

The Forgotten First World War

In Britain, the first world war is predominantly taught as a European fought war between England and Germany, with only occasionally mentioning other countries involvement. However, some may not know of the battles that took place in the rest of the world. In fact, studies show that only one in five people in the UK know of the African contribution in World War One. The topic of the forgotten first world war is used to revive the elements of the great war which are not taught in modern day education.

One way in which this is emphasised is the forgotten fronts of Africa. Most people believe that the first British shots of the war were fired by corporal Earnest Edward Thomas. However, it is noted in the book *The First World War in Africa* that the first rounds were shot ten days before Thomas on the 12 August 1914 by sergeant Alhaji Grunshi of the West African Frontier Force. The African colonies were engaged in warfare for the longest, as the commander Paul Von-Lettow Vorbeck did not formally surrender until two weeks after the traditional armistice in 1918. I believe that these events were important because they show that the beliefs of the general public are incorrect as a result of too much of a focus on Britain and Germany in the school curriculum. These viewpoints may also persist due to the popularisation of the works of famous soldier poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon as well as literature. For instance, the Michael Morpurgo book *War Horse* is one of the most well-known English language depictions of the first world war.

Another largely forgotten element of the first world war is the Indian army's contribution to the war effort in Europe and the middle east. Among the territories under British rule, India made the largest commitment to the war effort, with over 1.4 million people recruited as soldiers or non-combatant staff. In fact, during the battle of Neuve Chapele in 1915, around half the British line was made up of Indian soldiers.

Unfortunately, the Indian troops often faced discrimination and racism and were treated as less than the other troops. However, the first world war was the start of the first cross-cultural exchanges where soldiers from India and England with different backgrounds could interact with each other. For example, a man from Cornwall could find himself in a trench fighting alongside a Punjabi Muslim man. I believe that these encounters were incredibly important as the war

allowed India to become more militarised and develop more anti-colonial attitudes.

Germany also had a number of African colonial possessions. These included Togo, Kamerun (Cameroon), German Southwest Africa (modern day Namibia) and German East Africa (modern day Tanzania, Burundi and Rwanda). Hostilities began with the British invasion of Togo on the twelfth of August 1914. The conditions in the African battles were similar to that of the European ones with common shortages of food and diseases spreading throughout the troops. However, a difference between the African and European battles is that the conflict in Africa remained a war of movement and did not develop into immobile trench warfare. Many of the African colonies were incredibly isolated, as a result of this, they were not informed about the armistice for two days and continued fighting after the eleventh of November.

One of the forgotten battles of the first world war was the siege of Tsingtao in China. All of the German Asian colonies were under Australian or New Zealander control by mid-September 1914 except for Tsingtao, as it was better defended due to the city being used to sustain German naval operations in the Pacific. The British and Japanese forces landed on the 2nd of September 1914 with the style of fighting in Tsingtao being very similar to that in Europe with trenches being dug and a reliance on heavy artillery. Although fighting alongside each other, Japan and Britain did not get along. Japan viewed Britain as an antiquated imperial power compared to their modern rising empire. The German troops surrendered Tsingtao on the 7th of November 1914 and the allied forces were surprised at the swiftness of the submission. Although being a battle in the First World War, Tsingtao was part of a series of conflicts between 1895 and 1922. This also challenges the western concept of the war's neat beginning in 1914 and ending in 1918.

In conclusion, the forgotten first world war is a course that I would consider studying at university. This is because I found researching the often overlooked components of the first world war incredibly fascinating and I was interested in the topic. I believe that there is a real opportunity to enhance people's knowledge on the global events of The Great War.