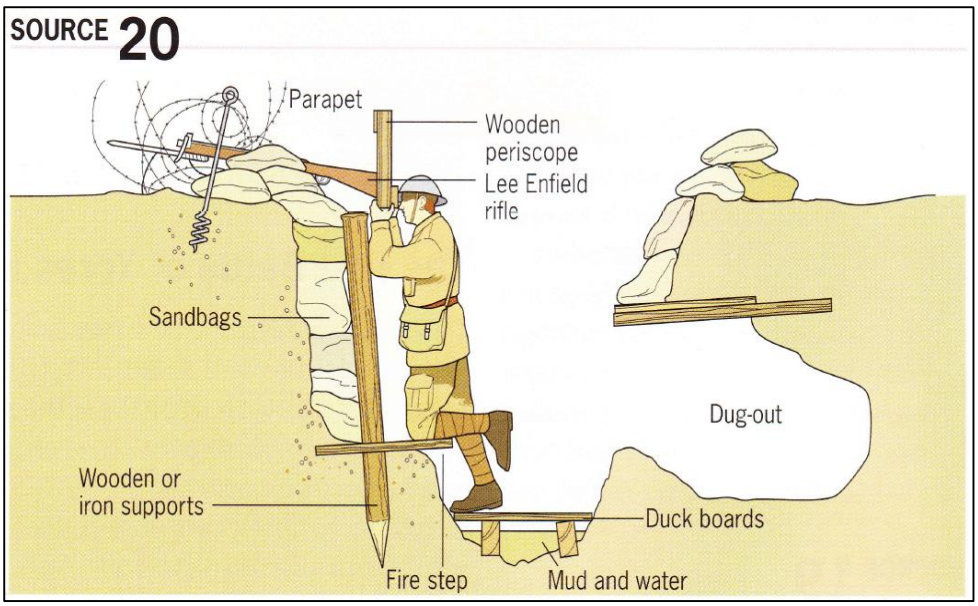
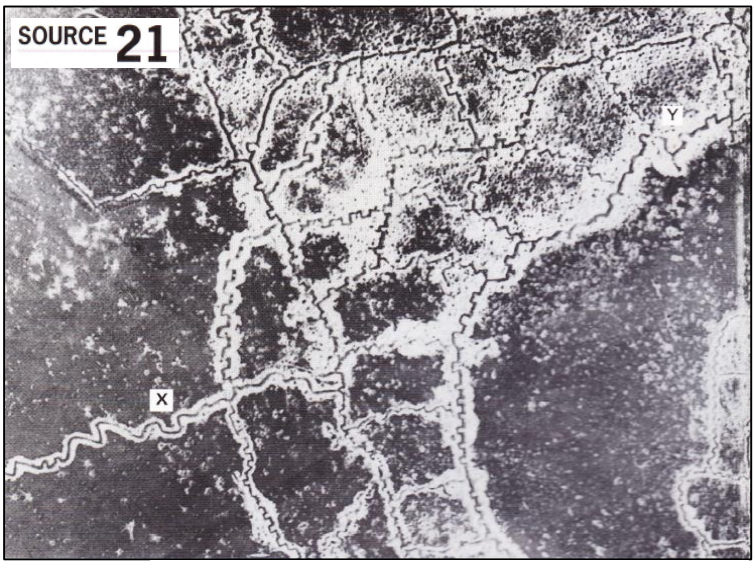
What was the fighting like on the Western Front?

Change 1: Trench Warfare

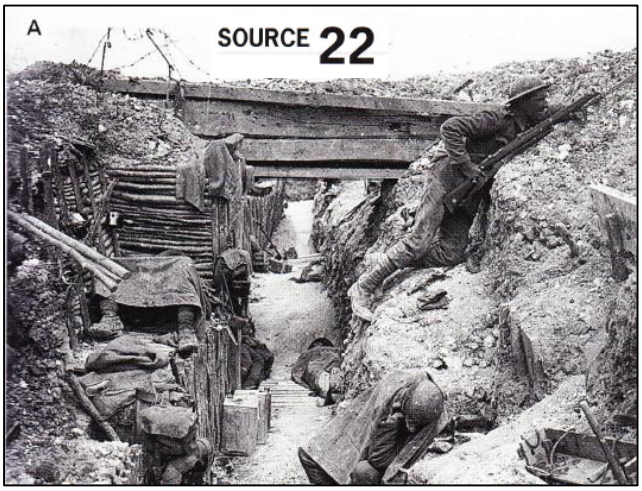
The most obvious new feature of this kind of warfare was the system of trenches. Instead of a war of movement this war was static. Trenches began as simple shelters but by 1915 they had developed into complex defensive systems. Source 20 shows a cross-section of a trench. However, Source 22 probably gives a better idea of what the trenches were really like:



Cross-section of a front-line trench. These were supported by much stronger reserve trenches and linked by communication trenches. German trenches were generally stronger and better constructed than Allied trenches. The Germans generally held better ground and had established their trenches in the early stages of the war. Many of their dug-outs and machine-gun posts were reinforced with concrete which provided a stronger defence against artillery bombardment.



The Trench System. This is an aerial photo taken by British planes. The main area is German, British trenches on right.



*Trenches in (**A**) the Somme, July 1916, and (**B**) Guedecourt, December 1916.*

Questions

1. One of the main problems facing army planners was supplying the army with food, weapons and other equipment. Use Sources 20-22 to compile a list of all the things they would need.
2. Sources 20-22 give you three different kinds of evidence about the trenches: a modern reconstruction, an aerial photograph, and two ground-level photographs. Explain how each one is useful to a historian.
3. Write your own definition of trench warfare.
4. Explain why the two trenches shown in Source 22 are so different.

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Change 2: Artillery became more powerful

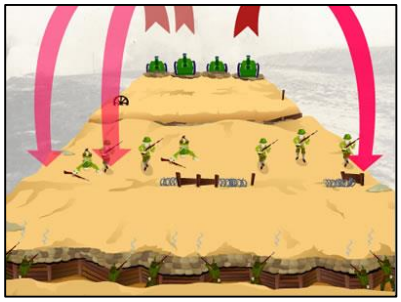
According to military historian John Terraine, '*The war of 1914-1918 was an artillery war: artillery was the battle-winner, artillery was what caused the greatest loss of life, the most dreadful wounds, and the deepest fear*'. For much of the war, all day, every day, artillery would pound the enemy's trenches with hundreds of shells. Artillery bombardments caused more casualities than any other weapon.

At the beginning of the war the guns were not very accurate. Firing from well behind their own lines, artillery often bombarded their own forward trenches before they got their range right. Military planners even expected up to 10% of their soldiers to be killed by their own shells during an assault on the trenches. Because early artillery guns were not very accurate, they were often fired indirectly at the target in an attempt to saturate the target area with artillery shells. This caused heavy casualties but the main aim was to supress enemy fire and shock the enemy before an infantry attack.

There are two basic types of artillery:

1. ***The Cannon*** which was used to fire a shell over a long arc and hit its target head-on.

2. *The Howitzer* *(or Mortar)* which was used to lob shells over a high arc so it lands atop its target.



By the end of the war, artillery was much bigger, and it was also more accurate. By 1918 artillery tactics were extremely sophisticated as well. Instead of just firing all their artillery at one target, the ***creeping barrage*** was developed which fired about 50 metres ahead of the advancing infantry and would continue to move forward 100 yards a minute. This enabled the infantry to take advantage and attack the enemy trenches, without allowing time for the defenders to recover from the shock of bombardment and emerge from their dug-outs.

Artillery was the key weapon of the Great War. Throughout the war a vast part of European industry was given over to making shells for the artillery. The capacity to manufacture enough ammunition and artillery pieces became a deciding factor in the war.

Change 3: Cavalry became less important

The First World War saw another major military change – the end of the cavalry as a weapon of the modern army. Before 1914, all sides thought the speed and mobility of the cavalry would be decisive. However, once trenches were dug cavalry became too vulnerable to artillery and machine guns.

In one particular cavalry charge only three out of four hundred horses survived. Even so, horses and mules remained vital for transporting supplies and equipment, as well as pulling artillery into place in the swamp-like conditions of the Western Front.

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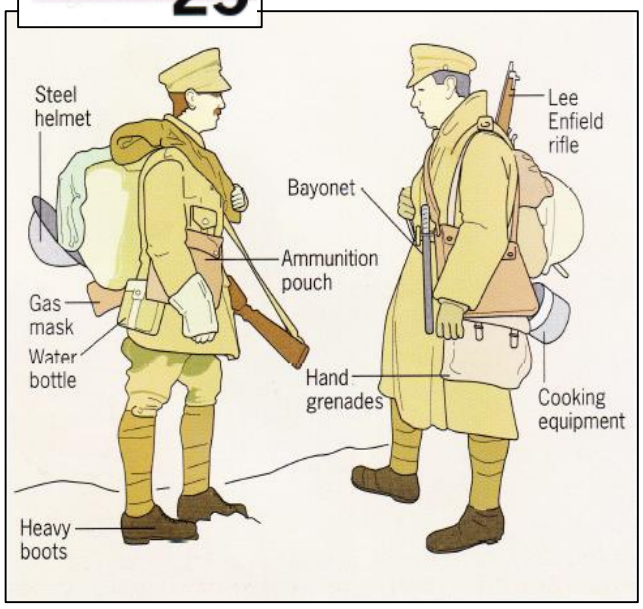
Change 4: Infantry became more important

The infantryman or foot soldier was the backbone of the army. The standard equipment for an infantry soldier is shown in **Source 25**. Steel helmets giving some protection against shrapnel from enemy shelling only became standard equipment in 1916. Troops also improvised their own weapons for the conditions of trench warfare.

Before the war, the theory was that an attack on the enemy would be led by a cavalry charge. The infantry's job was to follow the cavalry and take charge of the captured positions. They then had to defend the position against counter-attack.

Trench warfare changed the role of the infantry dramatically. The cavalry charge was replaced by the 'infantry charge' which became the main tactic used in the war.

SOURCE 25



An infantryman's weapons and equipment.

'Over the top'

A major assault would usually proceed like this:

1. The attacking side's artillery bombarded the front-line trenches of the enemy. This was called a 'barrage'.

2. As soon as the barrage stopped, attacking troops would go 'over the top' - that is, climb out of their trenches. It was now a race between them and the defenders, who had to emerge from their shelters and set up their machine guns before the attackers got over the barbed wire of no man's land.

3. The defenders usually had the advantage. They swept the advancing attackers with machine-gun fire, sometimes setting up a cross-fire.

4. If the attackers did capture forward positions, they then had to hold them. This generally proved impossible and they were usually forced back to their original position.

> *"The spirit of the bayonet... must be inculcated into all ranks so that they may go forward with that aggressive determination and confidence of superiority born of continual practice... In an assault the enemy must be killed with the bayonet. Firing should be avoided for in the mix-up, a bullet, passing through an opponent's body, may kill a friend who happens to be in the line of fire."*
>
> From a government pamphlet on military training, published before the war.

SOURCE 24

The machine gun was devastatingly effective against the infantry charge. It could fire eight bullets a second or more, and each trench would have a number of machine guns. During an infantry charge it could cut down a whole brigade in minutes. The machine gun made it inevitable that any charge on an enemy trench would cost many lives. However, the theory was that if enough soldiers charged then no matter how many were killed or wounded on the way there would still be enough men alive to capture the machine guns in the enemy trenches.

The infantry charge was the only attacking strategy the generals had. They thought that if they did it often enough, with enough men, eventually it would wear down the enemy, and they could break through. However, the idea that the generals simply threw away lives is not supported by the evidence. As the war continued, the generals tried new tactics, weapons and equipment. New camouflage techniques were used to protect troops and guns. Artillery and infantry attacks were better synchronised. Troops were given gas masks. One of the most promising developments came very late in the war: the tank.

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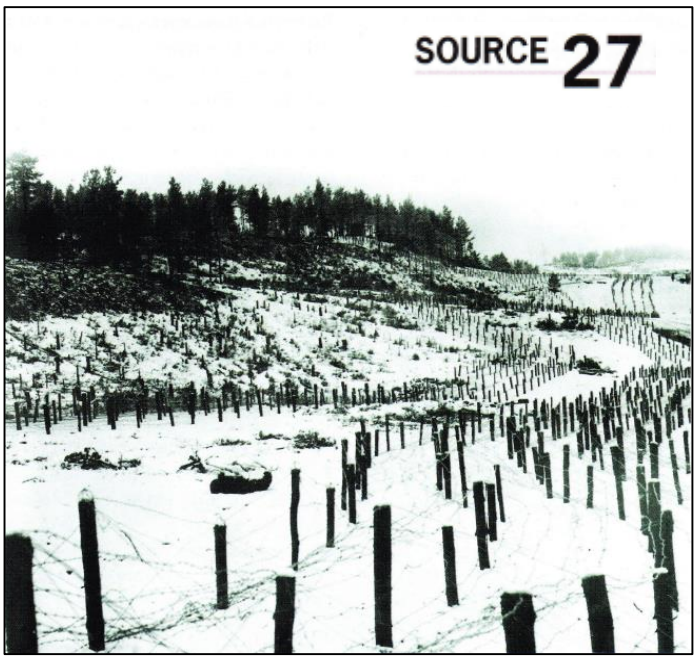
Day-to-day tasks

The soldiers did not spend all their time charging the enemy trenches. Far from it. Most of the infantry's work was more routine. Infantry soldiers spent much of their time digging new trenches or repairing old ones. They carted supplies and equipment up and down communications trenches. They spent long hours on sentry duty or in secret listening posts near to enemy trenches.

There were also specialist infantry called sappers. Sappers were usually ex-miners who dug tunnels below enemy trenches and placed huge mines there.

The infantry also made occasional raids in small numbers on enemy trenches – to capture prisoners or particular positions. Prisoners provided priceless information. If a new enemy unit was in your sector, you could soon be facing an attack.

The miles of barbed wire that protected the German trenches from infantry charge.



SOURCE 26

'We see the attackers coming. Our machine guns rattle, rifles crack. We recognise the helmets of the attackers. They are French. They have already suffered heavily when they reach our barbed wire.

We retreat. We leave bombs behind us in the trench. We hurl explosives at the feet of the enemy before we run. At last we reach one of our support trenches that is in somewhat better condition. It is manned and ready for the counter attack… Our guns open in full blast and stop the enemy attack… We counter attack. It does not come quite to hand to hand fighting; they are driven back. We arrive once again at our original shattered trench and pass on beyond it… Now we are so close on the heels of our retreating enemies that we reach their line almost at the same time as they do… But we cannot stay here long. We must retire under cover of our artillery to our own position…We get back pretty well. There is no further attack by the enemy.'

Adapted from 'All Quiet on the Western Front', a novel by Erich Maria Remarque. He was a German who fought on the Western Front and was badly wounded twice.

***Over the top**, a painting by John Nash. It is based on an attack that he took part in, in 1917, near Cambrai. The soldiers had to climb out of their own trench, charge towards the enemy trench and try to capture it. Of 80 men in his unit, 68 were killed in the first 5 minutes of attack.*

3. Read **Source 26**. Draw a diagram to show what you think actually happened in this attack.
4. Why was it so easy for the Germans to win back their captured trench?
5. What was the role of the artillery in this attack?
6. Look at **Source 27**.
   a. If you were an attacking soldier how could you get through this defence?
   b. How might the following factors affect your answer to a.?
      i. It is completely dark.
      ii. You are being fired on.
      iii. You are carrying heavy equipment.
      iv. You are wearing a gas mask.
7. Look at **Source 28**. One of the artist's aims was to show how vulnerable soldiers were when going over the top. Do you think he succeeded? Explain your answer.

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Change 5: Poison Gas

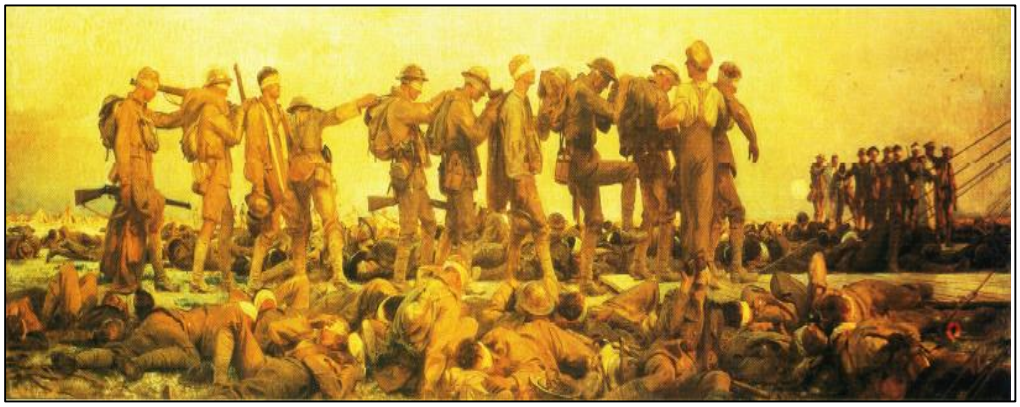
The first poison gas attack was made in April 1915. The Germans released chlorine which wafted on the wind across no man's land into the British trenches. There was panic there as the soldiers coughed, retched and struggled to breate.From that time gas attacks by both sides became a regular feature of the war. To start with, the aim of a gas attack was to disable enemy troops so that your own infantry charge would be successful. Later, scientists on both sides began to perfect new and more lethal gases such as mustard gas, which had a perfumed smell but which burned, blinded or slowly killed the victims over four to five weeks.

However, scientists also developed very effective gas masks. Soldiers in the trenches would carry their gas masks with them all the time. At the alert they would put them on. As a result only 3,000 British troops died from gas in the whole war. The main significance of gas was there its psychological impact. Soldiers who could bear a long bombardment by artillery often lived in fear of a gas attack.

SOURCE 29

From a poem by Wilfred Owen. He served on the Western Front and was killed just days before the final armistice in November 1918.

GAS! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling.
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.
[How sweet and proper it is to die for your country]



***Gassed*, a painting by John Singer Sargent. A famous portrait painter, Sargent was commissioned in 1918 to paint a memorial picture of the soldiers killed and injured in the war.**

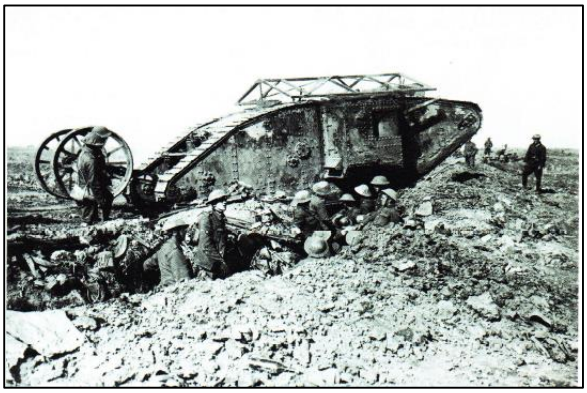
1. According to Source 29 what were the effects of poison gas on the victim?

2. Why do you think gas attacks were regarded with such fear?

3. Do you think Wilfred Owen (Source 29) would have approved of Source 30? Explain your answer.

Change 6: Tanks

The tank was a British invention. Early in the war inventors took the idea to the army leaders but it was rejected as impractical. However, Winston Churchill, head of the navy, thought that the idea had potential and his department funded its development. Two years later, the tanks were used for the first time at the Battle of the Somme. They advanced ahead of the infantry, crushing barbed-wire defences and spraying the enemy with machine-gun fire. They caused alarm among the Germans and raised the morale of the British troops. Surely this was the weapon that could achieve a breakthrough!



However, these machines only moved at walking pace. They were not very manoeuvrable and very unreliable – more than half of them broke down before they got to the German trenches. It was not until a year late, in November 1917 at Cambrai, that tanks actually achieved great success. Unfortunately they were too successful. They blasted through enemy lines so quickly that the infantry could not keep up. By 1918, German forces were using armour-piercing machine-gun bullets to deadly effect. They had also learned how to adapt field guns to fire at tanks. Tanks were virtually impossible to miss because they were so large and slow. However, the tank offered a significant boost to morale.