THE WAR TO END ALL EMPIRES

Prologue: “For Freedom’s Brotherhood”

From Rudyard Kipling the summons came:

In the Gates of Death rejoice!
We see and hold the good –
Bear witness, Earth, we have made our choice
For Freedom’s brotherhood.

Then praise the Lord Most High
Whose strength hath saved us whole.
Who bade us choose that the Flesh should die
And not the living soul!¹

All we need to know about this war and Empire is in the poster from which we copied, to make our “Uncle Sam Wants You.”

Other countries showed the Czar – or the peasant – or a woman
summoning the men to war.

But England put its biggest hero of Empire – K. of K. himself,
pointing a large gloved hand right at the viewer, and the words

“Your Country needs YOU.”²


² It didn’t begin as a poster. London Opinion, a widely-read weekly, needed a cover for its September 5th, and it was in a hurry. One cover had been turned down, and the editor asked Alfred Leete to do something topical and on the spot. Leete did the picture. He didn’t put the cast in Kitchener’s eye that was there in real life, and he made the mustache a lot bigger and fuller and darker than it really was.

But it struck a real nerve. London Opinion was deluged in requests for copies. The image was sent out on postcards. The War Office asked the right to use it, and before October, Kitchener was on posters nationwide.
It hit such a chord that too many people signed up at the very first.

The whole system was choked with men.

Many recruits took the oath and were sent home again, to await orders.
   There were no camps, uniforms, bunks, or guns for them.  

I. THE BUGLES OF ENGLAND...

A. THE EMPIRE ENLISTS

The whole empire rallied to the colors, at the summons of the King-Emperor.

And over it all, managing the mobilization, was the great Imperial general,
   Lord Kitchener, newly anointed War Minister.

A young Melbourne man, who would die within the year in France, wrote:

It became the most famous picture from England in the war, and made Kitchener’s face one of the best-known of the century. John Pollock, Kitchener, Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace, 402.

3 Kitchener wouldn’t stop the influx. “I have held up my finger and the men are flocking to me in thousands,” he protested. “How can I now hold up my hand and tell them to go back?” He told the head of the Financial Department – who suggested that maybe they should say you had to have a certain height to join – that if he slowed recruiting, the public would be so mad about it that Harris and he would be hanged on the lamp-post that men were putting up on the street outside his office.

Harris didn’t bat an eye. As he pointed out, it was an electric light pole. And unlike gas lamp posts, it didn’t have anything to hang you TO! John Pollock, Kitchener, Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace, 403.
The bugles of England are blowing o’er the sea,
Calling out across the years, calling now to me.
They woke me from dreaming in the dawning of the day,
The bugles of England: and how could I stay?

Prime Minister of Australia: “Our duty is quite clear, to gird up our loins and remember that we are Britons.”

8000 men from New Zealand were on the way within ten days.

31,000 Canadians were drilled and sent overseas in just two months.

South Africa sent soldiers to Europe, and, as we shall see, carried the fight into the German possessions next door, in Africa itself.

Some laggards there were...

Nationalist Irish, a few of them
French-Canadians, objecting to any such conflict
In South Africa, some 10,000 Boers staged an uprising.
There were risings in India and in black Africa, too.

But the general picture holds, of an Empire grasping its Mother Country by the hand.

This was the test of what Empire could do.
For the first time in a century, Britain had involved itself on the Continent of Europe.

This time, it would throw in many thousands more men than in the days of Wellington and of Napoleon.

But it could afford to, because it had soldiers to call on, that it hadn’t then, from the 450million people under the Union Jack --

– soldiers of the empire, of Australia,
   New Zealand, and India,4

India sent 1 ½ million men.

Many signed up for the honour, some for money, and some because they believed in the notion of Empire.

The white Empire’s 25 million people sent 857,000 overseas.

141,000 would be killed.

With arrows on their quarters and with numbers on their hoofs,
With the trampling sound of twenty that re-echoes in the roofs,
Low of crest and dull of coat, wan and wild of eye,
Through our English village the Canadians go by.

Shying at a passing cart, swerving from a car,
Tossing up an anxious head to flaunt a snowy star,
Racking at a Yankee gait, reaching at the rein,
Twenty raw Canadians are tasting life again!

Hollow necked and hollow flanked, lean of rib and hip,
Strained and sick and weary, with the wallow of the ship,
Glad to smell the turf again, hear the robin’s call,
Tread again the country road they lost at Montreal!

Fate may bring them dule and woe; better steeds than they
Sleep beside the English guns a hundred leagues away;
But till the war hath need of them, lightly lie their reins,
Softly fall the feet of them along the English lanes.

– Will H. Ogilvie⁵

By the war’s end, 8.5 million soldiers, sailors and airmen saw service.

5.7 million of them came from Britain – and 4/5ths of those from
England alone.

1.4 million were from India
630,000 from Canada
420,000 from Australia
136,000 from South Africa
129,000 from New Zealand – or one out of every two men eligible for
service on those islands.

African colonies produced 57,000 soldiers and
just under a million porters and laborers.

Egypt provided 330,000 more laborers, who worked in France and in
the Middle East.

43,000 black Africans from South Africa did behind the lines work.⁶


⁶ And this is just manpower. Let’s not forget the supplys account. Take something as minor as wood. The
India was left practically bare of forces.

1.3 million soldiers left to fight in England’s wars.

Only 15,000 were left behind to mind the store.

Think of it – a volunteer army almost as big as all the volunteers that the Union army put into the field in the Civil War!

And from India came the rations to feed a million men. 7

We’ve seen our pictures of the trench lines in France and Flanders, the chipper English soldier, staring off toward no-man’s-land.

But did you know that in a third of that line, the faces looking towards Germany would be brown, not white?

For Punjabi and Pathan and Sikh and Dogra manned the Lines there. 8

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Eleven of them won the Victoria Cross.\footnote{Till 1911, you had to be British to win it, which is why none had been won for valor before. V. Longer, \textit{Red Coats to Olive Green: A History of the Indian Army, 1600-1974} (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974), 154.}

There was even a Chinese Labour Corps working in France.

France by 1918 would have a third of a million Chinese, Africans and Egyptians at work.

They did sweat work ... unglamorous stuff.

But that only freed more white men to die in the trenches, or the other side’s white men die in the trenches.

And in each case, it was the colonies and dominions that footed the bill for their own soldiery.

They marched to an English beat; and to the tempo of the Empire’s poet laureate par excellence.

Soldiers invented themselves, pattered on Kipling’s stories. Not on him alone.

Kipling indeed grew up on the culture of the music halls.

He embodied an impression in his writings, of the new spirit of the working classes.
It wasn’t just a work of imagination.

These he made the style of speech in his writing, and his preoccupations.

He gave it a music-hall rhythm and gave it the language of the people.

That was what made them such a draw, among the soldiers.

More than anything else, it was his *Barrack Room Ballads*.

The new war poets didn’t pay attention to Kipling.

But the soldiers did, and they knew him and liked him best of all.

His work got recited on music hall stages – which is where his greatness and fame really came from.

For the volunteers of this war, Kipling’s soldier was the only soldier they knew, and the only pattern for what a soldier should be.

Joseph Conrad might find readers among the bourgeois.

Not among the rank and file.

Go to hospital libraries. Kipling is the one most in demand among inmates. Conrad and Hardy do not come close.

(Jack London was one of the few who was more popular).

At unit concerts, at the front, Kipling recitations came regularly.
The trench journals quoted him more than anybody else.\textsuperscript{10}

\section*{B. THE EMPIRE EMBROILED}

At the same time, it was very much an imperial war.

Wherever there was an empire, the fighting approached.

German ships were hunted down among the Pacific atolls and in their imperial territories and in African creeks

There was war to grab colonies in the Pacific and in Africa.

Read the casualty lists for India’s soldiers, if you doubt it. You can find the dead men’s bones scattered from sunrise to sunset.

at Gallipoli and Salonika

in Palestine and Egypt and the Sudan
in Mesopotamia and at Aden and in Somaliland
in the Cameroons and East Africa

in northwest Persia and Kurdistan and North China.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Fuller, \textit{Troop Morale}, 131-33.

For Australians in particular, war was a game – or at least too serious to get serious about.

As they made a landing under fire, one of them shouted,

“They want to cut that shooting out. Somebody might get killed.”

“They’re carrying this too far,” another added. “They’re using ball ammunition.”

As they touched shore, several took out cameras to get a snapshot of the scene.

Under constant fire on the beaches at Gallipoli, nothing could faze them.

They DID like a morning bathe in the surf, and they’d have it by the hundreds.

swimming, diving too

As the shells blew up around them, they would cry, “Hope there’s no sharks about,” and if wounded,

“Cripes, I’ve been torpedoed.”

Australian soldiers looked at the English ones, at first with bafflement.

Their officers weren’t like the English nobs, leading an English mob of enlisted men.

An Aussie colonel usually served his time in the ranks with other “diggers.”

He didn’t rule OVER his men.

He had risen up from AMONG them.

And remained one of them.
To an English officer, discipline and respect for one’s betters was the life of an army.

To see an Australian officer sharing his bottle of whiskey with British NCO’s looked like the first step to revolution and demoralization.

... and it became the first step to a court-martial.

What a bad example to British regulars they were!

... playing cards on sentry duty
... showing up on the parade ground unbuttoned
... smoking their pipes while superiors talked to them
... leaving the trenches untidy

A bunch of them on the march heard a British officer shout at them to salute.

We’re Australians, they told him.

The officer didn’t care. You have to salute an officer when you pass him.

All right, then, the Aussies told him; we won’t pass you. We’ll go some other way.

– and they did: nearly half a mile out of their way.

On the first day of one battle, Field Marshal Birdwood was told, “Duck, you silly old dill!” as the shrapnel fire flew overhead. Quite irregular and insolent!

But being Australian, he ducked.
But Australians didn’t understand this kind of hierarchy at all.

Why did the Tommy Atkinsses take this kind of treatment?

By the end of the war, they weren’t puzzled. They were contemptuous.

Men, real men, would stick up for themselves.

Were the Empire-builders, the privates among them, a bunch of chickens and milk-sops after all?

The narrow ways of English folk
Are not for such as we;
They bear the long accustomed yoke
Of staid conservancy.
But all our roots are new and strange
And through our blood there runs
The vagabonding love of change
That drove us westward of the range
And westward of the suns.\(^{12}\)

Australian soldiers made trouble when they didn’t have their way.

They rioted in Cairo and sacked the brothels and burned them.

They mutinied in France ... twice ... in the last months of the war.

When a New Zealander was killed in an Arab village, his mates tore the village apart, stone by stone and paid with a fair number of Arab lives.

Indian soldiers started out better, but the war demoralized them, too.

They were fit for border conflict – not for a war like that in Flanders’ fields.

They weren’t ready for cold, wet weather – or for casualty rates so fearsomely high.

When in India had a unit lost more than half its men in a single action?

Things got so close to a mutiny that by the second year of the war, the Government pulled all its Indian regiments out of France and sent them into Mesopotamia instead.

It wasn’t a fun war.

It was an ugly war, and ugliest on the western front, sprawled across Belgium and northern France...

A flat land, once of field and copse, but now raked clear by shells and churned into a moonscape of mud and crater-holes.

“No man’s land” stretched between trenches, a tangle of barbed wire thickets, to slow down any attack, and the remains of soldiers who had tried it.

Men died – 7000 a day, when there was no fighting to speak of
That was called ‘wastage.’

They stood in trenches, knee-deep in water that seeped through the soil, and slept in caves tunneled into the earth.

Battles were worst. Like those the Australians met on the Somme.

In the first day, 60,000 soldiers of all nationalities fell.

The fighting went on for weeks, through pouring rain.

Yellow, waist-high, muddy water filled the trenches.

Between the front lines and the rear lay lagoons and swamps.

Supply wagons stuck in the mud and sank.

Artillery ran out of shells.

Soldiers slipped and stumbled through the mud – rifles clogged, machine-guns choked up.

Soldiers were blown apart, or fell, wounded, into the shell-craters, there to drown.

Injured men, lying on their stretchers in communications trenches, felt the waters close over them, in a downpour, and never rose again.¹³

Nothing was gained.

South Africans were standing, holding the line at Marrieres Wood two years later when the Germans launched a massive attack.

They held on with all they had, till their ammunition was gone.

By then, out of three thousand, just 100 came out alive and unwounded to tell the tale.

This was not a war that imperial adventures had prepared Britain for.

Its cavalry were worse than useless.

So were its imperial generals.

Kitchener was in charge of the big picture, but he was mystified:

“I don’t know what is to be done. This isn’t war!”

Not by his standards. Nothing moved.

No battle was decisive.

Trenches stayed where they were.

Only the faces of the dead changed –

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Under the pressure of harsh war, a lot of that sentiment of empire dwindled.

By 1916, New Zealand needed to institute the draft to get manpower.

So did Canada – and there were riots there, when the law passed.

And of the 400,000 Canadians who served, not even 30,000 were French-Canadians.

This was not their war.\textsuperscript{15}

South African didn’t dare propose a draft, for fear of an uprising that would take the whole country out of the Empire.

Australia beat conscription laws time and again.

II. CARRYING THE WAR INTO AFRICA

A. SOUTH AFRICA REPAYS A DEBT

Africa may have been a sideshow, but it wasn’t on the sidelines.

The Allies needed to grab Germany’s colonies.

That would give them a bargaining chip when the war ended.

The Second Reich would be willing to trade.

\textsuperscript{15} Judd, \textit{Empire}, 250.
For Belgium, it was a chance to get back at the Germans on their own soil.

For Italy, it was a chance to get that empire in Africa that they’d been driven out of just twenty years before.

As part of the price of bringing Italy over on the Allies’ side, England promised to back up its claim to Ethiopia.

And France... well, it had given away the Cameroons to Germany in 1911 – but really, it was more like a loan.

Now they wanted it back.

And for South Africa, what could be tastier than German Southwest Africa, as the fifth province?

Most of the fighting went like clockwork.

Invasion of German South-West Africa.

This time it was the Germans who got a taste of the Boer way of making war ...

commando tactics

Botha cut off a German retreat; Jan Christiaan Smuts took the capital.

In the most impressive feat of the war, a column of 3000 men marched from Kimberley, 500 miles across the Kalahari Desert.
By July 1915, the Germans had had enough, and surrendered.

In 1916 the Indians and West Indians swept into the Cameroons and took them from Germany, too.

That left German East Africa, and the South Africans handled them without far more trouble than they planned.

In charge at the start was Brigadier General A. E. Aitken.

His job was to grab Tanga, the port in German East Africa.

He landed all right, but the first moment that the Germans opened fire, the Raiputs broke and ran.

They had been trained for drill and parade – not for being killed.

Many got away. A few were killed by their own officers, to discourage them from trying to get away.

The whole expedition had to be abandoned and evacuated.

Three years later, East Africans, Rhodesians, Indians, South Africans and British assembled in Kenya.
Beating the enemy, if they could meet him, wasn’t the hard part.

The hard part was getting there.

Germans harassed Smuts’s men every step of the way.

So did disease.

In the end, the German army never WAS met, never WAS beaten.

When the Second Reich fell, it had shoved into Rhodesia, and might well have taken its capital, given the chance.

The thing we ought to notice is that this was a war of the Africans, by the Africans – but not for the Africans.

On all sides, the troops deployed were overwhelmingly blacks.

Over a million African males would be recruited for soldiering total; and maybe three million more did back-up duty.

It wasn’t voluntary. There weren’t any sign-ups after the first few months.

Imperial dragnets went out and nabbed whoever they could get.

In East Africa’s campaign alone, there were over a million Africans as carriers and 50,000 as soldiers.

Over 100,000 of them died there.
But nobody asked what all this fighting would do for Africans.

If anything, they were sure to be worse off.

The Germans were the only empire out there that talked about a major effort to improve their health and set up schools.

... a minimum wage –

... maximum working hours –

And their colonies were the only ones having anything like an economic miracle when the war began.

III. THE FEUDAL CRESCENT

A. THE SELF-DESTRUCTION OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Let’s keep in mind what we often forget.

The story of the last two centuries wasn’t of an empire nibbled to death by western empires.

It was of an Empire that would have perished long, long since, if the French and the British hadn’t propped it up...

Propped it with money
Propped it with men
Propped it with ships.

They weren’t taking advantage of the “sick man.”
They were trying to keep the invalid from dying.

For a hundred years, the strongest force protecting the Ottoman Empire from being dismembered had been the British.

In return, they had puppet governments in some places, like Egypt, and friendly princes in others, like Persia.

The blame for the Ottoman Empire being torn apart isn’t the West’s. It is the caliphs and sultans who went to war.

The Allies would have bought their neutrality if they could.

They were ready to offer deals, and bargains.\(^\text{16}\)

Halfway through the war, they STILL were ready to offer deals and bargains, and keep the Ottoman Empire intact.

Rather, it was the Ottoman Empire that made the decision to commit suicide.

It did it not from fear, but from greed...

It wanted Cyprus back – and Greece and Macedonia and Thrace.

It had visions of spreading its border all the way to the Volga.

\(^{16}\) Efraim and Inari Karsh, *Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 125-37. Indeed, as late as 1917, Lloyd George was making bids to the Turks to work out a separate peace. By that time, he demanded independence for the Arabian peninsula, and a British protectorate over Mesopotamia and Palestine, but in each case, it would remain under nominal Ottoman control. See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 266-67.
And in three years... Iran! Aghanistan! And who know – India itself?\(^\text{17}\)

And for starters, the Empire wanted to grab the Caucusus from Russia and send an army into Egypt.

In fact, the Turks were more eager to get into the war on Germany’s side than Germany was to have them.

It was they who did the wooing and made the overtures.

They were greedy, treacherous, and duplicitous.

... the most vigorous “sick man of Europe” of their time.

German advisors helped them train their men.
German soldiers propped up their army.

The Ottoman Empire’s failure came because it was so lousy at its conquests.

It was the one enemy in this war that even the Russian army could beat.

Their invasion of the Ukraine cost them 80,000 men in a matter of days – 90% of all their fighting forces there.

The general himself only escaped by pure blind luck.

They mounted a full scale attack on the Suez Canal.

And the results were an embarrassing defeat.

They attacked in a sandstorm, because that would give them the advantage.

But, shucks, the wind died down just at the wrong time.

The army was beaten and fled.\textsuperscript{18}

\section*{B. A Mess in Mesopotamia}

Now, British planners started doing an inventory of the Sick Man of Europe’s effects, and mapped out ways of bringing him to an early demise.

Mesopotamia was a must-have place.

It had been one of the leading overland routes to India.

A British company held the monopoly for steamships along its two great rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates.

Leaving it alone, the Germans would build their Berlin to Baghdad railroad and pull the whole area into their orbit –

\textsuperscript{18} Efraim and Inari Karsh, \textit{Empires of the Sand: The Struggle for Mastery in the Middle East, 1789-1923} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 140-42.
They wouldn’t rest till they had an outlet on the Persian Gulf.

India would be at risk.

So would the oil fields in southern Persia.

The Turks could blow up the refinery at the head of the Gulf.

The Royal Navy would need to patrol the Gulf, when it was badly needed everywhere else.

So the Empire sent in an invasion force, mostly Indian to grab Mesopotamia.

Naturally, its commander was an English officer, trained in the Indian army’s lore.

Major-General Charles Townshend – who had a taste for violin music – which he played himself, to the troops, – led the Indian army there.

Everything went wrong, even before anyone killed anyone.

... disease
... a lack of medical staff
... terrible confusions about supplies.

The most Townshend could do was get to the river town of Kut-el-Amara.

A small, fly-ridden port.
It was dirty, depressing, and set into a flat, featureless plain.

Its architectural marvels were nothing better than mud-built one story buildings.

Its only industry was a licorice factory.

It had plenty of dysentery, plenty of sickness, plenty of Iraqis – but that was about all.

Kut fell with hardly a fight.

By then, one-third of Townshend’s forces were lost;

He couldn’t go further, and a siege hemmed him in.

13,000 British and Indian soldiers and just 39 artillery-pieces held Kut as long as they could.

There was nothing romantic about the town or the siege.

The Turks sniped at defenders and shelled the houses.

Every day, there was a little less of Kut standing – which, considering how much it needed urban renewal, was not all a bad thing.

A relief vessel steamed upriver with supplies – and ran aground.

It never made it to the town after all.

Five months of it, and Townshend surrendered.
His men were marched off to a filthy prison camp.  
They sickened, went hungry, and died like flies.

Half didn’t live to be released.

The rest were invalids for most of the rest of their lives – which were unusually short.

By the end of 1916, Britain was ready to try again, under new generals.

Lieutenant-General Sir Stanley Maude pushed into Iraq  
and the following March, captured Baghdad.

A few months later it captured him: he died of cholera there.

Indian troops invaded Mesopotamia.

English troops out of Egypt invaded Syria.

The mainspring of that last invasion was Sir Edmund Allenby.  

You couldn’t tell Allenby anything.

He was a strong-minded Englander, with some of his ancestor Oliver Cromwell’s hardness.

Not for nothing did his men call him “the Bull.”

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19 The British government’s first choice would have been Jan Smuts, who turned down the appointment because he was persuaded that the Prime Minister could never make good on his promise of the kind of military support such a campaign would need. Smuts, by the way, was a strong supporter of creating a Jewish homeland, in the Balfour Doctrine; and was the imperial spokesman who seems to have originated the idea of “mandates” as a way of having a colony without it being really a colony.  

Big-boned, bulky, he looked pretty hefty to have got his training in the cavalry.

You might imagine from the stolidity that he must have been one of the thicker-headed generals in France, and you’d be right.

But the Middle East brought out that vein of romance in him.

Left to do as he pleased, he pretty much did everything right.

He carried his army into Palestine, to swoop in on Jerusalem and Damascus.

It was a cavalry campaign, really, with 12,000 horsemen from the Dominion to give it drive.

But Allenby experimented with everything and anything...

- torpedo boats
- armored cars
- tanks
- propaganda leaflets.

He read his Herodotus and Old Testament, to get the feel of the land, pored over old atlases and travel guides.

British agents corrupted the minds of Arab chieftains to stir them into rebellions all their own against the Turks.
Allenby even tried a very clever trick of sending out an intelligence officer to run into the Turkish cavalry, and get shot at.

As he galloped off to safety, the officer dropped his haversack, rifle, and binoculars.

In the haversack were letters, and orders for an attack on Gaza and a telegram describing plans to study the landscape around Beersheba.\(^\text{20}\)

What incredible luck! The Turks knew exactly what this meant:

– the British army meant to feign an attack on Beersheba.

– but Gaza was their real target.

All it took now was to put their own troops where it would do the most good.

.... the saps!

They’d been taken in by a plant.

Imagine their surprise when Allenby threw all his forces against Beersheba, just after the extra Turkish soldiers had been stripped from its defenses!

Before he was through, the British had broken Turkish lines, outflanked their positions, and ran everything from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea.

A year and a day from the time he began, Allenby won a striking

\(^{20}\) The intelligence officer was Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, who had been a superb intelligence officer under Smuts in East Africa – another token of the interconnection of the imperial campaigns. David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace*, 308, 311.
victory at Megiddo.

The Turkish army in Syria wasn’t just beaten.
It was smashed to fritters.

The Ottoman Empire was gone, and for good.

Britain had just won its last empire.

By then, it had also won Jerusalem –

700 years after the last Christian army entered its walls.

The Holy City was rescued from Moslem hands for the first time since the Middle Ages.

General Allenby did it without ruining the ruins, either.

Both sides agreed not to fight in town –

though the Mount of Olives didn’t count.

Rather than damage the Holy City, the Turks had withdrawn.

When Allenby and his soldiers entered, they went on foot, like pilgrims, not on horseback as conquerors, through the Jaffa Gate.21

He would live to become a Viscount and a field-marshal –

High Commissioner of Egypt, too –

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but this, for him, was the high point of his life,

and, perhaps, just perhaps, the high point of the British empire as well.

Cost to the Empire: 16,000 dead in battle and 13,000 more dead of disease.

The Empire had won, but at a heavy price in lives.

702,000 dead from Great Britain

64,000 dead from India
59,300 dead from Australia
56,000 dead from Canada
16,000 dead from New Zealand
7,000 dead from South Africa

And most of those who fell, fell in France, where the war ended with over 2 million British soldiers under arms,
154,000 Canadians
94,000 Australians
25,000 New Zealanders.

New Zealand had just one-eighth the population of Belgium.
Halfway round the world from the Western Front, it suffered more casualties, allegedly, than Belgium did.  

But it’s worth asking: was this fight their fight?  
Was this win their win?  
Were their losses worth taking?  


Just because the question’s asked doesn’t mean the answer is the one you’d think. The answer was, probably, YES. For generations, Australian historians have argued that the war wasted the youth of a Dominion with nothing at stake. It wasn’t at risk. Loyalty to the Mother Country made them fight.

But this isn’t so at all. Australia and New Zealand were under a very real threat, even if they had to do their fighting half a world away. By 1914, there was a German presence all the way through the Pacific, from the Dutch Indies through New Guinea and Micronesia and Samoa. Germany had coaling stations in the South Pacific, and it sure wasn’t building them just for fun. Germany was trying to buy Timor from Portugal – a mere day’s steaming away from the coasts of Australia.

German military intelligence had taken the strongest interest in the Antipodes. It was as clear to them as to Britain that His Majesty’s Navy’s predominance was made possible by the fleets and help of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. Strike a blow at them, and you strike a blow at England.

They had made plans for a naval attack on Australia in the event of war – whether Australia came into the war or not – and the destruction of its commerce, as a blow against British interests. They actually started implementing it: the Emden, in the first three months of war, finished off twenty Allied vessels. The one thing that made a German threat small was quick action by the Australian government. It interned all German merchant vessels, many of which were about to be turned into cruisers. It seized New Guinea and Samoa. It wiped out the German coaling stations.

It was clear that a German victory would mean the end of British influence, and possibly the dissolving of the Empire. But Britain was Australia’s biggest trading partner. Losing the imperial connection would be a very costly thing. Without British naval supremacy, who would buy Australian grain, wool, minerals, and raw materials? In the short run at least – for the duration of the war – Australia’s economy would be ruined, and, if Germany won, in the long run, too.

Here dead we lie because we did not choose
To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we were young.

– A. E. Housman

**CODA: “WHAT REMAINS TO US?”**

At first glance, the Empire emerged from war, stronger than ever.

Certainly there was more of it, counted by the acre.

The Middle East was all but an outright possession.

Africa would have British presence, from the Cape to Cairo
at last.

Mother country and Dominions had forged bonds of obligation and shared in a common victory.

Victory banquets honored the colonial leaders whose people had done their parts.

An Imperial War Cabinet mapped strategy, and Prime Ministers from the Dominions spoke as very nearly equal partners.

A “Cabinet of Governments,” Canada’s premier called it.

“What remains to us?” Prime Minister Billy Hughes said, in the flush of triumph. “We are like so many Alexanders. What other worlds have we to conquer?”
But an imperial faith is founded not just on winning, but on Romance ... 

the romance of Glory
   Where wars have a kind of glamor.

   There was no glamor here, in the drizzle and mud of
   the trenches across northern France.

   Romance broke for good, when the recruits stopped coming.

   ... when the draft had to be set up, to get manpower.

   The romance of Empire died for Edward Elgar, and would not come again
   in his music.

   Rudyard Kipling’s only son died in the war; never again would he give a
   lyric appeal to Empire.

   When the war began, he had written mighty calls.

   For all we have and are,
   For all our children’s fate,
   Stand up and meet the war.
   The Hun is at the gate!
   Our world has passed away
   In wantonness o’erthrown.
   There is nothing left to-day
   But steel and fire and stone.

   Though all we knew depart,
   The old Commandments stand:
   “In courage keep your heart,
   In strength lift up your hand.”

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But the voice was a darker one now, as the war ended:

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Three times he would be offered the Poet Laureate.
Three times, he would refuse it.

Instead, he made an endowment for the Last Post to be sounded, every night, for
many years, at the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres.

Kitchener, the symbol of unstoppable imperialism, had been stopped, and
as the dead piled up, his reputation dwindled.

In 1916, he was sent off on a mission to Russia.

His ship struck a mine and sank, with almost all hands lost –
Kitchener included.\footnote{It was not far off the Orkneys, but the seas were so rough that most of the boats were dashed to bits against the ship as they were lowered, and most people who tumbled into the water died of exposure very quickly. Out of over six hundred people, just twelve reached shore.}

France was cluttered with memorials to the children of distant
Empire, come home to fight – and to die.

And so was Gallipoli.

For many, this war wasn’t a fulfillment of Empire.

\footnote{Kitchener himself didn’t leave the ship. He was last seen, pacing the quarterdeck, calm as ever, talking with several of his officers. See John Pollock, \textit{Kitchener, Architect of Victory, Artisan of Peace}, 481-83.}
It was a repayment of whatever service Britain had done them—

and, having given so much, they were not about to give it
again, so willingly, a future time.

If this was the price of Empire, wasn’t it time to get out, free of
decisions on which tens of thousands of young men would
fall, in which the Dominions played no part?

Here is one omen of things to come. It’s as small as Something That Isn’t There.

Any English village, you can find a war memorial standing.

They were built in the 1920s.

They list the names of the dead.

They died for King and Country. It says so – chiseled in
marble or set in bronze.

In fact, if you go to Brighton, you’ll find a marble
monument to Hindu and Sikh soldiers who
came to the hospitals there, fearfully wounded
in Flanders, and died there.

At Woking, Moslem soldiers are buried with full
military honors, and there was a memorial
gate for them at the cemetery.26

But the dead from India have no such village memorials.

26 V. Longer, Red Coats to Olive Green: A History of the Indian Army, 1600-1974 (Bombay: Allied
There is only one shrine. It’s a vast arch, standing in Delhi.

Indians didn’t make it. The British made it and paid for it.

Why did they die, then?

For the regiment’s good name – for their personal honor.

But not King and Country.

Not so they’d admit it.²⁷

How long, on that basis, will an Empire last?

How many sacrifices can it expect its people to make?