

They did not, however, get the war that they expected. Most officials confidently announced that the war would be over by Christmas. They were right; it was Christmas, but Christmas of 1918. Tidy plans for rapid victory were shattered by the realities of WWI. German forces crossed the Marne River on September 5, 1914, and got within a dozen miles of Paris, at which point they were repelled by a desperate French army. The war on this western front settled into a stalemate. Despite truly horrific battles at Verdun and Somme, and the loss of nearly two million men, opposing units made little progress. They dug trenches and fussed with barbed wire barricades that scarred the land along a 450-mile front that stretched from Belgium's beaches to the Swiss border. German and Austrian allied forces were more successful on the eastern front, where Russian western borderlands were taken and occupied, weakening Russia to the point of exhaustion and then revolution.

WAR AND THE HOME FRONT

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WWI was a **total war** because whole divisions clashed in civilian territory where the line between soldier and civilian was blurred. Everyone experienced the bitter taste of battle, no longer a distant set-piece fought between professional officers struggling nobly for the high ground. These were battles between masses of common men called up to engage in industrialized warfare to the death along fronts that stretched tens of miles, close to populated farms and villages, along familiar streams and rivers, and among ancient churches, grammar schools, and hospitals. And battles were fought beyond Europe on an Italian front, a Turkish front, a Palestinian front, a Mesopotamian front, and several African fronts, where rival tribes, forced to ally with their British, French, and German colonizers, killed each other now for another set of reasons.

VERA BRITTAIN

Named as if to represent those of her land and generation, Brittain was an intelligent, lovely young brunette from a well-to-do family in northern England. She wanted to be a writer and was eager to leave the confines of a small town and to change the second-class status of women. She studied hard to achieve her first dream, which was to go to college at Oxford. She passed the tough entrance exam, a great achievement in itself. Her dream was realized. But just as she arrived at Oxford for her first term in the fall of 1914, Europe went to war. Brittain and her new friends were swept away by the racing river of war enthusiasm. Eventually this included two friends, Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow; her younger brother Edward; and her first love, Roland Leighton, also a new student at Oxford. As she watched her friends, family, and love go to war, Brittain felt a surge of pride and a deep confidence that they were all a part of something grand and wonderful, something world-changing. They were right, but not in the way they expected. As Brittain began to correspond with Roland and the others about their experiences, her feelings of pride and confidence gave way to mixed emotions about the war itself and about what might happen to her loved ones. All around her, people were losing theirs. The thought of losing those close to her in a war that more and more seemed terribly brutal, futile, and never-ending struck Brittain hard. Doubts and feelings of helplessness plagued her. Sometime in 1915, she decided to do what she could and volunteered as an army nurse. She served for the next three years in hospitals in London, in northern France, and on the Mediterranean island of Malta, growing more disillusioned by the day. She held out hope that she would be reunited, if only for a short time.

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with Roland for Christmas in 1915. While waiting for him to arrive, she received a telegram: Roland had been killed two days earlier and would never be coming home. Grieving, she pulled herself back into nursing and corresponded with Victor and Geoffrey and now her brother Edward, who was just old enough to enlist. Every day, she cared for soldiers from both sides of the war. Some lost limbs. Some lost eyes. Others were ill from battle fatigue. Still others suffered horribly from the shock of war, which we now call PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). In 1917, Victor and Geoffrey were killed, and in the final year of the war, Edward was killed. In her unforgettable account of her war experience, *Testament of Youth* (1933), Brittain wrote that by the end of the war she was completely numb—to suffering, to loss, to any hope for the future—and felt too paralyzed to start over again.

But she did. She returned to Oxford, formed friendships with those who had survived the war, and began to write. She also saw that the war had taken an especially hard toll on women, those who before the war were often viewed as little more than grown children to be pampered and patronized. Those women had proven themselves to be far more as they were called upon to take up the tasks left unmanned by war. They worked in shops, in factories, in schools, in hospitals, and in every other conceivable way to keep a nation going. So Brittain led the campaign for gender equality. She was labeled a “feminist,” but to her, she was only doing what made good sense. Her *Testament of Youth* became a bestseller. Permanently affected by the shock of WWI, she became a pacifist, and years later, strongly opposed Britain’s entry into WWII.

Thus WWI was a total, global war, but it was also an all-consuming war on the home front. The best examples of this are personal stories, like that of Vera Brittain.

Economic Nationalism

As we reflect on Brittain’s story, there are a number of important themes to consider. First, her life is the narrative of a generation first enchanted and then disenchanted by world war, sometimes called the “lost generation” since so many millions were lost. Second, homeland policies and institutions were unified and nationalized for the war effort in ways they never had been before. Third, for the same reason, the economy was now systematically coordinated and more centralized under government direction. Fourth, this reorganization of the economy brought new powers—and a new justification for those powers—to governments across Europe. This was also true of the United States, which entered the war late (1917) but which turned the tide of battle for the victorious allies. Finally, it created a healthy skepticism to calls for war and to the propaganda that survivors of WWI now looked at through jaundiced eyes.

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