

What do the stories of the 'often forgotten armies' reveal about the Western Front?

China's government was excited by Britain's declaration of war. They were desperate to modernise the nation. In 1914, the **Republic of China** was only three years old. It had been established after the overthrow of the Chinese royal family in 1911.

China was '**semi-colonised**'. This meant China had been forced by Europe and America to sign **trade deals** that were very unfair on China. The trade deals made European countries rich at China's expense. By playing some role in the war, the leaders of China hoped Europe would start to see China as a strong nation: a nation worthy of fair treatment. So the Chinese offered soldiers to fight for the British and French.



The offer was rejected: the British didn't need them. They preferred soldiers from the more modern Japan. China's government tried again in 1915. This time, they offered Chinese labourers rather than soldiers. The French accepted but the British were still uninterested.

Then the **Battle of the Somme** started in 1916. The huge scale of losses at the Somme shook British confidence. In July 1916, the British finally accepted China's offer. The British recruited men from the North of China. These men were told to strip naked and were examined for 21 medical conditions. If they qualified, they were covered with disinfectant and had their head shaved.

The first group of the **Chinese Labour Corps** arrived in France in April 1917. The Chinese became specialists in digging trenches and were soon regarded as being very quick and capable. Other labourers became involved in the following: artillery maintenance, maintaining railway lines, repairing motorbikes, tank maintenance. After each battle, the tanks were cleaned, stripped and repaired at a 'tank hospital' in a place called Erin. Many Chinese labourers worked here.

In the frantic build-up to the **Battle of Cambrai** in November 1917, the Chinese Labour Corps worked non-stop. A total of 476 machines were prepared for the battle. The Chinese mechanics built 110 tank-towed sledges which were used to carry equipment into battle.

Great efforts were made to keep the Chinese **segregated**. The Chinese were often housed in separate huts, away from the British. Even Chinese hospitals were sealed off. The Chinese still needed to go into shops, however. Sometimes this caused problems. Racial **prejudices**, national rivalries and personal differences combined with alcohol and shell-shock to create violence behind the front lines. There are graves in Northern France of men killed in bar-room fights.

In total, around 140,000 Chinese labourers worked behind the lines in Northern France in 1916-20.