

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 October 2014

Barbed Wire

By [Alan Krell](#)

Invented in France in 1860, barbed wire was further developed in the United States, where it was used to restrict cattle and secure territory. Acquiring far more menacing qualities in the First World War, where it became an essential feature of trench fortifications, barbed wire prompted imaginative responses from wry ditties to serious literature.

Table of Contents

- [1 "To keep in and to keep out"](#)
- [2 Modern Warfare](#)
- [3 The Great War](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

“To keep in and to keep out”

Barbed wire’s simplicity of concept and ease of realization belies the critical role it has played in the modern experience: territorial expansion and settlement, regional and international conflicts, incarceration and extermination. Barbed wire’s singular purpose - to keep in and to keep out - was first put to use on the Great Plains of the American West in the late 19th century to restrict cattle and, implicitly, to secure territory by expansionist settlers and demarcate possessions. Important patents were issued to [Henry M. Rose](#) on 13 May 1873, and [Joseph Glidden \(1813-1906\)](#) on 24 November 1874 (a patent famously called “The Winner”). Barbed wire’s utilization in this rural economy led to hostility amongst the settlers themselves (the short-lived Range Wars, 1883-1884), and also to tension between the settlers and Native Americans - the latter of whom saw their open ranges dissected by barbed wire. American patents were predated by ones awarded to [Gilbert Gavillard](#) on 27 August 1867, a little-known French (Breton) brick manufacturer and, even earlier on 7 July 1860,

to [Léonce Eugène Grassin-Baledans](#), who had in mind “everything that ought to be enclosed or fenced,” including railings for parks, railroads, meadows, gardens and trees.

Modern Warfare

Barbed wire’s transformation from this mixed economy into the mechanized landscape of modern warfare would transform its symbolic meanings forever while still retaining its original purpose to “keep in and keep out”. Widely used for the first time in South Africa by the British General [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850–1916\)](#) against the Boers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State (in the so-called Second Boer War, 11 October-31 May 1902), it was Lord Kitchener who turned to a strategy of barbed wire and blockhouses that paralleled his other initiative, also involving barbed wire; the construction of what soon came to be called “concentration camps”, a term that would enter menacingly into the social imagination with the Nazi death camps of the Second World War, such as Belzec and Treblinka. Here barbed wire, now electrified, became an essential part of the architecture of mass murder. In the [Russo-Japanese War](#) of 1904-05, barbed wire was employed in conjunction with trenches, redoubts, glacis (banks sloping down in front of defensive positions), and *fougasses* (small mines placed underground with gunpowder or loaded shells).

The Great War

The scale and complexity of trench fortifications in the so-called Great War (stretching for nearly 1,300 miles), however, were unprecedented; and it was this that allowed barbed wire to play out its new and frightening role. Described phlegmatically in a British manual as the “most efficient obstacle and [one that is] universally used”, barbed wire and its dreadful effects were picked up and lampooned by British troops in the lyrics of *The Old Barbed Wire*, a popular World War I song: “If you to want to find the sergeant, /I know where he is, /... I’ve seen him... /Lying on the canteen floor... /If you want to find the old battalion, /I know where they are, /They’re hanging on the old barbed wire. /I’ve seen ‘em, I’ve seen ‘em, /...”^[1] The German war veteran and author, [Erich Maria Remarque \(1888–1970\)](#), would later allude to such “hangings” in his famous novel of 1928, *Im Westen nichts Neues*. Published in 1929 in English as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque writes: “We recognise the distorted faces and the flattened helmets — it’s the French...the body falls away completely and only the shot-off hands and the stumps of the arms are left hanging in the wire.”^[2]

Alan Krell, The University of New South Wales

Section Editor: [Catriona Pennell](#)

Notes

1. ↑ Anonymous: 'The Old Barbed Wire' in Ferguson, John (ed.): War and the Creative Arts, London 1972, pp. 139-40.
2. ↑ Remarque, Erich Maria: All Quiet on the Western Front (1929), trans. and afterword Brian Murdoch, London 1966, p. 97.

Selected Bibliography

Bourne, J. M.: **A personal reflection on the two world wars**, in: Liddle, Peter / Bourne, J. M. / Whitehead, Ian R. (eds.): The Great War 1914-1945. Lightning strikes twice, volume 1, London 2003: HarperCollins, pp. 13-26.

Krell, Alan: **The devil's rope. A cultural history of barbed wire**, London 2002: Reaktion Books.

McCallum, Henry De Rosset / McCallum, Frances Tarlton: **The wire that fenced the West**, Norman 1965: University of Oklahoma Press.

Netz, Reviel: **Barbed wire. An ecology of modernity**, Middletown 2004: Wesleyan University Press.

Razac, Olivier: **Histoire politique du barbelé. La prairie, la tranchée, le camp**, Paris 2000: La Fabrique.

Citation

Krell, Alan: Barbed Wire , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10199**.

License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](#).