

DEFINING MOMENTS WORLD WAR I AND THE AGE OF MODERN WARFARE



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Chapter Two

NEW MILITARY TECHNOLOGIES UNLEASHED



At the bottom [of the bomb crater], in the freshly turned earth, five bodies were spread, but in such a regular manner that you could see that the shell had burst in the middle of this little knot of men to send one in each direction.... The violence of the explosion had pushed them deep into the earth: three were almost completely driven into the lips of the crater, stuffed in like rags.¹

—A World War I soldier after the Battle of Verdun

As 1914 slipped away and 1915 began, millions of soldiers and civilians expressed the fervent hope that the new year would bring an end to the Great War raging across so much of Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Instead, they were forced to confront the bleak truth—the war had become a stalemate, with little prospect that it would end anytime soon. Even worse, the incredibly grim nature of the war became more evident with each passing month, both to soldiers in the trenches and to men, women, and children who lived far from the front. They came to learn that industrialization had revolutionized humankind's capacity for slaughter and destruction. These new technologies—chemical weapons, bomber aircraft, submarines, flamethrowers, tanks, and new breeds of heavy artillery—transformed World War I battlegrounds, European cities, and even the high seas into sinkholes of death and despair.

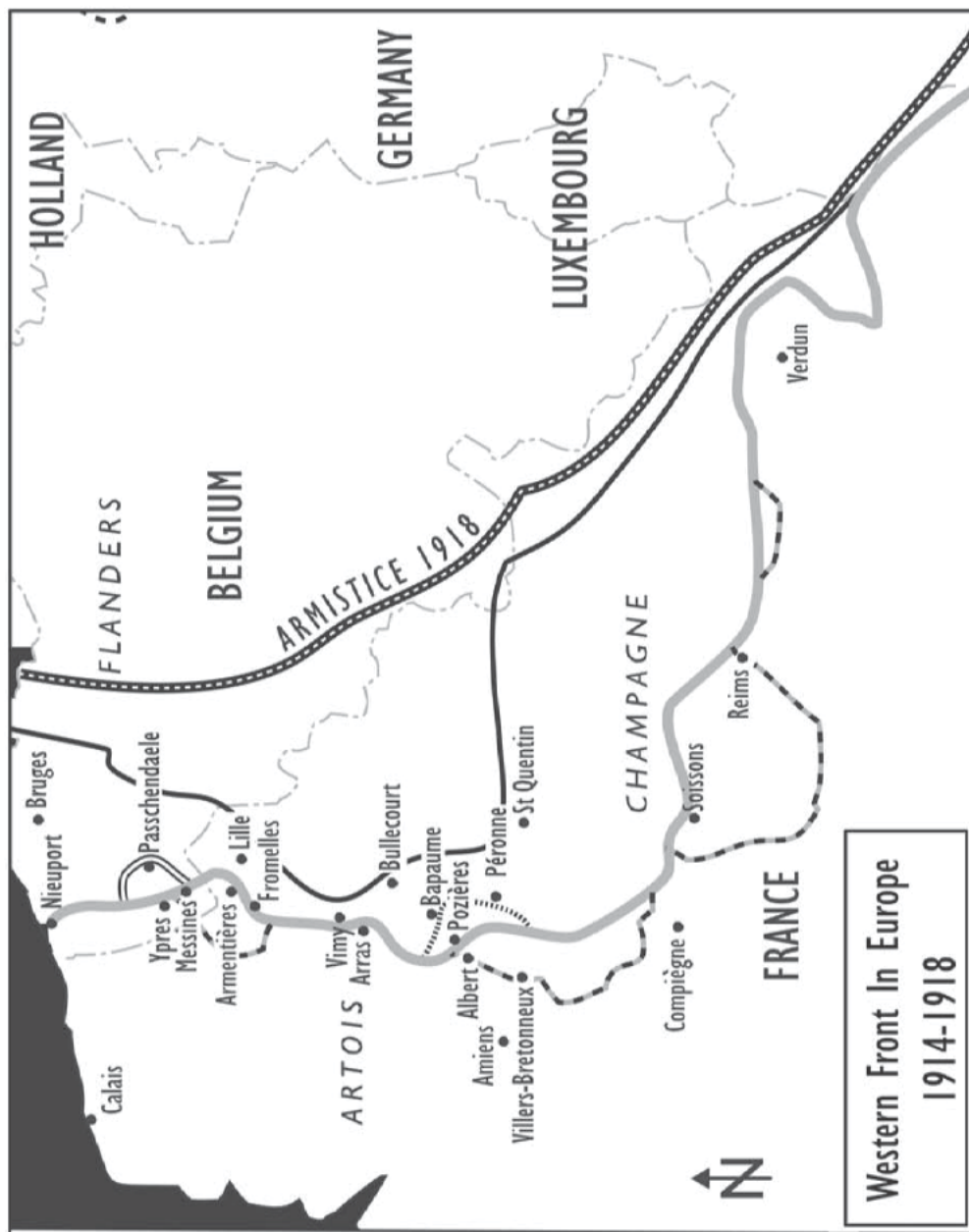
The World of Trench Warfare

The main defense that both Allied and Central armies employed to shield themselves from bullets, shells, and grenades was the primitive trench or



A Belgian soldier mans a machine gun in a trench on the Western Front.

dugout. These narrow pits, dug deep into the earth so that troops could walk or at least crouch without exposing themselves to direct enemy rifle fire, extended in zigzagging maze patterns across miles of broken and abandoned land. Many of them were also shored up by thick walls of sandbags or wood. Occasionally, trench networks even included underground bunkers that provided additional protection from enemy artillery. Other trench systems featured excavated rooms outfitted with carpet remnants, gas lamps, and salvaged furniture. Such sleeping areas provided officers with a primitive likeness of the living rooms they remembered back in England, Ireland, France, Germany, Canada, Russia, and other parts of the globe from which they hailed. Most trenches, though, were little more than long, deep pits that exposed their inhabitants to heavy rains, freezing wintertime conditions, and energy-sapping summer heat (see “A British Officer at the Western Front,” p. 174).



Western Front In Europe
1914-1918

End of 1914 ——— Somme Offensive 1916 ——— Ypres Offensive 1917 ——— German Offensives 1918 ——— Allied Offensives 1918

Trenches on both sides were supplemented with simple but devastating new innovations in warfare. Especially later in the war, well-established trenchworks bristled with batteries of machine guns capable of firing 500-600 rounds a minute. A defensive line armed with even just a few of these rapid-fire weapons could—and did—annihilate infantry attacks of significant size on numerous occasions.

The capacity of machine guns to blunt or even destroy enemy infantry assaults also was aided by another wartime innovation: barbed wire fencing. Originally developed by nineteenth-century American ranchers as a tool for livestock management, barbed wire was imported to Europe early in the war. It became a standard feature of defensive lines, used to slow enemy offensives and prevent smaller enemy patrols from creeping up to within grenade-throwing range.

A Terrible New Capacity for Carnage

On the whole, though, the trenches of the Western and Eastern Fronts offered limited protection against the new generation of lethal weaponry available to the armies of World War I. Infantry soldiers on both sides were equipped with fast-loading rifles that were accurate from several hundred yards, and British Expeditionary Forces members became particularly well known for their marksmanship. Armed with Lee-Enfield rifles, “they were expected to hit a target three hundred yards away fifteen times a minute, and many could double this rate of fire with almost no loss of accuracy,” wrote historian Richard Holmes. “In both precision and rapidity of fire there was simply no comparison between the magazine rifles carried by European armies on the eve of the First World War and the muskets shouldered by their grandfathers.”² In addition, both sides made effective use of rifle-wielding snipers on the Western Front and in other combat zones. These battlefield assassins claimed only a tiny fraction of the war’s total casualties, but “they played an important role in sapping enemy morale,” observed *First World War.com*. “Soldiers knew that they could not walk about freely along exposed trenches; anyone unwise enough to peep above the front line parapet could expect a well-aimed bullet in the head—as often happened.”³

Artillery fire was also more terrifying than ever before. Advances in manufacturing and science enabled weapons makers to build a new generation of big and accurate howitzers and other heavy guns that could pulverize targets as far as twenty-five miles away. The ammunition used by these guns featured



Turkish troops loading shells into a howitzer.

high-explosive shells that could shred fortifications and human flesh alike. Some shells were specifically designed to burst in the air just above the target and send deadly shrapnel in all directions. Others carried payloads designed to punish trenchworks. The targets of these extended bombardments sometimes broke down mentally under the assaults. “Day and night, the shells came upon us,” recalled one German officer. “Our dugouts crumbled. They would fall on top of us and we’d have to dig ourselves and our comrades out. Sometimes we’d find them suffocated or smashed to pulp. Soldiers in the bunkers became hysterical—they wanted to run out, and fights developed to keep them in the comparative safety of our deep bunkers. Even the rats became hysterical and came into our flimsy shelters to seek refuge from this terrific artillery fire.”⁴

As the war unfolded, battlefield strategists also became adept at using artillery bombardments as a sort of “first wave” in ground offensives. They launched moving curtains of artillery fire that steadily advanced toward enemy fortifications. Just behind this curtain of destruction moved attacking infantry forces, poised to throw grenades and fire their rifles as soon as they moved with-

in range of their stunned targets. Given this heavy overall dependence on artillery, it is little wonder that these guns became, by a great margin, the leading dispensers of death and dismemberment in the war.

Soldiers also came to harbor a terror of other war-making machinery unveiled during the Great War. British scientists introduced squat, heavily armored vehicles that moved on steel caterpillar tracks and bristled with machine guns. Initially called landships, the gas-powered behemoths soon came to be known as tanks, and they helped the Allies roll over trenches, barbed wire fences, and other obstacles that had once stymied them. The French military followed suit with tanks of their own. Both the French and the British effectively used tanks as substitutes for horse cavalry in several engagements, most notably the November 1917 Battle of Cambrai.

These primitive early tanks had many operational problems, though. Early tank models often became mired in muddy terrain, and the machines' drivers and gunners endured cramped, sweltering quarters and nauseating exposure to fumes. Germany and its allies were never able to match their foes in tank development, but in truth they never made tank research a priority. The Germans generally thought that tanks were more trouble than they were worth.

The Germans Unveil Flamethrowers and Poison Gas

On the other hand, the German military fully embraced two other military technologies that struck terror in the hearts of their enemies. The Germans first introduced flamethrowers in clashes with British troops in Flanders, Belgium, in the fall of 1914, and they made these fearsome devices a central part of their weapons arsenal the following year.

Flamethrowers were equipped with two cylindrical tanks that were worn on the operator's back, like a backpack. One tank held pressurized gas, which was used in combination with flammable oil housed in the other tank. The two tanks were connected via flexible pipe to the flamethrower's "gun," a device that included a trigger (which released the contents of the two tanks to mix together) and an ignition system to set the pressurized oil on fire. When the operator pulled the trigger, the gun nozzle released a concentrated stream of flaming oil with an effective range of about thirty yards. The flamethrower was used most often during World War I to attack soldiers hidden in deep bunkers and other strong fortifications. Many troops who were the targets of flamethrower attacks were not actually killed by the flames, however. German riflemen



A Russian trench comes under a poison gas attack from German forces.

picked off numerous enemy soldiers who came into their line of fire as they fled the horrible flames.

British and French scientists experimented with the technology, but flamethrowers never came into widespread use on the Allied side. Germany, on the other hand, carried out more than 600 flamethrower attack operations during the Great War. German operators of these terrifying machines had a short life expectancy, however. Equipment malfunctions sometimes resulted in fires that killed the operators. In addition, flamethrowers attracted extremely heavy fire from enemy soldiers, who knew that if they could puncture both tanks, the entire contraption would explode and engulf the operator in flames.

The most feared new weapon of all was poison gas (see “The Terror of Gas Warfare,” p. 179). Although French forces used tear gas in the opening months of the war, it was the German army that made poison gas a weapon of war. The Germans accomplished this grim milestone on April 22, 1915, at the Second Battle of Ypres on the Western Front. The chemical used on that occasion was chlorine gas, which causes suffocation by shutting down lung functions. Once the Germans introduced poison gas as a military weapon, the Allies followed suit and developed their own deadly chemicals for battlefield use.

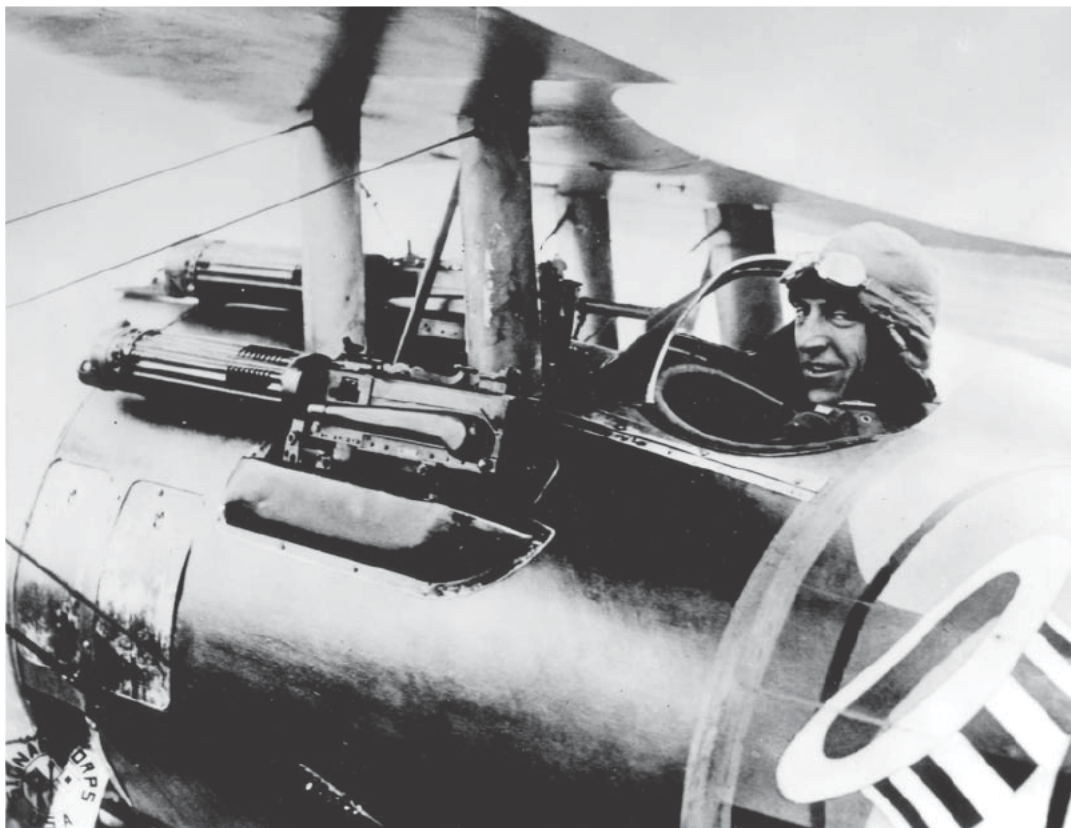
This chemical arms race produced a number of horrible poisons. One of the new weapons was mustard gas, also invented by the Germans. Mustard gas caused blindness and blistering of both the skin and internal organs when it was inhaled. Another airborne weapon was phosgene gas, which attacked the lungs even more viciously than chlorine. Unlike chlorine, phosgene did not trigger heavy bouts of coughing or other symptoms. As a result, soldiers sometimes inhaled the gas for a while before its odor became strong enough to be detected. And once phosgene infiltrated the respiratory system of a victim, there was little that could be done by doctors to alleviate his suffering. By some estimates, phosgene gas accounted for about 80 percent of all gas attack fatalities during World War I.⁵

Soldiers who inhaled poison gas could die or suffer permanent disability as a result of exposure. As a result, protective gas masks became one of the most common—and highly valued—possessions of soldiers in the trenches. When clouds of poison gas came rolling forward from enemy positions, there was nothing more terrifying to a soldier than finding that his gas mask was missing or broken. Poison gas attacks were not practical in all situations. If the wind was blowing in the wrong direction, for instance, it could not be released without endangering one's own forces. But both sides became adept at using the weather to their advantage, and they developed the capacity to deliver poison gas payloads via artillery shells (early poison gas attacks came from cylinders that had to be opened manually). Use of poison gas escalated throughout the war—the Germans alone released an estimated 68,000 tons of toxic gases during the conflict, while the French added another 35,000 tons—and it injured, blinded, or killed tens of thousands of soldiers.

Death from Above

World War I also marked the emergence of airplanes as important elements of military combat. The Wright brothers had made their historic first flight only eleven years prior to the start of the war, but innovations and advances in airplane design, engineering, and materials greatly improved the machines by the time Europe erupted in violence.

During the war's early months, aircraft were used primarily as tools for scouting enemy positions and movements. As the weeks passed by, however, they greatly expanded beyond this reconnaissance function. Both the Allied and Central Powers learned to use airplanes to drop bombs over enemy positions. Designers also figured out how to affix light machine guns to the front of planes,



Eddie Rickenbacker was America's most famous "ace" combat pilot of World War I.

enabling squadrons to strafe both enemy troops on the ground and enemy planes in the skies.

As the war dragged on, in fact, spectacular "dogfights" between enemy squadrons took place with increasing frequency. These clashes for air supremacy forced pilots to develop creative and dangerous airborne maneuvers to defeat their foes, and a handful of skilled aviators became among the most famous figures of the entire war. For the Allies, top pilots—or "aces," as they came to be called—included Frenchmen Georges Guynemer and René Fonck, Great Britain's William Bishop (from Canada) and Edward "Mick" Mannock (Ireland), and Eddie Rickenbacker of the United States. The most famous World War I flying ace, however, was Baron Manfred von Richthofen. Known around the world as the Red Baron for the red airplane he piloted, von

Richthofen shot down eighty enemy planes before he was mortally wounded in April 1918 while flying near the Somme River in northern France. He managed to land his plane without crashing but died a few minutes later, just as Allied soldiers swarmed over the downed plane.

Germany supplemented these aircraft with manned dirigible balloons that performed both reconnaissance and bombing functions. These enormous torpedo-shaped airships—also known as zeppelins after their designer, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin—were used by Germany not only to patrol strategically important areas of the North Sea and North Atlantic, but also to conduct bombing runs over cities in England.

In addition, both sides used observation balloons to track enemy movements and help direct artillery fire. Observation balloons were manned by an observer suspended below the hot-air balloon in a gondola. Armed with binoculars and wireless transmitters, he could monitor enemy activities with great accuracy. The strategic value of these observation balloons—and the fact that they were moored via ropes to a stationery position—made them frequent targets of enemy aircraft. But balloons were also outfitted with machine guns and protected by anti-aircraft artillery on the ground, and some of them were booby-trapped to explode when enemy aircraft drew within range.

The primitive tools employed by balloon observers to watch and pass along information about enemy troop movements underscore one of the most striking aspects of the entire war: although the capabilities and diversity of the weapons being used seemed to reach fearsome new levels with each passing month, the communications tools that the opposing armies used to make war remained underdeveloped. Some army units were able to use early telephone systems to communicate, but in many areas of fighting, forces relied on carrier pigeons, signal lamps, and couriers to deliver messages, just as their forefathers did.

A New Age of Naval Warfare

The Great War also brought about a revolution in naval warfare. In the years prior to the war, Germany had initiated a major shipbuilding program in an effort to close the firepower gap between its fleet and the one that cruised the oceans under the British flag. When the war began, though, Great Britain showed that its fleet of warships was still the class of Europe. British warships chased German naval vessels and merchant ships off the high seas and bottled them up in German harbors, where they sat at anchor for most of the war.



A captured German U-Boat grounded on the south coast of England.

Germany's only major bid to break free of Britain's stranglehold over the surface waters of the North Atlantic and North Sea came on May 31, 1916. On that day, the German "High Seas Fleet" of destroyers, dreadnaughts, and battle cruisers burst through the British blockade and onto the North Sea, where they confronted Britain's "Grand Fleet," known for decades as the world's mightiest armada. The two fleets clashed off the coast of Denmark in what came to be known as the Battle of Jutland. The titanic showdown featured more than 150 warships, two dozen of which were lost. The Germans actually lost fewer ships (11) and sailors (2,500) than the British, who lost 14 ships and more than 6,000 men. But many other German vessels suffered extensive damage, and the British had greater numbers to begin with. The Grand Fleet thus succeeded in

forcing the German ships back to their ports, where they remained until the end of the war.

Germany had other naval resources, though. When its destroyers and cargo ships were blockaded by the Allies, German military commanders retaliated with *Unterseebooten*—undersea boats. These “U-boat” submarines prowled the ocean depths armed to the teeth with torpedoes capable of sinking merchant ships, passenger liners, and destroyers alike. And as the war progressed, German subs sank all of these vessels with a ruthless efficiency that horrified people around the world.

German commanders and officials said that they were justified in attacking any vessel—including merchant ships and passenger liners—that carried war supplies to the British Isles, which the Germans classified as a war zone, or other Allied nations. As the war progressed, the Germans began torpedoing ships without warning, in clear violation of international agreements that required combatants to provide for the safety of innocent passengers and crew even in wartime. The subsequent surge in deaths of civilians at sea outraged not only Allied nations, but also neutral countries, many of which condemned Germany’s “monstrous” U-boat engagement policies. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States, for example, insisted that American neutrality in the Great War meant that Americans ought to be able to continue traveling and conducting business wherever they chose, without worrying about attacks from German U-boats.

German submarines sent hundreds of ships to the bottom of the ocean during the course of the war, but two particular attacks threatened to push America into joining the Allies. On May 7, 1915, a German U-boat cruising the North Atlantic sank the luxury liner *Lusitania*. The attack killed 1,201 passengers and crew, including 128 Americans. Ten months later, on March 24, 1916, a German sub torpedoed the French passenger ferry *Sussex*. The *Sussex* managed to make it to shore, but the attack still killed 50 passengers.

The American public responded so angrily to these events that Germany became concerned that the United States might drop its pledge of neutrality and join the Allies. In May 1916 the Germans pledged to stop targeting passenger ships and only sink merchant ships carrying proven shipments of military weapons to the Allies. This proof would be established through forcible seizures and searches of vessels, if necessary. They also promised to clear innocent passengers and crew from harm before sinking ships carrying military goods for

Germany's enemies. In early 1917, though, the Germans cast these restrictions aside. They calculated that ruthless submarine attacks might help lift them to victory before the United States could get involved in the war.

A Year of Setbacks for the Allies

The Allies could have used America's help in 1915. On the Western Front, the war remained mired in stalemate, despite several Allied efforts that year to burst through the German defenses, reclaim lost French territory, and liberate Belgium from German occupation. The first of these Allied campaigns was the March 10-13 Battle of Neuve-Chapelle in northwest France. Although this offensive began promisingly for British general Douglas Haig and the joint British-Indian infantry under his command, the effort ground to a halt after advancing only about two kilometers. The price for those two kilometers of territory was severe—more than 11,000 casualties (the Germans suffered similar losses).

In September the Allies launched a multi-pronged offensive designed to break the back of the German defenses arrayed along the northern France section of the Western Front. British-led forces attacked the enemy-held town of Loos at the same time that French troops pushed against German positions in the Champagne region. This joint offensive was preceded by the Allies' first use of poison gas against enemy positions. Around Loos, however, the wind shifted and actually pushed the gas back into the British lines, where it disabled more than 2,000 soldiers. An even bigger problem for the joint French-Anglo offensive was that shortages of artillery made it difficult for them to clear the gap between the opposing armies—No Man's Land—of barbed wire and other obstacles. As a result, Allied infantry advances proceeded very slowly. This halting progress gave German machine gunners, artillery, and riflemen ample opportunity to mow down the approaching soldiers.

The Allies continued to press forward in a desperate effort to claim a decisive victory, but to no avail. German defenses stiffened thanks to the arrival of reinforcements, and neither the British nor the French were able to make a game-changing breakthrough. The Allies finally called the offensive off in November, after making only minimal territorial gains. The cost of securing these broken strips of land was immense. Combined losses in the French and British armies exceeded 250,000 dead or wounded. The heavily fortified German lines, on the other hand, experienced comparatively few casualties. Still, the autumn fighting in northern France resulted in the death, wounding, or cap-

H.G. Wells Issues a Dire Warning

The famed English author H.G. Wells is best known for writing visionary science fiction novels like *The Time Machine* (1895), *Invisible Man* (1897), and *War of the Worlds* (1898). He also was an influential social critic, though, and he wrote frequently on European politics, cultural trends, and world events. When World War I broke out, Wells was stunned by the power of the weapons that were being used—and the ruthlessness with which both the Allied Powers and the Central Powers approached the war. In his essay “Civilization at the Breaking Point,” published in the *New York Times* in May 1915, Wells asserted that unless nations united into a single world government capable of reducing nationalistic tensions, these frightening new military technologies would destroy the planet:

What the submarine and aircraft make manifest and convincing is this point ... that if the human intelligence is applied continuously to the mechanism of war it will steadily develop destructive powers, but that it will fail to develop any corresponding power of decision and settlement.... It will therefore progressively make war more catastrophic and less definitive....

ture of more than 100,000 German troops. The fall 1915 offensive was so painful and disappointing to the Allies that it resulted in a change of leadership at the top of the British military. Haig stepped in to replace Sir John French as head of the British Expeditionary Force in December.

The news was just as bad for the Allies in the war's other theatres. On the Eastern Front, Russian forces were manhandled by German and Austrian forces in clash after clash. The Russians were forced out of both Poland and Galicia, which they had seized in the war's opening months. Even worse, Russian forces were suffering appalling casualty rates that steadily eroded public support for the war. By the end of 1915, the Russians had suffered about four million casualties. This total was kept hidden from Russian soldiers and civilians, but they were not fooled. The Great War had turned into an ongoing disaster for the Russian people, and there was no telling how much longer they would be willing to throw their young men into the conflict's bloody maw.

With every failure to accomplish your end by violent means you are forced to further outrages. Violence has no reserves, but further violence. Each failure of the violent is met by the desperate cry, the heroic scream: "We will not be beaten. If you will not give in to us for this much, then see! We will go further." Wars always do go further. Wars always end more savagely than they begin.... When [the German] finds he cannot march gloriously into Paris or Warsaw, then and only then does he begin to try to damage Paris and Warsaw with bombs; when he finds he cannot beat the French army and the British fleet, then and not till then does he attack and murder the slumbering civilians of Scarborough and Dunkirk, and lie in wait for and sink the *Lusitania*.... Probably at the beginning of the war he was quite a decent man. But once he was committed to war the fatal logic of our new resources in science laid hold of him. And war is war.

Source

Wells, H. G. "Civilization at the Breaking Point: Man's Increasing Power of Destruction, Unchecked, Will Overwhelm Hope, Beauty, and Freedom in the World." *New York Times*, May 27, 1915.

Elsewhere in Europe, Italy decided to join the Allies in April 1915. But when Italian forces attacked Austrian positions along the Austria-Italy border, the Austrians easily repulsed them—and wreaked massive damage on Italian divisions in the process. Meanwhile, on October 15 the country of Bulgaria cast off its cloak of neutrality to side with the Central Powers, in part because of its longstanding tensions with neighboring Serbia. A few weeks later, Bulgarian troops joined German and Austrian forces in an invasion of Serbia. Their offensive rolled over most Serbian army units, and pockets of Serb resistance were quickly stomped out by the invaders.

The Gallipoli Campaign

The other major blow that staggered the Allies in 1915 was the Gallipoli Campaign. In late 1914 and early 1915 the Allies devised a plan to attack Turkey—one of Germany's two main partners in the war, along with Austria—

and open a third front in the war. The idea was to force Germany to send troops and weaponry south to Turkey, thereby weakening German lines on the Western and Eastern Fronts. If these lines became sufficiently thin, British, French, and Russian forces could finally overwhelm the German defenses and end the war. Allied forces also hoped that capturing Gallipoli would open a pathway to the Turkish capital of Constantinople (now known as Istanbul). If they could capture Constantinople, they could knock Turkey out of the war, which would put enormous additional pressure on Germany's political and military leadership.

On the evening of April 24, 1915, an Allied military force featuring soldiers from France, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom began an amphibious assault on Gallipoli. This peninsula in far southern Turkey jutted out into the Strait of Dardanelles, a strategically important waterway between Russia's Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. The landing was doomed from the start, however, due to poor planning and insufficient respect for the Ottoman army, which was determined to defend its homeland.

The single greatest problem with the invasion of Gallipoli was that the planners did not adequately account for the Turkish army's command of the cliffs overlooking the shore where the Allies landed. When the Allies approached the beach and began landing, they absorbed terrific punishment from Turkish artillery positions atop the cliffs. "As soon as they hit the beach, they had nowhere to go," said military historian Jay Winter. "The idea that they would land and go straight up to the positions where the guns were, and then allow a force to basically occupy Gallipoli, was hopeless. And there was no cover for the men.... The shock of recognizing that this would not be an easy operation took very little time to settle in to the men who were on the beaches. It took a lot longer to settle in to their commanders who still believed that they could do it, and, basically, wasted 200,000 men trying to do the impossible."⁶

The battle for control of Gallipoli dragged on through a hot, disease-ridden summer that was marked by several bloody but inconclusive clashes. During this period Ottoman commanders became notorious for their willingness to sacrifice their men if it gave them even the slightest advantage against the enemy. The most infamous example of this phenomenon came when an Ottoman general ordered a full-scale assault by one of his regiments, even though they were nearly out of ammunition. "I am not giving you an order to attack," he bellowed. "I am ordering you to die."⁷

When the stalemate continued through the fall, the Allies finally decided to withdraw. The evacuation began in December 1915 and ended a month later. Turkey lost an estimated 300,000 troops during the campaign, nearly 85,000 more than the total suffered by the Allies. But Gallipoli was accurately seen as a big victory for the Central Powers, and it triggered a political crisis back in London. British prime minister Herbert Asquith never regained his political footing after Gallipoli, and in December 1916 he was replaced by David Lloyd George (see biography, p. 133).

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in Holmes, Richard. *The Western Front: Ordinary Soldiers and the Defining Battles of World War I*. New York: TV Books, 1999, p. 103.
- ² Holmes, pp. 25-26.
- ³ "Weapons of War—Rifles." First World War.com, August 22, 2009. Retrieved from <http://www.firstworldwar.com/weaponry/rifles.htm>.
- ⁴ Quoted in Arthur, Max. *Forgotten Voices of the Great War*. Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2004, p. 153.
- ⁵ Croddy, Eric A. "Choking Agents." In *Weapons of Mass Destruction: An Encyclopedia of Worldwide Policy, Technology, and History*. Croddy, Eric A., and James J. Wirtz, eds. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005, p. 102.
- ⁶ Quoted in "Gallipoli: An Intelligence Screw-Up." *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*. PBS, 2006. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist_winter_07_gallipoli.html.
- ⁷ Quoted in England, Peter. *The Beauty and the Sorrow: An Intimate History of the First World War*. New York: Knopf, 2011, p. 116.

Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1918)
Emperor of Russia during World War I

Nikolai “Nicholas” Aleksandrovich Romanov was born near St Petersburg, Russia, on May 18, 1868. He was the eldest son of Empress Maria Alexandrovna and Tsar Alexander III, a member of the Romanov Dynasty that had ruled imperial Russia since 1613. Alexander III ascended to the throne in 1881 after his own father (and Nicholas II’s grandfather), Alexander II, was assassinated by political radicals in Russia.

Nicholas received a fine private education that gave him an understanding of everything from Russian history and fine art to military strategy. He was not particularly intellectually curious, however, and security concerns limited his social circle to fellow members of European royalty. As a result, his upbringing was a strangely isolated one that gave him little concept of the lives of average Russians, or the social, intellectual, political, and artistic currents of late-nineteenth century Europe.



A Controversial Bride

Tsar Alexander III fell ill from kidney disease in 1894, and on November 1 of that year he died, leaving twenty-six-year-old Nicholas II as the new emperor of the Russian Empire (other titles transferred to the young emperor included King of Poland and Grand Duke of Finland). Less than one month later, Nicholas II married Princess Alix of Hesse, a strong-willed German princess. They would eventually have five children—four daughters and a single son, Alexei. As the tsar’s only son, Alexei was heir to the throne. The boy suffered from a serious blood disease known as hemophilia, however, and his frailty cast a long shadow over the royal family.

Nicholas II’s rule was troubled from the outset. Historians generally believe that he felt overwhelmed by his responsibilities as emperor. His personal insecurities, however, made it difficult for him to trust or rely on advisors or other government officials who might have helped him shoulder the burden of

rule over the vast Russian Empire. Even the tsar's most loyal ministers had little influence. Instead, Nicholas II hoarded power for himself and resisted political and social reforms that would have given Russians more freedoms.

The tsar also relied almost entirely on his wife for advice and encouragement. This gradually became a big political problem for the tsar. As a condition of becoming empress, his wife had converted to the Russian Orthodox faith—and adopted the Russian name of Alexandra Feodorovna at the same time. But the Russian people never warmed to the idea of having a German princess as the tsar's wife. Instead, the relationship between Alexandra and the Russian public—including affluent, educated members of Russian society—worsened with each passing year. She made little effort to disguise her low opinion of the people her husband ruled.

In the meantime, Russians of every class were scandalized by the emergence of the mysterious “holy man” Grigori Rasputin as the Royal Family's chief advisor. Alexandra was fiercely devoted to Rasputin because of his apparent success in treating Alexei's hemophilia. Once Rasputin became established as chief spiritual advisor to the monarchy, though, stories began flying around about his depraved sexual appetites and his unhealthy influence over the royal family.

Cracks in the Wall of Empire

The first several years of Nicholas II's rule were relatively quiet, but in 1904–1905 Russia was soundly defeated by imperial Japan in a war over influence and territory in eastern Asia. The Russian army suffered an estimated 400,000 casualties in the conflict, known as the Russo-Japanese War, and the empire's naval fleet was almost completely destroyed at the May 1905 Battle of Tsushima.

The year 1905 also saw an explosive upsurge in worker strikes, military mutinies, and other demonstrations of civil unrest across Russia. Nicholas II attempted to stamp out the so-called Revolution of 1905 through intimidation and violence, but the demands for social, political, and economic reforms continued to grow. Desperate to ward off what had become a real threat to his rule, the tsar finally agreed to a series of political reforms. These included establishing a parliament known as the Duma and approving an October 1906 “manifesto” that expanded the political rights and freedoms of Russian citizens.

The tsar's concessions kept the monarchy intact, but they failed to quell unrest among the Russian people. Nicholas II and his generals became partic-

ularly concerned about radical workers called Bolsheviks who urged a revolutionary overthrow of the government. The tsar's security forces were able to chase Bolshevik leaders like Vladimir Lenin into exile, but the movement remained a simmering threat to the throne.

The Tsar and the Great War

The outbreak of World War I in August 1914 shook the Russian monarchy to its core. When efforts by Nicholas II and other European leaders to avoid war fell short, Russian forces marched westward into Germany, the greatest of the Central Powers. In the late August Battle of Tannenberg, however, the Russian army suffered a devastating defeat at German hands. The Russians retreated back to their own territory. They spent the next three years engaged in brutal and exhausting combat against German, Austrian, and Turkish forces.

In September 1915 Alexandra convinced Nicholas II to dismiss Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolayevich—his uncle—from his position as commander of the Russian armies. To the great dismay of Nicholas II's royal advisors, the tsar then appointed himself as commander and promptly departed for the Eastern Front. This sequence of events marked the beginning of the end for the Romanov Dynasty and the Russian Empire. Nicholas II did not possess the leadership skills or military instincts to be an effective general. In addition, the tsar's status as supreme commander increasingly led Russian civilians and soldiers to blame him—not his generals—for the massive casualties Russia was incurring at the front.

Worst of all, Nicholas II's extended absences from the Russian capital of St. Petersburg (known as Petrograd during the war and Leningrad during Russia's Soviet era) left Alexandra in charge of the home front. She spent most of her time bickering with advisors and political enemies, even as shortages of food and coal and anger over the war's mounting death toll continued to intensify. In December 1916 assassins killed Rasputin, who many Russians had come to believe was a German spy.

In February 1917 Nicholas II's shaky grip on the Russian Empire was shattered by a fresh wave of civil unrest in the capital. When the tsar was informed of the riots, he instructed military authorities to put down the rebellion and arrest the instigators. After a brief flurry of attacks on the demonstrators by loyal troops, however, entire regiments of disillusioned Russian officers and soldiers joined the revolutionaries. This turn of events made it clear that Nicholas II had

lost the support of the Russian army, which for many years had been the only thing standing between the monarchy and the Bolsheviks.

Executions of the Tsar and His Family

On March 15, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II stepped down as emperor under heavy pressure from Russia's generals, who warned him that they could no longer protect him and his family from the wrath of the revolutionaries. As Russian generals and officials tried to establish a new temporary government, they sent the tsar and his family to a remote castle in the Ural Mountains. Though far removed from the capital, the new surroundings were quite comfortable, and servants remained at the beck and call of the royal family.

In October 1917, however, Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd. Over the next several months the pampering of the royal family came to an end. Most of their servants were taken away and they were shipped around to a number of secret locations in the Russian backcountry. By the spring of 1918 they were being held in a home in Yekaterinburg on the eastern side of the Urals in Siberia. On July 17, 1918, Nicholas II and his entire family were executed in the cellar of the house. The Bolsheviks later stated that the executions were carried out to prevent forces loyal to the tsar from rescuing him, and to punish Nicholas II for numerous crimes against the Russian people.

For decades the exact burial location of Nicholas II and his family remained a mystery. In 1979, however, the remains of the tsar, his wife, and three of his daughters were discovered outside of Yekaterinburg, and in 2007 the remains of his other daughter and his son were found. DNA testing conducted over the years has confirmed the identity of all family members, and their remains are now interred at Saint Peter and Paul's Cathedral in St. Petersburg.

Today, Tsar Nicholas II is remembered by historians as a tragic figure. "He was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, in the wrong job," said historian Jay Winter. "He never wanted to be Tsar, he never wanted to lead the country, he never wanted to lead the army. He was a private man, intensely religious, utterly devoted to his family, and never had a chance to do any of that because of the nature of the regime: absolute monarchy has the terrible curse of having to live with the people who are born into it."¹

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Note

- ¹ Quoted in "Tsar Nicholas of Russia." *The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*. PBS, 1996. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist_winter_04_tsar.html.

A British Officer at the Western Front

One of the best-known writers about World War I was Siegfried Sassoon, a novelist and poet who became a young British infantry officer during the war (his brother Hamo was killed at Gallipoli). Sent to France in November 1915, Sassoon became a decorated war hero during his time at the front. Eyewitness accounts suggested that Sassoon's bravery in the face of the enemy often verged on the suicidal. In 1917 Sassoon publicly spoke out against the war while in England recovering from battle wounds. After receiving treatment for shell-shock, though, he returned to active military service in France. He was wounded again, and spent the last months of the war in England.

*Once the Great War ended, Sassoon resumed his career as a writer and editor. He composed several famous poems about the war, as well as a thinly fictionalized autobiography of his war experiences called *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930). In the following excerpt from *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Sassoon relates his experiences in Allied trenchworks near St. Martin, a war-blasted village in northern France.*

We took over an old German reserve trench (captured on Easter Monday). Company Headquarters was a sort of rabbit-hole, just wide enough to accommodate Leake, a tiny stove, and myself. Leake occupied himself in enlarging it with a rusty entrenching tool. When dusk was falling I went out to the underground dressing-station to get my festering fingers attended to. I felt an interloper, for the place was crowded with groaning wounded. As I made my way back to our trench a few shells exploded among the ruinous remains of brickwork. All this, I thought, is disgustingly unpleasant, but it doesn't really count as war experience. I knew that if I could get the better of my physical discomforts I should find the War intensely interesting. B Company hadn't arrived at the groaning stage yet; in fact, they were grimly cheerful, though they'd only had one meal that day and the next was to-morrow morning. Leake and I had one small slice of ration bacon between us; I was frizzling my fragment when it fell off the fork and disappeared into the stove. Regardless of my unfortunate fingers I retrieved and ate it with great relish.

The night was cold and sleep impossible, since there was no space to lie down in. Leake, however, had a talent for falling asleep in any position. Chiselling away at the walls by candlelight, I kept myself warm, and in a couple of hours I had scooped out sufficient space for the other two officers....

On Saturday afternoon the order to move up took us by surprise. Two days of stagnation in the cramped little trench had relaxed expectancy, which now renewed itself in our compact preparations for departure. As usual on such occasions, the Company-Sergeant-Major was busier than anybody else. I have probably said so before, but it cannot be too often repeated that C.S.M.s were the hardest worked men in the infantry; everything depended on them, and if anyone deserved a K.C.B. [Knight Commander of the Bath, a British military honor] it was a good C.S.M.

At 9 p.m. the Company fell in at the top of the ruined street of St. Martin. Two guides from the outgoing battalion awaited us. We were to relieve some Northumberland Fusiliers in the Hindenburg Trench—the companies going up independently.

It was a grey evening, dry and windless. The village of St. Martin was a shattered relic; but even in the devastated area one could be conscious of the arrival of spring, and as I took up my position in the rear of the moving column there was something in the sober twilight which could remind me of April evenings in England and the Butley cricket field where a few of us had been having our first knock at the nets. The cricket season had begun.... But the Company had left the shell-pitted road and was going uphill across open ground. Already the guides were making the pace too hot for the rear platoon; like most guides they were inconveniently nimble owing to their freedom from accoutrement [gear], and insecurely confident that they knew the way. The muttered message “pass it along—steady the pace in front” was accompanied by the usual muffled clinkings and rattlings of arms and equipment. Unwillingly retarded, the guides led us into the deepening dusk. We hadn’t more than two miles to go, but gradually the guides grew less authoritative. Leake fussed and fumed and they became more and more flurried. I began to suspect that our progress was circular.

At a midnight halt the hill still loomed in front of us; the guides confessed that they had lost their way, and Leake decided to sit down and wait for daylight. (There were few things more uncomfortable in the life of an officer than to be walking in front of a party of men all of whom knew that he was leading them in the wrong direction). With Leake’s permission I blundered experimentally into the gloom, fully expecting to lose both myself and the Company. By a lucky accident, I soon fell headlong into a sunken road and found myself among a small party of Sappers [military engineers who construct bridges, trenches, and listening posts at the front] who could tell me where I was. It was a case of “Please, can you tell me the way to the Hindenburg Trench?” Congratulating myself on

my cleverness, I took one of the Sappers back to poor benighted B Company, and we were led to our Battalion rendezvous....

We were at the end of a journey which had begun twelve days before, when we started from Camp 13. Stage by stage, we had marched to the life-denying region which from far away had threatened us with the blink and growl of its bombardments. Now we were groping and stumbling along a deep ditch to the place appointed for us in that zone of inhuman havoc. There must have been some hazy moonlight, for I remember the figures of men huddled against the sides of communication trenches; seeing them in some sort of ghastly glimmer—(was it, perhaps, the diffused whiteness of a sinking flare beyond the ridge?). I was doubtful whether they were asleep or dead, for the attitudes [positions] of many were like death, grotesque and distorted. But this is nothing new to write about, you will say; just a weary company, squeezing past dead or drowsing men while it sloshes and stumbles to a front line trench. Nevertheless that night relief had its significance for me, though in human experience it had been multiplied a millionfold. I, a single human being with my little stock of earthly experience in my head, was entering once again the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon. And I saw it then, as I see it now—a dreadful place, a place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented. Also it was a place where a man of strong spirit might know himself utterly powerless against death and destruction, and yet stand up and defy gross darkness and stupefying shell-fire, discovering in himself the invincible resistance of an animal or an insect, and an endurance which he might, in after days, forget or disbelieve....

It was nearly four o'clock [in the morning] when we found ourselves in the Hindenburg Main Trench. After telling me to post the sentries, Leake disappeared down some stairs to the Tunnel (which will be described later on). The Company we were relieving had already departed, so there was no one to give me any information. At first I didn't even know for certain that we were in the front line. The trench was a sort of gully, deep, wide, and unfinished looking. The sentries had to clamber up a bank of loose earth before they could see over the top. Our Company was only about eighty strong and its sector was fully 600 yards. The distance between the sentry-posts made me aware of our inadequacy in that wilderness. I had no right to feel homeless, but I did....

When I had posted the exhausted sentries, with as much cheeriness as I could muster, I went along to look for the Company on our left. Rather expecting to find one of our own companies, I came round a corner to a place where

the trench was unusually wide. There I found myself among a sort of panic party which I was able to identify as a platoon (thirty or forty strong). They were jostling one another in their haste to get through a cavernous doorway, and as I stood astonished one of them breathlessly told me that “the Germans were coming over.” Two officers were shepherding them downstairs and before I’d had time to think the whole lot had vanished. The Battalion they belonged to was one of those amateur ones which were at such a disadvantage owing to lack of discipline and the absence of trained N.C.O.s [noncommissioned officers]. Anyhow their behaviour seemed to indicate that the Tunnel in the Hindenburg Trench was having a lowering effect on their *morale*.

Out in No Man’s Land there was no sign of any German activity. The only remarkable thing was the unbroken silence. I was in a sort of twilight, for there was a moony glimmer in the low-clouded sky; but the unknown territory in front was dark, and I stared at it like a man looking from the side of a ship....

By ten o’clock I was above ground again, in charge of a fatigue party [a group of soldiers carrying out ordinary noncombat duties]. We went half-way back to St. Martin, to an ammunition dump, whence we carried up boxes of trench mortar bombs. I carried a box myself, as the conditions were vile and it seemed the only method of convincing the men that it had to be done. We were out nearly seven hours; it rained all day and the trenches were a morass of glue-like mud. The unmitigated misery of that carrying-party was a typical infantry experience of discomfort without actual danger. Even if the ground had been dry the boxes would have been too heavy for most of the men; but we were lucky in one way; the set weather was causing the artillery to spend an inactive Sunday. It was a yellow corpse-like day, more like November than April, and the landscape was desolate and treeless. What we were doing was quite unexceptional; millions of soldiers endured the same sort of thing and got badly shelled into the bargain. Nevertheless I can believe that my party, staggering and floundering under its loads, would have made an impressive picture of “Despair.” The background, too, was appropriate. We were among the debris of the intense bombardment of ten days before, for we were passing along and across the Hindenburg Outpost Trench, with its belt of wire (fifty yards deep in places); here and there these rusty jungles had been flattened by tanks. The Outpost Trench was about 200 yards from the Main Trench, which was now our front line. It had been solidly made, ten feet deep, with timbered firesteps, splayed sides, and timbered steps at intervals to front and rear and to machine-gun emplacements. Now it was wrecked as though by earthquake and eruption. Concrete strong-posts were smashed and

tilted sideways; everywhere the chalky soil was pocked and pitted with huge shell-holes; and wherever we looked the mangled effigies of the dead were our *memento mori* [a Latin phrase that translates to “reminder of death or mortality”]. Shell-twisted and dismembered, the Germans maintained the violent attitudes in which they had died. The British had mostly been killed by bullets or bombs, so they looked more resigned. But I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing at the sky with an accusing gesture. Each time I passed that place the protest of those fingers became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the War. Who made the War? I laughed hysterically as the thought passed through my mud-stained mind. But I only laughed mentally, for my box of Stokes-gun ammunition left me no breath to spare for an angry guffaw. And the dead were the dead; this was no time to be pitying them or asking silly questions about their outraged lives. Such sights must be taken for granted, I thought, as I gasped and slithered and stumbled with my disconsolate crew. Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull.

Source

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IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Allies

Group name for the countries, led by Britain, France, and Russia, that opposed the Central Powers in World War I.

Armaments

Weapons.

Armistice

A truce or cease-fire agreement.

Asquith, Herbert Henry (1852-1928)

British prime minister from 1908 to 1916.

Blighty wound

A wound incurred in battle that was severe enough to send a soldier home to recover, but not so severe that it was life-threatening or crippling.

Bolsheviks

Communist revolutionaries who overthrew Russia's Tsar Nicholas II in 1917.

Brest-Litovsk, Treaty of

March 1918 treaty that ended hostilities between Russia and Germany.

Casualties

People who are killed, are wounded, are taken prisoner, or disappear during wartime.

Central Powers

Group name for Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria during World War I.

Conscription

Compulsory enlistment in military service; also known as a military draft.

CHRONOLOGY

1870-1871

The Franco-Prussian War ends in a decisive French defeat and the establishment of the German Empire through the union of Prussia and other Germanic states.

1888

Wilhelm II succeeds his father as kaiser of Germany.

1894

Nicholas II ascends the throne in Russia.

1914

June 28 – Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary is assassinated in Sarajevo by Serbian revolutionaries.

July 28 – Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.

July 31 – Russia begins full mobilization of its armed forces.

August 1 – Germany declares war on Russia and begins full military mobilization.

August 3 – Germany declares war on France.

August 4 – Germany declares war on Belgium and launches a military invasion into Belgian territory.

August 4 – Great Britain declares war on Germany in retaliation for its invasion of Belgium.

August 6 – Austria-Hungary declares war on Russia.

August 16 – German forces take the Belgian city of Liege.

August 26-30 – German forces win the Battle of Tannenberg over Russian troops on the Eastern Front.

September 5-12 – French defenses push back the German army at the Battle of the Marne.

December 25 – British and German troops stationed at various points along the Western Front arrange Christmas truces among themselves.

1915

February – Germany begins policy of “unrestricted submarine warfare” in the North Atlantic.

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