

No Man's Land

By [Stephen Bull](#)

Summary

"No Man's Land" was a popular term during the First World War to describe the area between opposing armies and trench lines. How it came to exist and how far it might extend was influenced by a variety of military and topographic factors.

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Origins of the Term

The English term "No Man's Land" has existed since the medieval era to denote disputed territory. In the First World War it was re-coined to describe the terrain between opposing forces, particularly where fronts were static, gaining common currency from late 1914. The term remains current, and is used more broadly to indicate areas of ambiguity and lack of ownership as well as military situations.

World War One

Sometimes generals of the First World War influenced, to advantage, where this dangerous strip of ground lay by positioning forces on ridges, or behind obstacles, overlooking good fields of fire. Often, however, "No Man's Land" arose in a particular location by chance, as offensives ended, or armies encountered each other and entrenched wherever they could. "No Man's Land" therefore varied dramatically according to geography and happenstance. Its boundaries might be clearly defined by belts of [wire](#) and trench lines or natural features, or unclear and fluid. On the Yser the distance between Belgians and Germans was at times just a few yards of wet mud. On Vimy Ridge and at the Butte de Vauquois Canadians and French occupied craters on hills adjoining those of the Germans. Conversely, where land was deliberately flooded, or armies confronted each other across wide rivers, or on quieter sectors of the [Eastern Front](#), "No Man's Land" could be miles wide.

Raids and patrols into "No Man's Land" between the protagonists of the [Western Front](#) took place as early as late 1914, and were encouraged as a method of gleaning intelligence and

striking small demoralising blows. However, the threatening emptiness of this mysterious strip of land was notorious, being much enhanced by the difficulty and danger of retrieving the wounded or [dead](#). In part therefore “No Man’s Land” was a function of the lethality of modern [weapons](#) at short range – so linking the concepts of “No Man’s Land” and the new experience of the “empty battlefield.”

Stephen Bull, Lancashire County Museums

Selected Bibliography

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Citation

Stephen Bull: No Man's Land, in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-08-20. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10704](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10704)

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- [Detailed maps of Western Front military movement, 1914-1916 \(Cartographie 1914-1918\) \(Map\)](#)

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Author Keywords

Western Front; Topography; Trench; Military; Technology

GND Subject Headings

[Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Grabenkrieg](#)

LC Subject Headings

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Key Person(s)

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[Butte de Vauquois](#); [Vimy](#)

Title

No Man's Land

Author(s)

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Article Type

Encyclopedic Entry

Classification Group

Concepts, Practices and Policies

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