

# A Century of Mass Slaughter



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This August marks the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I. That "Great War" was many things, but it was most certainly a war of machines, of dreadnought battleships and "Big Bertha" artillery, of newfangled airplanes and tortoise-like tanks. Industrial juggernauts like Great Britain, France, and Germany succeeded more or less in mobilizing their economies fully for war; their reward was reaping the horrors of death-dealing machinery on a scale theretofore thought impossible.



In that summer of 1914, most experts expected a short war, so plans for sustaining machine-age warfare through economic mobilization were lacking. Confronted by trench warfare and stalemate on the Western Front which owed everything to modern industrialism and machinery, the "big three" antagonists strove to break that stalemate using the means that had produced it: weapons and munitions. Those empires caught up in the war that were still industrializing, e.g. Russia, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, found themselves at a serious disadvantage.

Together, Britain and France forged an industrial alliance that proved (with help from the U.S.) to be a war-winning "arsenal of democracy." Yet this alliance contributed to an overvaluing of machines and munitions at the soldiers' expense. For Entente leaders -- even for old-school cavalry officers like Britain's Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig -- new artillery with massive stockpiles of shells promised to produce the elusive breakthrough and a return to mobile warfare and glorious victory.

Thus it was that at the Battle of the Somme that began on July 1, 1916, British soldiers were reduced to trained occupiers. Lengthy pre-battle artillery barrages, it was believed, would annihilate German defenders, leaving British troops to slog uncontested across no-man's land to occupy the enemy's shattered and empty trenches.

But those trenches were not empty. Germany's defenses survived Britain's storm of steel largely intact. And Britain's soldiers paid the price of misplaced faith in machine warfare: nearly 20,000 dead on that first day, with a further 40,000 wounded.

The Somme is but one example of British and French commanders being overwhelmed by the conditions of machine warfare, so much so that they placed their faith in more machines and more munitions as the means to victory. After underestimating the impact of technology on the battlefield up to 1914, commanders quickly came to overestimate it. As a result, troops were inadequately trained and tactics inadequately developed.

As commanders consumed vast quantities of machinery and munitions, they became accustomed to expending lives on a similarly profligate scale. Bodies piled up even as more economic means were tapped. Meanwhile, the staggering sacrifices required by destructive industrialism drove nations to inflate strategic ends. Industrialized warfare that spat out lead and steel while consuming flesh and bone served only to inflame political demands, negating opportunities for compromise. Total victory became the only acceptable result for both sides.

In retrospect it's remarkable how quickly leaders placed their faith in the machinery of war, so much so that military power revved uncontrollably, red-lined, then exploded in the faces of its creators. Industrialized destruction and mass slaughter were the predictable outcomes of a crisis whose resolution was driven by hardware -- more weaponry, more machinery, more bodies. The minds of the men who drove events in that war could not sanction negotiation or compromise; those were forms of "weakness" that neither side could accept. Such murderous inflexibility was captured in the postwar observation of novelist Virginia Woolf that "It was a shock to see the faces of our rulers in the light of the shell fire. So ugly they looked -- German, English, French -- so stupid." Note how she includes her own countrymen, the English, in the mix of the ugly and the stupid.

In World War I, Carl von Clausewitz's dictum of war as an extreme form of politics became tragically twisted to war as the only means of politics, with industrialized mass destruction as the only means of war. The resulting failure to negotiate a lasting peace came as no surprise since the war had raced not only beyond politics, but beyond the minds of its military and political leaders.

The Great War had unleashed a virus, a dynamic of destruction that would only be suppressed, and even then only imperfectly, by the wanton destruction of World War II. For what was Auschwitz but a factory of death, a center for mass destruction, a mechanized and murderous machine for efficient and impersonal slaughter, a culmination of the industrialized slaughter (to include mass gassing) of World War I?

The age of mass warfare and mass destruction was both catalyst for and byproduct of the age of machinery and mass production. Today's age is less industrial but no less driven by machinery and mass consumption (which requires a form of mass destruction inflicted largely on the environment). Aerial drones and cyber warfare are already providing disturbing evidence that the early 21st century may yet echo its predecessor in introducing yet another age of misplaced faith in the machinery of warfare. The commonality remains the vulnerability of human flesh to steel, as well as human minds to manipulation.

A century has passed, yet we're still placing far too much faith in the machinery of war.