

**WORLD WAR
ONE**

Why WWI soldiers were trained to 'enjoy battle'

Two historians have a controversial answer to how first world war soldiers endured the fighting for so long: they enjoyed killing. But does this belittle the mental trauma such men suffered?



Entrenched hatred: Did the first world war turn men into monsters?

In his diary of life in the trenches, John French recalls spending night and day 'up to my knees in water,' digging holes while snipers shot his friends and fleeing chemical weapons which descended 'like a thick yellow fog.' The stench of rot would have been overpowering, the roar of shells deafening.

Trench warfare sounds like **hell** to most and many wonder how soldiers tolerated these conditions for years on end. Historians Niall Ferguson and Joanna Bourke offer a controversial answer: the soldiers were able to fight for so long simply because they came to enjoy killing.

These soldiers did not start out in life as **killers** and new recruits were initially reluctant, but they were trained to think of the enemy as subhuman. Once they accepted this, many found killing brought 'intense feelings of pleasure,' and they were able to kill Germans for revenge or just for fun.

One of these men was Julian Grenfell, who recorded how 'exciting' it was to sneak up

behind a German 'laughing and talking', before shooting him. Even Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote many anti-war poems, said battle was an 'uplifting experience'.

Transforming ordinary people into killers was not just a byproduct of war but actual military policy. Reflecting on the war in 1922, a War Office enquiry into **shell shock** found that civilians made poor warriors and were in need of 'hardening': 'Men must be trained with one purpose ... to fight.' For Ferguson, this is the real tragedy of the first world war: that it turned decent people into amoral killers.

Yet other historians counter that this misses an essential point: these men were most likely traumatised by what they experienced at a time with little understanding of mental health.

Such damaged men may have believed they enjoyed murder, but this tells us of their mental disarray rather than their natures. Better to concentrate on what these soldiers endured, rather than how their trauma manifested itself.

Internal scars

Some believe killing is simply part of human nature and welcome this frank discussion of a long taboo subject. Even a 1920s psychologist's report admitted the war allowed 'all sorts of forbidden and hidden impulses' to be explored. We take an animalistic pleasure in fighting and we fail to understand the first world war if we try to ignore that.

Others are truly appalled by this view and believe it treats psychological trauma flippantly. It was recognised as early as 1917 that one in seven of all personnel discharged from duty was suffering from terrible neuroses. Pleasure in killing is a sign of mental trauma. It is a huge injustice to the millions deeply scarred by the war if we dismiss their suffering as a kind of secret enjoyment.



RAINFORD
HIGH

READING HOMEWORK

1. Research soldiers' experiences. Write a 'before and after' of the ways in which the war changed them. Think about the physical and psychological effects.

2. "Killing is part of a soldier's duty and they shouldn't have any regrets about performing such acts." Do you agree or disagree? Why?
