



New worlds, old worlds and underworlds: 'conflict culture' and the First World War

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The overwhelming effects of global, industrial war dictated that the soldier's experience of the First World War was one very different to that of previous, non-industrialised conflicts. During the war, battles regularly raged for several months, often over a piece of ground that had already been fought over countless times before. Even away from these grand, pitched battles, the frontlines were continually besieged by a perpetual state of attritional war, creating a place where the traditional and well understood relationship between human beings and the world they inhabited no longer applied.

The tactical and strategic concepts of trench warfare have been well explored from the perspective of military history for almost a century. But this focus on the military aspects of the frontline has not engaged with an obvious reality. Trenches were dug into the ground, meaning that much of the experience of the frontlines was gained in a subterranean world alien to everyday experience for most soldiers. In addition, there were vast systems of tunnels, caves, dugouts and *souterraines* (a French term for underground quarries) that were occupied by the armies at the front.

The hellish landscapes of the Western Front are a common trope in the popular imagination. Mud, trenches, barbed wire and blasted trees are all ubiquitous in the contemporary literature and visual media that 'vividly' expresses the war, and arguably even more so in the innumerable historical publications, novels, films and television programmes of the past hundred years. But far less is understood about the war that raged underground.

Below the level of the trenches was another world, as complex and ambiguous in nature as the web like defensive systems above, and home to millions of men, who carved out an alien existence in the literal underworlds of the war on the Western and Eastern Fronts. Since the end of 1918, this previously hidden world has often been unintentionally relegated by historians to nothing more than lines on a map, or a tool of military planning, as opposed to a unique space in which a new culture was born. The approach of modern conflict archaeology allows for these subterranean spaces to be viewed from an anthropological perspective and to be explored as objects that were created by human beings, broadening the understanding of life in the conflict.

Today, the surface evidence of the old frontlines has all but disappeared beneath the farmer's plough and the relentless march of modernity. But, underground, much of the hidden landscape of the war still exists. These subterranean landscapes still embody the history, culture and memory of the conflict. They are artefacts that were created through the sensorial engagement of men and the varied *matriel* of war. As the anthropologist Danny Miller states, objects make people as much as people make objects and the subterranean landscapes created by the men of the war, in turn created objects in the form of the men themselves and the 'conflict culture' they contributed to. In effect, a unique society was created which adopted a very different sensorial and

corporeal relationship with its surroundings in order to survive.

In these hidden landscapes of the war, the use of sight was severely restricted and consequently the other senses were employed to survive. Sounds, smells and the haptic engagement with the surroundings were far more critical to survival in a world where the slightest mistake could mean death through explosion or being buried alive. At certain places on the frontlines, such as at the Cavern du Dragon, on the Chemin des Dames, opposing armies occupied the same underground space, at the same time, creating a troglodyte battlefield that had more in common with the landscapes of ancient Greek drama than of twentieth century Europe.

One of the great paradoxes of the First World War was that the savage and rampant onslaught of industrial killing weapons sent modernity reeling back to the Stone Age. The sensorial engagement with the landscape that man had developed over the millennia had to be recalibrated. The senses that were engaged for survival in this 'new' world, and particularly deep within the bowels of the earth, meant that men became far more akin to animals than human beings, and the evidence for this transformation can still be found in the almost untouched world that still lies deep beneath the old frontlines.

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