

OIL IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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This paper discusses oil production and consumption during World War I, and the role of oil in the war. Besides being the most horrific conflagration in the world up to that time, and the second deadliest conflict in history (after World War II, measured by combatant casualties), World War I was also the first motorized war and the first in which oil both played a crucial operational role and constituted a significant strategic objective. George Curzon, the British foreign secretary from 1919 to 1924, famously declared that the Allied cause had “floated to victory on a wave of oil.” French president Georges Clemenceau said in 1917 that gasoline was as vital as blood. Oil played a role on land, on sea, and in the air. On land, the United States alone brought 50,000 vehicles to the theater in the roughly 18 months it fought in the war, and World War I also saw the introduction of the tank. On sea, the British gained an advantage in the range and speed of ships by moving from coal to oil as a fuel. Meanwhile, the air war was almost entirely dependent on oil. The Central Powers relied on oil production from Galicia and Romania, while the Allies depended crucially on the United States, which accounted for 80% of Allied supplies. The El Dorado oil field discovered in Kansas by Cities Service Company played an important role during the war. By 1918, it was producing more oil than all the Romanian and Galician fields seized by the Germans. In Britain, the buildup to the war and its execution also resulted in the fateful British involvement in Iran’s oil industry, with momentous geopolitical consequences extending to the present day.

STANDARD OIL AND THE GREAT LAKES

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In the 1880s The Standard Oil Company began to invest in the new oil fields surrounding Lima, Ohio. They not only solved the problem of refining high-sulphur crude, but also organized a new company town at Whiting, Indiana, around the largest oil facility in the world to refine oil from this new field. The transformation of this new source of crude oil mirrored the transformation of the environment Standard spearheaded in the Calumet region 20 miles southeast of Chicago. As pollution in Lake Michigan ignored property and state boundaries, local environmental groups and sanitary engineers would contribute to a growth of the emerging environmental movement.

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Power House, Lima, Ohio, 1909
Courtesy of Jeff Spencer

