



## Forgetting the French

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2012-10-03 18:51:38

One of the ongoing discussions (or controversies depending on your viewpoint) regarding the First World War focuses on its global nature. Specifically regarding the dominant view of the Western Front above all else that was happening elsewhere between 1914-1918. This is not a entirely British issue, although it is clearly manifested in our view of the war, but it is with the British view I wish to start.

I intend to tackle the global nature of the war in a forthcoming post but, to begin with, I thought it would perhaps be best to highlight one of the side issues with the war's inter-national aspect and that is the essential side-lining of the French in much of the dominant British imagery of the war.

It is of course understandable that here in Britain we would focus most of our attention on the efforts of our own nation but there is a fine line between having a specific focus and actually ignoring what else is going on. In too many cases it seems that it is the latter rather than the former which is dictating response.

[Matthew Leonard](#) has already written on this very website on the fact that the Verdun battlefields are strangely ignored by other nationalities. There's an argument that a purely French/German battlefield wouldn't greatly interest the British either in a tourist sense or for wider examination, but what of the Somme?

The first day of the Somme holds a powerful position in the British social consciousness, and that's not to suggest that it shouldn't do, but again it comes at the expense of the wider battle. For example the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing (which was once described to me as the largest Lego structure ever made - go ahead and try not to think that everytime you see it now) is a favourite spot for Battlefield Tours and documentaries regarding either the Somme or the war in general. However what is it you find behind the Thiepval Memorial?

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600 gravestones. 300 for the British and 300 for the French. Most of these are graves marking the bodies of unknown soldiers. In its own way it seems frankly ludicrous that it needs to be pointed out but the French were on the Somme too. So why don't we talk about it?

This can, perhaps at least partly, be explained by the role that the Somme and Verdun play in the memory of each nation, For the French 1916 is dominated by Verdun whilst for the British its the Somme. But considering how badly the 1 July 1916 went for the British Army surely it is important to understand why it wasn't a disaster for the French and in fact to understand why the French were often several steps ahead of the British when it came to tactical and military attributes during the time.

Whilst the French did occupy less of the Somme battlefield than the British (a result of the need for greater manpower at Verdun) and the positions south of the river were less heavily fortified than those facing the British, they also approached the challenge of the Somme differently to the British. Foch, directing the battle for the French, used a greater ratio of artillery pieces to tackle German positions than the British and was able to overwhelm and destroy the opposing trenches with far greater success. It is added contexts such as this that can help us understand some of the reasons why the British suffered on the first day of the Somme, and elsewhere, like they did.

But we shouldn't just look at the French example to add extra meaning to our own experiences. The French were far more important to the Western Front for much of the war than the British were. There may have come a time in the eyes of some of the generals and soldiers that the First World War became a contest between Britain and Germany, but for most of the war the British weren't in much of a position to do anything on their own.

The French held more of the front line than the British. They fielded more men. They suffered greater casualties. They suffered bigger disasters than the British. They fought in longer battles than the British, and, most importantly of all, when the war was finally won in 1918 the allied armies were under the authority of a single French commander Marshal Foch.

I've asked some of my students in the past; 'Who won the First World War?' and the answer is generally 'We did'. But this is 'we' meaning the British. Which is a problem. It places far too great an emphasis on the British at the expense of everyone else who fought in the Entente Alliance but principally because it completely ignores the role of the French.

This isn't just an issue in popular consciousness of the war either. As befits a man who has now been studying the war for longer than it took to fight it, I have a full bookshelf of texts regarding the war. I could go and select pretty much any of them that focus on the Somme or the British on the Western Front and the references to the French would be almost negligible. That's not universally the case obviously and in recent years there's been a great push towards more inter-national understandings of the war, but the British experience has become incredibly insular which is neither healthy for our own national identity nor for building a more cohesive image of the war and the British place within it.

If, therefore, we accept that the French have been relatively hard-done by in regards to British recognition the natural response is to ask 'why?' This is not particularly easy to answer and, I feel, is rooted more in our understanding of the French army during the Second World War. One of the many quotable lines from The Simpsons is Ground-keeper Willy's description of the French as 'Cheese-eating Surrender-monkeys'. Whilst it is clearly a fairly crude description it does, in its own way, capture a particularly dominant view of the French in Britain in regards to their surrender to the Nazis and supposed general untrustworthiness.

It is hardly a fair description of course, such stereotypes rarely are, particularly when you consider that the only reason the British Army got away from Dunkirk is because they had somewhere to retreat to. Had Britain been part of mainland Europe they would not likely have fared much better in 1940 than the French army did. Regardless of that however I can't help but feel that this WW2-related image has seemingly been reflected back through time into either an assumption of French incompetence or a feeling of French military irrelevance that has almost entirely erased them from the British popular conception of the Western Front.

If we want to view the war as being a world one then the very least we can start doing is by recognising the presence and role on the front lines of our closest European neighbour. Because, whilst it might sound strange,

the French were much more important and crucial to it all than the British were.

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