

## **Soldiers in World War II: Expectations versus the Reality of War**

During the years, 1914 – 1918 expectations of soldiers *going into* World War I were shaped by society's views, and were very different to the reality of the war.

1. Soldiers advanced into the war with commonly held beliefs. Pre-established ideas of how war was conducted were shaped by the culture of the time.
2. It was these ideas and views towards war which created a push for men to enlist in the war. Thus creating a shift in society's views toward men, those not enlisting being established as cowardly.
3. However the beliefs of war were vastly different to the reality. Battle warfare and conditions, were so unlike previous battles.
4. The realities of war were to a great extent concealed to the outside world. The vast amounts of dead and injured were all kept under wraps as the war had to continue.
5. It was not only the death and injury which was a tragic outcome of World War I, but also the ways it psychologically affected soldiers over time.

1. The expectations of the physical war held by soldiers were shaped by the culture of the age, fantasising the setting of the war to resemble previous battles. War was seen as a romantic notion to society, previous war battles had been hand to hand at close range. Men used swords, knives or guns and charged and retreated across the battlefield, (a war of movement). The ideology of war was of men dressed in their war attire with pride, with medals lining their chests, charged across the field. The battles were over quickly and each had structure, with previously planned tactics. The soldiers went into war with this attitude; war was this romantic notion, which would begin and end quickly. Of course the fear of death loomed, but this was a fear of gun shot, something which as they entered the battlefield the soldiers believed was the worse possible death. This whole romantic notion created by the culture of the time lulled soldiers entering the war into a false sense of security for what was to come.

2. Soldiers enlisting in the war were *channelled* into a duty to their nation, again through the culture of the time. In becoming a soldier, you established yourself within society as being heroic, this being a push for some men to enlist. However a more common and truthful reason behind enlisting for men, was the persona of cowardness given to those not joining. The push for men to enlist in the war can be seen through propaganda posters at the time. These posters tried to guilt men to join the war with slogans such as; 'Who's absent? Is it you?' this writing being above and below the image of Winston Churchill, with soldiers standing to attention in the background. This makes the request for enrolling serious, as the Prime Minister himself is calling for men. It was further made serious by the fact that it was considered a loyalty to the nation, and by joining, true patriotism was shown. With this *reasoning* there was great pressure. There was also the belief that war would achieve a progression of society. A poster with slogan; 'The only road for an Englishman.' has soldiers marching through a rubble town. This is instilling in the men the idea that without men enlisting, things are not going to stop; towns are going to keep being destroyed. The expectation from soldiers was that this was a call of duty, and would be considered cowardly if they did not go to war.

3. The expectations of soldiers for the war ahead were however erroneous. The battles unlike previously were not of movement, (although that was the objective). At the beginning, battles did involve advancing forward to capture towns etc, such as in the Battle of Liege on the 5<sup>th</sup> August. However there was a change of tact, and in late 1914 on the Western Front, trenches were dug. The endeavour for battles was to either try and capture the opposition's trench so as to move forward, or prevent the enemy from moving forward, and destroy them, by holding your position. The strategy for many battles was to constantly bombard the opposition and then charge over to their trench when it was believed they were at their weakest, thus capturing their trenches. Military commanders were slow in recognising old battle tactics would not work due to lack of movement, and they gradually changed tactics. New weaponry was introduced, such as hand grenades and shell artillery. Shells were the most effective weapon in trench warfare. *They made a hole thirty feet deep and fifty feet across, anyone in close range would be killed or maimed.* They did not have time to plan where shells would be fired, as the strategy was to steadily bombard the opposition to weaken them. The conditions in the trenches were appalling. Soldiers slept,

ate and lived with their guns at the ready. At any moment, there could be a raid from opposition's trenches. The sound of gunfire was ever present. Shell could explode at any moment. The call to go 'over the top' could happen *any second*. .....

4. People back home to a certain degree continued to support the war, as they did not know of the realities the men were facing on the front lines. Letters sent to and from the front line masked the reality of war, as the men did not want to explain to their loved ones the truth. The lack of food, widespread diseases and illnesses, as well as muddy, *unhygienic conditionss* were all not explained to the public to the truest extent. The amount and way in which men died was also withheld. Soldiers would send letters to friends families who had died, explaining how their death had been quick, were in many cases they were slow and painful. Men hit by shell shrapnel or who had inhaled deadly fumes from gas attacks especially. (Gas was another weapon invented which when exploded let out a ground covering toxic gas, effects of inhaling included 'burning out' of the lungs, face and eyes.) Any men who were stable enough to travel home were sent on trains at night to side-in stations. Facts were also censored within newspapers. People back at home did not know true statistics. The commanders did this so that the people 'back at home' did not know of the vast amounts of injured. Without support from home, the war would not be able to continue, as this is where the artillery was coming from.

5. Men came under great psychological stress during the war because of the constant and unpredictable risk of death. This constant level of stress had a negative effect on men after the war, both physically and mentally. Some events scarred men so deeply they never forgot. Fighting across trenches meant that the soldiers did not always see the enemy. However, some events brought men back to reality of their killing. Some came to believe that life had no meaning. Because of this, soldiers found it hard to slip back into normal life; there minds would not stop running through of past events. Extreme breakdowns occurred which were known as shell shock, or battle fatigue. Symptoms included clawing at their face, rocking back and forth, and shouting orders at invisible people.

**Conclusion:**

The reality of war was much worse than what had been expected by the soldiers, however the war had to go on. The ideology for the upcoming war was created through the culture of the time, this, the emphasis on soldiers that they would become heroes, as well as the 'duty to ones nation' caused men to enlist into the war. However, soldiers were faced with somewhat of a different situation when they started battle. There was not just the possibility of a quick death by gunshot, but also by toxic gas and shell fire. The reality of the romantic notion of war was crushed, and men lying in muddy trenches did not seem heroic. Not all the truth of reality at the front was exposed to people back at home. Disclosure of information from newspapers and letters meant that they did not know what was really going on. The authorities had begun a war, and therefore had to finish it, no matter how many sacrificed.

Psychological effects....