

# The Battle of Wytschaete- Messines 1917

## How the war ended up in Wijtschate

- 1908: Austria-Hungary **annexes Bosnia**, which had formally been part of the Ottoman Empire, to the great displeasure of Serbia, which was dreaming of a **great Serbian empire** in the Balkans.
- 1912: First Balkan War: Serbia expands its territory.
- 1913: Second Balkan War: Serbia again expands its territory.

## June 1914

- 28: **Assassination** of Archduke Ferdinand, the moderate heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo (Bosnia), by Gavrilo Princip using a Belgian FN firearm obtained from the Serbian military intelligence service.
- 30: Austro-Hungarian emperor: "Our **credibility** as a regional power in the Balkans, as a multinational state and as a European superpower is at stake. We must react accordingly to this deed."

## July 1914

- 23: Austro-Hungarian **ultimatum** with three demands: Serbian support to terrorist organisations must stop; anti-Austro-Hungarian propaganda must be banned, and participation in the internal Serbian investigation in the assassination.
- 24: Serbia agreed to 2 of the 3 demands. It refused however any external involvement in the investigation because this would violate the Serbian constitution.
- 25: **Serbia mobilises** its army even before all diplomatic options had been exhausted. Austria-Hungary also mobilised.
- 28: Austria-Hungary **declares war** on Serbia.
- 29: Russia announces a partial mobilisation as a sign of support to Serbia. **Germany sees this not as a warning but as a direct declaration of war.**

## August 1914:

- 1: Germany **declares war** on Russia. Germany was an ally of Austria-Hungary. France, an ally of Russia, mobilises.
- 3: Germany **declares war** on France. It asks our country for a **free passage** so as to be able to flank France. King Albert refuses.
- 4: **Germany invades neutral Belgium with 800,000 soldiers.** It wants to conquer Paris in six weeks' time via our country, before the Russian army is at full strength. Our country declares war on Germany.
- 4: Great Britain, which was the guarantor of Belgian neutrality, declares war on Germany.
- 20: Brussels is taken.
- 24: The first **German scouts** are sighted near Ypres.

## September 1914

- 6-10: The Battle of the Marne stops the German march on Paris. The **race to the sea** gets under way because the French harbours are the umbilical cord for the supply and landing of British troops.
- 11: First clashes in our region between German and Belgian troops. The stream of refugees continues to grow.

## October 1914

- 3: **8,000 German troopers plunder Ypres** and withdraw to the heights round Ypres as the British army advances.
- 6: During the race to the sea, both armies reach the Lys River, near Wervik. Ypres comes within sight.
- 10: When the Belgian army leaves Antwerp for tactical reasons, the city surrenders.

- 15:
  - o The British army takes positions in Ypres and the environs.
  - o The Germans are reinforced by no fewer than 2 armies on the move for Ypres.
  - o Civilians flee in massive numbers.
- 21: The city of Ypres is attacked for the first time.
- 27-28-29: **Sluice gates at Nieuwpoort are opened.**
- 30: The inundation forces the Germans to evacuate the region between Diksmuide and Nieuwpoort. They look for an inland opening to the French harbours. As **the last opening** in the emerging front line, Ypres and the entire region now comes under intensive pressure.
- 31: Fierce German attacks on the ridge of Wijtschate and Mesen.

### **November 1914**

- 1: **First German attack on the village of Wijtschate.**
- 13: After days of fighting back and forth, Wijtschate falls to the Germans for 2 years and 7 months.

### **The Wytschate – Mesen arc**

The inundation of the Yser plain and the race to the sea brought the Ypres region centre stage for both warring parties. Because only here was a German breakthrough to the French harbours of Calais and Dunkirk still possible. The hills of Wytschate-Mesen and of Passchendaele formed the last natural obstacle to the North Sea. They had to be defended at any price, so the fighting was very fierce and pitiless. A German breakthrough could, however, be foiled. Exhausted by the heavy fighting and with the winter approaching, both armies dug in. The moving war came to a standstill and trench warfare commenced. Over a stretch of 750 km, between the North Sea and Switzerland arose a reinforced front line: a chain of bunkers, trenches and barbed wire... The problem of World War I was to break such a stiffened front line, that stalemate. New techniques (gas, flame thrower, tank) and tactics were developed. In our region, the frontline formed an inverse S. The Germans were on the hills, with the British below. Nothing could escape from the view of the Germans dug in higher up. As a result, the British had to carry out all their activities in the Ypres Salient and for the Wytschate-Mesen arc at night.

### **The fort of Wijtschate**

Wijtschate was of great strategic importance for the Germans as an observation point. The city of Ypres is only 7 km from there as the crow flies. All troop movements to the south of the city could be observed from here. The British lines were fully within range of the German artillery posted higher up. The Germans turned Wijtschate into an impregnable fort. A number of prominent positions were reinforced and turned into fortified outputs: Spanbroekmolen, Petit Bois, Dutch shed Farm, Maeldestede Farm, Peckham, Ontario Farm ... Various classic attacks were dashed against the fortified ridge of Wijtschate and Mesen. *If above ground will not work, then we should try underground*, the British must have thought. Already in 1915, the war quietly moved underground throughout the Ypres Salient. British and German mine workers dug a network of galleries and tunnels to and under each other's positions. They blew them up regularly and turned the resulting crater into a new, fortified position. In the beginning of 1917, some 44 German and 12 British minicraters could be seen in the no man's land between Hill 60 and Ploegsteert -- only a fraction of the number of the underground explosions, because in 1916 the British blew up 750 mines and the Germans 696.

Gruesome scenes were at times played out under ground: fighting between tunnellers and miners when an enemy tunnel bored through, diggers suffocating from lack of oxygen or mine gas, collapsing tunnels from ground movements, etc. And what do you do when you climb out of your tunnel only to realise that the enemy have taken your

trench in the meantime? And yet, everything was only a prelude to what was still to come in mid 1917.

*According to British estimates, the fortifications on the Wytschate-Mesen ridge consist of 340 machine-gun holes, about 90 fortified positions, mostly small bunkers and miles of trenches. These front lines were manned by 25,000 German soldiers, backed by 630 pieces of artillery.*

### **Norton Griffith, the brain behind the plan**

The very extensive network of shallow tunnels is situated between 5 and 10 metres in depth. The mine explosions in these tunnels are not powerful enough for a real break through enemy lines. Norton Griffith, a British officer, came up with a new idea. He devised a plan to dig tunnels in the dry, blue clay at 11 locations, 15 to 40 metres under the German positions. Each tunnel would come out to one or more ammunition chambers. In this way, the British positions, which were situated lower down, became winning assets in underground warfare, because they had to dig less deep than the Germans who had taken positions higher up. Furthermore, the German excavation works were seriously hindered by an "impenetrable sand layer saturated with water." In January 1916, a plan was approved to dig under the Wytschate-Mesen ridge on a grand scale. To this end, special digging units were created, composed of miners and sewage workers called tunnellers. When such a deep mine exploded at St. Eloi in 1916, the Germans realised, to their great surprise, that the British had brought underground warfare to a deeper level – and they were not ready for it. Are the British also digging elsewhere under our lines? There were serious suspicions, but nothing was certain. Soon, they created their own digging units, the "miners." Furthermore, a new technique had to be developed to be able to dig through the sand layer saturated with water.

*The Norton Griffith plan is the military prelude to what would later become known as the Battle of Passchendaele. In the end, the aim was to force a breakthrough to the north of Ypres towards Ostend and Zeebrugge, where the dreaded German U-boats were located. The British also wanted to get their hands on Roeselare, an important German rail hub.*

### **To work like moles**

The British started the greatest digging works in January 1916. More than 1,500 tunnellers went quietly to work. They received technical support from some 6,500 sappers. The success of this plan would stand or fall on two elements: absolute secrecy about the British plan, and the digging had to be carried out in absolute silence. Sign language became the norm, as there was to be no talking in the tunnels. Anything that could make noise was muffled: loading car wheels were made of wood or rubber, sappers tied rags round their shoes and floors were covered with sandbags... The British used a special, silent technique to break up the clay called clay kicking. The Germans, on the other hand, used a pickaxe, and sometimes took less care about making noise... to the great delight of the British.

#### *digging machine*

*Industrialisation and mechanisation played an important role in World War I. Steel and coal were thus the supplying source for many "war factories." But that things could at times go wrong is proven by the underground digging machine at Petit Bois.*

*The digging of the 6 km tunnels under German positions was extremely labour-intensive. For this reason, the British engineers decided to use digging machines in the Ypres blue clay. These machines had to be adjusted first, because they had been used in British coal mines. On 4 March 1917, at Petit Bois, an electrical digging machine was tested for the first time at a depth of 24 metres. The experiment went wrong, however: the machine got stuck in the suctioning force of the wet blue clay. Furthermore, it had a tendency of digging always downward instead of straight ahead. After months of slow boring and 64*

metres of progress – 6.1 cm per hour – the 7.5 ton machine was stopped. It is now still somewhere near Petit Bois, under the ground. The allies thus had to continue digging the tunnels by hand and shovel.

*Eyewitness account of Private Donald Hodge, Royal West Kent Regiment:*

*"I had to face many bombs and snipers, but I never liked mining work. It was must, dirty, oppressive, dangerous and just plain frightening. You had to crawl down on your hands and knees for hours at a time. You were a link in a long chain of people who passed bags below their legs. You could not stand up straight because the gallery was only 1.20 meter high. And when you finally came out, you could not stand up straight because you had been squatting for hours*

### **A deadly game of cat and mouse**

Underground warfare was a sparring match between the allies and the Germans. In March 1916, both were aware of each other tunnelling activities. They just did not know where exactly the German and British tunnels were located. As a British tunneller put it, *"You knew that they were there somewhere. But you could not but guess what they were really up to. As long as you could hear them working, it was fine. As soon as things went quiet, fear set in..."*

A miner put it this way: *"All of a sudden, they were silent! Hundreds of thoughts ran through my head. What were they up to? Were they ready? Would they now light the charge and blow us up together with all our explosives?"*

At Petit Bois for example, the Germans had exploded various charges at a depth of 15 metres, hoping to find British tunnels. On 10 June 1916 they succeeded. A German charge destroyed a British tunnel over a total length of 90 metres. 12 sappers were stuck 27 metres below ground in a tunnel 1.20 meter high and 90 cm wide. It took six and a half days to repair the tunnel and to reach the twelve. Only one sapper came out alive, William Bedson, a miner from Rotherham. His 11 companions lie buried at the Kemmel Château military cemetery.

Eavesdropping on the opponent's activities became more and more vital. A well studied system was developed to capture every "hostile" sound. All the data were collected above ground and reconciled; counteractions were arranged...

The idea that the enemy might be ahead of them spurred both parties to work harder, so as not to be "left behind" and become vulnerable to enemy mines. One wanted to be ahead of the other... In this way, underground warfare fed more and more on itself.

### **Tunneller versus miner**

Underground warfare is a race against time and against death. Who will be the first to dig under enemy positions and blow them up? Can the Germans track down and destroy the excavation works already started by the British? The Germans have some catching up to do: in time, technique (cf. layer of quicksand), distance (high ground), etc. It's make or break, all or nothing...

Below is a summary of the respective performances by sappers and miners deep below the ground in Palingbeek, Wijtschate, Mesen and Ploegsteert over a distance of 15.5 km.

	Tunneller	Miner
- Start of digging works	October 1915	April 1916
- Number of diggers	1,500	3,000
- Number of shafts	11	32
- Number of tunnels	11	14

- Number of loaded ammunition chambers	24	0
- Meters of tunnels	6,000	1,200
- Average progress per day	7m.	5m.
- Number of cumulated months of digging	28	7,8
- Average length of a tunnel	534 m	86 m
- Longest tunnel	710 m	180 m
- Height of a tunnel	1.30 m	1.40 m.
- Width of a tunnel	0.65 m	0.80 m
- Deepest ammunition chamber	38.10 m	32 m
- Least deep ammunition chamber	15.2 m	14 m
- Number of exploded underground mines	19	-
- Number of separately exploded countermines	-	5
- Force of the explosion	450,000 kg	39,700 kg

The Germans succeeded in neutralising three charged British underground mines by destroying the tunnel to them by means of countermines. Two however were saved by the British (Kruisstraat and Spanbroekmolen): the tunnels were repaired. At Petit Douve, on the other hand, the damage was so great, that the mine was lost. The Germans started very many shafts. Because of technical problems, subsidence ('the quicksand problem') and the lack of manpower, the works stopped at 18 shafts.

### **Kemmel, Westouter, Dranouter, Loker, Wulvergem and De Klyte: Under the spell of the battle**

The thorough preparations for the mine battle had repercussions for the entire territory of Heuvelland.

- ✓ Sleeping places, dugouts, and training camps for 80,000 soldiers were spread over all the villages.
- ✓ A gigantic model of the Wytschate-Mesen ridge was set up at the foot of the Scherpenberg to familiarise the soldiers with the German positions to be taken.
- ✓ The sides of the Scherpenberg and Kemmelberg are ideal training ground for simulating the attack. Large-scale exercises were conducted six times on these flanks.
- ✓ New water reservoirs and pipes were installed, as 2 million litres of water were needed for men and animals.
- ✓ 5,400 mules were ready to transport ammunitions and other materials in the wake of the attacking army.
- ✓ Underground storage facilities were built everywhere for millions of shells, 144,000 tons in all, good for 367 trains. New rail and tram lines were installed.
- ✓ 160,000 tons of materials including wood for the tunnels was transported with a fleet of 7,500 lorries. In October 1916, the entire British army needed 2,610 tons of wood per day, 2/3 of which came from Canada and England.
- ✓ In Westouter, Loker and Dranouter, 642 carrier pigeons were used for communication purposes before and during the battle.

Heuvelland became a gigantic construction site and a melting pot of different nationalities: New Zealanders, Irishmen, Britons, Australians, Chinese, etc.

Secret and confidential!

*The plan of attack is described down to the minutest detail in a manual entitled: 'The attack of the British 9<sup>th</sup> Corps at Messines Ridge'. It contains 71 orders, instructions and information on the following subjects:*

- *The traffic before and during the battle;*
- *Which division may fire upon which German position, when and with which weapons;*

- *How much ammunition and which weapons each soldier was given;*
- *The behaviour towards German prisoners;*
- *The plan for distributing food among the attacking troops;*
- *A description of a underground mine that explodes. What should one do during such an explosion?*
- *A very detailed description of the situation of the German trenches, the morale of the enemy, their fortified positions, their railways, barracks, storage facilities for ammunition and an estimate of the occupancy on the front line.*

*This information was obtained via aerial photography, raids on German positions, German defectors and Germans taken prisoner.*

*A telling example of such a detailed instruction: Instruction 61: All precautionary measures must be taken to avoid that in the event of full moon, bayonets should shine in the moonlight at a time that the troops are moving to their assembly points right before the attack.*

*Interesting detail: this handbook was printed at the printing press of the US War Office in Washington on 19 June 1917. America declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917.*

### **Zero Hour: 7 June 1917**

Timeline:

- The bombing started sporadically on 28 May 1917, and was intensified on 31 May, six days before the attack. During this period, 3,561,530 missiles were shot.
- Various sham attacks were launched on 3 and 5 June with Creeping Barrages. The aim was to entice the German artillery pieces out of their tent, so as to locate and destroy them.
- Various gas attacks were directed at German field artillery.
- On 3 June, the village of Wijtschate came under shelling, and the day after it was the turn of Mesen.
- Raids were carried out daily to wear down the morale of the German troops.
- On 7 June 1917:
  - o 02:00 AM: aeroplanes buzzed at low altitude over the German artillery positions to distract the attention of the troops hunkering down there.
  - o 03:30 AM: all British artillery stopped roaring to beguile the Germans to do the same. Everything went completely quiet. An eyewitness: *'It is difficult to describe the last half hour. A beautiful, clear starry sky, so calm, as night had never been from bombardments on that highly contested front. At times, a signal flare would fall as a bright meteorite and less often a shot from a rifle.'*
  - o 04:00 AM: all attack troops are present at the assembly points on the front line.
  - o 04:10 AM: FIRE! 19 mines rent the silence and caused a gigantic sea of fire. The Wijtschate-Mesen ridge shook...

Achiel Van Walleghe, a curate at Dikkebus witnessed the events:

*" It was just over 4:00 AM, and the first daylight had begun to shimmer, when all at once I saw the gigantic and at the same time dreadfully magnificent fireworks that had ever arisen in Flanders, a real volcano, it was as if the entire south-east was spewing flames... It took a few seconds before we felt the shocks. This was a real earthquake that lasted more than a minute... If it weren't a bloodbath, you could have called it "pretty."*

British soldiers who witnessed the battle:

*" A flash of light tore into the darkness, as if it had open a gate of hell, flinging the earth far away, shooting fire and flames in high scarlet towers, followed by swirling black smoke. This monstrous phenomenon hung in the air interlaced with streams of fire. And below this horror, the ground shook and the earth spewed stones and human bodies – an agony without equal caused by human hands."*

*"At three ten precisely, a deep smothered sigh went up; the ground before me was raised as if a giant, woken from his sleep, was making his way to the surface of the earth; then I saw seven immense columns of smoke and flames go up hundreds of feet high, while thousands of pounds of clay and stone were splattered in all directions. Not only did the earth tremble, but it was so shaken, that I had difficulties standing up."*

*German soldiers who witnessed the battle:*

*"The ground shook like a natural earthquake. Heavy concrete bunkers tipped over. A hurricane of hot air blew for miles on end, while pieces of wood, iron and earth fell out and enormous black clouds of smoke and dust spread over the land. The effect on the troops was overwhelming and crushing."*

*"They appeared as nineteen gigantic roses with crimson petals or like enormous mushrooms that rose up slowly and majestically from the ground, and then broke into smithereens with an enormous bang, throwing multicoloured columns of fire, mixed with earth and splinters to high heaven."*

## **Attack!**

The explosion of the 19 underground mines was also the signal the soldiers were waiting for to leave the safety of their trenches and to attack. At the same time, a deafening and devastating bombardment broke loose. The effect of the exploding mines and roaring artillery took the German soldiers on the front line by surprise. The attack was simply crushing.

*A British soldier:*

*"That was the first time that I had to come out of the trenches for an attack. It is not as we had expected. No, it was far worse. Awful noise and explosions. Our shells were flying towards the enemy and exploding in their support lines. There was German machine gun and rifle fire. Quite a number of our men were wounded. Some were killed, others were knocked down by the vibrations of the earth. I was frightfully scared... Yes, very scared. I suppose that most men were scared. I don't know."*

Some witness accounts of the consequences:

- *"The trenches were pressed so rapidly and totally against each other that the German soldiers were still standing straight in them."*
- *"Those of the enemy who survived, were on the verge of a breakdown. A large number of them were crying from fear."*
- *"The Germans offered little resistance: they either ran forward to surrender, or ran away. Few were prepared to fight."*
- *"The survivors lay hidden in bomb craters or destroyed bunkers, crying like beaten animals. I had never seen the enemy so demoralised."*

The resistance at the second defence (blue) line was stiffer. In spite of the fact that a number of fortified positions put up stiff resistance, they were taken out one after the other. Many perplexed Germans raised their hands in the air to surrender. They had just witnessed the complete destruction of their front line in a few seconds. At 8:30 AM, the completely destroyed village of Wijtschate was liberated by Irish divisions. In the morning of 11 June, all hostilities had ceased. This battle was over...

*Chronological summary*

- *04:10 AM:*
  - o *2,266 pieces of artillery open fire massively*
  - o *80,000 British soldiers start the attack*
- *04:20 AM: German artillery fire on "empty" British assembly points*
- *06:00 AM: the second German defence (blue) line is ousted. There is a 2-hour rest period to bring up reserve troops and strengthen the positions won against a possible counterattack.*

- 08:00 AM: Mesen is liberated.
- 08:30 AM: Wijtschate is liberated.
- 09:10 AM: the black line (the current Ieperstraat) is consolidated.
- 02:45 PM: a German counterattack is dispersed by British artillery fire.
- 04:10 PM: 'Zero Hour 2' a new attack is launched from the black line towards Oosttaverne. This attack, accompanied by British tanks, partially overruns the Oosttaverne line.
- 12:00 PM: Partial British withdrawal from the conquered Oosttaverne line because of friendly fire.
- In the morning of 8 June: The British retake the Oosttaverne line
- in the morning of 11 June: The Germans withdraw from the Warneton line and the British dig in.

### **The Irish story**

The attack was executed by 4 army corps: the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps, the 9<sup>th</sup> Corps, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Anzac Corps and the Reserve Corps. Each corps consisted of four divisions. The sector before Wijtschate was manned by the 9<sup>th</sup> Corps consisting of the 36<sup>th</sup> Ulster Division, the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division and the 19<sup>th</sup> Division. The 11<sup>th</sup> Division was kept in reserve and did not take part immediately in the battle. This was the first time on the Western Front that Catholic and Protestant Irishmen fought side by side in the field. They answered the call of Major William Redmond to go to battle together. In view of the tense situation on the home front, this was not self-evident. The 16<sup>th</sup> Division took the left side of the Kemmel-Wijtschate road, and the 36<sup>th</sup> stood on the right side.

*Major William Redmond, Member of Parliament*

*Ireland 1914. The Irish island is a complete part of Great Britain, and a cause of rapidly evolving internal tensions. Radical nationalists were calling for total separation. More moderate voices pleaded for home rule. The unionists, essentially in Northern Ireland, resisted with tooth and nail against any form of independence.*

*The Irish National Party, headed by the influential nationalist John Redmond, in the end obtained an act from the British Parliament that would give form to the long expected home rule. World War I threw a monkey wrench in the works and the act was postponed. Redmond remained loyal to the British and called on his countrymen to enlist in the 16<sup>th</sup> Irish Division. His brother William, a prominent member of parliament for the Irish Party, threw his full support behind this recruiting campaign. In an inspired speech from the balcony of the Imperial Hotel in Cork he committed himself with the legendary words: "Old as I am, and grey as are my hairs, I will say: Don't go, but come with me".*

*"Willie" Redmond became captain, later major, in the 6<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Royal Irish Regiment. He also remained active in the British Parliament. In his last, impressive speech in Westminster, he called on the Irish to take the example of cooperation on the front line between the mainly Protestant 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, and the mainly Catholic 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division.*

*On 7 June, he was wounded by shell shrapnel at the start of the battle during the liberation of Wijtschate. A former political opponent, private John Meeke, ran to his aid. He took the 56-year old member of parliament on his shoulders and tried to evacuate him. He was wounded while attempting to do so, but managed to get the major carried off by colleagues nonetheless. For this action, Meeke was later awarded the Military Medal. William Redmond died shortly thereafter in a first-aid post in Dranouter. He was buried in the monastery garden of Loker. The man who was once called the Peter Pan of British politics still lies buried in a solitary grave between the fields.*

## Blood and tears

There are few dead in the craters themselves after the battle: 10 to 20 men per crater. These numbers are far fewer than the British had expected. British reports afterwards stated that many German soldiers died from the shock waves of heavy artillery shells that pounded the bunkers and pillboxes mercilessly. These dead bore no external wounds.

A summary of the number of victims:

	<b>German</b>	<b>British</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Missing</b>	7,548	3,047	10,595
<b>Dead</b>	12,375	3,538	15,913
<b>Wounded</b>	5,976	17,977	23,953
<b>Total</b>	25,899	24,562	50,461

7,264 Germans were taken prisoner or surrendered. The spoils included 48 cannons, 218 machine guns and 60 mortar pieces.

In the weeks that followed, 53,016 mothers and fathers received a letter announcing to them that their son had fallen or was mission in action in the service of his country.

Between 26 May and 6 June, the British artillery fired 3,561,530 shells. The total cost amounts to £17,500,000 or €25,714,500 or BEF 1,037,320,358 – a gigantic amount spent solely for the preparatory bombardments. The total cost of this attack is not known.

*image of Christ*

*"At least 15,000 men died in the battle. In Christian belief, the religion shared by the two sides, every human being is considered a child of God. God comes to life in every one, once and in a unique way. The children of God are gods in turn: in their innermost being, they are flickers of the Great Mystery. That day, God too died at least 15,000 times."*

## Chaos and victory

After the battle, the British troops were in a real euphoric mood. "We won! We survived!" Soldiers posed proudly with the conquered German trophies: helmets, swords, rifles, clubs, etc. Or was all this for the sake of the photos only?

Triumphal articles appeared in all the British papers already on 8 June. The day before, the journalists had witnessed the first hours of the attack from the Kemmelberg. The news was a stroke of good luck on the home front and the British government. The autumn of 1916 had been a disaster for the British. The battle of the Somme, which started on 1 July 1916, claimed 60,000 British dead on the first day alone. This battle lasted four and a half months. Haig would subsequently be known as the 'butcher of the Somme'. The success of the mine battle strengthened Haig's position among the top brass again.

The chaos was complete: destroyed trenches, bunkers blown to bits, the many dead and wounded, the mud and misery, the many dead mules and horses, and ravished landscape... The force of one of the 19 underground mines was so strong as to overturn a complete bunker on its head.

## A British "success story"

This attack was a complicated affair: neither the British army, nor any other army in history had ever waged such a mine battle before. The outcome is very uncertain.

From the military point of view, this mine battle is a British success story. The planning and execution would later serve as models of modern warfare. A concourse of various factors contributed:

- Plumer's **careful and detailed planning** of the classic attack, where all army units were perfectly coordinated with each other.
- British **morale was excellent** and confidence in the top brass great, thanks also to the exercises and preparations. This is where future field marshal Montgomery saw how "daddy" Plumer (as he was known) dealt with his civilian soldiers.
- The attack was **limited in time and space**: The German territory to be taken was strictly delineated and limited in surface area, and a strict timing was laid down.
- The **crushing shock** of the mine explosions had a devastating effect on the morale of the German soldiers.
- British **superiority** on land and in the air: there were 2,266 British pieces of artillery against 630 for the German, or 14 British against 4 German per 100 metres on the front line. Furthermore, there were 4 British attackers for each German defender on the front line.
- The **luck factor**: the overall plan was not leaked during the years of preparation, and the Germans did not withdraw to safer grounds.

Deep underground, the tunnellers worked faster and more efficiently than the German pioneers. The high-ground positions of the Germans certainly was a disadvantage for them, as they had enormous problems to detect the enemy. Clay makes scarcely any noise. The Germans hadn't a clue as to where the enemy might be, at what depth they were digging or how many men were at it. This was a gigantic and almost impossible task.

## Beyond the WWI madness: reflections on the consequences

The mine battle was the most successful Allied military operation during WWI on the Western Front. This war still leaves its mark today. The overview below is mainly based on the book of Hew Strachan: The first world war, Oxford.

The industrialisation of acts of war (mass production) made the democratisation of war possible:

- 70 million soldiers became 'suffering objects' and were offered on the altar of technology. The war was conducted by a gigantic machine, of which soldiers are a mechanical component, with as lubrication 'Duty and love to the fatherland', 'blind allegiance to authority', 'a deep survival instinct' and the 'close camaraderie' between the soldiers.
- Never before did so many people personally witness the horrors of war. Both on the front and back at home, the confrontation with the misery of the war left deep scars. In 1918, 80% of the world's population at the time was at war with each other.

## Maimed humanity ...

- 20 million fathers and mothers lost a son. In addition to the grieving process many of them were burdened with a feeling of guilt: 'Did the older generation do enough to avoid the bloodbath of their sons?'
- Millions of children lost their father, becoming war orphans.
- 20 million soldiers suffered physical or psychological damage (such as shell shock), 12% of all wounded had very severe mutilations to the face, *literally* losing their identity. Their homecoming caused a shock effect...
- In the aftermath of this war, 1918-1919, 20 million people died of the Spanish flu.
- 5% of all war victims were unarmed civilians.

- 590,000 Belgian refugees lived abroad, mostly in France (325,000).
- There was major famine in large parts of Eastern Europe and Russia, prompting Hoover to start a massive American aid campaign, with the result that in 1921 hundreds of thousands of Russian children in 191 Russian villages and cities received American food aid.
- Reintegration was laborious: halfway into the twenties about 80% of the unemployed in England, for example, were war veterans. Veterans were no longer able to find their place in civilian society and they felt like strangers in their own homes. The war was still, *like a pathogen*, in their blood... A great many marriages were on the rocks.
- After the war everyone tried to find the meaning of the slaughter and to fathom the suffering. There were pilgrimages to the battlefields and later to the many cemeteries along the front zones. Time and again people tried, through remembrance, to find all kinds of connections with the past, with each other and with the dead. That is the effect and the value of remembrance.
- Recent genetic research has shown that deep traumatic experiences and negative environmental factors have an effect on the function of human genes: some genes are activated by trauma; others are deactivated ('trigger-effect'). Some scientists even suggest that these effects have genetic repercussions on descendants to the second generation. To this day the genetic scars of hundreds of thousands of grandchildren of World War I soldiers have never been studied.
- Not known:
  - Suicides among returned soldiers. The Falklands war in 1982 has given us an idea about this problem. Of the 10,000 British soldiers who took part in the conflict, 252 died in the actual battles. 200 (2%) committed suicide after returning home. They could no longer live with the trauma experienced in this short war. These soldiers were nonetheless much better prepared for battle situations than the WWI soldiers. Extrapolated to WWI standards this means that at least 1,400,000 soldiers at home quietly committed suicide.
  - The number of rapes and illegitimate children.

### In a maimed world ...

- The front line zone was completely destroyed. Between the North Sea and Switzerland alone this was 750 km long and 10 km wide in many places. The landscape, the villages and cities were completely destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of ancient art treasures, books and precious heritage buildings have disappeared forever.
- Trench warfare needs wood for the reinforcement of the trenches and the construction of new roads, railways, dug-outs, tunnels, encampments, etc. The forests in the zone were ransacked. After some time all the wood was imported, particularly from Canada. The figures below give an idea as to the scale of these developments. Allied wood production:
  - 1917: 61 million linear metres of milled lumber and 75,700 tons of round wood.
  - 1918: 198,000 linear km (almost 5 x the circumference of the Earth) milled lumber and 244,300 tons of round wood.
- Nine million horses paid for their loyalty to their masters with death.
- 1.5 billion grenades were detonated; thousands of tons are still buried in the ground under the front lines. 5% of them have a toxic payload.
- In all of Belgium there were 144 attacks with poisonous gas, of which 82 were in the Ypres Salient. Due to the inevitable corrosion of the metal casings, decades later the contents of war munitions were released, causing toxic materials to be released into the ground: white phosphorous, chlorine, phosgene, and heavy metals like arsenic, lead, copper and zinc. The effects for the public health are not yet known.
- More than a million tons of excess munitions were dumped at sea up until the 1980s. There are 80 known locations in the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Off the Belgian

coast (the Paardenmarkt) there is at least 35,000 tons, of which 2/3 are conventional and 1/3 chemical munitions.

## Political upheavals

### The birth and death of nations

- The war signalled the end of four major nations: the German Empire, the Russian Empire, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire.
- The war made fully-fledged nations of Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Their sense of nationhood ('one nation') was born, raised, and established on the European battlefields.
- Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Finland and Lithuania become independent states. New countries are formed in the Middle East: Kuwait and Palestine.
- In November of 1917 World War I unleashed the Russian Revolution, arising from a hunger revolt and with the support of the German secret service. In this way the war laid the groundwork for the Soviet Union and later communism.

### Driving force for new international power relationships

- It forced an unwilling America onto the world stage, blowing new life into liberalism in Europe.
- Europe put itself (temporarily) out of action internationally. Through the mandate system it tried to keep a hold on the Middle East and on Africa.

### Breeding ground for new political ideas and values

- International thinking was introduced: American President Wilson argued for 'a general association of nations'.
- The idea that war is useful spread shortly after the war, around the world and over various generations. In the middle of the 1920s this slowly changed.
- Democratic and liberal values strongly increase in importance in the west, partly due to the implementation of the general right to a single vote. In this way the democratisation of war led to the democratisation of political decision-making.
- Women's emancipation is born: the war was in part possible due to women being put to work *en masse* in the war industry. After the war the women stood up for the positions and rights they have earned.
- On the social level there was a breakthrough in our country (Belgium): the eight-hour workday became a fact, minimum wage was legally regulated.

### Source of new conflicts

- The genocide by the Turkish army of the Armenian civilian population leaves its mark to this day.
- The Peace of Versailles formed the basis of the conflict in the Middle East, in part due to the British breaking their promise to the Arabs that they would become independent after the war. (See the story of T.E. Lawrence of Arabia)
- In the turbulent years that followed the First World War, Germany was plagued by regime crises, famine, left and right rebellion, disease and uncontrollable inflation. The reparations set to Germany demanded a great deal from the German economy, and after the stock market crisis poverty and social unrest increased in Germany. In November 1932 33% of Germans (11 million) voted for the Nazi party. Hitler was supported by men who were marked by the First World War and by those who had not forgotten Versailles. Hitler became chancellor.
- It lay at the basis of the ideological conflict between communism and capitalism, which was expressed after World War II as the Cold War.
- The ambitions of the Balkan states were only temporarily nipped in the bud. After the fall of the Soviet Union, in the beginning of 1990, we were witness to the partial revival of old alliances and the new resurgence of various unresolved questions of nationality (former Yugoslavia, Kurds, Armenians...)

*Robert Schuman (French minister of Foreign Affairs 1948-1953):  
Plan for the establishment of the E.C.S.C (press conference, 9 May 1950)*

*'The French Government proposes that Franco-German production of coal and steel as a whole be placed under a common High Authority. The pooling of coal and steel production will change the destinies of those regions which have long been devoted to the manufacture of munitions of war...The solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible. By pooling basic production and by instituting a new High Authority, whose decisions will bind France, Germany and other member countries, this proposal will lead to the realisation of the first concrete foundation of a European federation indispensable to the preservation of peace.' In this way the European Union finds its origins on the battlefields of the First and Second World Wars.*

### An economic and financial disaster

- War had been industrialised. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, World War I gave the impulse for the expansion of a strong military industrial complex.
- England, Germany and France, before the war the most industrialised countries in the world, were virtually bankrupt. The war had ransacked their treasuries.
  - o 1916: the British spent 250 million dollars a month in the United States, both for themselves and for their allies. On an annual basis this was 3,000 million dollars.
  - o 80% of this amount was lent in New York or obtained by the sale of treasury bonds.
  - o December 1916: stock market crash in New York: 1 billion dollars evaporated from the stock market.
  - o On April 1st 1917 the British debt was 359 million dollars. Each month 325 million dollars were spent in America.
  - o The American participation in the war saved the Entente and possibly also a number of American speculators from bankruptcy.
- Belgium lost 18% of its national assets, meaning machines, buildings, bridges, fields and money.

### Military thinking is accelerated

- New military tactics and weapons were tested on the battlefield. The view was established that victory on the battlefield is achieved through 2 elements:
  - a. The revival of the relationship between fire and movement. Only two weapons were able to both manoeuvre and to direct fire at a target.
    - o The tank becomes more and more important.
    - o On 1 April 1918 the British established the first air force in the world.
  - b. Attack with combined weapon sections was planned around artillery (cannons/tanks) and no longer around the infantry (soldiers).
- The First World War was a training ground for the figures that filled leading roles during World War II: Montgomery, Churchill, Hitler, Göring, Höss (later camp leader of Auschwitz) and many others.

### Ethical shockwaves

- For men like Höss the First World War and the revolutionary uprisings in Germany that followed were an exercise in mass violence. This son of a devout Catholic ended

as the overseer of the hell Auschwitz, the symbol of the industrial killing machines of the concentration camps.

- The horror and the terror of Stalinism (1926) was rooted on the one hand in the First World War and its aftermath in the civil war, and on the other hand in the degeneration of the state under the dictatorship of the communist party. 'I kill, therefore I am', in a horrific confirmation of the normalisation of violence after the First World War in Russia.
- Käthe Kollwitz was right at the time: "The worst thing is that every war sows the seeds for the next. Every war calls for a new war, until everything, everything is ruined."

Baffling figures.

*Scientific research among WWII veterans revealed that only 15% of the soldiers in an attack actually shot at the enemy. Only 2% of these really shot to kill. 1% of these were real psychopaths, born murderers. 1% were able to kill while keeping their empathy. The origin of this is to be found in our brains. In life-threatening situations the primitive part of the brain takes over from the frontal cortex where reason is created. Our primitive instincts prevent us from killing our kind. Killing our fellow humans is an unnatural act. Highly intensive and realistic military training teaches soldiers to shoot as a reflex, automatically. In this way improved training leads to 'improved' shooting behaviour. During the Korea war 50% of the attacking soldiers shot at the enemy, and in the Falkland war this was up to 95%. However, this training could not prevent 98% of soldiers having great difficulty with the consequences of their actions after the war. This was expressed as nightmares, horrible flashbacks and suicides. In WWI 70% of the victims fell to (long range) artillery barrages, such that the enemy was an objective target, not a human being.*