

100 years ago today the mass slaughter of the First War ended

Every family in the UK must have slept so much easier this night one hundred years ago. The terrors of warfare in an industrial age had been great. Life in the trenches was dreadful. It drove some men mad and left many more maimed for life. All too many never returned from their brief lives in battle. Most of those who died were too young to leave children. They left behind grieving parents, brothers and sisters. Today most of us are grandchildren and great grandchildren of the survivors. We are doubly grateful that their generation sacrificed their young lives to resist tyranny, and that our own relatives lived through the trials of war.

Most of the soldiers just accepted their duty, and did not think much in public about the justice or wisdom of it all. Now they have all died we can both remember their bravery and ask ourselves what have nations and statesmen learned from that bitter experience?

The war was about the imperial expansion of Germany. The superior forces of the allies once the USA entered the conflict finally forced an unconditional surrender on the Germans after nearly four years of stalemate on the western front. The power of artillery, the machine gun and barbed wire to defend positions was so much stronger than the ability of forces to attack and overwhelm. As a result much of the war in the West was fought over a few miles each way in Belgium. It led to work on even more fearsome weapons that allowed more mobile warfare with greater chances of success for attackers in the subsequent world conflict. By 1939 planes used for reconnaissance and modest bombing in 1914-18 became terror weapons, with new generations of tanks and faster moving military vehicles. The Second World War ended with the massive explosions of Atom bombs.

The failure of the peace after 1918 to settle the German question should give us pause for thought. A comprehensive victory won at such cost did not give rise to a lasting peace. Far from resolving German aggression and militarism it led to a more fanatical and more heavily armed Germany. We need to remember in future that winning the peace matters as much as winning the war. It entails settling the defeated country in a way which allows it to be stable and successful in future without reverting to invasion and threats to neighbours.

Why did 1945 work when 1918 did not? The allies succeeded in helping Germany and Japan establish working democracies. Clauses against militarism and against re-armament were placed in their constitutions. American power was there as a guarantor of their peace and as a guarantor of the general peace. The Treaty of 1919 left Germany with anger over reparations and a sense they had been exploited in defeat. This led to a dictatorship born of violence and adopted through a sense of grievance pushing Germans to assert new claims over European lands and peoples. After the Second World War the allies learned more about how diplomacy and the post war settlement needed to be wiser and

more effective than the 1918 one. As a result they helped create a peace loving democratic Germany (and Japan) that have not threatened others with force since 1945. The formation of NATO and an allied troop presence for many years in Germany established a new pattern of mutual security.

When I first read of the tragedy on the Somme I was angry that men were led in such a way. The more I have read the more saddened I have been by the excessive slaughter, the failure to find tactics that could shorten the war and lessen the death rates, and the ultimate failure to resolve the underlying problems at the heart of the war.

There is much to remember, and much to learn from as we reflect on a much needed peace in 1918. All too often men were sent over the top to repeat the mistakes of past battles, in the false hope that this time enough damage had been done to the enemy to warrant the risk of walking towards a hail of machine gun and rifle fire. All too often they repeated the same slaughter as the previous time frontal assault by foot soldiers was tried. Why didn't they learn? Why weren't they told to shelter or turn back when they realised that their bombardment had not paved the way for success? Could their commanders not see that the defending forces were still too strong for infantry advancing on machine guns? Why were the politicians and Generals well away from the danger so unable to think of new tactics and so careless of such a huge slaughter? Why could they not trust the junior officers to vary the orders as not only led the futile attacks, but were often the first to die?