

The First World War

TIME LINE

- 1914 World War I breaks out in Europe
 - The Germans fail to take Paris; trench warfare begins in France
 - The Germans defeat a Russian offensive in East Prussia
 - The Ottoman Empire enters the war on the side of the Central Powers
- 1915 Italy enters the war on the Allied side
 - The British launch the Gallipoli campaign
 - Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare results in the sinking of the **Lusitania**
- 1916 The German offensive at Verdun and the Allied offensive on the Somme fail to produce breakthroughs
 - The British and German **fleets** fight the Battle of Jutland
 - David Lloyd George takes office as Great Britain's prime minister
- 1917 The United States enters the war on the Allied side
 - Georges Clemenceau becomes premier of France
- 1918 President Woodrow Wilson announces the Fourteen Points
 - Soviet Russia signs the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
 - Germany agrees to an armistice
- 1919 The Paris Peace Conference begins its deliberations
 - The Germans sign the Treaty of Versailles

Despite its name, World War I was primarily a European conflict, fought over European issues.

The Allies of World War I included, first, the nations of the Triple Entente: France, Russia, and Great Britain. Serbia was also numbered among the Allies. Italy, Rumania, and Greece ultimately supported the Allied cause, as did the United States and Japan. Although the Japanese had no interests at stake in Europe, they hoped to acquire

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Germany's concessions in China, as well as the German-held islands in the North Pacific.

The Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, won the support of Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

On the western front, the fighting in France quickly became stalemated between the invading Germans and the French and British defenders. On the eastern front, the Russians did relatively well against the armies of the Austro-Hungarian empire. By the end of 1916, however, the Germans had effectively ended Russia's ability to resist, although the Russians did not conclude a formal peace treaty with the Central Powers until March 1918.

Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare against Great Britain brought the United States into the war on the Allied side in April 1917. American participation in the war provided the French and British with what they most needed: manpower. In the summer of 1918, Allied offensives broke the stalemate in France. The Germans were forced to retreat, and the fighting ended with the signing of an armistice in November 1918.

The task of making the final peace settlement was in the hands of the Paris Peace Conference, which met in 1919-1920.

The War in the West, 1914-1917

On August 4, 1914, during the first week of the war, the Germans invaded Belgium. As the Germans advanced, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was sent to France.

Battle of the Marne

At the end of August, the Battle of the Frontiers resulted in a major German defeat of the French. A few days later, on September 5, 1914, the Germans crossed the Marne River at a point about twelve miles from Paris, but they lacked the strength to push on and take the French capital. The Battle of the Marne ended with the French turning back the German threat to Paris.

Stalemate on the Western Front

The front in France became stalemated, with the Germans controlling most of Belgium and a large section of northern France. The two sides dug trenches, which they protected with barbed wire and concrete pillboxes. Trench warfare continued in France for the better part of four years. Each side launched offensives, but the machine guns of the defenders mowed down the advancing infantrymen. In an attempt to achieve a breakthrough, both sides used heavy artillery. The Germans used chlorine gas for the first time at Ypres in April 1915. But neither artillery nor poison gas proved decisive.

Battle of Verdun

In February 1916, the Germans massed their armies and artillery in an assault on the French stronghold at Verdun. Failing to take Verdun, the Germans moved to the defensive in July, and the battle continued until December. By that point, the French had stabilized the front much as it had been at the beginning of the year. At Verdun, the French suffered some 540,000 casualties, while German losses exceeded 430,000.

Battle of the Somme

In July 1916, the British and French launched a great offensive on the Somme River. Along the thirty-mile Somme front, the Allies achieved a maximum advance of only seven miles. By the time the battle ended in November, British casualties totaled 400,000, while the French suffered 200,000 casualties. German casualties have been estimated at 650,000. During the battle, the British used tanks for the first time. But like heavy artillery and gas, tanks failed to produce a decisive breakthrough.

The Western Front in 1917

The war-weariness of the French required the British to assume greater responsibility for the front in France. During 1917, British offensives at Passchendaele in the Ypres sector and at Cambrai in Flanders proved both indecisive and costly.

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After more than three years of fighting, neither the Allied nor the German armies had made any real gains and both sides had suffered tremendous casualties.

Changes in Political Leadership

In December 1916, British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852-1928) stepped aside, giving way to a war cabinet headed by his fellow Liberal, David Lloyd George (1863-1943, the popular “Welsh Wizard.” In November 1917, Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), the old “Tiger” of French politics, became premier, providing France with determined leadership.



The Eastern Front, 1914-1917

German Victories in East Prussia

When the war began in the summer of 1914, the Russians succeeded in mobilizing more rapidly than the Germans expected. Two Russian armies invaded East Prussia. The Germans inflicted crushing defeats on the Russians in the Battle of Tannenberg at the

end of August and the Battle of the Masurian Lakes in early September.

The War in the East, 1914-1916

While the Germans were smashing the Russian invaders of East Prussia, the Russians scored some successes at the expense of Austria-Hungary. In order to relieve the pressure on their allies, the Germans pushed toward Warsaw in eastern Poland. By the end of 1914, the Russians held almost all of Galicia (Austrian Poland), while the Germans occupied about one-quarter of Russian Poland. Russia's industry was inadequate to meet the country's needs, and ammunition and military equipment were in short supply.

The German advance against Russia continued during 1915. By the end of the year, the Germans occupied most of Russian Poland and Lithuania. While the Russian offensives against the Austrians in Galicia achieved some success during 1915, they remained indecisive. In September 1915, Tsar Nicholas II took over the supreme command of the Russian army.

In June 1916, the Russians began a great offensive against the Austrians in Galicia. The Germans rushed in fifteen divisions and halted the Russian advance.

Prior to the Russian setback, Rumania entered the war on Russia's side in August, hoping to acquire the province of Transylvania from Austria-Hungary. By January 1917, however, Austro-German forces had defeated and occupied Rumania.

Defeat of Russia

By the end of 1916, the Germans had, in effect, defeated Russia, and the revolutions of 1917 ended any possibility that the Russians might continue fighting. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, ended the war between Russia and the Central Powers (see Chapter 30).

The Italian Front, 1915-1917

Although Italy was still technically allied with Germany and Austria under the terms of the Triple Alliance, Italy remained

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neutral when the war began. In an effort to win Italy's support, the Allies agreed to the secret Treaty of London of 1915, promising the Italians Austrian and Turkish territory, as well as colonies in Africa. In May 1915, Italy entered the war on the Allied side.

Italy was unsuccessful in its war against Austria, and in the fall of 1917, the Austrians inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Italians in the Battle of Caporetto. The British and French had to rush troops in to help the Italians stabilize the front.

The Gallipoli Campaign

In November 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, thereby closing the Turkish Straits to the Allies. The western Allies were thus unable to ship vital war supplies to the faltering Russians.

Winston Churchill (1874-1965), the British first lord of the admiralty, pushed for a campaign to open the straits. In February 1915, the British launched an amphibious invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula at the southern end of the Dardanelles. However, the invasion failed as a result of errors in its planning and execution. In January 1916, the British withdrew.

While the Gallipoli campaign was in progress, Bulgaria entered the war on Germany's side in October 1915. Bulgaria had been at odds with Serbia since the Second Balkan War in 1913 and hoped to square accounts. Bulgarian forces helped Germany and Austria crush Serbia at the end of 1915.

The War in the Middle East

The Allies were able to make substantial gains at Turkish expense elsewhere in the Middle East. In the Caucasus, the Russians succeeded in turning back a Turkish offensive in early 1915. The Turks then began to deport and massacre the Armenians, whom they accused of aiding the Russians.

With the Turkish Straits closed to Allied shipping, the British hoped to open a route to Russia through Turkish-ruled

Mesopotamia. In March 1917, the British seized Baghdad and soon took control of most of Mesopotamia.

Under the leadership of Colonel T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935), known as Lawrence of Arabia, the British succeeded in stirring up revolts among the Arab subjects of the Turks. In 1917, the British invaded Palestine, capturing Jerusalem in December.

The War at Sea

Germany's much-vaunted high-seas fleet had little impact on the Allies during World War I. Their submarines, on the other hand, posed a serious threat.

Battle of Jutland

During the afternoon and evening of May 31, 1916, the British Grand Fleet battled the German fleet at the Battle of Jutland in the North Sea, off the coast of Denmark. The Germans inflicted substantially greater damage on the British than they suffered, but the battle proved indecisive. The Germans failed to break the British blockade, while the British failed to open the Baltic Sea route to Russia. Following the battle, however, the German surface fleet limited its activities to the Baltic and ceased to present any threat to the Allies.

Submarine Warfare

In February 1915, in an effort to starve out the British, the Germans declared a submarine blockade of the British Isles. In May, a German U-boat sank the British passenger liner *Lusitania* off the Irish coast, with the loss of 139 American lives. Vigorous American protests caused the Germans to reduce their submarine campaign.

During 1916, however, many German leaders urged the renewal of a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in an attempt to knock Great Britain out of the war. On February 1, 1917, the campaign began. The Germans were taking a calculated risk, hoping that the British would be forced out of the war before the United States could bring its power to bear in Europe.

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United States Declaration of War

On February 26, the British liner *Laconia* was sunk without warning; two Americans died in the sinking. On March 1, the Zimmermann Telegram was revealed; in it, the Germans proposed an alliance with Mexico, promising to restore Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona to the Mexicans.

The United States declared war on Germany in early April 1917, but American troops were not present in large numbers on the front in France until almost a year later.

The End of World War I

In March 1918, the Germans launched a massive offensive in France in a final effort to win the war.

The Allied Advance

The British rushed in reinforcements, and some 2 million American troops, commanded by General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing (1860-1948), began to arrive in France. In April, the Allies established a unified command, headed by Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929), a French general.

In mid-July 1918, the French, British, and American armies began a counterattack that marked the beginning of the long offensive that ended the war. The Germans began to retreat along a broad front. On August 8, 1918, the Black Day of the German Army, British tanks scored a major breakthrough near Amiens.

Armistice

On September 30, Bulgaria signed an armistice. Turkey capitulated to the Allies on October 30, and Austria gave up on November 3. The armistice with Germany was signed at five A.M. on November 11, 1918, to go into effect at eleven AM. World War I resulted in the loss of some 10 million military and civilian lives. Another 20 million were wounded.