early sense of insecurity and victimhood that many Germans felt, at their racial as well as their national isolation. The issue of race became, increasingly, an area of contestation and one of the conflict's defining characteristics, as the Great War evolved inexorably into the World's War.



Empire, colonialism, race and multiple theatres of war were defining features of this war. Yet, bizarrely, the First World War has a unique characteristic that has – among other consequences – come to *submerge* the war's multinational, multi-ethnic, multi-racial dimensions. The historical war has been overwhelmed by what the historian David Reynolds has called the 'literary war', a popular memory of the conflict formed from the collected fragments of prose and war poetry, which, over the course of the twentieth century, coalesced into a dominant but narrow image of the conflict.<sup>41</sup> This process, by which history has been overshadowed by literature, has had many distorting effects, among which is that it has rendered invisible those aspects of the war that were inherently unappealing to the poets and prose-writers of the time. Features of the conflict to which they were little

exposed, or in which they found no inspiration, along with elements that did not subsequently fit into the narrative that was built around their powerful words, were discarded or consigned to footnotes. The literary war focuses on lost generations, the follies of a callous establishment and the sheer pity of it all. It is a powerful and important condemnation of a conflict that cost millions of lives, but it is hardly a comprehensive exploration of the greatest war the world had ever known. Seventy million men were mobilized during the First World War. From that mass levy, there emerged only about 1,000 published memoirs, most of which are long out of print and forgotten beyond the world of academic history. Only a handful – Jünger, Blunden, Remarque, Graves – have become classics, textbooks known to students and casual readers and works through which the war has for a century been understood.<sup>42</sup> The list of war poets whose words are remembered a hundred years later is similarly circumscribed.

One facet long obscured by the victory of literature over history, and by the narrowness in terms of both class and race among the authors of that literature, is the global nature of the conflict. No great memoir or work of poetry emerged from the war in Africa, the war at sea, or the battles in Asia and the Pacific. In English, only T.E. Lawrence's turgid and self-mythologizing *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* came out of the war in the Middle East. What has been lost sight of is not only the true geographic scope of the war but its fundamental demographics. More words have been written over the past century about the few dozen middle-class officers who wrote their war memoirs and penned their war poetry than about the 4 million non-white, non-European soldiers who fought for Britain, France and their allies, let alone the millions of civilians who laboured at war work or who suffered hardships and loss when the war swept through their communities.<sup>43</sup> Any reconception of the First World War as the *World's War* is, at one level, about recovering those stories and those perspectives, or – to put it another way – about restoring the names of Mike Mountain Horse, Mir Dast and Mir Mast to the collective memory alongside those of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen.



# NOTES

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