



## War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War

*William Philpott*

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## **War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War** William Philpott

Now, one hundred years after the first guns of August rang out on the Western front, historian William Philpott reexamines the causes and lingering effects of the first truly modern war.

Drawing on the experience of front line soldiers, munitions workers, politicians, and diplomats, *War of Attrition* explains for the first time why and how this new type of conflict was fought as it was fought; and how the attitudes and actions of political and military leaders, and the willing responses of their peoples, stamped the twentieth century with unprecedented carnage on—and behind—the battlefield.

*War of Attrition* also establishes link between the bloody ground war in Europe and political situation in the wider world, particularly the United States. America did not enter the war until 1917, but, as Philpott demonstrates, the war came to America as early as 1914. By 1916, long before the Woodrow Wilson's impassioned speech to Congress advocating for war, the United States was firmly aligned with the Allies, lending dollars and selling guns and opposing German attempts to spread submarine warfare. *War of Attrition* skillfully argues that the emergence of the United States on the world stage is directly related to her support for the conflagration that consumed so many European lives and livelihoods. In short, the war that ruined Europe enabled the rise of America.

## **War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War Details**

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Author : William Philpott

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## From Reader Review War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War for online ebook

### Geevee says

A solid, well-researched and balanced view of why and how the war was fought from a political, military and logistical standpoint as attrition became the driver and the perceived answer to achieve victory.

Statistics are used for emphasis and when coupled with quotes from national leaders, military commanders and men on the ground the writing is sharp and absorbing.

Mr Philpott's book is a fine account and read alongside the following books readers looking for well-reasoned arguments for the war and its outcomes will be well served (my suggestions are neither not exhaustive nor exclusive):

1914-1918: The History of the First World War by David Stevenson

The Guns of August by Barbara W. Tuchman

July 1914: Countdown to War  
by Sean McMeekin

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### Gumble's Yard says

The book explores the First World War chronologically but also introducing different themes for each chapter reflecting the different phases of the war.

The book's first key theme is that the war was fought on five key interlinked fronts: the land front – which very rapidly became a battle of attrition; the maritime front – where the principal weapon of the Entente powers was the blockade and the central weapon of the Central powers was the attacks on Commercial shipping via submarine warfare; the home front and particularly the channelling of a country's (and crucially its winder Empire's) population (ie its people resources), financial strength, raw materials, industrial productivity, transport capacity, managerial deployment of resources and popular support for the war into a total war state; the diplomatic front firstly around allies and also around getting international support for war aims and peace terms (the German's attempts to win the maritime front cost them the diplomatic front); the united front across the two key alliances. The book explores how these developed over time and how each ended up as a battle of attrition.

The second key theme is that from very early on it was inevitable that given the current state of technology and the existential nature of the war, the land war would largely be an attritional battle of numbers – destroying or capturing the enemies key war resource (i.e. soldiers) to the extent that they could no longer sustain the battle. The author argues that much of the criticism of the war after its closure simply doesn't recognise that military leaders quickly understood this imperative and, however awful its cost, acted within it.

An excellent book as an overall way of re-understanding the war and seeing how it played out over time. Not however without its faults: for all of his rejection of criticisms of the military leaders, its very clear that

almost every military plan over the period involved a sudden push, lightning strike or war-ending breakthrough (none of which occurred); the attrition theme is repeated to the point of tedium; the book falls short of giving a full picture (for example reference is made to President Wilson's 14 points – but the points are never listed or even summarised) – the book would perhaps be better if a conventional/factual micro history of the war was interleaved with the meta-analysis, some of this is deliberate (for example maps are deliberately excluded) nevertheless for the reader new to the topic it is frustrating.

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### **Steven Raszewski says**

One of the very few books I could not finish. So much prattle and bunk. After a hundred pages I returned it. Obviously this author never read (at least that I could find searching the index etc.) Mosier's: The Great Myth of WWI. This was as if the author was on a mission to find an excuse for the complete criminal incompetence of the western generals and politicians ( I mean don't you know history belongs to the victor and we won the war and by dammit our generals are going to resurrected into flippin geniuses by realizing the slaughter was attrition warfare). For anyone interested in the war and what really went down I highly recommend Moiser's book and not this drivel.

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### **Steve says**

Despite having read many histories of WWI, I never really understood it before reading this book. Confession--I actually listened to it on unabridged CDs for the most part on a cross-country drive. That was probably the best way to get through it, as there is so much detail and complex analysis that it would have been a real slog to actually sit and read. Very little detail of battles as it is concerned with large-scale military and political strategy and societal mobilization rather than tactical developments. The best comparison is with Richard Overy's "Why the Allies Won" (WWII)

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### **Robin Friedman says**

#### **An Insightful Study Of The Great War**

The centenary of WW I offers the opportunity to reflect upon this seminal event of the twentieth century. In his new book "War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War" (2014) William Philpott offers an absorbing, moving history of the Great War which captures its complexity and significance. Philpott, a Professor of the History of Warfare at Kings College, London specializes in the Western Front of WW I and has written an earlier book on the Battle of the Somme. Philpott offers a hard-headed, informed account of how and why the War was fought. At the end of his book he writes with no sense of false modesty: "I can justly claim having now written about the whole of the First World War that I still know very little about it." My reading of the book echoed this claim. I had been in the presence of a highly informed writer who taught me a great deal and who managed to leave me troubled by his subject.

Philpott's densely-written study which takes a fresh, somewhat revisionist approach. The Great War is sometimes seen as an accident fought by bumbling politicians, incompetent generals, and greedy capitalists. There is a measure of truth to these characterizations, but Philpott goes deeper. He sees WW I as radically changing the nature of warfare and the 20th century in its mobilization of large countries, citizenries, and resources. Philpott sees the leaders of both sides as recognizing the nature of the conflict relatively early --

by 1915 -- and by planning in fighting the war in an increasingly rational way. In other words, he disagrees with the view that the political and military leaders were fumlbers. Philpott summarizes the nature of the conflict in his title, "War of Attrition".

When the war began, Philpott argues, both sides thought it would be short. They thought that the war would be resolved in large decisive battles or by broad scale conquests of territory. When Germany's early advance through France was halted, the war became stalemated. Leaders of both sides, probably more so, France, Britain, and Russia came to realize that the war would be long, difficult and cruel and could be won only by killing the soldiers on the other side and depriving them of the will and the means to fight on. The war became a long, slow bloodbath. Philpott argues the war was essentially decided when the initial German advance was halted as the resources and reserves available to the Triple Entente far exceeded those of the Central Powers.

Philpott argues that the Great War was fought on five interrelated fronts which he develops throughout the study. The first, of course, is the land war which centered on the Western front in France and Belgium. The second was the sea war in which the blockade and naval superiority of Britain was pitted against German u-boats and mines. Third was the popular front in which the citizenries of the combatants were mobilized and persuaded of the justice of their respective causes and of the need to fight. The fourth front involved diplomacy which centered on finding allies. After 1914, world opinion turned decisively against Germany, Philpott argues, leading to among other things the United States' entry into the war. The fifth and final front was the "united front" which involved the ability of the belligerents on each side to coordinate their efforts. Philpott's study shows how the "War of Attrition" was fought on each of these fronts and how each factor tilted in favor of the Triple Entente.

The book is arranged chronologically with separate chapters documenting activities on each of the five fronts for both the Triple Entente and the Central Powers. Given the brevity of the book, Philpott tries to get to the heart of complex, difficult events rather than to become emeshed in detail. The book is more conceptual than factual. Thus the discussions of the major battles tend to be short and to focus on how the military events illustrated a trend rather than in a particularized account of troop movements. Because of the conceptual nature of the study, I did not find the absence of maps in this book especially bothersome. Philpott discusses the world-wide scope of the conflict, including the war with the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, but the focus is on the Western Front where the war was decided.

If there is a hero in this account, it would be the Allied generalissimo Marshall Ferdinand Foch. Philpott praises Foch for his military acument, for his early understanding of the nature of the conflict, and for his relentless and well conceived push for victory in the war's final year. As with everything about WW I, Philpott's view of Foch will be controversial.

The book shows how Germany and its rather reluctant allies were worn down militarily and politically. Contrary to some accounts, Philpott describes the eagerness of both sides at the outset to enter the war. The victors in particular saw themselves as fighting the "Great War for Civilization" and then began to question their perception as the war dragged on and the human cost mounted. Philpott makes clear the moral issues that surround the fighting of a large-scale total "war of attrition". Throughout the study, he considers how the war shaped further military and political events of the twentieth century. "Whether it was worth it today is impossible to judge", Philpott writes. "Why it was so might yet be understood".

"War of Attrition" helped me think about WW I during this opening centenary year. Philpott eloquently concludes his study:

"Looking back from our vantage point a century later their war seems remote, irrational and perhaps now unknowable. To dismiss it as futile as many do is however a regrettable failure of understanding. We will continue to mark the veterans' passing, to seek out their stories, to mourn our societies' losses, to honor their

contemporaries' sacrifice and to lament and commemorate the sacrifices and slaughters that their generation unleashed on the world. We will do so as long as we still live in their flawed civilization."

This book will interest readers interested in a short, penetrating study of WW I.

Robin Friedman

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### **Andrew Parnell says**

The author suggests that the way the first world war was fought, was the correct way. I disagree, but he writes his argument very well.

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### **Brendan Hodge says**

I picked this book up because I was very, very impressed with Philpott's book Three Armies on the Somme, and from the title, blurb and table of contents I was expecting a book focused on the strategy and tactics of attritional warfare.

There's some of that here, but Philpott's scope is more general. He addresses the entire war from the point of view of it being fought as a war of attrition -- an approach almost necessitated in a pre-nuclear age when countries of such massive resources set out to fight wars of national survival against each other.

I felt that the result ended up filling a sort of uncomfortable middle ground: too conception to be simply a high level history of the war, but too broadly conceived to be very satisfying to someone who's already read 20+ books on WW1.

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### **Skuli Saeland says**

Ágætis yfirlit yfir fyrri heimsstyrjöldina. Philpott einsetur sér að sannfæra lesandann um að flestir hershöfðingjarnir hafi áttað sig tiltölulega snemma á því að stríðið snérist fyrst og fremst um að vinna andstæðinginn með því að eyða getu hans til að endurnýja mannafla og hergögn. Því hafi blóðbaðið í fyrri heimsstyrjöldinni snúist fyrst og fremst um þetta markmið hershöfðingjanna. Sagan er því að hluta til skrifuð sem syndaaflausn fyrir miskunnarleysi herforingjanna sem þótti nokkurra tuga þúsunda mannfali ásætlanlegt ef andstæðingurinn varð fyrir álíka mannfali. Philpott setur ágætlega fram þennan rökstuðning sinn og sameinar heildarmyndina af stríðsrekstrinum með land- og sjóhernáði, pólitík, áróðri og efnahagsuppbyggingu ríkjanna til herrekstursins.

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### **Marks54 says**

This book is a sharp analytic approach to understanding WW1. Its perspective is that the strategy of the warring states evolved away from their initial emphasis on achieving a quick "knockout" victory and towards one of a concerted war of attrition, where victory would come to the side that was most successful in forcing their opponent to deplete their reserves and eventually crack under the strain of continual attack. The book is

effective in showing how this approach evolved over the course of the war, how it involved multiple dimensions (military, political, social, economic), and how it was nearly perfected by Foch in his final response to the German spring offensive of 1918 and the "100 days" campaign that followed and led to the Armistice. This analysis seems reasonable and even insightful, especially for a war in which conventional strategy appears to have been wanting and the resulting slaughter nearly pointless.

Having said this, I am still of mixed feelings about the message of the book. On the one hand, knowing that the allies were pursuing a strategy of sorts is better than the alternative - that they were not and that this war which wrecked Europe and the Middle East for a century afterwards was without overall purpose and even insane. However, documenting a strategy that explains the actions of the allies does not go very far in justifying them. Why was this possible to pursue in democratic states? While the strategy may have been instrumental, how can the wanton disregard for the lives of soldiers and civilians not be seen as criminal in some sense? It is very difficult for good analysis, such as provided by Philpott here, to really be "value free". The really disturbing nature of WW1 does not lessen with the passage of time or with the clarification provided by good historical accounts such as this one. While such books make the war easier to understand, they also make it harder to accept.

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### **Mark white says**

Excellent history of the much-ignored WW I. Philpott mostly presents the macro view and I wish he had included more vignettes of individual soldiers.

The book is particularly good in its discussion of the effects of the war on civilian populations.

This is not by any means a neutered popular history, yet it is pleasingly accessible.

AS an American who remembered only what I learned in high school I was surprised to learn that the US only entered the war in the last months and our primary effect was not so much to fighting of our brave soldiers, but his combined with the surety that millions more Americans and untold amounts of supplies and logistics. It was this threat that caused the Germans to sue for peace.

I'm inspired to read more about this fascinating period of history.

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### **Chris Tollefson says**

Of all the historians I've read who specialize in the First a world War, William Philpott is the best at cutting through the myths and cliches of this titanic conflict to reveal the strategy and commitment of those who fought it. It does a great disservice to those who served, bled and died on all sides to view the Great War as a meaningless slaughter. To be sure, it was terrible and enormously costly. But this book and Philpott's other great book, Three Armies on the Somme, disposes of facile condemnations that would have meant little to the combatants, whether privates or generals. While the war didn't need to be fought, once it began, the nature of industrial warfare made a strategy of attrition inevitable. Philpott shows the rational thought behind the war on all sides, and the terrible choices that confronted every nation involved. Do yourself a favor and read him. You'll gain a new understanding of a very misunderstood war.

## Joshua Horn says

This book was able to make subject that though complicated, is very dramatic, very boring. He went off into some side tracks on the home front and mobilization that were rather interesting, but most of the war is covered much better by other works. I was also not convinced by the driving theory of the book - that the Great War was just a war of attrition that had to be fought to the bitter end. I think there were so many men dying on the Western Front that Britain had a duty to pursue some of the side expeditions, even if they did turn out eventually to be fruitless.

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## Charles says

I was quite impressed by Philpott's "War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War". It is well written in the British academic style. I found it to be a good, but not great military and diplomatic survey history of WWI.

What I thought best about the book was the description of the war affected of the belligerents' societies. In particular, the author does a good job in relating the dependencies of the regimes on their populace and their moves to manipulate their citizens at the beginning, middle and end of the war. I greatly appreciated thumbnail biographies of less well known personalities, particularly the businessmen profiteers. In particular, the descriptions of how Britain and France 'weathered the war' were very well done. If anything, this book convinced me 'The French army won WWI', a fact that gets diluted in the Anglo-American histories of the war.

I am still thinking about the author's point that the brutalization of the generation who fought at the front affected world history into the atomic age.

However, this book is not perfect.

Firstly, the author's style is academic, and English. The reading demands concentration. This is not bad, but be prepared. In addition, I would not recommend this as the first book read on WWI. Having some reading background in the conflict, the early 1900's and the geography is required for full appreciation.

While Philpott is very good at his coverage of English and French efforts, the Central Powers and the eastern Allies get decidedly less coverage. Germany receives the most prose and analysis, being the major belligerent. Germany's war is well covered. However, the coverage of the war gets sparser the further east and south you go. Austria-Hungary gets short shrift, and Bulgaria goes almost without discussion. Crucially, the mid and end war state of Russia does not receive the attention it should get. Frankly the analysis of the eastern front and the peripheral campaigns paled in comparison to the western front. Although I do believe the author's contention, the war was won and could have been lost only on the western front.

Finally, I've become convinced that wars are won by men and machines; WWI being the first of the first example of industrial war. It is perfectly clear the population was bent to production, and tremendous innovation occurred. However, only sporadically does the author digress to discuss the effect of a particular technological development on the war. Also, while the evolution of military strategy and operations during the course of the war is adequately discussed, important tactical innovations such as Stoßtruppen and U-boot wolfpacking that affected operations are mentioned only in passing.

Philpott's book is a worthwhile read. It is very dense, and will lead you in many directions. For example, I'm interested in the Polish-Soviet war of 1919, where "Communism was stopped at the Vistula by the Polish army". However, this book will only be appreciated by someone who has studied the military and diplomatic history of the war in other books.

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## **Brad Bradford says**

One more World War I book released for the 100th anniversary of the start of the War. Unfortunately I cannot recommend William Philpott's War of Attrition: Fighting the First World War.

For starters, this book should be called "War of Attrition: The Secondary War". A war of attrition is an actual military strategy in which the belligerents attempt to win a war by wearing down the enemy to the point of collapse. Mr. Philpott's thesis is WWI was a war in which the strategy of the belligerents was to wear each other out by taking out as many enemy troops as possible.

Unfortunately the book does a poor job at connecting the strategy of attrition to the belligerent's actual conduct of the war. He states over and over that the War was a war of attrition, but he does not explain how the belligerent's strategies were attritional. At several points the book even contradicts itself by stating the strategy of battles was for a "knock out" blow. This is not an attritional strategy by definition.

Mr. Philpott quotes various sources as saying the War was one of attrition, but a lot of the sources of the quotes were people not involved with military strategy. It seems as if they were expressing their personal opinion on a grim situation instead of a reflection on actual military strategy. Also, some of the sources used to back up the thesis were from material written after the War. The problem with this is a lot of people, after the war, wrote about fighting a war of attrition as a way to combat their critics and justify the huge casualty lists.

Attrition is a natural outcome of war. What Mr. Philpott explains in the book is the natural attrition that occurs during a war, especially one lasting over four years. Just because a war has a very large body count over the course of four years does not make it a war of attrition. Instead of making a connection between an actual attritional strategy and a four year war with a large body count, Mr. Philpott seems like he's trying to convince readers that WWI was a war of attrition by saying the word "attrition" over and over again. From a military perspective he does not explain how the strategy was attritional outside of battlefield casualties that naturally occur in war.

As a general history of WWI, War of Attrition leaves a lot to be desired. This book is too general of a history of WW I to be a good narrative of the War. There are many other books on WW I that are better historical narratives.

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## **Bettie? says**

Description: *The Great War of 1914-1918 was the first mass conflict to fully mobilize the resources of industrial powers against one another, resulting in a brutal, bloody, protracted war of attrition between the world's great economies. Now, 100 years after the first guns of August rang out on the Western front, historian William Philpott reexamines the causes and lingering effects of the first truly modern war.*

*Drawing on the experience of front-line soldiers, munitions workers, politicians, and diplomats, War of Attrition explains for the first time why and how this new type of conflict was fought as it was fought, as well as how the attitudes and actions of political and military leaders, and the willing responses of their peoples, stamped the 20th century with unprecedented carnage on - and behind - the battlefield.*

