

# Trench Rats

By Mr Huggins  
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Many men killed in the trenches were buried almost where they fell. If a trench subsided, or new trenches or dugouts were needed, large numbers of decomposing bodies would be found just below the surface. These corpses, as well as the food scraps that littered the trenches, attracted rats. One pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year and so the trenches were soon swarming with them.

Some of these rats grew extremely large. One soldier wrote: "The rats were huge. They were so big they would eat a wounded man if he couldn't defend himself." These rats became very bold and would attempt to take food from the pockets of sleeping men. Two or three rats would always be found on a dead body. They usually went for the eyes first and then they burrowed their way right into the corpse.

One soldier described finding a group of dead bodies while on patrol: "I saw some rats running from under the dead men's greatcoats, enormous rats, fat with human flesh. My heart pounded as we edged towards one of the bodies. His helmet had rolled off. The man displayed a grimacing face, stripped of flesh; the skull bare, the eyes devoured and from the yawning mouth leapt a rat."

**Source A: Punch, 1916**



**Source B: Stuart Dolden, 1920**

The outstanding feature of the trenches was the extraordinary number of rats. The area was infested with them. It was impossible to keep them out of the dugouts. They grew fat on the food that they pilfered from us, and anything they could pick up in or around the trenches; they were bloated and loathsome to look at. Some were nearly as big as cats. We were filled with an instinctive hatred of them, because however one tried to put the thought of one's mind, one could not help feeling that they fed on the dead.

# Trench Rats

**Source C: George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)**

Rats bred by the tens of thousands and lived on the fat of the land. When we were sleeping in funk holes the things ran over us, played about, copulated and fouled our scraps of food, their young squeaking incessantly. There was no proper system of waste disposal in trench life. Empty tins of all kinds were flung away over the top on both sides of the trench. Millions of tins were thus available for all the rats in France and Belgium in hundreds of miles of trenches. During brief moments of quiet at night, one could hear a continuous rattle of tins moving against each other. The rats were turning them over. What happened to the rats under heavy shell-fire was a mystery, but their powers of survival kept place with each new weapon, including poison gas.

**Source D: Richard Beasley, interviewed in 1993.**

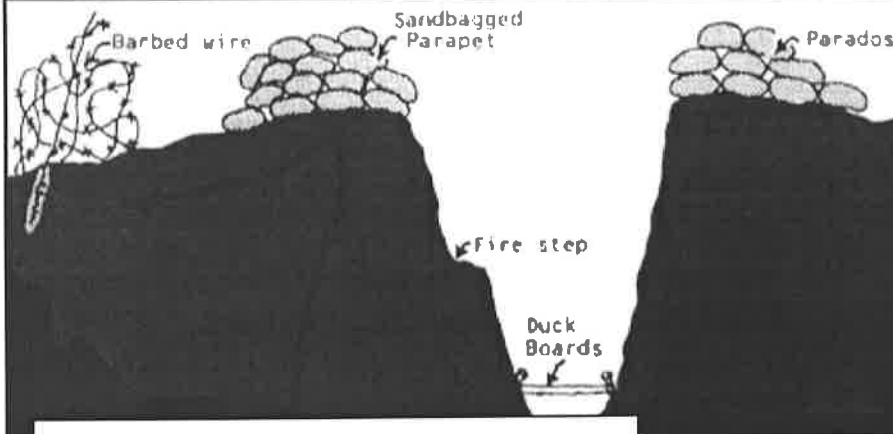
If you left your food the rats would soon grab it. Those rats were fearless. Sometimes we would shoot the filthy swines. But you would be put on a charge for wasting ammo, if the sergeant caught you.

**Source E: Frank Laird writing after the war.**

Sometimes the men amused themselves by baiting the ends of their rifles with pieces of bacon in order to have a shot at them at close quarters.

# The First World War

# Trench Warfare



## The Trench

The British and French Armies in Northern France first dug Trenches. The aim of trenches was to act as a barrier against the rapid advance of the German army from which a counter attack could be made. At first they were quickly and easily constructed using few materials other than sandbags and a shovel.

## Trench Details

**Barbed wire:** to make running at the trench difficult.

**Sandbagged parapet:** to stop the trench collapsing.

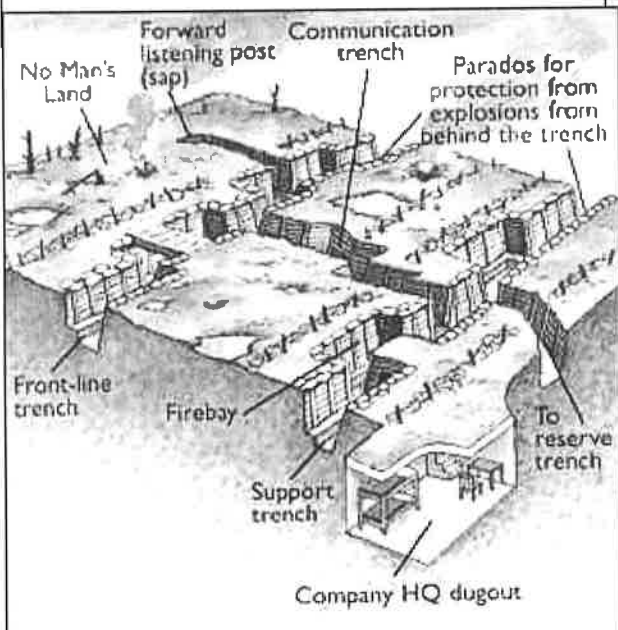
**Parados:** to stop 'shrapnel' getting into the trench.

**Fire step:** to shoot from.

**Duck Boards:** stopped the bottom of the trench getting very muddy and slippery.

## Development of the Trench

As it became obvious that the Trench was not going to be the short-term barrier it was originally intended to be, networks of trenches were constructed. These trenches had to ensure the safety of the soldiers who would live, eat, sleep and fight there. Often these trench systems were as close as 20 meters away from the enemy who would face them across No Man's Land.



## Trench Important Points

**Advantages:** easy to make, easy to defend, cheap to build, don't need lots of men to defend them.

**Disadvantages:** wet, cold, hard to get in and out of without being seen by the enemy. Trenches were very dirty and unhygienic as there was no water or flushing toilets.

# Body Lice

**Source B: Private George Coppard, *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969)**

A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers. After a session of this, my face would be covered with small blood spots from extra big fellows which had popped too vigorously. Lice hunting was called 'chatting'. In parcels from home it was usual to receive a tin of supposedly death-dealing powder or pomade, but the lice thrived on the stuff.

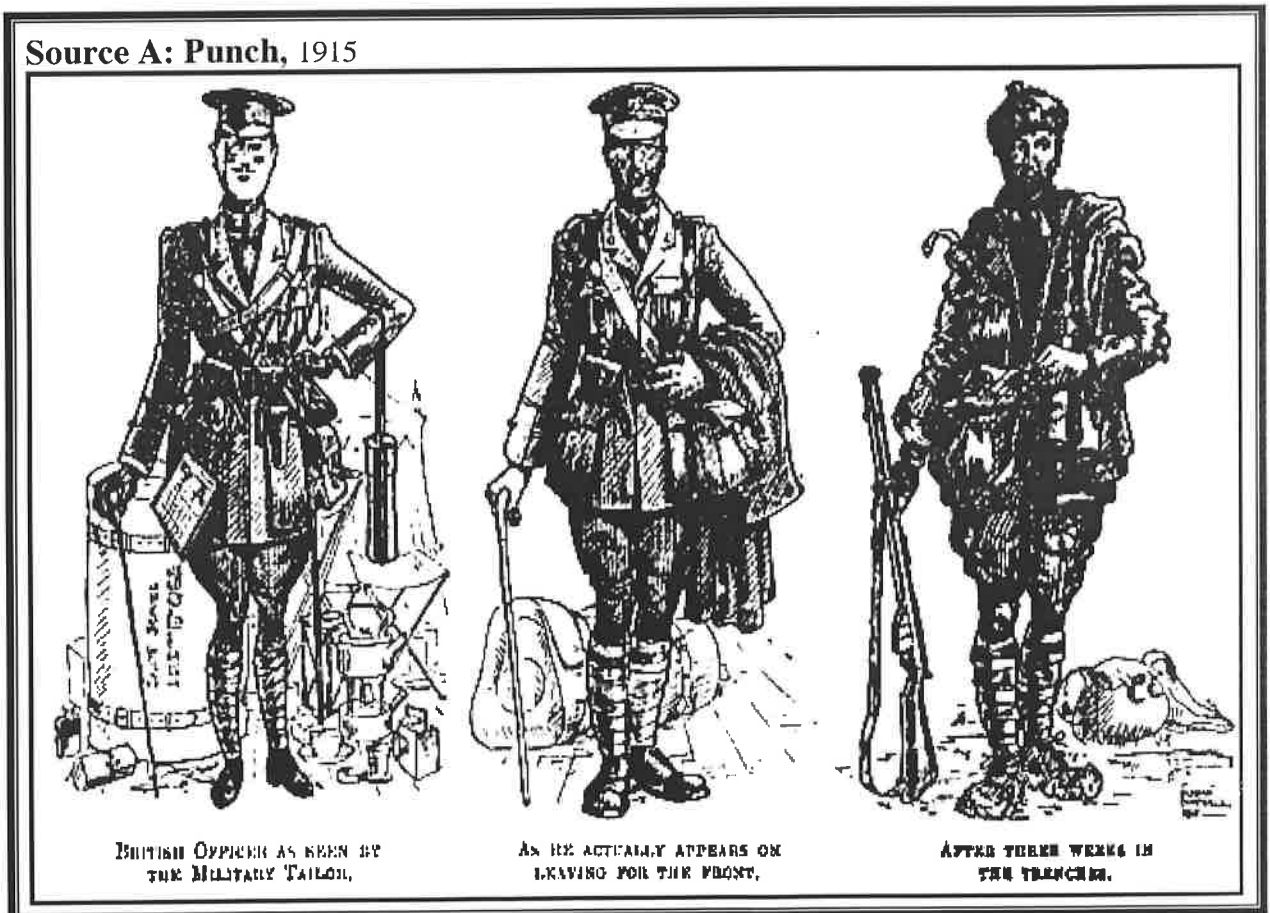
**Source C: Private Stuart Dolden wrote about his experiences in the trenches after the war.**

We had to sleep fully dressed, of course, this was very uncomfortable with the pressure of ammunition on one's chest restricted breathing; furthermore, when a little warmth was obtained the vermin used to get busy, and for some unexplained reason they always seemed to get lively in the portion of one's back, that lay underneath the belt and was the most inaccessible spot. The only way to obtain relief was to get out of the dugout, put a rifle barrel between the belt and rub up and down like a donkey at a gatepost. This stopped it for a bit, but as soon as one got back into the dugout, and was getting reasonably warm so would the little brutes get going again.

# Body Lice

Men in the trenches suffered from lice. One soldier writing after the war described them as "pale fawn in colour, and they left blotchy red bite marks all over the body." They also created a sour; stale smell. Various methods were used to remove the lice. A lighted candle was fairly effective but the skill of burning the lice without burning your clothes was only learnt with practice. Where possible the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of hot water while their clothes were being put through delousing machines. Unfortunately, this rarely worked. A fair proportion of the eggs remained in the clothes and within two or three hours of the clothes being put on again a man's body heat had hatched them out.

As well as causing frenzied scratching, lice also carried disease. This was known as pyrexia or trench fever. The first symptoms were shooting pains in the shins and was followed by a very high fever. Although the disease did not kill, it did stop soldiers from fighting and accounted for about 15% of all cases of sickness in the British Army.



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# Trench Foot



(1) After the war, Captain G. H. Impey, 7th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, wrote about his experiences of trench life.

The trenches were wet and cold and at this time some of them did not have duckboards and dug-outs. The battalion lived in mud and water. Altogether about 200 men were evacuated for trench feet and rheumatism. Gum boots were provided for the troops in the most exposed positions. Trench feet was still a new ailment and the provision of dry socks was vitally important. Part of the trench was reserved for men to go two at a time, at least once a day, and rub each other's feet with grease.

# Long Term Causes of the First World War



In 1900 nearly everyone would have agreed with this statement made by a French Politician. A large Empire was important not only for trade but also national prestige. The larger your empire, the more important your country was. In 1800 France and Britain both had large empires, and these continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century.

In 1870s Italy and Germany became united countries for the first time. They too wanted an overseas empire. The result was that in the years up to 1900 competition between European powers grew more intense. There was a scramble for territory, especially in Africa with its rich minerals and resources.

This competition for colonies (countries controlled by European power) caused several disputes. For example, in 1906 and 1911 Germany and France argued about who should own Morocco. However, none of these arguments lead to a war, but they did lead to resentment and cause bad relations between some European countries. Sources A and B below show the colonies that were controlled by each European power.

[Source A: Empire map – separate sheet]

**Source B: European countries Empires in 1914.**

	Population of country	Population of colonies	Area in km <sup>2</sup> of colonies
Great Britain	40.8 million	390 million	27 million
France	39.6 million	63 million	11 million
Germany	63 million	15 million	2.5 million
Austria	50 million	none	none
Russia	139 million	none	none

# Long Term Causes of the First World War

## The Arms Race

When the German Emperor Wilhelm II, known as the Kaiser in Britain, made the statement in Source C, everyone knew what he meant to do next and began to increase the size of their armed forces. This led to an arms race in which each country tried to build a much bigger and better military machine than their enemy. Between 1870 and 1914, military spending by the main European powers increased by 300 percent! After 1871 all the major nations except Britain brought in conscription, which meant that all men over the age of 18 were forced to serve a minimum period in one of their country's armed services.

**Source C: This is what the Emperor of Germany, Wilhelm II, said in 1898.**



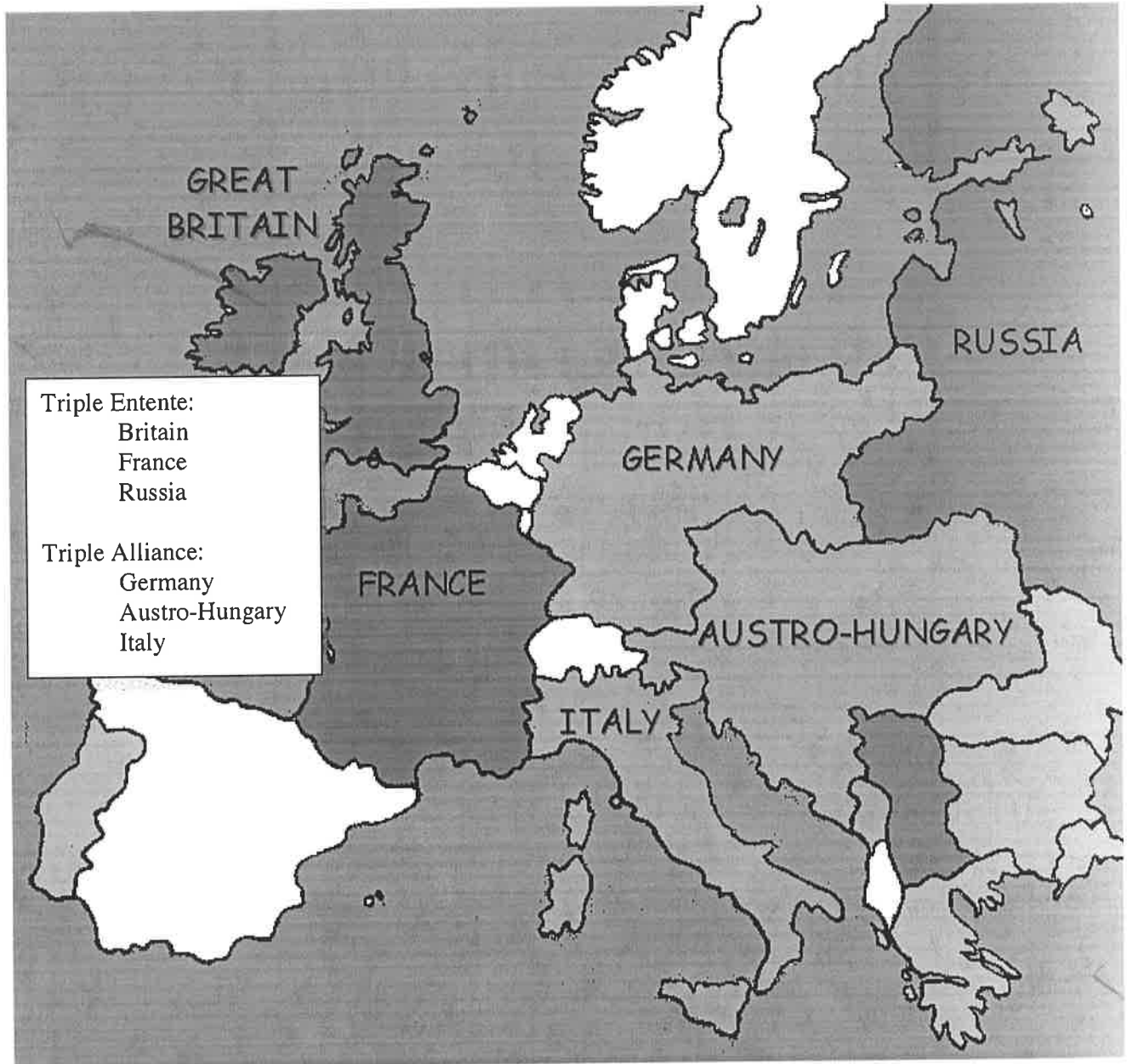
**Source D: European Military spending and the size of their armies, 1913 - 14.**

Country	Soldiers	Money spent in millions.
Britain	750,000	50,000,000
France	1,500,000	40,000,000
Germany	8,250,000	60,000,000
Austria	750,000	22,500,000
Russia	1,250,000	15,500,000
Italy	750,000	10,000,000



# Long Term Causes of the First World War

They formed two gangs. These gangs were called alliances. The Map below shows the gangs or alliances that each of the great European powers had joined by 1914.



**Activity 3: Alliance System.**

# Long Term Causes of the First World War

enough resources to protect its vast Empire. In particular, Britain was worried about the growing size of the Germany Navy.

The British Government was determined that their navy should remain the biggest. Soon an arms race to build new battleships began between Britain and Germany. In 1906, Britain launched HMS Dreadnought, a new battleship that was stronger and faster than any other ship built before. Soon Germany also began to build 'Dreadnoughts' as well. The table below in Source E shows the results of this naval arms race.

**Source E: German and British ships in 1914.**

Type of ship	Great Britain	Germany
Dreadnoughts	29	17
Pre-Dreadnoughts	40	20
Battle-cruisers	34	9
Cruisers	74	41
Destroyers	167	130
Torpedo boats	49	0
Submarines	75	21

**Source F: Dreadnought, 1906**



Country	Men mobilized	Killed	Wounded	POW's + missing	Total casualties	casualties in % of men mobilized
Russia	12 million	1.7mill	4.9mill	2.5mill	9.15mill	76.3
France	8.4 mill	1.3mill	4.2mill	537,000	6.1mill	73.3
GB + Empire	8.9mill	908,000	2mill	191,000	3.1mill	35.8
Italy	5.5mill	650,000	947,000	600,000	2.1mill	39
USA	4.3mill	126,000	234,000	4,500	350,000	8
Japan	800,000	300	900	3	1210	0.2
Romania	750,000	335,000	120,000	80,000	535,000	71
Serbia	700,000	45,000	133,000	153,000	331,000	47
Belgium	267,000	13,800	45,000	34,500	93,000	35
Greece	230,000	5000	21,000	1000	27,000	12
Portugal	100,000	7222	13,700	12,000	33,000	33
<b>Total Allies</b>	<b>42million</b>	<b>5 million</b>	<b>13million</b>	<b>4 million</b>	<b>22million</b>	<b>52%</b>
Germany	11million	1.7million	4.2million	1.1million	7.1million	65
Austria	7.8million	1.2million	3.6million	2.2million	7 million	90
Turkey	2.8million	325,000	400,000	250,000	975,000	34
Bulgaria	1.2million	87,000	152,000	27,000	266,000	22
<b>Total Central Powers</b>	<b>22.8mill</b>	<b>3.3million</b>	<b>8.3million</b>	<b>3.6million</b>	<b>15 million</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>65 million</b>	<b>8.5mill</b>	<b>21million</b>	<b>7.7mill</b>	<b>37million</b>	<b>57%</b>