

Fighting on the Fronts

Europe did not get the war it expected. What was supposed to be over by Christmas turned to stalemate by the end of 1914. Though the war eventually involved the nations of six continents, the hinge turned on the Western Front. It is most important for you to understand the nature of the war and its phases; do not be overly concerned with battles.

The Nature of the War

Military tactics often lag a generation behind technologies. The First World War illustrates this adage in bold type. Generals of the day learned the Napoleonic tactics of rapid movement and the massed infantry assault. Military theorists assumed that the new technologies of airplanes, high-powered artillery, and machine guns would favor the offensive by overwhelming a static opponent with massive firepower. The reverse turned out to be the case, as these weapons and technologies proved advantageous to entrenched (defensive) positions. In all, almost 10 million Europeans (almost all soldiers) were killed during the First World War, largely the result of an inability to conceive of new tactics in dealing with defensive weapons.

Once the Western Front settled down to a stalemate, each side entrenched positions and fortified them with barbed wire. In between stood “no-man’s land,” an expanse denuded of trees, houses, and crops. Generals attempted to soften up enemy positions with artillery bombardments, often lasting days, as a prelude to “over the top,” where infantry ran exposed through no-man’s land in a vain effort to overwhelm the enemy trench. Though trenches had been used during the Crimean War and the U.S. Civil War, the combatants in this war relied on them extensively. Trench warfare emerged as a dehumanizing and absurd symbol of the futility of the First World

War. Many other important technological breakthroughs occurred or were first used in World War I, but none exercised the decisive impact as hoped and only increased the body count: tanks, airplanes, flamethrowers, submarines (U-boats), high-powered artillery, grenades, poison gas, barbed wire, zeppelins, and aerial bombardment.

The War of Illusions: 1914

Germany gambled that its Schlieffen Plan would defeat France before Russia could mobilize. The plan called for a huge right-flanking maneuver in August 1914 through Belgium to hit Paris from the rear and trap the French

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army at Alsace-Lorraine. Violation of Belgium neutrality brought Britain in the war on the side of the Entente (Allied Powers), and moreover, Belgium put up unexpected resistance to German forces. This resistance led to the first atrocities of the war against Belgian civilians, providing the Allies with an important propaganda weapon against Germany.

As the German advance toward Paris stalled, the French regrouped and hit the German flank at the Marne River. The Miracle of the Marne halted the German offensive. After each side unsuccessfully tried to outflank the other by racing to the English Channel, the Western Front had settled down by Christmas to a stalemate, with a string of trenches from the English Channel to the Swiss frontier – 300 miles in length. On the more open and less populated Eastern Front, the Germans met with more success by capturing an entire Russian army at Tannenberg. This battle was the prelude to the generally poor performance of the Russian army, whose men were captured in much larger numbers than any combatant nation.

Stalemate: 1915

To break out of the stalemate, the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany) and the Allied forces (Russia, France, Britain, Belgium) expanded the war by bidding for new allies. To recapture its lost territories, Turkey joined the Central Powers in November of 1914. The Allies, meanwhile, bribed Italy, via the Treaty of London, with the promise of Austrian territory to join the war against the Central Powers. From 1915 to 1917, Bulgaria, Romania, and Greece all entered the conflict to achieve territorial objectives left over from the pre-1914 Balkan conflicts.

Each side engaged in probing offensives aimed at finding the enemy weak spot. To knock out the Turks and secure Europe's "soft underbelly," the British in April 1915 launched the poorly planned Gallipoli campaign, an amphibious assault designed to capture Constantinople and the Dardanelles. British forces found themselves pinned down on a narrow ridge and after months of futile assaults withdrew in early 1916.

Germany and Great Britain both attempted to blockade the other and starve it into submission. The German navy's reliance on the submarine made blockades dangerous – the U-boat had to either surface to inspect enemy ships, making it vulnerable to enemy fire, or gamble and destroy the potential enemy craft. This problem almost brought the United States into the conflict when a German U-boat sank the British liner *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland, killing 1,200, including 128 Americans. President Wilson

was able to maintain U.S. neutrality while extracting a promise from the German government to avoid unrestricted submarine warfare. However, U.S. exports and loans to Britain and France skyrocketed as aid and trade to Germany fizzled.

Slaughter: 1916-1917

By 1916, the effects of total war were exhausting all nations involved in the conflict. To break the deadlock, Germany rolled the dice on another bold plan. In February 1916, Commander Erich von Falkenhayn launched a massive surprise attack at the key position of Verdun in the French line. Though the attack met with initial success, the Germans were unable to maintain their momentum. They did not call off the battle, however, until January 1917, making Verdun the longest battle of the war and one of the deadliest in history. In all, the French and German armies combined experienced 1.1 million casualties.

• EXAMPLE BASE

Few of the specifics in this section constitute required knowledge per se; however, you can employ examples from the fighting to examine how military stalemate and technology affected mobilization, home front issues, and the relationship between governments and science.

To take the pressure off the French, the British launched the Somme offensive in July. The battle proved a disaster for the British army, which lost 30,000 dead in the first 3 hours of the attack, known as the bloodiest day in British military history. In addition, the Russian command surprised the Austrian army with the Brusilov Offensive, driving their enemy back hundreds of miles before the Germans stabilized their collapsing ally. One success for the Central Powers was their victory over Serbia; this country was knocked completely out of the war, losing a greater percentage of its population than any other warring nation.

In one of the ironies of the war, the large battleships that had provoked such animosity between Britain and Germany generally stayed in port, with leaders fearful of destroying such large investments. The only major naval engagement of the war occurred in 1916 off the coast of Denmark at Jutland. Both sides were bloodied but survived, and the German battleships returned to port. After the armistice, the Germans scuttled (sank) their expensive fleet rather than allow it to fall into enemy hands.

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Exhaustion and Revolution: 1917-1918

In 1917, the Allied forces lost a key nation: Russia. At the same time, they gained perhaps an even greater force: the United States. Russia's deteriorating economic and political situation resulted in the fall of the Romanov Dynasty, and in late 1917 the newly empowered Bolsheviks pulled Russia out of the war. Germany once again rolled the dice to end the war, betting that unrestricted submarine warfare around the British Isles, in violation of an earlier pledge, could knock Britain and France out of the conflict before the United States could effectively mobilize. They were wrong; the announcement of Germany's U-boat campaign, combined with the Zimmerman Telegram—in which the German ambassador promised Mexico the recovery of lands lost to the United States if it entered the war—drew the United States into the war in April 1917. Contrary to German plans, American involvement proved decisive.

By mid-1917, it looked as if the Central Powers might prevail. Austrian and German forces routed the Italian army at Caporetto, forcing the diversion of French and British forces into the difficult Alpine fighting to prop up their ally. In Belgium, British, ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps), and Canadian forces worked to retake the town of Passchendaele. In the subsequent battle, thousands drowned in muddy shell holes, a morbid symbol of the futility of warfare. By March 1918, the Germans imposed on the Bolsheviks the draconian Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, costing Russia significant territory and resources.

In Germany's final gamble of the war, its High Command launched one last major offensive in Spring 1918 on the Western Front. Despite initial gains, which brought the Germans to within 30 miles of Paris, American troops began to inject fresh manpower and morale into the Allied cause. American and French counteroffensives pushed the German lines back by early Fall 1918. By this time, ethnic minorities were establishing independence from the Austrian Empire, and Germany faced a revolutionary situation at home from an exhausted populace. Though few troops stood on German soil, the German High Command asked for an armistice on November 11, 1918. The Armistice ended fighting, yet Europe faced a revolutionary situation in which a return to the prewar world proved impossible.