



How World War One Changed the Car You Drive Today

by James Allen

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Many things come to mind when discussing World War One ' the stalemate of trench warfare, the horrors of Passchendaele, the poetry of Sassoon and McRae and the massive loss of life on all sides.

It's easy to forget the impact of the young automotive industry during the war, whether it be on the battlefields or the home front. The companies that sell some of today's most popular cars ' Renault, Ford, Citroen, BMW and more ' all took part in the conflict, and not in the ways you might have thought.

In light of the recent centenary of the outbreak of war on 4th August 1914, it's an ideal time to look back on the car firms with the most prominent connections to the First World War.

Rolls-Royce

As the self-proclaimed maker of the 'best car in the world' in the pre-war years, it was perhaps inevitable that the British military would call upon [Rolls-Royce](#) to provide them with sturdy and dependable motorised transport. As good as the stock Silver Ghost model was ' Rolls-Royce had been producing it for eight years by the outbreak of war ' it did require some beefing up for battlefield life. Armour cladding filled in for the coach-built bodywork on customer cars, and some came with a rotating machine gun turret on the top.

Though used extensively on the Western Front, Rolls-Royce's armoured cars are perhaps most famous for their exploits in the Middle East. The legendary T.E. Lawrence used them extensively in the Arabian campaigns, and famously went on record to say 'a Rolls in the desert is above rubies'.

World War One also played a part in establishing Rolls-Royce as an aero-engine manufacturer. Despite only offering three engines at the time, and even though it was never able to fully keep up with demand, Rolls-Royce's units ended up powering more than half of the aircraft used by the Allies during the war. By the time the Second World War started, its famous Merlin engines would power Spitfires, Hurricanes, Lancaster bombers and countless more aircraft over the skies of Europe and Asia.

Renault

Of all the car manufacturers to participate in World War One, Renault was by some margin the most active. Like Rolls-Royce, [Renault](#) did initially contribute to the French war effort by supplying cars to the military. More impressively, every single Renault taxi cab in Paris was temporarily repurposed as a troop transport in 1914, to help counter the German offensive during the First Battle of the Marne.

As important as the commandeered cabbies were, of even more significance to the war was Renault's FT light tank (shown above). Although no-where near as heavily armed or as imposing as the British heavy tanks, their (relative) speed and the sheer quantity of them made this dinky little device a devastatingly effective asset. Renault produced approximately 3,600 of them, and more than half of the tanks used by the Allies during the war were FTs.

Crucially for the firm's future interests, World War One inadvertently gave Renault the tools it needed to create commercial vehicle off-shoots with. Its first tractor, for example, was heavily based on the FT tank. Renault's various commercial vehicle sub-divisions still exist today, although most have now been separated from the car company.

Ford

Here's a fact for you: despite being one of the most powerful and influential pacifists in the world at the time, even Henry Ford couldn't keep his gargantuan car company out of the Great War for long. Almost as soon as war was declared, the tractors and trucks built in [Ford's](#) British factories were soon being produced almost exclusively for the armed forces. Eventually, even Ford's cars were repurposed into suitable warzone surplus ' once converted into a mobile field ambulance for the Red Cross, the almost-omnipresent Ford Model T soon became just as common a sight on the Western Front.

Ford's contribution to the Allied war effort really kicked up a notch when America officially entered the fray in 1917. However, not all of Ford's products proved successful ' the M1918 light tank, for instance, was so basic compared to the Renault FT that the US Tank Corps cancelled the 15,000 unit contract after a mere 15 examples had been shipped to France.

Despite the focus on military vehicle production, Ford's many plants ' in particular, the factory in Manchester's Trafford Park ' were still primarily geared up for car production. As a result, by the time the Treaty of Versailles was signed and the war at an end, a staggering two out of every five cars on UK roads was a Ford, a vast majority of which being Model Ts.

Citroen

In the early 20th century, [Citroen](#) wasn't a name many would have associated with cars. Whilst the eventual founder Andre Citroen had prior experience in the automotive industry, most would have known him at the time for patenting the double-helical gear pattern, or for operating one of France's largest munitions factories during the war.

As early as 1916 Monsieur Citroen realised that once hostilities eventually ended, his cutting-edge production facility in Paris would suddenly have no practical use.

So, believing the best post-war industrial opportunities would be in mass-producing cars, Andre soon set about

drawing up the preliminary plans for the quirky French car company we know today.

In 1919, the first Citroen production car rolled out of the Quai de Javel factory, and the rest, they say, is history.

BMW

Like Citroen, [BMW](#) wasn't around in 1914. In fact, the 'Bavarian Motor Works' wouldn't even exist as a car maker until a decade after the war was over. But it was during the conflict when the roots of BMW started to sprout. It all kicked off in late 1917, when internal disputes at the Rapp aero-engine maker resulted in co-founder Karl Rapp being forced to depart the company which bore his name. Upon Rapp's resignation, the firm was instantly reorganised, restructured and renamed into the 'Bayerische Motorenwerke?', or 'BMW'.

Around about this time, the now-famous BMW badge had also been successfully patented. However, whilst many believe the blue-and-white roundel resembles a rotating aeroplane propeller, and is a reminder of the company's roots in the aviation industry, the colour palette wasn't chosen on reminiscent grounds: it's merely a homage to the Bavarian flag.

Ways to remember

There are several ways to find out more about the Great War and the ways it changed the world, but the [Imperial War Museum's First World War centenary project](#) would be our first stop ' it shows events taking place around the UK over the coming months.

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