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## The Course of the War

The war began with France, Britain, and Russia on one side (the Triple Entente) against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers). Even though Italy had allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary before the war, the Triple Alliance broke up when Italy ultimately joined the Allies after a secret agreement that guaranteed it control of land in the north disputed with Austria-Hungary. Most other European countries took one side or the other, but a few – such as Spain, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian nations – remained neutral. As the Triple Entente gained allies, they came to be known as the “Allied Powers.” The United States and Japan joined later in the war, contributing to the worldwide nature of the conflict.

Most people felt that the war would be a short one, basing their prediction on the precedents of Prussia’s rapid victories in the 1860s and 1870 and the relatively quick defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. The four years of total war that followed, which mobilized entire societies behind their armies, was unforeseen and produced unprecedented horror.

The war was fought along two major fronts: the Western Front where German troops faced French and British troops, and the Eastern Front, where Germany and Austria-Hungary faced Russia. Once Italy joined the war in 1915, a third Italian front developed between Italy and Austria-Hungary. The Germans were guided by the Schlieffen Plan, named after its author, former General Alfred von Schlieffen. The plan determined a sequence for Germany to combat its foes on both fronts. It called for a rapid, concentrated attack of France to the west, which – it was predicted – would cause France to fall within six weeks. The armies would march across Belgium, whose neutrality was guaranteed by treaty, to get to France quickly. The Germans believed the Russians would be slow to mobilize, so would not create a threat while the armies were busy with France. The western armies would then turn their attention to Russia in the east, which without the aid of France, would fall relatively easily. The German plans went awry early when they encountered resistance from Belgium and were tricked by diversionary tactics of the French. The result was that the armies were slowed down, giving the Russians time to mobilize, even though the Germans launched many successful attacks against them. All and all, though, the Schlieffen Plan did not work and the war continued, with neither side able to defeat the other.

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The style of fighting on the Western Front was called trench warfare, where soldiers dug opposing trenches for protection from the enemy, but modern technologies made it impossible to avoid high casualty rates. Both sides made use of machine guns that were responsible for a great deal of the slaughter, and poison gas made warfare deadly even when the artillery was silent. The war quickly bogged down into a stalemate, with one side launching an offensive that gained a few of the other side's trenches, only to lose them again when a counteroffensive was launched. By 1916 the Germans had lost 850,000 men, and the French and English combined lost 1,100,000, all with no real progress on either side. The countryside – mostly in northeastern France – was pock-marked by miles of trenches

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divided by areas called “no man’s land” strewn with shell craters and body parts.

Most of the fighting on the Eastern Front took place in western Russia, but fighting also spread to the Balkans, where Austria defeated Serbia and the other small states joined one side or the other. Because the front was much longer, fighting was more fluid than on the Western Front, but Germany had the challenge of fighting on both fronts, and the forces of Austria-Hungary were relatively weak, providing too little support for the strong German forces. However, the Russian armies fought badly, first driven out of East Prussia and Poland in 1915, and then their counterattacks failed in 1916 and 1917. The heavy casualties and lack of leadership increased hostilities toward Tsar Nicholas II and brought chaos and civil war to Russia, leading to the overthrow of the tsar, the takeover by V.I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and the eventual withdrawal of Russia from the war in 1917. When the U.S. joined the war in 1917, most of its soldiers went to the Western Front where fresh troops called “doughboys” – helped to break the stalemate.

The war also took place at sea, where German submarines blocked British ports and attacked sea lanes that brought people and supplies to Britain. In May 1915, German submarines sank the British passenger ship *Lusitania* and killed 1198 people, including 124 Americans. Although the United States officially remained neutral after the *Lusitania* incident, the German submarine attacks on U.S. ships were largely responsible for U.S. entry into the war in 1917. The war at sea, like the war on land, remained indecisive, especially after the battle of Jutland in May 1916, when the German fleet could not defeat the British navy, and the battle ended with no clear winner.

The United States at first remained neutral in the conflict, with many Americans believing it to be a European war. American businesses sold goods to both sides, but on balance, the American leadership was pro-British, and German submarine warfare against U.S. ships eventually convinced the country to officially side with Britain and France. The United States was only involved in the war for eighteen months, and none of the fighting took place there, and as a result, the country did not suffer nearly as many ill effects as the European nations did from the war. British dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand also sent forces to several fronts throughout most of the war.

Minor skirmishes were fought around the German colonies in Africa, involving Africans as colonial troops, and France also sent many of its African

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colonists to fight on the Western Front. Large numbers of troops from India fought for the British in Europe, and many Indian nationalists hoped that their support would promote India's independence once the war was over. Japan and China both entered the war on the side of Britain and France, and Japan advanced its own imperialist designs by taking over German holdings in China's Shantung Province. In the Middle East, the British successfully weakened the Ottoman Empire by sponsoring an internal rebellion by Arab nationalists against the sultan's forces. The British also gained support from Jewish settlers in Israel by promising to help them carve a homeland out of the Ottoman Empire. Allied actions set in motion the drive for independence among the various Ottoman subjects, bringing on the final collapse of the empire when the Central Powers lost the war.