

★ HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY ACTIVITY 16



The Battle of the Somme

Where there had once been green forests and groves, there was now only the occasional leafless, branchless tree. Autumn had come to the Somme valley of France in 1916. But it was an artificial autumn, brought on by bombs, bullets, and hand grenades. How did advances in military technology change the nature of warfare with the outbreak of World War I?

Before World War I, vacationing Parisians used to flock north to the Somme River. The waterway flowed lazily through a gentle countryside dotted with rich farms, quaint villages, and thickly wooded hills. Happy to escape the stresses of city life, the Parisians swam in the Somme, strolled through the woods, and nibbled on bread and cheese from the local bakeries and farms.

The tourists barely dented the local food supply. For hundreds of years, the rolling plains around the Somme had been one of France's leading agricultural regions. Wheat, barley, oats, sugar beets, and all manner of fruits and vegetables grew in the area's fertile

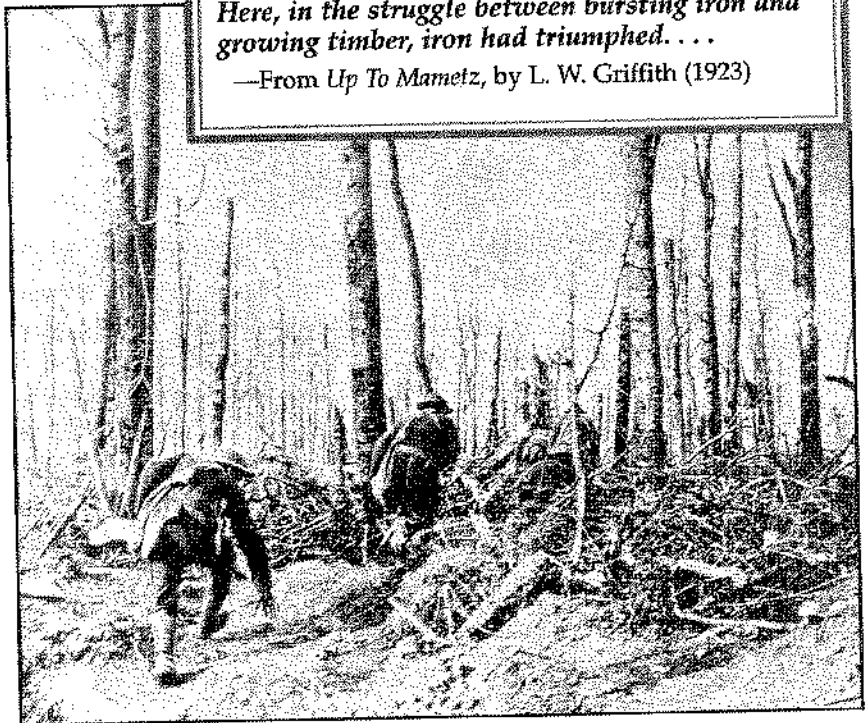
soil. Farmers raised cattle by the thousands and produced cheese and butter by the ton.

When the opposing armies arrived at the Somme in 1916, they dug trenches

A Desolate Landscape

I reached a [crossroads] where four lanes broadened into a confused patch of destruction. Fallen trees, shell holes, a hurriedly dug trench beginning and ending in an uncertain manner, abandoned rifles, broken branches with their sagging leaves, an unopened box of ammunition, sandbags half-filled with bombs, a derelict machine-gun propping up the head of an immobile figure in uniform, with a belt of ammunition drooping from the breech into a pile of red-stained earth—this is the livery of War. Shells were falling, over and short, near and wide, to show that somewhere over the hill a gunner was playing the part of blind fate for all who walked past this well-marked spot. Here, in the struggle between bursting iron and growing timber, iron had triumphed. . . .

—From *Up To Mametz*, by L. W. Griffith (1923)



"Over the top!" resounded along Allied lines as soldiers poured from their trenches into No Man's Land. The scarred remains of a forest show the devastating effects of trench warfare on the countryside near the Somme River.

HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY ACTIVITY 16 (continued)

instead of seed rows. Their constant artillery fire soon destroyed the land between the trenches, turning it into a desolate landscape known as No Man's Land. It was No Tree's Land as well, because nothing could stand up to the powerful artillery shells.

Different groups of people interact with their environment in different ways. The farmers of the Somme, for example, grew wheat, oats, and vegetables in the fertile soil of the plains, but they grew few

crops on the surrounding hills. It was difficult for them to clear the trees from the hills and plant crops on the hillsides. Besides, the soil was richer on the plains.

The soldiers had a different opinion of the Somme's geographic features. They prized the hills and dreaded the plains. The hills gave commanding views across a wide area and were easy to defend. The plains, on the other hand, offered little protection and exposed soldiers to attack from all sides.

APPLYING GEOGRAPHY TO HISTORY

DIRECTIONS: Answer the questions below in the space provided.

1. Why did soldiers and farmers have different opinions of the Somme's geographic features? Which features were important to each group? Why?

2. Compare the impacts of farming and warfare on the Somme.

3. What impact do you think a modern war would have on the Somme? Why?

Critical Thinking

4. **Evaluating Information** Which aspects of the Somme's geography might interest a modern factory owner? Why?

Activity

5. Do you think the land of the Somme ever returned to its prewar condition? Working with a group, research the Somme or another famous World War I battlefield. Try to answer the following questions: How did war transform the land? Which parts of the land were able to recover? How long did the recovery take? Which parts were unable to recover? Why? Report your findings to the class.