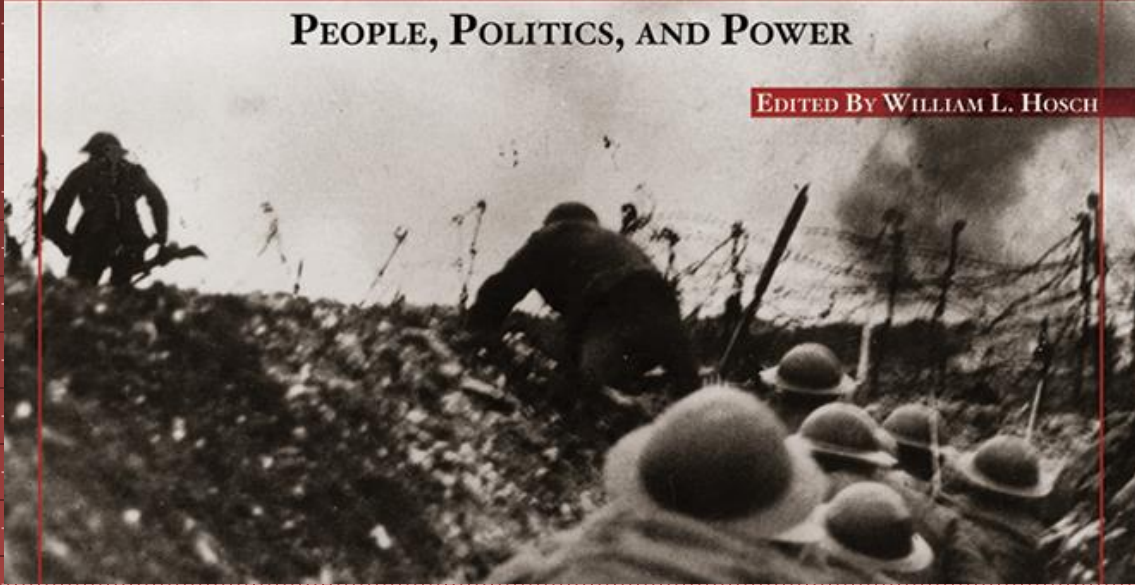


WORLD WAR I

PEOPLE, POLITICS, AND POWER

EDITED BY WILLIAM L. HOSCH



► HISTORY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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The diplomatic drift towards war: 1890-1914

In the years leading to World War I there are five major powers within Europe - Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, France and Britain. The cast list is unchanged since the early 18th century (except that Prussia is now Germany), and the players are well used to the game of diplomacy in which alliances formed for defensive purposes turn into aggressive partnerships as soon as a new war develops (a circumstance considered almost inevitable sooner or later in the atmosphere of national rivalry).

However the 19th century has introduced one new element in the form of very much shorter wars. If the [Seven Years' War](#) characterizes the 18th century, the [Seven Weeks' War](#) is more typical of the 19th (the [Franco-Prussian War](#) is almost equally short).

The idea of rapid victory in a short war is particularly prevalent in Germany, the victor in both the Seven Weeks' War and the Franco-Prussian War. And the German nation is both more hungry for immediate success on the international stage than its rivals, and more nervous about succumbing to hostile alliances.

The reasons are numerous. Germany has recently been transformed by [Bismarck](#) from a relatively minor player to potentially the most powerful nation in continental Europe. But as a late arrival on the world stage, it has no empire to match those of Britain, France and Russia. Nor, unlike them, has it a great navy - the most tangible symbol, perhaps, of international power.

German nervousness is increased during the 1890s when alliances among the European powers seem to be slipping beyond German control. [Bismarck](#) worked on the assumption of hostility from France (eager to avenge the loss of [Alsace and Lorraine](#)) and a neutral stance from Britain (historically the great rival of France).

He therefore concentrated his efforts on creating alliances with his eastern neighbours, Russia and Austria-Hungary. To these he added [Italy](#), a new nation on the verge of great power status within Europe. The Triple Alliance, agreed in 1882 between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, lasts until 1915.

Bismarck's chosen path is not easy, particularly since Austria-Hungary and Russia have conflicting spheres of interest in the unstable [Balkans](#). As a result, while Austria-Hungary and Italy remain constant allies (the three nations become known from 1882 as the Central Powers of Europe), Bismarck is constantly having to patch up or renew the alliance with Russia under the pressure of international events.

The careful edifice crumbles after Bismarck's dismissal in 1890. The [new Kaiser](#), recognizing the incompatibility of Russia and Austria-Hungary as allies, breaks off the alliance with Russia. As a result Russia and France, both equally alarmed by Germany, begin secret negotiations - which result in the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894.

Then, even more surprisingly, in 1904 France and Britain agree an unprecedented Entente Cordiale. Austria-Hungary, a declining power, and the relatively weak Italy now seem to be Germany's only probable allies in a European conflict. And by this time many, particularly in Germany, feel that such a conflict cannot be far in the future.

All the major nations have been preparing for such an eventuality, but Germany has done so in the most deliberate fashion.

The strategic drift towards war: 1890-1914

A popular buzz-word in Germany at this time is *Weltpolitik* ('world politics'), meaning that the nation must assert itself on the international stage in order to claim its 'place in the sun' (another current phrase). To this end much pride is placed in the plan devised by Admiral von Tirpitz to provide the nation with a High Seas Fleet to match the naval forces of Britain.

Tirpitz's demands on the Reichstag escalate in the inexorable pattern of any arms race. In 1898 he persuades the politicians to pass a Navy Law providing for a fleet of 16 battleships. Two years later a new Navy Law revises the figure to 38 battleships, with a completion date of 1917 for the full fleet.

This level will still be below that of the British navy, but Tirpitz argues that it will provide Germany with a *Risikoflotte* ('risk fleet'), meaning one too dangerous for Britain to attack. Britain radically upsets the calculation by introducing in 1906 a vastly more powerful class of battleship, the first of the famous 'dreadnoughts'. Germany follows suit, upgrading its production line to the new standard.

To the German argument that Britain is escalating the stakes, Winston Churchill (when first lord of the admiralty in 1912) replies that for an island nation a powerful navy is a defensive necessity, whereas to Germany it is 'more in the nature of a luxury'.

Meanwhile the German strategy for the army in the event of war is both more secret and more illicit. It is the work of Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the general staff from 1891 to 1906. During the second half of the 1890s, when France and Russia are in alliance and it is accepted that a war must be fought on both fronts, Schlieffen devises a two-stage plan.

A massive and rapid flanking attack will be made on France from the north, through Belgium (in total disregard of Belgium's neutrality), while a relatively light force holds at bay the Russians - who are likely to be slower in their mobilization. France will then be defeated in time to redirect the full German might against Russia.

In December 1912 the emperor William II and his military advisers hold a secret meeting in which they discuss the possible launch of a preventive war, on the basis of the Schlieffen Plan, to protect Germany's interests. Tirpitz argues for delay to give him more time to build up the fleet. His view prevails, but it is agreed that it will be essential to wait for not much more than two years.

In 1913 the Reichstag passes a bill to increase the size of Germany's peacetime army, with a target of 800,000 men by the autumn of 1914. The other four players in this dangerous game are also now following suit. There is no evident reason for war. But policy, as if by stealth, seems to be making it inevitable.

Five weeks to war: 1914

The flashpoint comes in [Bosnia](#) on 28 June 1914, when a Serbian nationalist assassinates the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. This is a highly dramatic event, though less unusual than now (since the turn of the century assassins have claimed the lives of a president of the [USA](#), a king of [Portugal](#) and a king of [Greece](#)). But it is certainly not due cause for a world war.

The mere five weeks between the shot fired in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip and the first declaration of war between the major powers demonstrates vividly the tangle in which Europe's statesmen have tied themselves.

The first reaction to the outrage at Sarajevo is from Vienna. To the Austrian emperor and his advisers the immediate requirement is to destroy the influence of Serbia, the mainstay of Slav resistance to Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. But the danger is that an invasion of Serbia may provoke Slav solidarity and thus war with Russia.

So an urgent question is sent on July 4 to Berlin. Will Germany come to the assistance of Austria-Hungary if Russia intervenes on behalf of Serbia? Within two days an answer comes back in the affirmative. The Austrian emperor should deal with Serbia as he thinks fit.

Germany nevertheless hopes that Russia will hold back, leaving the Serbian crisis as a local affair between Vienna and Belgrade. Subsequently the Kaiser even sends telegrams to the Tsar urging this course of action. But if Russia does intervene, there will be one advantage to Germany. The subsequent war can be presented to the world as the result of Russian aggression.

For three weeks there is a deceptive lull, partly owing to disagreements in Vienna and partly because Serbia makes conciliatory efforts to defuse the situation. Then suddenly, on July 28, Austria-Hungary declares war on its small neighbour. The following day, removing all chance of further diplomacy, an Austrian flotilla on the Danube bombards Belgrade.

In response Russia mobilizes her army, thus inevitably triggering the urgent launch by Germany of the [Schlieffen Plan](#) - for if Russia gains the advantage of amassing troops in the east, there will be no time for the preliminary defeat of France in the west. With her options thus seemingly reduced by strategic demands to only one, Germany impetuously declares war on Russia on August 1.

Two days later she also declares war on France. During the night of the same day, August 3, German armies cross the border into Belgium, to begin the flanking movement which is intended to bring them rapidly down into northern France and so once again (echoes of [1871](#)) to Paris.

This action brings in the fifth of the European powers. Britain's Entente Cordiale does not commit her to come to the defence of France, and many in the German high command expect her not to do so. But the violation of the neutrality of Belgium introduces an element which the Germans have either overlooked or have considered insignificant. Britain was one of the powers guaranteeing (in 1831 and again in 1839), to protect Belgium as 'an

independent and perpetually neutral state¹.

Under this obligation Britain declares war on Germany on August 4. For the first time in 100 years all the major powers of Europe are at war. A mere five weeks and three days have passed since the unexpected event at [Sarajevo](#).

War in the west: 1914

At first the thrust of the German armies through Belgium and south into France seems to fulfil the [Schlieffen Plan](#). 'Victory by Christmas' does indeed seem possible (though the German high command is not alone in making this promise to its citizens - all the other combatants are professing equal optimism).

The Belgian army puts up a heroic resistance but is unable to prevent the Germans from taking Liège on August 16, Brussels on the 20th and Namur on the 23rd. Meanwhile a small British Expeditionary Force, rushed across the Channel in mid-August to Boulogne, reaches Mons.

Confronted at Mons on August 23 by a much larger German army, the British Expeditionary Force fights a successful rearguard action and retreats south again to escape encirclement.

Meanwhile the initial French effort has been wasted in a drive east through [Lorraine](#). By August 22 this is halted by the Germans, bringing France massive numbers of dead and wounded (in the region of 300,000, a foretaste of the ghastly statistics which will characterize this war). After this disaster the French redirect their efforts northwards to counter the threat from Belgium.

The German intention has been to sweep to the west of Paris and thus encircle the city. Opposition in Belgium and northern France has been sufficient to confine the German thrust to the east of the capital. Nevertheless by September 3, a month after their invasion and well within their schedule, German armies cross the river Marne. To safeguard against the likely fall of Paris, the French government moves south to Bordeaux.

The Germans are within 30 miles of the capital when a mainly French force finally halts and then rolls back their relentless advance. During four days of fighting (Sept. 5-8, the battle of the Marne) the German army is pushed north of the river.

This reversal means the collapse of the Schlieffen Plan in the west, depending as it did on a rapid conquest of France. Meanwhile it has proved equally defective in the east, where the Russians make early advances.

These advances prompt the German high command, in late August, to transfer four divisions from Belgium to the eastern front. So the army which is forced back over the Marne is smaller than intended. It is also much

more vulnerable than it should be. The German supply lines have not been able to keep up with the army's rapid move south.

With the tide turning, the German forces hurry back to the river Aisne to regroup. They then move west in a second attempt to outflank the Allied armies. (By this time Britain, France and Russia are known as the Allied Powers, after signing a treaty in London on September 5 in which each guarantees not to make a separate peace treaty with the [Central Powers](#).)

The Allies also move west, to frustrate the German flanking movement. Thus begins the competitive advance which becomes known as the 'race to the sea', during which the most hard-fought encounters are in October and November around Ypres. The point at which the two armies reach the sea becomes the northwest end of a 400-mile line of demarcation.

By November 1914 the line is fixed. It runs roughly along the French and Belgian border and then down the French and German border to Switzerland. The only part of this terrain which is flat and therefore hard to defend is in the northwest, among the fields of Flanders.

Here, in the winter of 1914, each side begins feverishly building [trenches](#). These become permanent defensive structures, more like cramped underground barracks than mere shelters from bullets and shells. They will be home to hundreds of thousands of Europe's young men for more than three years. The fanciful notion of 'victory by Christmas' is transformed into protracted and nightmarish warfare of a kind previously unknown in history.

War in the east: 1914

Russia mobilizes rapidly in August 1914, in an attempt to relieve the German pressure on France. As a result early gains are made, with Russian armies advancing into east Prussia and into Galicia (the northeast corner of Austria-Hungary). This move has the desired short-term effect, causing the Germans to withdraw four divisions from Belgium for the eastern front. But events soon suggest that Russia has entered the field unprepared. Disaster strikes before the end of the month.

Several factors contribute. The large Russian army in east Prussia is ill-fed and exhausted. And Russian commanders incautiously send each other uncoded radio messages which are intercepted by the Germans.

The result is that a much smaller German force is able to effect a devastating pincer movement during August 26-28 to encircle the Russians at [Tannenberg](#) (the site also of a famous medieval battle). About half the Russian army is destroyed, including the capture of 92,000 men. The Russian general, Aleksandr Vasiliyevich Samsonov, shoots himself.

Further south the Russians have slightly more lasting success in their invasion of Austria-Hungary. By the end of 1914 much of Galicia is still in their hands. Further south again, the Austrians prove ineffective in their

attempts to crush their tiny neighbour Serbia (in the regional dispute which sparked [the wider conflict](#)).

The local campaign begins in mid-August when an Austrian army invades Serbia, but within a fortnight - and with a loss of some 50,000 men - they are driven back by the Serbs. Another invasion is more successful, three months later, when the Austrians succeed in occupying Belgrade for two weeks (from Nov. 30). But by the end of the year the Serbs have again recovered all their territory.

Although there is more movement on the eastern front, particularly on the open plains between Germany and Russia, the outcome at the end of the first calendar year of the war suggests that here too there will be no easy or quick victory. Both sides begin to look for new allies.

The search for support: 1914-1916

Britain enters the war with the support of her dominions (willingly given in Australia and Canada, much resented by some of the Boers in South Africa). But the Central Powers are the first to win an unexpected ally.

Before the outbreak of war Germany has spent much diplomatic effort in befriending the [Young Turks](#) who now form the government in Istanbul. Germans and Turks share a hostility to Russia, Turkey's traditional opponent, and Germany offers help in building up the Turkish navy. On 29 October 1914 a German admiral commands the Turkish fleet in a bombardment of Russian ports in the Black Sea. Russia declares war on Turkey on November 1. France and Britain follow suit four days later.

The other important European power as yet unaligned is Italy. In spite of her Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Italy is able to stand aside in August 1914: the treaty does not commit her to take part in a war of aggression, and the original [alliance of 1882](#) specifically excluded any action against Britain.

For the first nine months of the war the Italians appraise the situation to decide where their best interests lie. By the spring of 1915 they have been tempted by an offer put to them by the Allies - that after the war they can take the remaining Italian-speaking parts of the Austrian empire (Trentino and Trieste), together with German-speaking [South Tirol](#) (thus straightening their Alpine border).

With this agreed, the Italians declare war on Austria-Hungary in May 1915, thereby committing themselves to prolonged trench warfare along the Isonzo river. It proves as futile and costly as the better-known [Flanders](#) version. Over the following eighteen months there are no fewer than ten battles of Isonzo, bringing little change of territory but half a million Italian casualties.

In response to similar bribes, Bulgaria enters the war in September 1915 on the side of the Central Powers with the promise of receiving Serbian Macedonia. And Romania joins the Allies in August 1916, tempted by the bait of several neighbouring parts of the Austrian empire.

One small nation voluntarily enters the fray from the start. In August 1914 the new republican government of [Portugal](#) offers military support to Britain, in token of Europe's [longest alliance](#). Portuguese troops in [Africa](#) immediately take steps to defend their colonies. But it is not until Portugal seizes German ships in Portuguese ports, in February 1916, that Germany takes notice and declares war.

[Greece](#), the last European nation to enter the war, joins the Allies in November 1916 after more than two years of uneasy neutrality and bitter internal disagreements as to which side to support.

Neutral nations: 1914-1918

On the first declarations of war, in 1914, several European nations either reiterate or declare for the first time their neutrality - at the same time mobilizing large forces to deter any aggressor.

Among them are [Switzerland](#), the longest established of the neutrals, and the Netherlands - where the German violation of their neutral neighbour, Belgium, strengthens the local resolve to stay out of this conflict. Plans are immediately laid to breach the dikes if necessary, in the ultimate Dutch act of self-defence.

The Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Sweden and newly independent Norway, take the same path. Denmark is particularly robust in her response. 19,000 men are immediately mobilized to lay mines in the Danish coastal waters bordering on Germany. In Spain, where Liberals and Republicans incline to the Allies while Catholic and conservative groups favour the Central powers, the government contrives to maintain a steady impartiality throughout the war.

But outside Europe there is one neutral country of major concern to all. The United States, whose population comes from all the countries at war, is determined to wash its hands of the belligerent Old World - though Germany's [submarine strategy](#) seems well calculated to enrage the sleeping giant.

The war at sea: 1914-1915

The war at sea immediately takes on the aspect of a world war because the fleets of two main combatants, Germany and England, are already dispersed around the globe.

From the very first week of the war a German light cruiser, the *Emden*, carries out a brilliant series of raids in the seas around India, preying on the British merchant and troop ships which are bringing supplies and men to the European theatre of war. Within a period of three months, until being sunk on November 9 off the Cocos Keeling islands by an Australian cruiser, the *Emden* either sinks or captures as many as twenty-three merchant vessels - while incidentally finding time to shell the British oil installations at Madras.

Meanwhile the German admiral Graf von Spee is leading a small squadron of four cruisers across the Pacific towards South America. In September von Spee stops at Fanning Island to cut the trans-Pacific telegraph cable. He shells a French base in Tahiti, before reaching the South American coast and joining up with another German light cruiser. Off Coronel, on 1 November 1914, he is confronted by four British cruisers. Von Spee wins a decisive victory, sinking two of the British ships with no damage to his own.

Von Spee continues round Cape Horn to attack the Falkland Islands, where he is unaware that two British battle cruisers, more heavily armed than any of his squadron, have recently arrived from Britain to join half a dozen cruisers at Port Stanley.

Von Spee tries to escape but he is overtaken. In an engagement on 7 December 1914, he and some 2000 other German sailors lose their lives when four of the five ships in his squadron are sunk. The British on this occasion lose only ten men.

The last naval engagement of the early part of the war is again a British victory, this time much closer to home. A battle off the Dogger Bank, on 24 January 1915, ends with the sinking of a German battle cruiser, the *Blücher*. The effect is to keep the German fleet in harbour for a year or more. But by this time German strategy has in any case shifted to a far more effective form of aggression - submarine warfare.

From the start of the war both Britain and Germany have done their utmost to cut off the other's maritime supply lines. For Britain this is relatively easy. A heavily mined English Channel can prevent vessels from reaching the North Sea and the Baltic from the south. And fleets can be on permanent patrol to protect the only other means of access, around the north of Scotland.

Britain, by contrast, has the entire north Atlantic as access to the outer world. The only way to apply any sort of stranglehold here is by submarine warfare - a task which Germany now undertakes with astonishing success, given the very recent development of the submarine as a practical sea-going vessel.

The first victim of a German submarine is claimed in a chivalrous encounter on 20 October 1914. A U-boat (or *Unterseeboot*) surfaces to confront the British merchant ship *Glitra*. The crew are ordered into their lifeboats, whereupon the German captain fires his torpedo into the empty vessel.

But matters will not long remain so civil. Ships begin to be sunk without warning, including on 30 January 1915 two passenger liners, the *Tokomaru* and the *Ikaria*. In February Germany declares that all the waters round the British Isles are a war zone, in which not even neutral ships will be immune from attack.

Neutral countries, including the USA, are by now protesting at this high-handed damage to their trade. The Germans are not deflected. Even neutral cargo vessels plying between neutral countries continue to be sunk. And then, on 7 May 1915, comes an event of a different order. The British passenger liner *Lusitania* (which the Germans rightly claim is also carrying ammunition for Britain) is sunk off the coast of Ireland with the loss of more than a thousand civilian lives, among them those of 128 US citizens.

American protests have no immediate effect (two more passenger liners are torpedoed during 1915) but the incident has dangers for Germany. It begins a crucial shift in American perception, from committed neutrality to a growing sympathy for the Allied cause.

War in the air: 1914-1918

In 1914 war in the air is an even newer phenomenon than war under the sea, but it is part of the scene from the very start. In early October British planes, taking off from Dunkirk, bomb Cologne railway station and destroy Germany's latest Zeppelin in its great shed at Düsseldorf.

By December the Germans are ready to retaliate. Bombing raids by aeroplanes on Dover in December are soon followed by the much more alarming arrival of vast Zeppelins during the night. Great Yarmouth is the first British town to be bombed by a Zeppelin, on 19 January 1915. London suffers its first raid on May 31. The most intense of all the Zeppelin attacks is on 2 September 1916, when fourteen Zeppelins drop 35,000 lb. of bombs on London and elsewhere.

Meanwhile the development of fighter aircraft is proving an unexpected but increasingly significant factor in the skies above the battlefields. In the early months of the war single- and double-seater planes are used for reconnaissance. Subsequently their task is extended to include photography of the enemy's disposition behind the lines, once the stalemate of trench warfare has developed.

These small light planes are unarmed, but there is always the hazard of encountering a reconnaissance plane from the other side. So the pilots begin to fly with their own hand weapons on board, taking pot shots at each other in mid-air with pistols and rifles.

Both sides rapidly progress from this amateurish state of affairs. During 1915 single-seater planes acquire a machine gun, cunningly synchronized to fire between the blades of the revolving propeller. And the pilots are equipped now with radio, to communicate with each other.

The fighter plane has arrived, and with it the glamour of the ace - the pilot who proves his mettle again and again in individual combat. (No ace of World War I surpasses the glamour of Manfred von Richthofen, known from the colour of his plane as the Red Baron. Before himself being killed in action, in 1918, he shoots down 79 British and one Belgian aircraft.)

As fighter aircraft improve, the great gas-filled Zeppelins prove too vulnerable to undertake bombing raids. In their place both sides develop heavy bombers during the second half of the war. By 1918 these are quite formidable craft. On February 17 of that year one of London's railway stations, St Pancras, is bombed by a Staaken R.VI which carries a crew of seven and a bomb load of 4000 pounds.

Aircraft are not yet at the point of influencing the outcome of World War II, as they will in all subsequent conflicts. But to an extent unanticipated in 1914, they have progressed far enough to make their future role

unmistakable.

Japan seizes a chance: 1914

Japan has a diplomatic reason for participating in the war, since she has signed in 1902 an Anglo-Japanese Alliance in which both nations agree to safeguard each other's interests in China and Korea.

However Japan also has a strong motive of self-interest in coveting a German enclave around the valuable port of Qingdao, just south of the Shandong peninsula. This has been leased to Germany by China in 1898, to solve the crisis caused by the murder of two German missionaries. It is a port well placed to protect (or to harm, if in the wrong hands) Japan's interests in Korea.

Japan declares war on Germany on 23 August 1914. In September a Japanese army lands on the Chinese coast and the navy mounts a blockade of the port of Qingdao. After two months of siege and some heavy fighting, the German colony falls to the Japanese in November.

Meanwhile the Japanese navy has also appropriated some useful German staging posts in the long curve of islands to the south of Japan (the Marianas, and the Caroline and Palau islands). With these acquisitions so rapidly made, Japan plays little further part in the war, apart from some assistance in the escort of convoys at sea.

German Africa: 1914-1918

The early months of the war also see energetic attacks on the most significant part of Germany's empire, the four territories acquired by Bismarck in the 1880s in the ['scramble for Africa'](#).

Matters are speedily resolved in the two colonies on the Bight of Benin, [Togo and Cameroon](#), both of which have French and British colonies as immediate neighbours. There are invasions across the borders within a week of the start of war in August 1914. In Togo the Germans are defeated before the end of the month. Hostilities last a little longer in Cameroon but are over by the end of February 1915.

In [South West Africa](#) (now Namibia) the situation is more complicated. Here the main neighbour is South Africa, an ally to whom Britain entrusts the task of seizing the German colony. But such a policy is much resented by many in the Boer community, including some of the most distinguished commanders from the [Boer War](#). The result is that some of these leaders rebel, deserting the South African cause and taking their troops over to the German side.

The rebellion peters out by February 1915, but it has delayed any effective action as yet against the German

enemy. The Germans are eventually forced to capitulate five months later, in July.

In Germany's only east coast colony, [German East Africa](#) (now Tanzania), the action is much more prolonged. Indeed, owing to the astonishing skill and persistence of one man, the conflict here lasts for the entire four years of the war.

The inspired leader is Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, commander of the German army in the colony. The first force sent against him is 8000 men despatched from Bombay. Landing on 2 and 3 November 1914, and immediately losing nearly 1000 of their number under fire from the Germans, they re-embark and depart in disarray (an embarrassing fiasco, news of which is kept from the British public for several months).

During 1915 Lettow-Vorbeck, left to his own devices, sets about transforming his colony into a self-sufficient territory, capable of surviving without imports as a siege economy. The next allied invasion comes in February 1916, when an army of some 20,000 under General Smuts moves south from British East Africa (now Kenya).

This force is too strong for Lettow-Vorbeck to confront head on, so he transforms his men with great success into a guerrilla army. For two years he moves around German East Africa, and often across its borders into neighbouring hostile colonies, always avoiding defeat - and tying down as many as 130,000 Allied troops, about half of whom die (some in action, many more of disease).

By November 1918 Lettow-Vorbeck is still as active and elusive as ever. It takes two weeks for the news of the armistice to reach him, but when it does - on November 25 - he finally surrenders. As an indication of the fight still left in his guerrilla army, he is found to be in possession of 500,000 rounds of ammunition.

Welcomed as a hero on his return to Germany in 1919, and twenty years later avoiding any link with the Nazis (though strongly right-wing in his political views), this remarkable man lives on until 1964, dying in Hamburg in his ninety-fourth year.

Beleaguered Russia: 1915

By the start of 1915 Russia is at war with three powerful neighbours (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey) and is effectively cut off from any contact with her allies in the west, except through the icy northern waters to Archangel.

The weakest in the triple alliance of the Central Powers is Turkey. So at the turn of the year Russia sends a message to the British and French urging them to attack Turkey and thus create a useful diversion on one of the three fronts (a request which in the event has disastrous results at [Gallipoli](#)).

Russia at first holds her own on the border with Austria-Hungary and even makes certain gains (capturing the important fortress of Przemsyl in March). But a sudden German push in the north, endangering four Russian divisions, is a foretaste in February of much worse to come. The first major German campaign of

the year begins in May, breaking through the Russian line of trenches in a surprise attack at Gorlice and advancing the 150 miles to Lvov within a few weeks (retaking Przemsyl on the way).

A third advance comes in September. By the end of the year the Russians have lost Poland and have been driven back to a line from Riga to Chernovtsy. Moreover, in addition to heavy casualties, 750,000 of their troops have been taken prisoner.

The Russian front with Turkey is less disastrous. West of the Black Sea their territories are separated by Romania and Bulgaria, both still neutral, so there is only one region where the confrontation can take place. This is in the Caucasus, where the Russo-Turkish frontier runs on a line between the Black Sea and the Caspian. Russia is at a considerable advantage here because her navy controls the Black Sea, forcing the Turks to carry all their supplies to the front through the mountainous terrain of central Anatolia.

As a result Russia makes a gradual though difficult advance. By July 1915 Russian troops have reached a line from Trabzon to Erzincan. But their success triggers one of the war's worst atrocities, in Armenia.

The Armenian people live in a region divided between Russia and Turkey. With a proud history of independence (achieved intermittently as far back as the 6th century BC), the Armenians have no wish to be in either empire. But if forced to choose between them, their inclination as Christians would be to Russia's side. The Armenians in Turkey therefore have good reason to hope that the Russian border will be extended west, to reunite them with their Armenian cousins and give them access to their historic capital at Yerevan.

The disaster of 1915 derives from a Turkish fear that the Armenians in Turkey represent a danger, straddling their already precarious supply lines to the front.

The decision is taken to move the entire Turkish Armenian population (some 1.6 million people) from their homeland to the desert regions of Syria, 250 miles to the south.

In the rush to implement this policy, and in the face of inevitable resistance, Turkish troops massacre in cold blood many tens of thousands of Armenians. Even more men, women and children perish from hunger, disease and exhaustion as they are driven south. There are no reliable figures for the number who die, but a probable estimate is between half and three quarters of a million. The Armenian atrocities, targeting a specific ethnic group, are the first major example of the genocide which disfigures the twentieth century.

Gallipoli: 1915

Early in 1915 a dramatic new strategy is under discussion among the Allies. There are two reasons. Many British and French strategists feel that the trench warfare on the western front is settling into a gridlock which cannot be resolved by continuous frontal attacks, and that therefore a bold alternative is required. And on 2 January 1915 a request is received from Moscow for an attack on Turkey, to relieve pressure on

the Russian armies fighting on three fronts.

The result is the gradual formation of a plan to try and force a passage through the Dardanelles (the heavily defended straits leading into the Sea of Marmara), in order to reach and capture Istanbul.

If this could be achieved, there would be numerous advantages. Turkey would be crippled. An easy supply route from the west to Russia would be opened up. An attack could be launched up the Danube against Austria-Hungary. Relief could be brought to beleaguered [Serbia](#). And this demonstration of power might well persuade Greece, Bulgaria and Romania - all at this stage still neutral - either to stand aside from the conflict or to join the Allies.

The plan of a purely naval attack on the Dardanelles is strongly supported by Winston Churchill in his role as first lord of the admiralty, the cabinet member responsible for the navy.

The scheme is opposed by Lord Fisher, the first sea lord (the senior serving officer in the navy) unless it is heavily supported by an invasion on the ground. But at a meeting of the War Council, on 13 January 1915, Churchill's view prevails.

On March 18 six British and four French battleships, bombarding the Turkish defences on either shore, begin to make their way through the straits. Minesweepers successfully clear the water in front of them. But disaster strikes when the leading battleships reach a line of mines which have remained undetected. Three ships are sunk, with the loss of 620 French sailors on one of them (the *Bouvet*).

This disaster causes a change of plan. It is decided that there must after all be a land invasion, to clear the Turkish defences from the Gallipoli peninsula (the thin strip of land separating the Dardanelles from the Aegean Sea) so that the battleships can next time steam through the straits in greater safety.

A multinational force arrives on April 25. Australian and New Zealand troops land on the west shore of the peninsula (at a point subsequently known as Anzac Cove, the initials standing for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps). British troops come ashore at the southern tip of the peninsula. A French contingent, as a diversion, takes up a position on the other side of the straits.

Both the Anzacs and the British are confronted by much stronger opposition than expected (the Anzacs lose 2000 men on the first day). Only very limited beachheads are established. Large reinforcements later in the year, in August, make little difference.

Eventually it is decided to abandon the campaign. The armies slip out of Gallipoli in December 1915 in a skilfully achieved retreat. But the previous eight months have cost the Allies more than 200,000 casualties, to absolutely no advantage. In November 1915 Churchill resigns from the government. For the next six months he exchanges his cabinet post for active service as a lieutenant colonel at the front in France.

Trench warfare: 1915-1917

By the start of 1915, on the western front, the pattern of trench warfare is established. It will trap all the combatant nations for the next three years in an insoluble deadlock in which the lifeblood of their young men drains unquenchably away.

The commanders-in-chief - John French and then Douglas Haig for Britain, Joseph Joffre and Philippe Pétain for France, Erich von Falkenhayn followed by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff for Germany - all agree on one thing. The only way forward is to wear the opposing forces down in a ceaseless war of attrition, weakening them to the point where a sudden strategic breakthrough can be achieved.

Never in history have so many men, so heavily armed, remained for so long confronting each other in a restricted area of open ground. All the great battles of the war, some of them lasting several months, take place along a crescent stretching less than 200 miles from Ypres to Verdun. The few major advances made in either direction are less than 50 miles and are soon reversed. Most of the time it is a matter of winning, losing, clawing back a few hundred yards of shell-churned mud.

Yet in this blighted area, during the four years of the war, millions of men lose their lives. In one day alone, at the start of the four-month battle of the Somme in 1916, 20,000 British soldiers die and another 40,000 are wounded.

The pattern of attack, from one line of trenches to the other across no man's land, becomes more sophisticated as the months roll by but remains essentially the same. The trenches are protected by lethal rolls of barbed wire. These need to be flattened before there is any hope of the advancing infantry reaching the enemy. This is achieved by a preliminary bombardment from artillery behind the lines, lasting days and sometimes weeks.

In the early part of the war the bombardment ends when the infantry go over the top of their trenches, armed with rifles, bayonets and hand grenades, to stagger and slither towards the machine guns awaiting them.

Later a slight improvement is made in the form of the rolling barrage, in which the artillery gunners steadily raise their sights as the troops advance. The purpose is to lay down ahead of them a carpet of high-explosive shells, forcing the enemy to keep their heads down. Reconnaissance aircraft fly overhead, equipped with radio, to report back to the gunners where their shells are landing and what enemy targets are available.

Even when this softening-up procedure succeeds, the infantry are left with a lonely final assault on the trenches followed by close combat, unless (always the hoped-for result) the bombardment has in itself persuaded the enemy to withdraw to a secondary line of defence.

Battles along the western front: 1915-1917

In each year of this gargantuan contest both sides mount offensives, usually more costly to them than to the defenders. In 1915 the Germans move first, in April, in the northwest section of the line near Ypres. In May the French retaliate further south, between Lens and Arras. In the autumn the Allies launch twin campaigns, the British in the north near Loos and the French in the southeastern part of the line around Reims.

The first offensive of 1916 is a German thrust towards Verdun, a town behind the Allied lines at the eastern end of the trenches. Beginning in February, the battle for Verdun lasts for the rest of the year and severely stretches the resources of the French defenders - commanded by Philippe Pétain, who becomes a national hero.



The pressure on Verdun is eased in July, when the Allies advance in the valley of the Somme, in the centre of the line, in what becomes the most deadly single engagement of the entire war. On the very first day 60,000 of the British troops running forward from their trenches are mown down by enemy fire. Four months later, when torrential rain brings the battle finally to an end with little gained, the British have lost 420,000 men, the French 195,000 and the Germans more than 600,000.

Allied strategic plans are dislocated in March 1917 by a surprise German move. The line of trenches has given the Germans a southwest bulge between Arras and Reims. Deciding not to hold this, the Germans now make an unexpected withdrawal.

They pull their troops back to a newly prepared line, reinforced with a very effective innovation - concrete pillboxes to house machine-guns. This defensive barrier becomes known as the Hindenburg Line, after the recently appointed German commander-in-chief. The territory which has been abandoned is left as a heavily mined wasteland.

By this stage of the war both French and Germans have learnt the value of taking a defensive stance in this new form of warfare, but the British commander, Field Marshal Haig, is still convinced that aggression must ultimately prevail. After attempting to soften up the opposition with a bombardment of 4,500,000 shells, he launches on 31 July 1917 a massive attack from Ypres at the northern extremity of the line of trenches.



As so often previously in the war, three months of horror end with nothing achieved. The

campaign lasts until early November, when a macabre last-ditch advance by British and Canadian infantry, wading through knee-deep mud churned up by constant bombardment in the autumn rain, results in the capture of a trivial but by now symbolic prize - the village of Passchendaele. It stands just five miles from where the attack began in July. Since then some 250,000 British soldiers have died.

There is one briefly effective campaign in late November 1917. A suitable terrain is chosen near Cambrai for the first serious outing of a British innovation, the tank. These strange vehicles achieve a rapid advance. But there are not enough infantry in support to consolidate the gain.

Innovations on the western front: 1915-1917

There are occasional innovations on the western front, when radically new weapons are brought to the battlefield in an attempt to clear the enemy more effectively from their trenches.

The Germans first try the use of chlorine gas against the Russians in Poland in January 1915, but the extreme cold makes it ineffective. They make a second attempt at Ypres in April 1915. This time the creeping poisonous green vapour immediately empties the French trenches. But the Germans, not anticipating such an immediate success, fail to take advantage of their opportunity. Five months later the British use chlorine gas, at Loos in September - again to little advantage, partly because the wind changes and blows the gas back over their own men.

By the end of the war both sides make frequent use of even more alarming gases (phosgene and mustard). The damage is limited by the gas mask, soon part of the basic equipment of every soldier, though mustard gas also causes severe burns to the skin.

From 1916 poison gas is no longer released from canisters, to drift with the wind across the enemy's position. Now it is fired in compressed form in shells and mortars, to expand on impact. During one advance, in the Ypres region in March 1918, the Germans fire half a million mustard gas shells into the Allied lines. But protective measures by now ensure that even such a heavy bombardment results in only 7000 gas casualties and less than 100 deaths.

Poison gas has been relatively little used in subsequent wars, for fear of retaliation in kind. But modern warfare has been transformed by another innovation on the western front.

During the battle of the Somme, on 15 September 1916, the British send into action eleven vehicles of an entirely new kind, the Mark I tank. On this first occasion they make relatively little impression. But on their second outing, at Cambrai in November 1917, they prove their unmistakable value in clearing the battleground for the infantry following behind them. Unlike foot soldiers, tanks can advance against the dreaded machine gun and can crash through the barbed wire barricades protecting the enemy trenches.

Balkan alliances: 1915-1916

During 1915, as the war first settles into stalemate on the western front, the European theatre with the greatest volatility is the Balkans - where there is much unfinished business in the aftermath of the two recent [Balkan Wars](#) (1912-13). The immediate concern of the various countries is local – how best to preserve recent territorial gains or recover recent losses.

At the outbreak of war, in 1914, all but one of the nations in this turbulent region keep their options open with declarations of neutrality. The exception is [Serbia](#), at the heart of the conflict from the very start and surprisingly resilient during the rest of 1914 in keeping the armies of Austria-Hungary at bay.

Serbia and Bulgaria become a high priority for both sides. For the Central Powers, if Serbia can be occupied and Bulgaria brought into their alliance, a crucial railway link can be made between Vienna and the Turkish capital at Istanbul. For the Allies there is strategic value in preventing this happening, and an important element of prestige in being seen to protect Serbia.

During the summer of 1915 both sides promise Bulgaria the return of territory in Macedonia lost in the Bucharest treaty of 1913. It is a more convincing promise from the Central powers, since much of the land went to Serbia. Moreover the king of Bulgaria is strongly pro-German. In September Bulgaria takes the plunge by declaring war on Serbia.

This act places the focus firmly on Greece. A friendly Greece is essential to the Allies, since an expedition north from the Greek coast is the only practical way of bringing assistance to land-locked Serbia. Moreover Greece can reasonably be expected to enter the fray. After the [First Balkan War](#), in 1913, she signed a treaty with Serbia in which each promised to help the other if attacked by Bulgaria.

However opinion in Greece is deeply divided. The king and his senior commanders are pro-German, while the prime minister sympathizes with the Allies. The result is that Greece fails to side with Serbia, but Allied troops nevertheless land at Salonika for a push inland (claiming to have been invited to do so by the prime minister).

French and British divisions are rushed from Gallipoli to land at Salonika on October 5 (the Greek king dismisses his insubordinate prime minister on the same day). But the expedition proves a fiasco. Advancing up the Vardar river, the Allies find the Bulgarians ahead of them in Serbia. An Austrian and Bulgarian attack from both flanks is finally subduing this small country, with Belgrade falling to the Austrians on October 9. The Serb army, abandoning an unequal struggle, escapes through the mountains into Albania.

The Allied forces, having failed in their mission, withdraw in December back to Salonika. At this same moment the British and French are also pulling ignominiously out of [Gallipoli](#).

It would make tactical sense to abandon both these unsuccessful ventures, but it is decided that there are strategic reasons for staying in Salonika. One is prestige in this important part of Europe. The other is the

hope that Romania, still neutral, may soon join in on the Allied side. As a result further French and British divisions are sent in 1916 to Salonika. They are joined by the escaped Serbian army and by Italian contingents.

The Germans decide not to disturb this quiet encampment, which at times ties up nearly 500,000 Allied troops - until at last they go into [action in 1918](#).

Romania does eventually join the Allies, in August 1916, on being promised much of Hungary after the defeat of the Austrian empire. Romania's decision pays off after the war, but in the short term it brings disaster. Early in December the capital city, Bucharest, falls to an Austro-Hungarian army. The king and his ministers flee to exile in the neighbouring Russian province of Moldavia.

Meanwhile the split in Greece between the factions of the king and his dismissed prime minister become more extreme. In September 1916 the prime minister moves from Athens to Salonika to set up an independent Greek government under Allied protection. This government, in November, declares war on Bulgaria. The rival Balkan alliances are at last complete.

The Battle of Jutland: 1916

The early summer of 1916 brings the only major sea battle of the entire war. Since the loss of the *Blücher* at [Dogger Bank](#) in January 1915, the German High Seas Fleet has been content to remain in the safety of German waters in the Baltic, leaving the U-boats to carry on the war at sea. Meanwhile Britain's larger Grand Fleet watches over the North Sea from its base at Scapa Flow.

However in 1916 the Germans devise a plan which they hope will entice into a trap one half of the British fleet, which can then be destroyed in isolation. The scheme has two related parts.

First a small force of cruisers is despatched to bombard the east coast ports of Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft. It is hoped that this will prompt Admiral Jellicoe to send down less than the whole fleet from Scapa Flow, to end this annoyance. He does just that, despatching one battle squadron.

The next step in the German plan is to send a scouting group of cruisers up the Norwegian coast, tempting the British across the sea to move south of them and cut them off. But the cruisers are to be followed at a distance of fifty miles by the entire High Seas Fleet under its admiral, Reinhard Scheer.

A succession of accidents frustrate and alter these plans. British listening devices intercept a message on May 30 suggesting that the High Seas Fleet is on the move. Jellicoe responds by steaming south with the rest of the Grand Fleet from Scapa Flow, heading for a rendezvous near the entrance to the Skagerrak (the channel to the north of Denmark's province of Jutland, leading into the Baltic Sea). This accidentally brings the British and German fleets into the same area.

They fail to notice each other until a chance encounter in the early afternoon of May 31. At that stage the battleships of both fleets are still miles apart. By about 4 p.m. the cruisers of both sides are in combat. Two hours later the battleships open fire.

In the gathering dusk these massive vessels, armed with enormous guns, cumbrously manoeuvre and wheel about with the same objective as the old ships-of-the-line - to be in position to fire a broadside at an enemy less well placed. In the event the chaos is such that neither side has a decisive advantage before night falls and contact is lost.

When the tally is taken, the Germans are the winners. The British lose marginally more ships and twice as many men (about 6000). But in another sense the German effort fails. After the battle of Jutland (known to the Germans as the battle of the Skagerrak) the Grand Fleet is still in command of the North Sea - while the German fleet prefers once again to remain safely at home, shy of the high seas after which it is named.

Mesopotamia: 1914-1916

With the collapse of the [Gallipoli](#) campaign in 1915, the only untried route of attack against the Turkish empire is in the Middle East, up through Mesopotamia or Palestine.

From the start of the war Mesopotamia has been the site of British muddle and disaster. As soon as Britain and Turkey are at war, early in November 1914, a British force is despatched to seize the Turkish port of Basra on the Shatt-al-Arab (the confluence of the two great rivers of Mesopotamia, the Tigris and the Euphrates). The purpose is precise and limited. Basra is a mere fifty miles upstream from the Persian port of Abadan, where the recently established Anglo-Persian Oil company refines and ships out its precious commodity. Britain needs to protect its supply of diesel for the navy.

This limited objective is rapidly achieved. Basra is taken on 22 November 1914, and a defensive outpost is established some fifty miles further north at the junction between the Tigris and the Euphrates. But during 1915, as the campaign in [Gallipoli](#) gets bogged down, an impressive advance up the Tigris becomes politically attractive.

Amara is taken on 3 June 1915, followed by Kut on September 29. This is more than half way towards the mesmerizing prize of [Baghdad](#). A British and Indian advance party, too small for the task and too far from reliable sources of supply, pushes on up the river.

It finally reaches strong Turkish opposition at the historic site of [Ctesiphon](#), a mere twenty miles from Baghdad. The date, 22 November 1915, is exactly a year after the successful capture of Basra. With heavy losses (half the 8500 men are killed or wounded), the Allied force withdraws to join its supporting troops in Kut. There they find themselves trapped. For five months they are besieged by a Turkish army until, on 29 April 1916, the British commander finally surrenders. 10,000 British and Indian soldiers are taken into Turkish captivity.

This adventure against the Turks has been as humiliating as the contemporary events at [Gallipoli](#). But meanwhile a new development in [Arabia](#) seems to offer greater hope.

Arabia and Palestine: 1916

When the Turks enter the war, in 1914, the hereditary emir of Mecca (Husayn ibn Ali) sees a chance of extricating his territory from [Ottoman rule](#). He secretly begins negotiating with the British. By June 1916 he is ready to launch an Arab revolt along the Red Sea coast.

The most effective part of this uprising is conducted by Faisal, one of Husayn's sons, in conjunction with T.E. Lawrence, a young British officer seconded for the purpose. Together they attack the most strategically important feature in the region, the railway which runs south from Damascus, through Amman and Ma'an, to Medina. This is the only route by which the Turks can easily send reinforcements to Arabia.

The policy succeeds and by the summer of 1917 the Arabs have moved far enough north to capture Aqaba. This is achieved on July 6 in a dramatic raid by Lawrence and some Arab chiefs with a few hundred of their tribesmen. Together they kill or capture some 1200 Turks at a cost of only two of their own lives.

The port of Aqaba occupies an important position at the head of the gulf of the same name. It offers relatively easy access up towards the Dead Sea. Faisal's army is now well placed to support a British thrust into Palestine, by operating from the desert region of the Negev to bring pressure on the eastern flank of the Turks.

During the winter of 1916 the British have been laying a railway along the northern coast of the Sinai peninsula. This makes possible an attack on Gaza, the gateway into Palestine. But on two separate occasions - in March and April 1917 - the campaign is seriously bungled. As a result a new commander, Edmund Allenby, is brought in.

Allenby succeeds in taking Gaza on November 7. He follows this with the capture of Jerusalem a month later, on December 9. Meanwhile Britain's fortunes in Mesopotamia have also been transformed by a new commander, Stanley Maude. Maude retakes Kut on 24 February 1917 and captures Baghdad on March 11.

So by the end of 1917 the Allies, occupying both Jerusalem and Baghdad, have completed half the necessary task in the Middle East. But they are still a long way from the frontier of Turkey itself. On the Mediterranean front Damascus and Aleppo lie ahead, in Mesopotamia there is still Mosul to be taken. And even then there is the almost impenetrable terrain of Anatolia before one can reach Istanbul.

With massive armies confronting each other on the western front, this all seems a long way from the centre of the action. But this year of 1917 has meanwhile brought two major developments, in the [usa](#) and [Russia](#), which in their very different ways profoundly alter the equation of the war.

U-boats and convoys: 1917-1918

In the spring of 1917, and then again a year later, Germany seems to have two real chances to clinch victory. The first is at sea and the second on the western front.

Germany's advantage at sea early in 1917 is the result of her decision in January to resume all-out [submarine warfare](#). Three months later the success rate is 430 Allied and neutral merchant ships sunk during April alone (of merchant vessels leaving British harbours during that month one out of four fails to return). Both the Germans and the Allies calculate that if losses continue at this rate, the Allies will be starved into submission by the end of the year.

A rapid solution is essential, and it is found in a very simple change of procedure - though one which is considered highly controversial at the time. A proposal is put forward in the British admiralty early in 1917 that merchant ships should cross the Atlantic in convoys. Opponents point out what seems to many at the time blindingly obvious - that such a strategy merely gathers the ships together for a U-boat to pick them off, as a collection of sitting ducks.

But until now each vessel has been setting off on its own for its transatlantic journey, thus dotting the ocean with separate targets which a U-boat is much more likely to encounter. Moreover if ships are grouped together, it becomes feasible to provide an armed escort.

The argument is won by those in favour of convoys, which begin crossing the Atlantic in June 1917. There is an immediate and drastic fall in the number of ships sunk. In the following six months only ten fall prey to U-boats when travelling in convoy. Like fighter planes and bombers and tanks, the convoy system evolves in World War I before becoming a standard feature of later conflicts.

With the advantage at last turning, the Allies now take much more vigorous steps to retaliate against the U-boats. Vast numbers of mines, laid in the Channel and North Sea, bring many underwater victims. And successful raids are launched to block the Belgian harbours where the U-boats have been returning to refuel.

Western front: 1918

The Germans appear to win a second chance of victory on the western front early in 1918. It is by now a matter of urgency. Ludendorff, in command of the German armies, is aware that a decisive blow is essential if Germany is to prevail before the arrival of US troops tips the balance irretrievably.

Between March and June he launches three massive attacks in different parts of the line. They succeed as no such offensive has done in the past three years. Indeed the first, pushing towards Amiens, brings the Germans forty miles into France within a few days. The other two create similar great bulges into French territory.

But Ludendorff fails to make the breakthrough which he requires, either against the French towards Paris or against the British in the direction of the Channel ports. And in July and August he suffers two critical reverses at the hands of the Allied armies, now under the unified command (since April 1918) of the French marshal Ferdinand Foch.

In the second battle of the Marne (from July 18) and in the battle of Amiens (from August 8) the German forces are driven back. In both encounters the Allies make extremely effective use of the one weapon which is exclusively theirs. The attack at Amiens is led by as many as 450 tanks.

With these German defeats the psychological tide of the war finally turns. At the same time the balance of physical power is also tipping. US troops are in action on the western front in large numbers from May 1918, and many more divisions are on their way.

After the battle of Amiens, in August, Ludendorff concludes that the German cause is hopeless. He advises his emperor that peace negotiations should be started before the situation deteriorates further. Meanwhile Germany's allies are all about to drop separately out of the fray.

The Central Powers crumble: 1918

On all fronts, during the autumn of 1918, the Allies suddenly have successes where stalemate has previously prevailed.

The troops long bivouacked uselessly at Salonika begin in mid-September a successful thrust up the Vardar river towards Serbia. With the Serbians fighting in the vanguard to recover their own territory, rapid advances are made against German and Bulgarian forces. Before the end of the month the Bulgarians ask for a separate armistice. It is signed on September 29 in [Salonika](#), leaving the Allies free to march east towards Istanbul. Meanwhile, in this same month, the Turks have been suffering similar reverses on their eastern front in Syria.

In Palestine, during the summer of 1918, [Faisal and T.E. Lawrence](#) keep a Turkish army occupied east of the Jordan in a campaign of guerrilla warfare. This has the effect of leaving the coastal area more lightly protected. Here, on 19 September 1918 at [Megiddo](#) (a historic site in the annals of warfare), [Allenby](#) sweeps aside the Turkish defenders and begins an advance which brings him into Damascus on October 1.

Further east, in Mesopotamia, there are similar successes. In the last week of October British forces are on the verge of capturing Mosul. But by this time the Turkish government has asked for peace.

An armistice between the Ottoman empire and the Allied powers is signed on 30 October 1918 on a British cruiser lying off Mudros (a port on the island of Lemnos). It leaves Austria-Hungary as the only Central Power still fighting as an ally of Germany. But this alliance too has only a few more days of life, after developments on the Italian front.

The front at [Isonzo](#) between Austria-Hungary and Italy has for much of the war been virtually static. The only exception has been a sudden Austrian advance after a battle at Caporetto on 24 October 1917. As many as 600,000 Italians either surrender or desert under the onslaught, and the Austrians are not held until they reach a new line some 70 miles further into Italy.

Now exactly a year later, on 24 October 1918, the Italians begin a push which rapidly recovers their territory from a demoralized Austrian army. It also triggers off the disintegration of Austria-Hungary. During the last week of October declarations are made in Budapest, Prague and Zagreb, proclaiming the independence of their respective parts of the old empire.

On October 29 the imperial authorities ask Italy for an armistice. It is signed in the Villa Giusti near Padua on November 3. Germany is now on her own. And she too is making enquiries about an armistice.

Germany's armistice: 1918

The German decision to seek an armistice comes with surprising speed after the start of a new Allied push in the west. This is a carefully coordinated assault on three fronts. On September 26 the French and the US 1st army (under John Pershing) advance at the eastern end of the line, near Verdun. A day later the British begin an assault on the central section, between Cambrai and St Quentin. And on the following day a French and Belgian army (commanded by the Belgian king, Albert I) attacks in the north, round Ypres.

Only in the centre is a rapid advance made, similar to the German successes earlier in the year. By October 5 the British, under Haig, are through the much vaunted [Hindenburg Line](#).

These events seem to reinforce Ludendorff's advice (given after August 8) that it is time for an armistice. So does the capitulation of [Bulgaria](#) on September 29, opening up a new front to which German resources will need to be diverted if the conflict is to continue.

On October 3 the Kaiser appoints a new chancellor, Prince Max of Baden, who is internationally respected (during the war he has worked with the [Red Cross](#) for the welfare of prisoners on both sides). His task is to win Germany a just peace. The obvious channel, among the Allied leaders, is through Woodrow Wilson. During the past year the US president has spoken frequently on the necessary basis for a lasting peace in Europe. His blueprint is enshrined in his famous [Fourteen Points](#).

During the night of October 3 Prince Max sends a message via Switzerland to President Wilson. It asks for an immediate armistice followed by peace negotiations based on the [Fourteen Points](#). Over the next four weeks Wilson and the Allies stipulate various conditions. An armistice will only be signed with a government representing the German people (a direct threat to the Kaiser's autocracy). And its terms will have to ensure that Germany is in no position to renew the conflict before a peace treaty is agreed.

Seeing this as a demand for unconditional surrender, Ludendorff now argues that Germany should fight

on. On October 26 Prince Max persuades the Kaiser to dismiss him.

Over the next ten days events give ever greater urgency to Germany's need for an armistice. On October 28 there is the start of a mutiny when the High Seas Fleet in Kiel is ordered into the North Sea (in the hope of a last-minute naval victory which might improve the peace terms). Within days the mood of rebellion spreads through the armed forces and erupts in German cities. On November 3 [Austria-Hungary](#) opts out of the war with its own separate armistice.

Prince Max moves swiftly. On November 6 he appoints a commissioner to negotiate for Germany. On November 9 he deposes the Kaiser and hands over his own powers as chancellor to a Social Democrat government, which proclaims a [German republic](#). It is therefore a new but uncertain Germany which approaches the armistice and the peace.

Forest of Compiègne: 1918

The German delegation to the armistice talks consists of three men - the commissioner (a politician, Matthias Erzberger) and two army officers. They set off from Spa, in German-occupied Belgium, to their rendez-vous with the Allies. Their destination is a railway carriage parked on the track at Rethondes in the forest of Compiègne, north of Paris. Here, on November 8, they are confronted by a team led by the Allied commander-in-chief, Marshal Foch.

The terms on offer are uncompromising. In addition to the return of foreign land captured during this war, together with [Alsace-Lorraine](#) (won from France half a century previously), German territory to a line 31 miles (50 km) east of the Rhine is to be occupied by Allied troops for up to fifteen years and then be permanently demilitarized.

The advantageous German [treaty with Russia](#) is to be annulled. All German submarines are to be appropriated by the Allies, as is much military equipment. The High Seas Fleet is to be interned in Scapa Flow, pending any future decision. And the Allies will continue their blockade of Germany until peace is agreed. In addition there is one further ominous detail. France and Britain have announced they will insist on a postwar settlement not envisaged in Wilson's [Fourteen Points](#) - the compensation by Germany for damage done by land, sea or air to civilian property.

For the next two days the small German delegation struggles to improve these terms, mainly using the argument that both sides share an urgent need to prevent revolution in Germany on the Russian pattern.

They win some concessions, particularly in delaying the withdrawal of German troops on the highly sensitive eastern front. But the eventual agreement is nevertheless close to the one imposed from the start by the Allies. Both sides eventually sign at 5 a.m. on November 11. With a fine instinct for the drama of the occasion, the document states that hostilities will cease six hours later. So the great war ends, with memorable precision, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

The Germans certainly expect the peace treaty to follow fairly soon. In the event their nation suffers the economic effects of the Allied blockade for a further six months before peace terms are finally offered.

Paris and Versailles: 1919

The delegates to the peace conference gather in Paris and hold their first full session on 18 January 1919. The terms to be imposed upon Germany are not agreed until May. The treaty is finally signed at Versailles, on 28 June 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors - the very room, so profoundly symbolic of triumphalist French power, which has been sullied by the proclamation here in 1871 of the [German empire](#).

In most respects the terms follow Wilson's Fourteen Points (though distorted by an animosity towards Germany) and the broad outlines of the armistice. Historic national frontiers are restored except where the higher principle of self-determination is deemed to prevail (plebiscites in border regions between Germany and Poland are used to define new boundaries).

Germany's land and sea forces are to be permanently reduced to a very limited size, and she is to be allowed no air force at all. Her pre-war pride, the great [High Seas fleet](#), is to be transferred to the Allies (a decree frustrated in a splendid act of defiance by the German sailors themselves who on 21 June 1919, under the very eyes of the British, manage to scuttle every one of the fifty German warships held in Scapa Flow).

The German empire is to be dismantled and all its colonies redistributed among the victorious powers under mandates from the [League of Nations](#). And finally, under consideration by the delegates in Paris, there is the contentious matter of reparations.

Germany cannot complain at the principle of reparation, for in [1871](#) she imposed a vast indemnity on France after a brief war blatantly engineered by the Germans themselves. But in Paris there is profound disagreement as to the proper level of payment. The USA, Britain and Italy argue for a more moderate imposition than France and Belgium (the main sufferers) are inclined to demand.

Eventually, in 1921, the commission set up for the purpose assesses Germany's obligation at \$33 billion. Of this some \$21 billion is eventually paid, becoming a profound source of German grievance. The economic burden does not prove quite as crippling as is often implied. But the injury to a nation's pride is of a different order.

Other treaties: 1919

The delegates to Paris also need to settle peace treaties between the Allies and their other enemies. During the following year four such treaties are signed in various locations in or near the capital city.

The first, at St Germain on 10 September 1919, is with Austria - regarded, for the purposes of the treaty,

as the much reduced rump of the pre-war Austro-Hungarian empire. On the principle of self-determination, enshrined in Wilson's [Fourteen Points](#), there is international acceptance of the three new nations proclaimed in 1918 in Budapest, Prague and Zagreb. The treaty is mainly concerned with drawing the borders between Austria and these three newcomers (Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the future Yugoslavia).

In two regions the wishes of the majority of the local inhabitants are consciously disregarded. One is [South Tirol](#), where the German-speaking population is brought within Italy to fulfil the promise made by the Allies in 1915.

The other group to become now a linguistic minority is in the long run far more significant. It is the 3.5 million German-speaking inhabitants of the [Sudetenland](#). They have been part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, so their historical link is with Vienna rather than Berlin. They wish therefore to become part of a new German-speaking nation centred on Austria, even though they share a long border with Germany and only a very short one with Austria, from which they are largely separated by the territory of Czech-speaking Bohemia. But it is decided in Paris that they will become, against their will, Czech citizens.

One of the three new nations, Hungary, has been part of the enemy, so a separate peace treaty is required. It is a long time in the pipeline because of the instability of the political situation in postwar Budapest, but finally a document is signed in the Trianon Palace at Versailles on 4 June 1920. It greatly reduces Hungary from its historic frontiers, with many border regions assigned to Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia (still known at this stage as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes).

A treaty with Bulgaria is signed at Neuilly on 27 November 1919, assigning Bulgarian territory in the west to the future Yugoslavia and in the south to Greece. The ceding to Greece of western Thrace, and with it access to the Mediterranean, is Bulgaria's most serious loss.

These treaties leave matters unresolved in relation to only one Central Power, the Ottoman empire. Owing to the vast rambling extent of the Ottoman territories, these discussions prove the most protracted.

When a treaty is eventually signed, at Sèvres on 10 August 1920, its terms are harsh to Turkey. The empire is entirely dismantled, with all the middle eastern provinces previously under Turkish control now made the responsibility of France and Britain as mandated territories. Inroads are even made on the Turkish heartland, [Anatolia](#) itself.

In May 1919 the Allies authorize the Greeks to occupy Smyrna (or Izmir) on the Anatolian coast. They immediately do so, and are pressing further into Turkish territory by the time the treaty of Sèvres is signed.

The results of this folly are a new Greco-Turkish war, a new nationalist government in Istanbul and a reconvened peace conference at Lausanne in November 1922. The replacement treaty, signed in

Lausanne on 24 July 1923, rationalizes Turkey's frontier with Greece. The border becomes, as it remains today, the Aegean coast from the Maritsa river in eastern Thrace to the southwestern tip of Anatolia.

The League of Nations: 1919

The earliest and most high-profile achievement of the Paris peace conference is the establishment of the League of Nations. During the four-year carnage of the war, public opinion in many nations has been turning towards the utopian dream of an international organization strong enough to prevent the repetition of such a disaster. Before the end of 1914 a book by H.G. Wells provides the popular notion that this will be the war to end war.

Famous for his imaginative visions of the future, Wells is quick off the mark with *The War that will end War*. In it he sees the conflict (not as yet sunk into the blood-stained sludge of trench warfare) as the prelude to a future world state.

Early in 1915 the term 'League of Nations' is coined to describe this future form of international cooperation. Societies are formed, particularly in Britain and the USA, to discuss and promote the idea. In January 1918, with President Wilson's formulation of his [Fourteen Points](#), the concept acquires a high international profile.

The idea has widespread appeal - so much so that the first decision taken by the delegates to the Paris peace conference in 1919 is the establishment of the League of Nations. A document entitled the Covenant of the League of Nations is published in draft form in February. An amended text is adopted in April by a unanimous decision of the conference.

The Covenant is intended to be part of the eventual peace agreement, so it comes into effect only with the signing of the [treaty of Versailles](#). The organization is to be based in Geneva, capital city of Europe's most consistently neutral country. An existing building on the north shore of the lake is selected as temporary headquarters.

From 1929 construction begins of an imposing Avenue of Peace, leading up from the lake to a custom-built Palace of the Nations. This imposing structure is not completed until 1937, by which time it is painfully evident that the League has failed in its central purpose.

The main forums of the League are the assembly (to which each member nation sends one or more delegates) and the council. In the early years the council is intended to have as permanent members the five major Allied powers (France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, United States), who will be joined by four rotating temporary members selected by the assembly. The expectation is that Russia and Germany will in due course take their place as permanent members.

To Woodrow Wilson's profound disappointment, this scheme is frustrated by the absence of the United States. Opposition to Wilson in the senate, and a deep-rooted US instinct for isolationism, mean that the

necessary majority is never achieved to ratify the Covenant. The US seat remains empty throughout the life of the League.

The League has some early successes in settling international disputes, and the long-term plan seems to be on course when Germany joins in 1926. But the resignation of Germany in October 1933 after Hitler's rise to power, and of Japan in March of this same year, is a clear indication that the international community is now faced by tensions beyond the powers of the League to resolve.

The discredited League is formally disbanded in April 1946. By then the [United Nations](#) is already in existence. The new organization, with its assembly and security council, adopts very closely the structures of its predecessor. So in spite of the disasters of the 1930s, the idealism of 1919 can be said at the very least to have lasted out the century.

The human cost: 1914-1919

No war in history up to this point has brought such a high cost in human life. The nature of [trench warfare](#), with the infantry trapped under the almost permanent bombardment of heavy artillery in encounters lasting for months, means that men may die at any moment, often when themselves inactive, as well as being exposed to the sudden bursts of violent danger which have previously been the characteristic of battles.

These conditions, over four years, result in a death toll of serving personnel usually estimated in the region of 8 million.

The figure is extremely vague, because this has been a war in which casualties are hard to count. It is a war characterized by the rotting unrecovered bodies which litter the pounded earth of no man's land; by the rows of plain white crosses marking the graves of the unidentified dead; and by the profound emotion evoked by the concept of the Unknown Warrior, whose tomb can be found under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and is the first to confront every visitor entering Westminster Abbey in London.

The broad estimates for the main combatant nations are 1.8 million German dead, 1.7 million Russian, 1.55 million French, 1 million from the Austro-Hungarian empire, 900,000 from Britain and her empire, 650,000 Italians, 117,000 from the USA. And these figures do not include civilians.

Civilian deaths are even harder to calculate, since the deprivations of war take their toll surreptitiously. Seven million people world-wide is the figure usually quoted, with victim groups such as the [Armenians](#) featuring largely in this total.

These calculations bring the total number of deaths caused by the war to around 15 million. And to add to the devastation of an entire generation (for the military deaths are almost exclusively of young adults), nature delivers a devastating new blow in the autumn of 1918. In the last two months of the war

an influenza pandemic breaks out, bringing death in vast numbers to troops and civilians alike.

There are 1 million US soldiers in Europe that autumn. One in fifteen of them die of flu (a total of 62,000). In Britain 150,000 people are killed by the disease within a few weeks. The figures can be duplicated anywhere in the world, with the Indian subcontinent being particularly hard hit.

The war cannot be directly blamed, though a severely weakened European population is perhaps less able to resist (a global pandemic in 1889-90 has a similar rate of infection but far fewer deaths). Influenza deals a massive additional blow in an already shattered world. Figures for the number of deaths within a few months range from 12 to 20 million (with estimates of 6 to 12 million in India alone).

The winter and spring of 1918-19 also bring the threat of further human cost in the future, as a result of the [treaty](#) taking shape in Paris during these months. The reparations imposed on Germany, her virtual and indefinite disarmament, the permanent neutralization of a strip of her entire western region bordering the Rhine – all these slights, and the accompanying moral opprobrium, provided fertile ground in which resentment might fester and an aggressive nationalist spirit be nurtured.

The war may have ended badly for Germany. But the opportunities offered by the peace are not lost on Adolf [Hitler](#), a corporal who has seen front-line service throughout the war and has been decorated in August 1918 with an Iron Cross (first class).