

Forgotten Men: An International Comprehensive Documentary on Remembering the Horrors of the Great War

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*Abstract: The 1933 Great War film *Forgotten Men* is an anti-war documentary that captured the horrors of the war through the experiences of frontline soldiers. This film was made during the rise of fascism in Germany and served as a message to the next generation of youth about the horrors of conflict through its genuine anti-war message. As a historical film nearly 100 years old, *Forgotten Men* still has pedagogical value to contemporary audiences as it echoes the voices of Great War veterans from the past and the need to stop all wars, especially in our world as multiple wars occur throughout the globe.*

Keywords: The First World War, Historical Film, Veterans, Anti-War Documentary, History Education

Introduction

Over 100 years after the end of the Great War in 1918, war has been glorified in some Canadian and British public learning institutions including schools and war museums (Alexander, n. d.; Downing, 2012; McCulloch, 2009; Telch, 2023; Whitmarsh, 2001). Historically, some schools and war museums have fostered patriotism, loyalty, military service, war heroes, and a glorified death on the battlefield to students and the public (Alexander, n. d.; Whitmarsh, 2001). Yet, despite the heroic presentation of war in some learning institutions, some history educators have countered the glories of war by promoting peace in schools, museums, memorials, art, literature, and film to create a better tomorrow (Kingston, 2023). History educators have an excellent opportunity to explore the relationship between war and peace in a film that has yet to be analyzed. In this conceptual paper, I will analyze how the film can provide history educators with a potential impetus for discussions about war and peace with students.

Using historical films to teach students about the past could benefit students' socio-emotional learning. Watching historical films in the classroom, for example, might lead to emotional responses as students interconnect with a particular historical moment or figure, the development of critical thinking, and foster historical recognition of the past (Russell, 2012). In addition to utilizing films in the classroom as a learning tool, Stoddard and Marcus (2010) reveal that watching films might develop students' historical empathy as they learn about the perspectives of a particular historical cause or movement in a specific time. Students' historical empathy is further developed when teachers use historical films as a primary source for students to understand the beliefs and ideologies of the past (Stoddard & Marcus, 2010). Viewing historical films can encourage "imaginative stimulation" as students develop a keen interest in the past (Haworth, 1976, p. 167).

The 1933 Great War film *Forgotten Men* is an anti-war documentary that featured the horrors of the First World War ("Horrors of Modern War," 1936; "Turner Classic Movies," n. d.). It is a powerful film that captured the war from the perspectives of combatants from multiple nations and portrayed the destruction of an entire generation of young men ("Real Fighting Scenes," 1933). Unlike Hollywood war films including *Saving Private Ryan* where war is heavily embellished or not factually accurate (Stoddard & Marcus, 2010), *Forgotten Men*, for the most part, captured the authenticity of war and the raw experience of frontline combat through its millions of participants (Sternberg, 2002; "World War Film," 1933). Viewing *Forgotten Men* in the classroom could allow students to think about the realistic consequences of war and the need to establish peace to prevent more wars in the future.

Historical Context of *Forgotten Men* and Summary

With the end of hostilities on 11 November 1918, the Western Front was bathed with an eerie, calm silence for the first time in years. For the Allied forces along the Western Front, it was a surreal moment for some war-weary soldiers as news about the end of hostilities was not fully grasped after years of fighting (Cuthbertson, 2018). After the signing of the Armistice, some soldiers mourned for their friends and comrades, some soldiers remained bitterly angry about the loss of life on the Western Front, and others were glad that the fighting was over (Grogan, 2014). Equally, while

the populations of the Allied nations took to the streets to celebrate the news of victory, the families also mourned for their deceased loved ones and anticipated their unknown future.

In Britain, during the 11 November 1920 Armistice Day and the burial of the Unknown Warrior at Westminster Abbey in London, families “shared their grief, their unimaginable pain” as they associated their deceased family members with the Unknown Warrior (Linden, 2024, p. 19). Many British and Allied families mourned for the rest of their lives, unable to overcome their sorrow, unable to overcome their sorrow.

Even as the post-war years went on during the 1920s and 1930s, the lingering legacies of the Great War could not be forgotten. Some veterans and female participants of the war wrote memoirs and novels to make sense of their experiences and honour their deceased comrades (Barbusse, 1917; Brittain, 1933; Cane, 2004; Clint, 1934; Graves, 1929; Hemingway, 1929; Junger, 2004; Manning, 1930; Massey, 1976; Remarque, 1929; Romain, 1939; Sassoon, 1928; Scott, 2000; Wilson-Simmie, 2004). Other veterans took to the silver screen to act out their experiences and show the long-lasting consequences of shell shock on veterans (Telch, 2024). While Armistice Day and eventually Remembrance Day were observed internationally by the Great War participants to remember the fallen, there were some attempts to remember the war through commemorative war documentaries (Manchel, 1990).

One documentary to capture the horrors of the Great War was Samuel Cummings’s *Forgotten Men* (“World War Film,” 1933). Cummings, an American director and producer, “conceived the idea of making an authentic chronological, unbiased record of every nation’s part in the war” during the 1920s (“World War Film,” 1933, p. 5; “IMDb,” n. d.). He sought to debunk the glorious myths of the war by creating a realistic anti-war documentary to raise awareness about the horrors of armed conflict (“Horrors of Modern War,” 1936; “World War Film,” 1933). Cummings assembled *Forgotten Men* by collecting footage from the archives of 14 former Great War countries (“Veterans Sponsor,” 1934). Some of the documentary was acquired through deceitful measures or by returning soldiers; other footage came from deceased cameramen who died in action filming the war (“World War Film,” 1933).

Forgotten Men begins with the introduction of Sir Ian Hamilton, a British Army Great War General turned pacifist, who commended the film’s creation (“Horrors of Modern War,” 1936; Kornicki, 2010). It then transitioned to the documentary’s narrator, Sir John Hammerton, writer and editor, who engaged with multiple veterans of different nations throughout the course of the presentation (“Artware,” n. d.; “Horrors of Modern War,” 1936). Cummings’s program showed a multi-perspective of combat through the lenses of the French, British, Americans, Germans, Russians, Belgians, and Italians (“Real Fighting Scenes,” 1933). The footage of *Forgotten Men* was filmed during the war years from multiple theatres of combat and included both authentic and some faked footage, including soldiers reenacting going over the top into combat in the 1916 *Battle of the Somme* film (Sternberg, 2002; “Veterans Sponsor,” 1934). Hundreds of sanctioned cameramen from different countries were killed filming the scenes of war (“Lesson to Youth,” 1935; “Veterans Sponsor,” 1934). Scenes in the documentary included German U-boats attacking ships, chemical attacks, Zeppelin assaults, pilots burning to death, tanks, hand-to-hand combat, and “machine gunners murdering thousands” (“Lesson to Youth,” 1935, p. 12). Cummings’s documentary showed the “harrowing, shocking, brutal and unvarnished truth about the war” (“Forgotten Men’ Film,” 1934, p. 7).

Sound was also added to the film to capture the realities of the war (“Veterans Sponsor,” 1934). It was shown in several countries during the mid-1930s, including Britain, Australia, Canada, and the United States (“Forgotten Men,” 1935; “Poignant War Scenes Recalled,” 1935; “Richmond’s Theatres This Week,” 1933; “What Representative People Think of Actual War Film,” 1935). *Forgotten Men* was directed by Bud Pollard, British International Pictures served as the production company, and was officially released in January 1933 (“IMDb,” n. d.; “Turner Classic Movies,” n. d.).

As a historical and educational film, *Forgotten Men* captured the horrors of the Great War through its powerful and authentic anti-war message to prevent the slaughter of youth in future conflicts. The film’s decry of war through the experiences of soldiers and veterans was publicly proclaimed in Western countries during the 1930s amid fears of a second global war with Germany.

Capturing the Horrors of the Great War in *Forgotten Men*: A Message to Youth

Forgotten Men debunked the myth that the Great War was not a glorious conflict. Instead, it showed to audiences worldwide that the war was a catastrophe that led to the slaughter of young lives. For millions of European families after the war, they mourned for the loss of their loved ones. Across Western Europe, families and communities formed tight kinships around war memorials, for example, that emphasized the values of loyalty to country and Christian symbolism to mourn for their loved ones (Winter, 1995). Although discontent about the worthlessness of the war was not widespread during the interwar years (Hynes, 2018; Telch, 2024; Todman, 2014; Winter, 1995), *Forgotten Men* challenged this perception to audiences that the war was not glorious: “Death is undramatic. The whole action has the unhighlighted, casual quality of reality-which makes it doubly terrible” (“Forgotten Men,” 1933, p. 16). *Forgotten Men* made it clear that the Great War was a futile conflict where young lives were unnecessarily mowed down on the stalemate battlefields of Europe. The graphic, brutal scenes of soldiers’ deaths added to the film’s realism, as Cummings did not hesitate to leave out scenes of violence. The senseless deaths of young men in the film added to the “stupidity of war” as families were left to rebuild their shattered lives (“Forgotten Men,” 1933, p. 24).

Forgotten Men deeply impacted some British Great War veterans. The presentation of the film to the veterans justified their combat experiences. Captain W.F. Strickland, Member of Parliament, for Coventry, rightly observed “if the film has no other effect than that of awakening the poignant interest in those four tragic years of war, it will have accomplished its purpose” (“Poignant War Scenes Recalled,” 1935, p. 9). The showing of *Forgotten Men* to British veterans at the Empire Theatre in Coventry in 1935 appeared to have lessened their suffering (“Poignant War Scenes Recalled,” 1935). After the 1918 Armistice, many veterans often experienced a sense of guilt that they survived while their friends and comrades were killed on the Western Front (Grogan, 2014). The fact the film reduced, perhaps, some of the veterans’ guilt or discomfort allowed them to comprehend that their service and daily hardships on the Western Front were not entirely meaningless. The service of British veterans was not in vain because their sacrifices might “re-awakened the public conscience” of some British people about the horrors of the war (“Poignant War Scenes Recalled,” 1935, p. 9). Although it is unclear if Strickland himself fought in the war, he still firmly advocated that the suffering experienced by the veterans and the showing of the documentary to audiences would serve as a historical lesson for generations to come (“Poignant War Scenes Recalled,” 1935).

Forgotten Men honoured the millions of dead throughout the war. The title of the film itself is symbolic. Though recognized as a senseless conflict, the film “hosts...World War dead, [and] will not be forgotten if all persons see the film” (“Forgotten Men’ Brought to City,” 1934, p. 1). Tens of thousands of veterans in Western countries suffered psychological wounds or were recovering from their physical wounds at home. They were at times easily forgotten, cast aside, or denied a pension for their service (Bogaert, 2020; Reid, 2010; Telch, 2024). For both the living and the dead, their reasons for fighting in the Great War were subjective, but for each man, it represented his truth (Telch, 2024). Whether fighting for King and Country or liberating the oppressed peoples of France and Belgium, their service held meaning, regardless of the slaughter on European battlefields. *Forgotten Men* implied that viewers should recognize the truth of soldiering for the dead and even the living and not forget why they fought and the wounds they endured (“Forgotten Men’ Brought to City,” 1934; Telch, 2024).

Though not explicitly mentioning the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, one veteran foreshadowed a second world war. He urged the youth of the 1930s generation to watch *Forgotten Men* to observe the lessons of the Great War (“Forgotten Men’ Film,” 1934). The 1920s and 1930s gave rise to Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany. With Hitler and his party in power by 1933, a wave of anti-Semitism swept across Germany, as the German youth, particularly the Hitler Youth, embraced the principles of Nazism and the urge to make Germany a powerful country through militarization. American Great War officer veteran Fred A. Boettger is one veteran who firmly argued that the youth of the 1930s generation “should be encouraged to see these pictures. The horror of those scenes would be an asset to peace if our younger generation takes on the reins of government” (“Forgotten Men’ Film,” 1934, p. 15). Well-informed that the Great War led to the catastrophe of the Lost Generation, Boettger did not want to see the next generation of young people slaughtered in a second global conflict, with improved technological weapons of war. With an urge in his plea, Boettger exhorted the 1930s youth to see *Forgotten Men* “before our country [the United States] would be plunged into another war” (“Forgotten Men’ Film,” 1934, p. 15). Convinced in his belief, the American veteran believed that film could save an entire generation of young people.

Watching *Forgotten Men* even led some British people to voice that Hitler must be stopped, even in 1935. Maurice Levey wrote to the *Evening Chronicle* that “we must regard Nazi Germany with its streets full of ‘goose-stepping Nazis’ as preparing not for peace but for war, and can come to the conclusion that in the future Hitler will renew the attempt of 1914. He is certainly not going to let Dictator of Germany be the pinnacle of his ambition. Dictator of Europe sounds nicer” (Levey, 1935, p. 8). Even years before Hitler’s annexation of European countries, it appeared that *Forgotten Men* caused some anxiety for some Britons that a second global conflict was inevitable with Hitler’s Germany. The calls for peace were no louder in Britain as Levey warned that the world must keep a watchful eye on Germany (Levey, 1935). The tone of Levey’s response highly suggested that military force must be utilized to prevent Hitler and achieve long-term peace globally.

Watching *Forgetting Men* reached a general viewership of Western audiences during the 1930s. They were stunned to witness the horrors of the Great War on the silver screen. It was shown in multiple cities, including New York, Washington, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Buffalo, Coventry, England, Manchester, Liverpool, Brisbane, Australia, Montreal, and Vancouver (“Films,” 1935; “‘Forgotten Men,’” 1935; “‘Forgotten Men,’ Benefit Show,” 1933; “Poignant War Scenes Recalled,” 1935; “To See War Film,” 1936; “War Realism in ‘Forgotten Men,’” 1935; “What Representative People Think of Actual War Film,” 1935). During the showing of *Forgotten Men* at the Paramount Theatre in Idaho Falls, Idaho, in 1934, for example, “a gasp may be heard over the sound of exploding shells and the staccato fire of machine guns as one of these veterans feels once more the terror that is a part of war” (“Veterans Sponsor,” 1934, p. 2). After watching the documentary, some individuals reacted with horror. R.D. Huish, State President of the Returned Sailors’ and Soldiers’ Imperial League of Australia, highly recommended that viewers watch the picture, especially if they wished to participate in war (“What Representative People Think of Actual War Film,” 1935). J.C. Valentine, Secretary of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen, urged that world leaders must watch it as they would have no desire to participate in war with other countries. Even during the 1930s, some viewers comprehended that no one avails from war.

Reflection and Conclusion

Fortunately, *Forgotten Men* is available to watch on YouTube. It is a deeply, moving film that captured the history of the Great War from the assassination of the Archduke of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1914 to the end of the war in 1918. I highly recommend that all historians of the First World War as well as lovers of history watch this film to remember those who perished and fought. I must caution that the depictions of violence and death in *Forgotten Men* are realistic and not suitable for those who cannot view violence. It is a sad documentary and could make one think about how a young human life could abruptly end in war. It is nonetheless a significant picture that featured the destruction of an entire generation of men to show the futility of war.

With the wars in Ukraine and Israel and rising tensions in the Pacific between the United States and China over Taiwan, contemporary audiences must see *Forgotten Men*. The voices of the Great War veterans in the documentary are echoing to future generations to not repeat the mistakes of the past. Their pleas for peace and diplomacy are communicated through their suffering in combat and physical and psychological wounds. As the veterans themselves observed and experienced firsthand, there are no glories or victors in war, only long-term suffering and shattered lives. Only by establishing peace can wars be prevented, lives saved, and the suffering of Great War veterans would not have been in vain.

Forgotten Men was an international war documentary that depicted the horrors of the First World War. The film’s purpose was to prevent the destruction of another generation of youth due to fears of a second global conflict with Germany. Though shown in Western countries, there is no evidence to suggest that *Forgotten Men* was shown in Germany during Hitler’s regime. The documentary was a learning opportunity for Western audiences to witness the horrors of war and listen to the voices of those who fought. Using this documentary to teach history to students will expose them to war and peace, historical consciousness and empathy, and the suffering of the Lost Generation. This article is the film’s first critical analysis in over 90 years and hopes to serve as a message of peace for decades to come. Cummings’s *Forgotten Men* depicted the suffering of an entire generation of young soldiers and officers to show how unnecessary war truly is.

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