

# EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME

People, Personalities and Leaders  
in the First World War

*Edited by John Crawford,  
David Littlewood & James Watson*



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# INTRODUCTION

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DAVID LITTLEWOOD

## Experience

1. *Noun* [*mass noun*]: practical contact with and observation of facts or events; The knowledge or skill acquired by such means over a period of time; An event or occurrence which leaves an impression on someone
2. *Verb*: encounter or undergo (an event or occurrence); Feel (an emotion)<sup>1</sup>

The First World War is often depicted as a fundamentally negative historical event. Petty squabbles between emperors and élites are said to have pushed naïve young men into a nightmare environment of mud, blood and callous indifference that killed millions and left those who survived scarred and embittered.

This interpretation of the conflict came to prominence between the 1960s and the 1980s. It rested on the ubiquity of the anti-war poets in school curricula, on the release of literary-based studies by Paul Fussell, Eric Leed, Roland Stromberg and Modris Eksteins, and on the success of the *Blackadder Goes Forth* BBC television series.<sup>2</sup> While numerous historians have since endeavoured to qualify or overturn such portrayals, the First World War is

still widely perceived as a pointless conflict that destroyed a generation and ushered in a more brutal age.<sup>3</sup>

This appraisal wields so much influence because it contains an element of truth. The Somme, Verdun, Passchendaele, Gallipoli and many other engagements all resulted in dreadful losses of life. According to the most reliable estimates, fully nine million military personnel died during the conflict.<sup>4</sup> Even more striking is the number of fatalities as a proportion of those who fought. From the 100,444 men and women who served overseas in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, 17,661, or 17.58 per cent, died as a result up to the end of 1923.<sup>5</sup> Many of the survivors had braved artillery and machine-gun fire, in addition to enduring deplorable living conditions. Some suffered lasting physical or mental damage, which then hindered their return to civilian life.

Yet this popular understanding of the First World War suffers from four major problems. First, it discusses the conflict by reference to subsequent events and present-day concerns, particularly the Second World War and the geopolitical situation in the Middle East, rather than from the perspective of those who were alive at the time. Secondly, it centres on the development of 'over-arching theories' — 'the lost generation', 'the birth of the modern' and the 'end of innocence' — while omitting contradictory occurrences and neglecting specific details.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, it focuses on a narrow group of sources and the subjects they cover, meaning that trench warfare on parts of the western front often comes to represent the war as a whole.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the dominant narrative implies a form of mass paralysis, where participants were powerless to avoid being caught up in a general decline from optimism to disillusionment.<sup>8</sup>

Analysing the First World War via the medium of experiences allows these difficulties to be overcome. On the one hand, a focus on specific episodes militates against present-centredness by requiring an extensive use of primary sources. If letters, diaries, memoirs, official documents and interviews cannot entirely bridge the gap between the historian and the past, they do offer the best way to narrow it. Accessing and reproducing the words of contemporaries facilitates a much deeper understanding of how they perceived events and why they reacted to them in a particular fashion.<sup>9</sup>

Prioritising experiences also takes into account that everybody who participated in the First World War did so as an individual. Men and women were drawn into the conflict for a wide range of reasons and from all manner of backgrounds and occupations.<sup>10</sup> They served at different levels in the various branches of the armed forces across the war's numerous theatres, or remained at home as workers or dependents. Some died, but most survived.

Some were injured, but most went unscathed. Some had their health ruined by poor nutrition or disease, but the majority lived on for decades after the Armistice.<sup>11</sup> Exploring particular eventualities helps to recognise the impact of these variables, and means that disparities are treated with the same degree of importance as similarities.

Experiences also provide a more nuanced understanding of what being involved in the war entailed. Although hardship and death were all too common, they took place alongside more positive occurrences. For example, the movement of multinational armies across countries and continents gave vast numbers of people the chance to see new parts of the world and led to an unprecedented mixing of cultures. For some this merely reinforced or generated prejudices, but in others it inspired a sense of wonder and respect. The conflict also produced countless interactions between people within the armed forces, within other war-related organisations and within local communities. If the consequences could be unfortunate or even provocative, there was also a simultaneous formation of bonds, friendships and relationships that would never have happened otherwise.

Another attraction of experiences is that they foreground agency. Rather than being overwhelmed and alienated by the war's realities, many individuals were able to develop effective coping strategies.<sup>12</sup> Soldiers interpreted their surroundings by reference to familiar landscapes, and recreated elements of their domestic lives by holding sports tournaments, concerts and variety shows.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, people on the home-fronts and the battlefronts strove to maintain regular contact with each other. Millions of letters were sent in both directions, alongside countless trophies, mementos and keepsakes.<sup>14</sup>

A final consideration is that a person's experiences shed light on how they acquired new knowledge and skills. The common emphasis on military blunders and stubbornness tends to obscure the great doctrinal strides that were made across four years of war. Whereas the armies of 1914 relied on élan and mass frontal assaults, those of 1918 employed intricate combined-arms operations supported by scientifically directed firepower.<sup>15</sup> At the heart of these developments were groups of officers who honed their methods over an extended period of time.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, many individuals received training and education in the combat support services, in occupations behind the lines, or when working on the home-front. This acquisition of knowledge and skills often proved of continued use after the Armistice. Most military commanders of the interwar and Second World War periods came to prominence during the First World War, while the conflict also had a formative influence on many



politicians, writers, artists, union leaders and businessmen.<sup>17</sup> Some ethnic minorities used their participation in the fighting to press for equal rights and full citizenship.<sup>18</sup> Conversely, other groups developed a greater sense of self-identity and accelerated their efforts to achieve independence.<sup>19</sup>

The myriad benefits of experience as a research category are showcased across the following chapters. They comprise 16 of the papers delivered at 'The Experience of a Lifetime: People, Personalities and Leaders in the First World War' conference, which was held at Massey University's Wellington campus from 22 to 24 August 2014. This event drew together academics, public historians, archivists and interested members of the public from New Zealand, Australia, France, the United States and the United Kingdom. A diverse programme of talks was formally opened in the Great Hall of the Old Museum Building, and was interspersed with panel discussions and audio-visual presentations. The conference formed part of the Centenary History of New Zealand in the First World War Programme, and was generously facilitated by its sponsors: the New Zealand Defence Force, the Ministry for Culture and Heritage, and Massey University.

This volume covers a large number of First World War experiences. It is divided into five overall themes: high command experiences, soldiers' experiences, imperial experiences, experiences in the air and at sea, and experiences behind the front line. Although New Zealanders predominate, there is a wide-ranging examination of the various campaigns they fought in, and substantial sections that deal with individuals from other belligerents. Ultimately, the editors make no claims for this being a definitive account of the conflict, but rather one that is influenced by, and that seeks to influence, an ongoing process of reassessment. For if the First World War was a fundamentally nuanced, multi-faceted and open-ended event, then its historiography should also demonstrate those characteristics.



HIGH  
COMMAND  
EXPERIENCES

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## CHAPTER 1

# 1915

### *The Search for Solutions*

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HEW STRACHAN

**T**he so-called 'short-war illusion' was just that: an illusion.<sup>1</sup> By 1914 very few serious military figures expected a major European war, if one were to occur, to be short. The hope that a lightning campaign would end in decisive battle rested on the examples of the German wars of unification, and yet in 1890 the hero of those victories, Helmuth von Moltke the elder, acknowledged that they were unlikely to be repeated. He warned the Reichstag that the next war would be long.

This conclusion rested on three reasons. First, it would not be a war between single powers, but between alliances. Therefore, the defeat of one country would not end the war; it would simply end a campaign, and it might not even achieve that. Knowing that its partners would rescue it, the defeated power would be unlikely to sue for peace. Secondly, democratisation would make for long wars. The mobilisation of whole peoples, who were both better educated and politically more aware than their predecessors, would mean that nations would struggle to accept defeat. Indeed, as became increasingly evident in the First World War, the greater the loss, the harder negotiation became, even of a compromise settlement. It was difficult to accept that the dead had died in vain, and so mounting losses were an argument not for ending the war, but for continuing it. Finally, the character of war had itself changed. The

industrialisation of warfare, the advent of quick-firing artillery, machine guns and magazine-fed breech-loading rifles, meant that a decisive attack in tactical terms would lead to massive casualties and would be likely to fail. Alfred von Schlieffen was deeply worried by the tactical implications of the reports of the Russo-Japanese War he received from Manchuria in 1905. Victory, Schlieffen argued, would be achieved not by frontal attack, but by manoeuvre and envelopment at what today would be called the operational level. The opening weeks of the First World War seemed to prove him right. The great sweeps through Belgium, northern France, East Prussia and Galicia, with 'decisive' battles on the Marne, at Tannenberg and at Lemberg, flattered to deceive.

The war was not over by Christmas 1914, and nobody should have been surprised. But the questions that the war posed still demanded answers. When would it end? How would it end? Christmas, at least for an overwhelmingly Christian continent, exercised an emotional pull. The popular hope now was that the soldiers might return home for Christmas 1915. This was no more rational than any earlier expectations. Rather, it was a reflection of the human condition, a bloody-minded optimism rather than a statement of realistic calculation.

As with any war, nobody knew how long this one would last. It actually proved to be quite short, even if allowance is made for the fighting that continued after 11 November 1918. It was shorter than either of the precedents cited by the elder Moltke, the Thirty Years War and the Seven Years War, and shorter than the conventional European dating for the Second World War, or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So in January 1915, the politicians of Europe could not know how long this war would be, but they had begun to adjust institutionally to a war of uncertain duration.

The coming year would be crucial in this process. Industry's conversion from peacetime needs to wartime production would hit its stride. Governments would be restructured on more national than party political lines. The latter process had begun in August 1914, with the *Burgfrieden* in Germany and the *Union Sacrée* in France. In May 1915, Britain formed a coalition government. Those countries that persisted with active party politics, such as Australia and Canada, paid a terrible price in domestic disunity. Finally, states had to address their manpower policies, to balance the allocation of men between military service and industrial output. Those states that did not have conscription, most obviously Britain and its dominions, moved to compulsory service precisely in order to achieve this balance. Those that had conscription at the outset of the war also had to rebalance, by finding ways to return men from the army to the factory.

None of these changes was accomplished without friction, and none was fully completed in 1915. However, 1915 set the contours of debates for the national reorganisations that the war would compel. The process was renewed and sustained right up until 1918, the year in which at least one Frenchman, Léon Daudet, would coin the prescient term '*la guerre totale*'.<sup>2</sup> However, the acceptance of protracted conflict, and of the levels of national mobilisation it required, did not mean that the war was not simultaneously fought as a short-term activity. The belligerents did not stop trying to win the war as quickly as they could. The challenge was how to set about doing that: how to sprint while also running a marathon.

The Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, were inferior in almost every index of national power save one — geography. They were neighbours, physically contiguous and situated in the heartland of Europe. In the strategic terminology of the nineteenth-century staff college, they could operate on interior lines, and that was an increasing advantage in the age of the railway. Land communications had been transformed since Europe's last great war, that waged by Napoleon. The Central Powers could move troops on short chords rapidly from west to east, and back again, and if need be from north to south. On 17 November 1914, Erich von Falkenhayn, the chief of the Prussian general staff, drew the logical conclusion from this geographical advantage. He ordered the establishment of strong defensible positions in the west, siting them on the reverse slopes of high ground, out of direct artillery observation, and securing behind them the captured raw material and industrial resources of Belgium and northeast France. Germany in the west was still an invader on others' soil, and so remained on the strategic offensive, but it adopted the inherent advantages of the tactical defensive.

By contrast, the Entente powers — Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and Serbia — were on exterior lines, operating on the circumference of Europe. Britain and France in the west could only communicate with Serbia and Russia to the southeast and east by sea. Those maritime communications were challenging. Denmark's neutrality blocked the entrance to the Baltic, and ensured that Germany enjoyed almost unfettered control of its waters. The Russian ports in the north, around the Kola Peninsula, were ice-bound in winter. To the south, the warm-water ports of the Black Sea were closed at the Dardanelles. At the end of October 1914, the Ottoman Empire had entered the war on the side of the Central Powers. In due course, U-boats would be added to

the hazards of navigation around the continent's periphery. If strategy involves the concentration of force at the decisive point, the Central Powers could do this better than could the Entente. They could manage the twin conditions of time and space more efficiently than their enemies.

The Entente's solution to this problem, at least as planned in the winters of 1915–16 and 1916–17, was to attack the Central Powers simultaneously from three points of the compass — west, east and south (after Italy's entry to the war in May 1915). In doing so they hoped to prevent the Central Powers from shuttling their reserves from one front to another. But they still could not easily coordinate their offensives in time and space. While the Central Powers were pushed, they still managed to use the interior railway connections to fire-fight their way out of the problem.

**I**n the first winter of the war, the British and French had a different plan. They proposed to make limited efforts in the west, and to use the Russian 'steam-roller' in the east to do the serious fighting. Britain had the industrial and economic capacity; Russia had the manpower. In the First World War, Russia mobilised 15 million men, the largest number of any state, but this total still represented only 39 per cent of those of military age. Although much smaller in absolute numbers, the French and British armies took 79 per cent and 49 per cent, respectively, of their men of military age. So the solution — to get the Russians to assume the major military burden — seemed straightforward; in practice, however, it was not.

Russia could not exploit its latent numerical superiority if it did not have weapons. So the strategy for 1915 demanded that Britain's war production prioritise the supply of the Russian Army. And yet Britain was itself raising its own mass army, and so it, too, needed equipment. Nor did the problems end there. Moving equipment from Britain to France was self-evidently easier and less dangerous than shipping it to Russia. The problems were not just those posed by reaching Russia's northern ports. Neither Archangel nor Murmansk was well connected to the interior, and so goods accumulated on jetties and in warehouses, awaiting onward transmission south to the front. The first Russian need was not in fact munitions, but railways. Even those Britons who were persuaded to equip another army before their own tended to balk at using British assets to create a transport infrastructure that Russia would then use to develop its competitive edge after the war was over.<sup>3</sup>

Nor did prioritising the eastern front fully resolve what would happen on

the western front in 1915. Fighting to the last Russian, however superficially attractive to Britain and France, could not in practice mean that the British and French armies would not have to fight. They might not launch potentially war-winning offensives, but they still needed to hold the Germans in the west to prevent them from reinforcing the east. The French commander-in-chief, Joseph Joffre, called this *grignotage* or ‘nibbling’; other French generals called it *usure* (wearing out). In the British Army, the commander of IV Corps, Henry Rawlinson, also used a dental metaphor. He advocated ‘biting’ a chunk out of the enemy line and then ‘holding’ it defensively. The enemy would be forced to counter-attack to regain it, and so would exchange the advantages of the tactical defence for the disadvantages of the offence. In practice, limited offensives were not enough to hold the Germans in the west (or not in sufficient numbers), and in late September 1915 the western Allies had to admit that the strategy was not working and launched a much bigger series of attacks in Champagne and at Loos.

The debate around Entente strategy should not be characterised as one between ‘easterners’ and ‘westerners’, or even as one between politicians and generals or ‘frocks’ and ‘brass hats’. That is the vocabulary of the post-war British memoirs, a retrospective characterisation of a much more complex set of problems. France’s main effort was clearly going to be in France, which had been invaded. The main effort of Britain was also going to be there — both for political reasons (to support the French and to liberate the Belgians) and for logistical ones. British sea power, however strong, would always find it easier to sustain an army just across the Channel than it would one at the other end of the Mediterranean. So in 1915, strategy for the Entente was not a choice between east and west, but a matter of balancing both. The challenges of its formation, and the passions generated by them, were less set by geography, which after all was immutable, than institutional. No state had fully thought through the political implications for civil–military relations of fighting a major war, or how they would generate governmental structures that would blend the efforts of statesmen and soldiers in the making of strategy.

General staffs were new and powerful bureaucracies that had grown to maturity between 1871 and 1914, but states had not learnt how to accommodate them within the fabric of government. The boundaries of their responsibilities were still not clearly defined. The First World War would become the template against which the limits of their authority would



be determined. Given the war's scale, these limits were not immediately self-evident; in 1914–18, military activity shaped or influenced almost every aspect of national policy. The army had an interest in economic mobilisation, with its implications for shell production. It also had a direct role in government, especially in places where the war was being actively fought or in territories under military occupation. In late 1914, the whole of northern France was under military control, either that of the German Army or (in the case of unconquered territory) of the French. The German Army occupied Belgium and exploited its resources, and Austria-Hungary aspired to do the same in Serbia. In 1915, the Russian Army ruled the western reaches of its empire with an iron fist. All of these areas were subject to military law. Governments had begun the war by ceding control to the army, but as they adjusted to protracted conflict they sought to claw it back. The democracies did better than the autocracies in restoring balance to civil–military relations. By 1917–18, Britain and France had formed sensible institutional structures for shaping strategy, but the Germans and Austrians had not.

Civil–military relations exposed the point where geography did not work for the Central Powers. In the winter of 1914–15 the differences over strategy were espoused with far more vehemence, and became far more divisive, in Berlin than they were in the Entente. For Germany, and to an increasing extent Austria-Hungary, the easterner–westerner debate was immediate and real, not a post-war construct. After the German victory at Tannenberg, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff had become national heroes. An entire Russian army had been destroyed, East Prussia had been saved from invasion, and an operational manoeuvre had delivered decisive battlefield success. The two generals derived political clout from their national status. They now believed that in the east, on a longer front with a lower troop density, they could do more of the same. This proved to be not quite so easy in practice: the railways of East Prussia were not replicated across the Russian frontier, the internal links between the northern and southern ends of the front were poor, and the spaces were too vast in relation to the communications infrastructure, especially the roads. However, in January 1915 these points were still open to argument.

Erich von Falkenhayn, the chief of the general staff, entertained a different approach to strategy; one framed less by the operational possibilities and more by political realities. Unusually for a German army officer, he had served outside Europe, an experience that had convinced him that the centre of gravity of the enemy alliance was Britain — its imperial, economic and naval hub. Germany had therefore to break Britain to win the war; its problem was that it lacked a



Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin

Erich von Falkenhayn, chief of the German general staff.

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