



What makes a 'World' War?

by **Chris Kempshall**

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This is a slight continuation from my [previous post](#) regarding the dominant British views of the war to the exclusion of other nations.

The term 'First World War' or indeed 'World War One' trips off the tongue quite easily; it has a nice rhythm to it and seems fairly reasonable at first glance. But is it? Was this really a world war and, if it was, was it even the first?

It's worth noting early on that this topic, like many others regarding the war that can be pretty controversial. Too often the Euro-centric view of the war acts almost as a dismissal of the efforts, activities, battles and deaths of those from outside the primary protagonists. Such an approach isn't acceptable. However that doesn't mean that the questions regarding the global nature of the war can't be approached.

Let us initially begin with probably the easiest question. Was this the first global conflict? During the war and in its immediate aftermath I think it's understandable why the likes of Charles a Court Repington coined the term 'First World War'. Something of tremendous significance had just taken place and it needed a term that could help people understand it further.

However I continue to remain a little dubious over the 'First' element of it. A few years ago at a conference of the International Society for First World War Studies [Alexander Watson](#) made the point that the 'Wars of Revolution' from 1792-1815 could just as easily be termed a 'World War' as it featured widespread fighting involving numerous nations and nationalities in multiple theatres. These related conflicts aren't given the official status of a 'world war' but I think a pretty convincing argument can be made that they should do.

Of course were this to happen our naming nomenclature would have to adapt to fit the new model. The First World War would become the Second. The Second would become the Third. And I think that you can also make a good argument that the Cold War was a 'World War' in its own way so that could just as easily become the Fourth. So perhaps it's a good idea to just move on to the next point.

If the Wars of Revolution really were a World War then it doesn't actually change that much of our understanding about the First World War. There may have been a world conflict that pre-dates it. So what? But what if the First World War wasn't a 'World War' at all?

This is a much trickier (and as discussed above controversial) point to examine. But if you'll allow me, I'll give it a go.

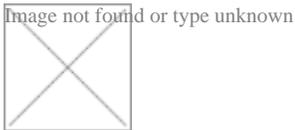
Now this very website has some excellent resources for looking at the wider [global aspects of the war](#) and,

frankly, if you haven't played with some of these yet then you've been wasting your life. But something constantly strikes me when looking at the [map of military engagements](#); there is a lot in Europe and down towards the Middle East. And all of a sudden what seems to be a World War can very quickly begin to look very Euro-centric.

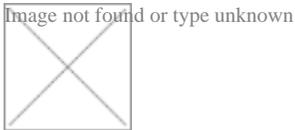
But it doesn't have to be that way. There are two ways of assessing the global nature of the war; by geography or by people. I don't think you can strongly argue against the fact that the majority of the fighting, the battles and the deaths of the First World War took place in Europe. But I would say that that fact alone does not necessarily mean it was a European War.

The battlefields might have been fixed and located primarily in Europe but the combatants were not. Yes the war was primarily directed and organised by European nations but, at the same time there were men fighting from such far away countries as: Brazil, Panama, Haiti, Siam, South Africa, Canada, America, India, Australia and New Zealand. The various African colonies of the principle nations were also well-represented in the ranks of their masters' armies.

If you travel to the Western Front cemeteries these days you won't just see graves of British, French or German soldiers. You'll also see graves for soldiers of numerous nationality or religion. Such as:



Chinese Labourers near Le Quesnoy.



Muslim graves at the Douaumont Ossuary at Verdun.

How can people have come from so far afield for something that could not be termed a World War?

There is a weakness to this nationality argument of course; how many men and how many countries does it take to make a World War? There clearly is a tipping point somewhere. 1 soldier each from every South American country for example would not necessarily create a 'World War' situation. But whilst that is a consideration I do not think it should be applied to the First World War. If there is a set limit or requirement for outside involvement then I can't help but feel it has been comfortably passed.

These people came from around the globe; they deserve to have their efforts recognised and their own roots acknowledged.

It might not have been the first of its kind but I continue to believe that regardless of where it comes in the running order The First World War deserves its global identity.

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