



The War, The Great War, The First World War

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Whilst visiting Germany and talking to colleagues last year the topic of what we call the War arose in conversation. One of my German friends noted that in Britain we occasionally use the term 'The Great War' presumably, he suggested, because it was 'great' in the sense that Britain was victorious. When I pointed out that it was not from 'great' as in 'wonderful', but 'great' as in magnitude and scale he was slightly bemused.

That said how do such terms arise? How do wars earn their name? During the war itself the terms 'Great War' or 'European War' were used commonly as indicated F. H. Simonds 1914 publication ['The Great War'](#) which set out to recount the conflict in a series of phases. 'World War' was also used having parallels with German 'der Weltkrieg', where, interestingly enough, they also termed it the 'time of greatness'. During the war itself, 'European War' was also suggested but as the conflict now encompassed Africa and the Middle-East this again was insufficient. Indeed, [Charles Repington](#) writing for *The Morning Post* recorded a conversation where he struggled with the correct term - The War, The Great War, and The German War.

It is interesting to note that in the end Repington, with remarkable foresight, chose for his book of 1920 the title *The First World War* (a name Churchill was also to use for the Seven Years' War), reminding us of the remarks D. H. Lawrence reportedly said whilst attending a party on Armistice Night:

'The war isn't over. The hate and evil is greater now than ever. Very soon war will break out again and overwhelm you ... the Germans will soon rise again.' (quoted in S. Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 1992, pp. 566-67).

By looking at terms used in publications over the 20th century we can see the use of various phrases across the [decades](#). Note how 'The Great War' dominates and only shows signs of decline in the late 1920s/early 1930s as the threat of a second conflict looms (and plummets after 1940 as the second world war becomes embedded in the public conscious), at the same time 'World War I' and the 'First World War' increase in use. Using a similar analysis we can also see how the [theme of 'war'](#) begins to pervade publications from 1911 onwards (and 1936), as tensions across Europe rose.

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