



# 3

# WORLD WAR I AND TOTAL WAR



As you read through this chapter, consider the following essay questions:

- In what ways can World War I be considered a total war?
- Why were the Central Powers defeated in World War I?
- Why did World War I last so long?

## Breakdown of events in World War I – 1914–18

	General	Western Front	Eastern Front	War at Sea	War in the Air	Africa and Asia
1914	Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand  Outbreak of general war  Japan enters war  Turkey enters war	Schlieffen Plan – German invasion of Belgium  First Battle of Marne  First Battle of Ypres  Christmas 'truce'	Austrian invasion of Serbia  Russian invasion of Germany  Battles of Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes  Austrian invasion of Russia	British blockade  Battles of Heligoland, Falkland Islands and Coronel	Bombardment of British towns by Zeppelins	Conquest of German Togoland and possessions in the Pacific
1915	Italy joins the war on side of Allies  Bulgaria joins on side of Central Powers	Battle of Neuve Chapelle  Second battle of Ypres (gas used)  Battle of Loos  Battles on the Isonzo between Italy and Austria	Defeat of Serbia  Gallipoli campaign  Defeat of Russia in Galicia	U-boat warfare  <i>Lusitania</i> sunk	Zeppelin raids on Britain	Conquest of German SW Africa
1916	Portugal and Romania join on the side of the Allies	Battle of Verdun  Battle of the Somme	End of Gallipoli campaign  Brusilov's breakthrough	Battle of Jutland	Machine guns are by now standard fittings on fighters	Arab revolt in Turkey  Surrender of German Cameroon
1917	USA and Greece join war on side of Allies	Nivelle offensive  French mutinies  Battles of Vimy Ridge and Arras  Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele)  Battle of Cambrai Italians driven back at Caporetto	Russian Revolution – Tsar abdicates  Russian armistice	Unrestricted U-boat warfare  British convoy system established	Air superiority shifts from the Germans to the Allies	British capture of Baghdad  Allenby's campaign
1918	US troops arrive in Europe  Abdication of Kaiser	Ludendorff Offensive  Allied counter-offensive  Armistice signed	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk  Surrender of Bulgaria, Turkey and Austria	Naval mutiny in Germany	British attack on Zeebrugge	Surrender of Turkey

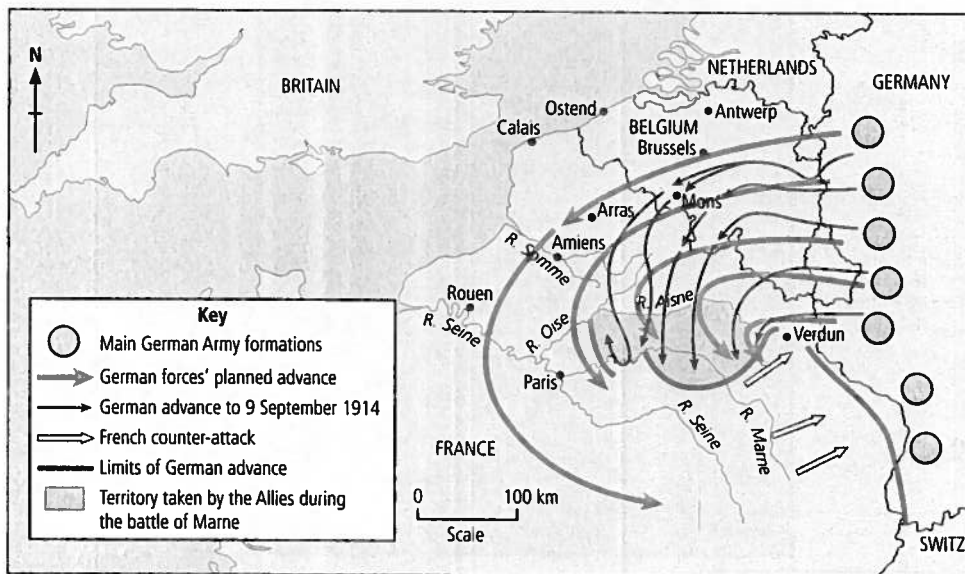
War fever gripped the populations of Europe; many felt the war to be just and necessary and all felt that the war would be short and that soldiers would be home by Christmas. Unfortunately, the quick and glorious victories that were expected did not take place. The war was to last for four long years, during which time the fighting took place on several 'fronts'. The most important of these fronts is known as the Western Front, and this stretched 320km from the English Channel to the Swiss Alps. Fighting also took place on Germany's Eastern Front involving both Austria-Hungary and Russia, and both sides continued to hope that they would be able to break through on one of the other 'diversionary' fronts that existed in the Balkans, in Italy and in the Middle East.

## Overview of the war: Western Front

Following the declarations of war in July and August 1914, governments made their opening moves: Austria-Hungary opened fire on Serbia, Russia mobilized its troops, Britain prepared its British Expeditionary Force (the BEF) and Germany put its Schlieffen Plan into action.

### The failure of the Schlieffen Plan

The wars of German unification had convinced strategists at the beginning of the 20th century that future wars would be short and that rapid mobilization and a strong opening attack would be the key elements necessary for victory. Von Schlieffen's war plan for Germany followed these assumptions. Dealing with Germany's nightmare scenario of a two-front war, he decided to use the bulk of German forces to win a speedy victory over France, after which they could be transferred to the east to deal with the Tsar's armies. Specifically, his plan required the German armies to sweep through into northern France via neutral Belgium and then advance to the west of Paris, finally swinging back eastwards to defeat the main French forces, which would still be defending the German border. German troops would then be free to move to the Eastern Front to confront the Russian Army which, given the size of the army and the country, would only just have mobilized.



Map showing the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, 1914.

There were several key reasons for the failure of the Schlieffen Plan:

- Belgian resistance was unexpectedly strong and it took the Germans more than two weeks to capture Brussels, the Belgian capital.

**German war aims**

German war aims in 1914 were very comprehensive. In the September Memorandum of 9 September, Bethmann-Hollweg promised 'security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time', and this was to be done through a combination of territorial expansion and economic control. In Africa, for instance, French, Belgian and Portuguese colonies would be incorporated into a Central Africa economic region – *Mittelafrika*. In Europe, Germany would have indirect control over much of Europe through a customs union, which would include Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Poland. Parts of Belgium, France and Luxembourg would be directly annexed and Russia would have to provide some level of self-determination to nationalities such as the Poles. (Poland had been part of Russia since the 18th century.) Britain's economic supremacy would be weakened by Germany's naval command of key international routes, as well as by Germany's economic domination of Africa and Europe. Such comprehensive aims increased the determination of both sides to fight for total victory, and they made a compromise peace difficult to achieve.

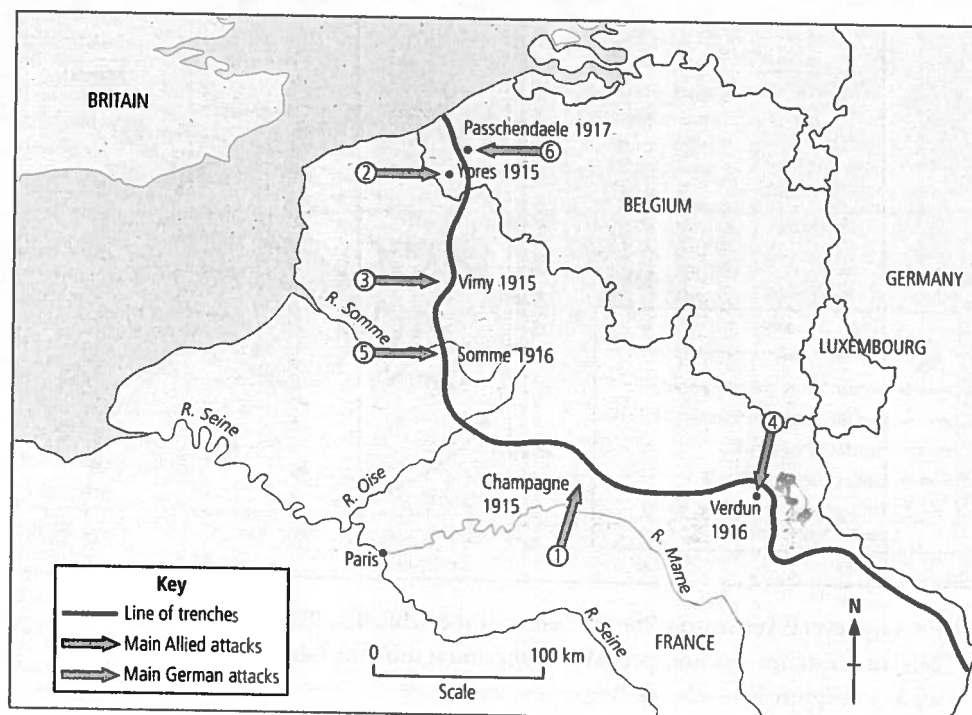
Trench line of the Western Front, with key battles, 1915–17.

- The attack on Belgium also brought Britain, who was a guarantor of Belgian neutrality through the 1839 Treaty of London, into the war.
- The German delay in getting through Belgium gave the British time to organize themselves and left the Channel ports free, enabling the BEF to land.
- The German forces marching to Paris were weakened by the deployment of some of their troops to the east (where Russia had mobilized faster than expected), and by the difficulties of maintaining supplies. Thus instead of approaching Paris from the west, the Germans swept down too early, making for Paris from the east of the city.
- In Paris, **reservists** were sent to meet the Germans via taxis in the famous 'taxis of the Marne'; the Germans, slowed down by exhaustion and a lack of food and ammunition, were halted by British and French troops at the battle of the Marne on 9 September.

The 'miracle of the Marne' marked the failure of the Schlieffen Plan and ensured that there would be no short war. Indeed, the battle of the Marne was followed by a 'race to the sea', as each side tried to outflank the other army in order to get behind them and cut them off. This race eventually resulted in the building of a continuous series of trenches stretching from the Alps to the Channel coast, and it was these trenches that determined the type of warfare that was to exist for the whole of the war along the Western Front. The failures of both the British and the Germans to break through at Ypres in November 1914, and then the failure of the French to break through at Artois and Champagne in December, meant that a stalemate situation was in place by the end of 1914.

## 1915: stalemate

In 1915, the stalemate continued on the Western Front. Several attempts were made to break this situation, but they all failed: the British tried at Neuve Chapelle and Loos, the French lost thousands of men in an unsuccessful offensive in Champagne, and the Germans were driven back from Ypres in April. It was at this second battle of Ypres that poison gas was first used by the Germans, and although it was initially effective in clearing the British trenches, the gas also prevented the Germans from making any progress, and the attack was halted.





## 1916: Verdun and the Somme

The two key battles of 1916 were those at Verdun and the Somme – both failed to achieve their aims and both were horrific in terms of loss of life.

### Verdun

In February 1916, the Germans launched a massive attack against an important French fortress town, Verdun. The German commander, Erich von Falkenhayn, set out his plans:

*Just behind the French lines on the Western Front there are objectives which the French command must defend to the last man. If it so defends them the French army will be exhausted by its bloody losses in the inevitable combat, regardless of whether or not we win the objectives immediately. If, on the other hand, it lets them go, the damage to French morale will be enormous... The essential question is not to take Verdun ... but to pin down the French, pull them towards the battlefield, and since they will have to defend it shoulder to shoulder, we shall bleed them white by virtue of our superiority in guns.*

To access worksheet 3.1 on the battle of Verdun, please visit [www.pearsonbacconline.com](http://www.pearsonbacconline.com) and follow the on-screen instructions.

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### Review questions

- 1 What were Falkenhayn's objectives in attacking Verdun?
- 2 What does this reveal about the way in which war was now being fought on the Western Front?

#### Cartoon analysis



“Father, we must have a higher pile to see Verdun.”

◀ We must have a higher pile to see Verdun! A cartoon by Louis Raemakers, A Dutch cartoonist.

#### Question

What point is Raemakers making in this cartoon?

Attacks were followed by counter-attacks. General Philippe Pétain, the commander in charge of the French troops, held out but at a huge cost: 315,000 men. He voiced French determination in the phrase 'Ils ne passeront pas' (They shall not pass), and by April, French counter-attacks had caused huge losses for the Germans – 280,000 men – with nothing to show for it. Falkenhayn was sacked in August 1916, but his policy at Verdun ran on for another four months. The casualties eventually numbered more than 800,000. Overall, the battle broke all previous records for killing and destruction.

#### ToK Time

Casualties are an inevitable element of waging a war. However, the battle of the Somme has been seen as resulting in unacceptably high casualty figures. Can high casualty rates in war be justified? What is a high casualty figure? Did the sheer number of men in the mass armies of World War I mean that high casualties were unavoidable?



## The battle of the Somme

The battle of the Somme was a series of attacks led mainly by the British under General Douglas Haig. They began on 1 July 1916 and lasted through to the following November. The aim of these attacks was to take the pressure off the French at Verdun, and ensure that the Germans were fully committed so that they could not send reinforcements to the Eastern Front against Russia. The first attack was preceded by the most intensive preliminary artillery bombardment ever made. The aim of this demonstration of firepower was to destroy the forward defences. It failed, however, and as a result the first attack by British soldiers ended in heavy casualties. A second major attack was made in September. This used tanks for the first time, but again, there was no breakthrough and by the end of this battle the Allies had made only limited advances varying between a few hundred metres and 4km, along a 50km front. Losses on both sides were appalling: British killed or wounded totalled 418,000, German casualties were 650,000 and French 194,000.

An American image of the to encourage enlist in the U

## 1917: the USA joins the war

In February 1917, the Germans withdrew behind the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line fortifications in north-eastern France, which could be more easily defended. During the rest of the year, the French and the British continued offensive actions, without any major breakthroughs, in the battle of Arras (9–15 April), the battle of the Aisne in the French Nivelle Offensive (16–20 April) and in the third battle of Ypres at Passchendaele (July–November). Failure in the Nivelle Offensive proved intolerable to many soldiers and the French government was faced with mutiny, resulting in the courts martial of 300–400 ringleaders. Only the battle of Cambrai (20 November–3 December) indicated that there could be an end to the stalemate, when British and Australian forces using tanks broke through German lines and achieved an advance of 8km. Yet the tank was still mechanically unreliable, and many broke down under the stresses of the advance. The British advance slowed and the Germans were able to counter-attack successfully, forcing the British out of many of the areas they had captured.

Yet the Allies had cause for optimism when the USA entered the war in 1917. America had suffered as a result of the German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare in the Atlantic from February 1917, which had involved attacks on American ships and the consequent loss of American lives. When the Zimmerman telegram was intercepted (see Interesting Facts box on opposite page) it was the final straw, and America declared war on Germany on 4 April. Nevertheless, it took time for US troops to arrive in Europe, and at the end of 1917 the situation on the Western Front still looked bleak; the French Army was recovering from the mutinies, and following the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, an armistice was signed between the Bolsheviks and the Germans. This event led to Russian troops being withdrawn from the Eastern Front, which meant that the Germans could focus their attention on fighting in Western Europe.

#### The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

When Lenin took over Russia in October 1917, he was determined to end the war with Germany. However, the 'robber peace' that Russia was forced to sign was extremely harsh. Russia lost Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Ukraine, Georgia and Finland. These losses included a third of Russia's farming land, a third of its population, two-thirds of its coal mines and half of its industry. In addition, Russia had to pay an indemnity of five billion gold roubles.



### **US neutrality, unrestricted submarine warfare and the Zimmerman telegram**

At the beginning of the war, the USA had maintained a policy of neutrality, and President Woodrow Wilson had even attempted to negotiate a peace, arguing for a 'peace without victory' in Europe. **Isolationism** – keeping America out of Europe's affairs – was also strongly supported by public opinion in the USA. Neutrality, however, was very difficult when the USA was trading with the combatants, particularly the Allies. Germany's response was to use submarines to attack American ships without warning – a situation that led to the sinking of the ocean liner *Lusitania* in 1915. Germany suspended its **U-boat** attacks, but resumed them in January 1917 (see p.54). Germany knew that this action might draw the USA into the war on the side of the Allies. Thus in January 1917, Arthur Zimmerman, Foreign Secretary of Germany, wrote a telegram to the German ambassador of Mexico, Heinrich von Eckhardt, instructing him to approach the Mexican government with a proposal for a military alliance; it offered US territory in return for Mexico joining the German cause. The Zimmerman telegram was intercepted and decoded by the British. Its publication in the US media caused public outrage that helped swing public opinion in favour of entering the war.

An American poster uses the image of the sinking *Lusitania* to encourage young men to enlist in the US Navy.

### **STUDENT ACTIVITY**

#### **Cartoon analysis**



#### **Question**

What does this poster tell you about American attitudes to the sinking of the *Lusitania*, and about America's position of neutrality?

## **1918: victory for the Allies**

With Germany on the verge of starvation as a result of the success of an Allied blockade, and under the threat of US troops arriving to join the Allies, the German commander Erich Ludendorff decided to risk everything on a quick victory in his 'Peace Offensive' (*Friedensturm*). Ludendorff's initial attacks were very successful; following the usual preliminary artillery bombardment came attacks of smaller bands of specially trained and lightly equipped 'storm troops' rather than the usual waves of **infantry**. Attacking along the entire frontline, the Germans broke the Allied lines in many places. In March 1918, 35

German divisions on the Somme made gains of about 65km against the British. In April, a breakthrough was made in Flanders, which threatened Allied control of the Channel ports, and in May, German troops once again reached the Marne River, so that they were only 80km from Paris.

Yet the Germans had overstretched themselves and they had no reserves to call on to replace the 800,000 casualties that they had sustained in the offensive. They made no further progress between May and August. Meanwhile, the Allied forces, now under the coordinated control of General Ferdinand Foch, and using planes and tanks, massed their growing forces around the salient that the German forces had created in their advance. The last German offensive in July met stiff opposition and was unable to make any progress. Instead, the French counter-attack made a breakthrough, forcing Ludendorff's units back to safer ground.

On 8 August – what Ludendorff called ‘The Black Day’ – the Allies achieved the furthest advance since the beginning of the war in 1914. By late September, they had reached the Hindenburg Line. By October, the Germans, by now suffering from low morale, hunger and indiscipline, were in full retreat. Germany was facing other problems – the impact of the blockade and the surrender of its allies. Back in September, Ludendorff had lost his nerve and urged the Kaiser to ‘request an armistice without any hesitation’; only a ‘quick end’ could save the army from destruction. Thus on 11 November 1918, the Armistice came into effect, ending the fighting between the Allies and Germany.

#### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

##### Review questions

- 1 Why did a stalemate develop, and continue, on the Western Front?
- 2 Why did the Americans enter the war?
- 3 What factors contributed to the Germans agreeing to an Armistice in November 1918?

## The Armistice

The Armistice was agreed at 5.00am on 11 November, to come into effect at 11.00am Paris time – thus ‘the eleventh (hour) of the eleventh (day) of the eleventh (month)’. The terms contained the following major points:

- Termination of military hostilities within six hours after signature.
- Immediate removal of all German troops from France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Alsace-Lorraine.
- Removal of all German troops from territory on both sides of the Rhine, with ensuing occupation by Allied troops.
- Removal of all German troops from the Eastern Front, leaving German territory as it was on 1 August 1914.
- Renunciation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia and of the Treaty of Bucharest with Romania.
- Internment of the German fleet and surrender of other weapons.

The agreement was signed by the German delegation in Foch's railway siding in the forest of Compiègne (which Hitler subsequently used for the signing of the armistice that the French made with the Germans in 1940).





Map showing the different fronts on which fighting took place.

## The Eastern Front

1914

The aim of the Schlieffen Plan had been for Germany to avoid fighting a war on two fronts. Yet not only did Germany fail to defeat France quickly, but the Russians mobilized their army much faster than Germany had predicted. On 17 August 1914, the Russians moved into East Prussia, forcing the Germans to divert troops from the Western Front. Although the Russians were initially successful against the Austrians, occupying the province of Galicia and helping to cause the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, they were defeated by the Germans both at Tannenberg in August and the Masurian Lakes in September. (Here was a pattern to be repeated several times – the Russians could defeat the Austrians but not the Germans, and the Germans had to keep coming to the aid of the Austrians.) These defeats boosted German self-confidence, forced Russia out of Germany and also resulted in the loss for Russia of huge amounts of equipment and ammunition. Russia's position worsened considerably when Turkey entered the war on the side of the Germany, as Turkey could cut Russia's main supply route through the Dardanelles.

1915

This year again saw the Russians defeated by the Germans, who captured Warsaw in August. A combined Austro-German offensive in the Carpathians in May also meant the loss of most of Russia's 1914 gains by late June. By the end of the year, the Russians had withdrawn some 450km with losses of a million dead and a further million taken prisoner. A Russian general reported to the Tsar; 'A third of the men have no rifles. These poor devils have to wait patiently until their comrades fall so they can pick up their weapons. The army is drowning in its own blood.' The Russians had to establish a new defensive line that extended from Riga on the Baltic Sea to Romania in the Balkans – a line that was soon to become 'six hundred miles of mud and horror'.

Russia was also starting to suffer from the effects of the Turkish blockade of the Dardanelles (see p.47).

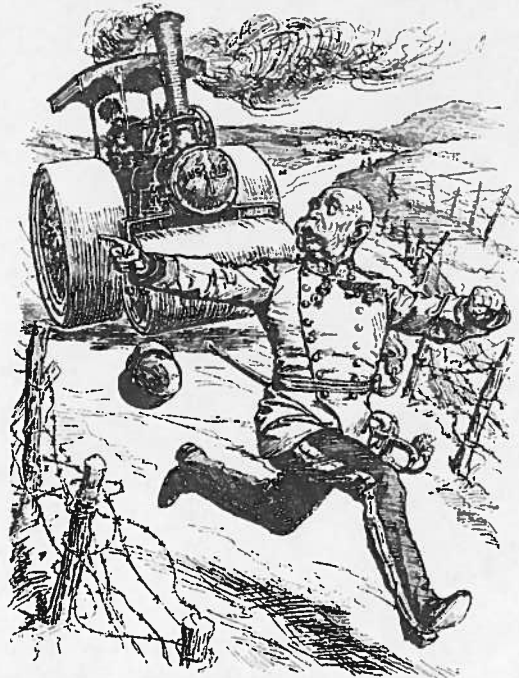


British cartoon, September 1914.

● **Examiner's hint**

When analyzing any source, the date is a crucial piece of information that needs to be taken into consideration. Look at the sequence of events on the Eastern Front and the date of the cartoon to help you with Question 3.

**STUDENT STUDY SECTION**



**"THE STEAM-ROLLER."**

AUSTRIA "I SAY, YOU KNOW, YOU'RE EXCEEDING THE SPEED LIMIT!"

**Questions**

- 1 How is Russia portrayed in this cartoon?
- 2 What is the message of the cartoon?
- 3 What reasons did the cartoonist have for giving this message?
- 4 How accurate was this message?

## 1916–17

The following year, 1916, saw the greatest Russian success of the war. Due to a determined effort on the home front, the Russian Army had better equipment than it had possessed in 1914, and on 4 June General Aleksei Brusilov, under pressure from France and Britain to divert German resources away from Verdun, launched a massive offensive over a wide front against the Austrians. Initially, this offensive was very successful, advancing 160km. By early August, however, with the Germans again coming to the support of the Austrians, the Brusilov Offensive came to a halt. It had cost the Russians a million lives.

The offensive had a devastating effect on both the Austro-Hungarian and the Russian empires. In Austria-Hungary the number of casualties – 340,000 with 400,000 more men taken prisoner – caused morale to reach rock-bottom. In Russia, the effect of a further million casualties combined with growing hardships at home to create yet more opposition to the ruling Romanov dynasty. The mounting pressure exploded in February 1917, when the Tsar was forced to abdicate. Although the new Provisional Government decided to maintain the war effort, the continued defeats of the Russian Army, and the ongoing economic crisis on the home front, helped increase support for the Bolshevik Party, who were successful in overthrowing the Provisional Government in October of the same year.

The new Bolshevik government then removed Russia from the war in December, ending Germany's need to fight a war on two fronts. The majority of German forces could now be used against the West.

## The Balkan Front

Austria-Hungary failed to occupy Serbia in 1914, yet Bulgaria's entry on the side of the Central Powers allowed a successful joint Austro-German-Bulgarian offensive in October 1915. In August 1916, encouraged by the Russian successes, Romania joined the Allies, but was quickly overrun by the forces of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. Allied attempts to relieve Romania by invading through Greece on the Salonika Front failed. It was not until 1918 that the Allies made advances against Bulgaria, leading to its surrender in September 1918.

## The Italian Front

Italy joined the war in 1915 on the side of the Allies, having been promised by Britain and France (in the Treaty of London) possession of Austria's Italian-speaking provinces, as well as territory along the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea. Italy's entry into the war opened up a front between Italy and Austria along the River Isonzo. However, fighting in the mountainous terrain was difficult and the Italians made little headway against the Austrians. In October 1917, a major Austrian offensive – the battle of Caporetto – was launched with German support. The Italians were forced to retreat more than 110km and the Central Powers' advance was halted only by the arrival of British and French reinforcements. Despite these failures, the Italian Front placed a heavy burden on Austria-Hungary, which in 1916 had to deploy half of its forces against the Italians.

## Turkey and the Middle Eastern Fronts

Turkey joined Germany and Austria-Hungary in the war on 31 October 1914, mainly with the intention of halting Russian expansion around the Black Sea. The Allies attacked the Turkish Empire in three separate campaigns.

The Gallipoli campaign planned for British warships to sweep through the Dardanelles, attacking Constantinople and driving Turkey out of the war. This success would then open up a sea route to the Russian Front, so that the Allies could get supplies to Russia. It would also allow the Allies to march through the Balkans and attack Austria-Hungary, thus opening up a new front. The plan was an attractive alternative to the stalemate on the Western Front, seeming to offer the possibility of a quick and unexpected success. Lord Herbert Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, believed that it would be the plan that would win the war.

The first stage of the campaign, a naval bombardment of the Turkish forts protecting the narrow Straits, was a failure. With British and French ships damaged by a combination of mines and shell fire from the forts, the Allied commanders decided that the risks were too great. They opted instead to launch a land invasion to capture the peninsula. Thus an Allied army, which included a large number of Australians and New Zealanders (Anzacs), landed on the Gallipoli peninsula on 25 April 1915. In the ensuing months, the campaign suffered from shortages, delays, lack of coordinated command and tactical errors. It was finally abandoned in November, having achieved none of its goals and having cost the Allies 250,000 men, dead, wounded or captured.

**ToK Time**

Religion was used as a propaganda tool to motivate and console the different societies fighting in the Great War. Christians on both sides – entente powers and Central Powers – were reassured that ‘God was on their side’. Turkish troops would be told that Allah was supporting the Islamic armies. How could people reconcile their religious beliefs with the death and destruction they saw all around them? Would the impact of war strengthen or undermine faith in religion? Discuss your responses with a partner and write them up in your ToK journal.

The second campaign against the Turks involved an operation to win control of oil supplies through an expedition to oil-rich Mesopotamia. The Turks, led and supported by German officers, resisted fiercely at first, but by the end of the war British forces were in control of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul.

The third campaign involved British, Anzac and Indian troops driving the Turks back through Palestine towards Turkey itself. The British were aided in this campaign by guerrilla warfare carried out by the Arabs, who had been promised independence from Turkey after the war. T.E. Lawrence, a British intelligence officer, became a military adviser to the Arabs. Known as ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, he led a guerrilla force in attacks on Turkish railways and supply lines. Under the leadership of General Edmund Allenby, the British and empire forces defeated the Turks at Megiddo in September 1918, and the Turks finally surrendered on 3 November.

## War in the colonial territories

Most of the major powers fighting in the war had colonies, and so fighting also took place in other parts of the world. Britain’s control of the seas, however, meant that attacks on overseas territories and colonies were all Allied attacks. Most colonies were manned by relatively small garrisons and their capture was not difficult, though it was not until 1917 that all German forces in Africa were overcome.

Britain, France and Germany also involved the people living in their colonies in the fighting; soldiers from India (one and a half million volunteers), Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa contributed to the British war effort, for example. The French recruited some 600,000 combat troops and a further 200,000 labourers from North and West Africa. Many of these soldiers ended up facing not only the appalling conditions of the Western Front, but also racism from the European troops.

Indian troops: 57th Wilde’s Rifles in action, October 1914.



### Guerrilla warfare in East Africa

The British experienced the impact of guerrilla warfare when Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck launched a series of successful guerrilla-style attacks against the British in East Africa, including raids against British railways and forts in Kenya and Rhodesia. With no more than 14,000 troops at his disposal, he tied down as many as ten to twenty times that number of Allied troops. He officially surrendered to the British in November 1918, having never been defeated.

In Asia, meanwhile, Japan joined the war on the side of the Allies and took the opportunity to attack and occupy Germany’s islands in the Central Pacific and take over the heavily fortified German fortress at Kiaochow. A New Zealand force took over Samoa and an Australian battalion took New Guinea. By the end of the year, Germany had lost its Asiatic colonies, which Britain promised to their different conquerors.

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### IBLP link – Inquirer

Research the role of one of the colonial countries that contributed troops to the Allied war effort. This activity could include looking at the number of troops sent, casualties, impact on the home life of the country and impact on the colony’s status and relationship with either Britain or France.



# How was World War I fought?

## War on land – the Western Front

Although fighting took place on several fronts throughout the four years of the war, the Western Front nevertheless remained the most important for several reasons:

- Because of its size and the length of time it remained an operational theatre of war. It was a continuous battlefield stretching for 320km from the North Sea to the French–Swiss border in the south. Across this line, the Allies and the Germans attacked each other continuously for four years without significantly breaking the position of the line.
- Because of the key role it played in the outcome of the Great War. Many of the other conflicts in the war were ‘diversionary fronts’, which were created to break the deadlock on the Western Front.
- Because the fighting on the Western Front was to have a significant impact on ideas about and attitudes towards war.

To access worksheet 3.2 on trench warfare, please visit [www.pearsonbacconline.com](http://www.pearsonbacconline.com) and follow the on-screen instructions.

## Why did trench warfare lead to a stalemate?

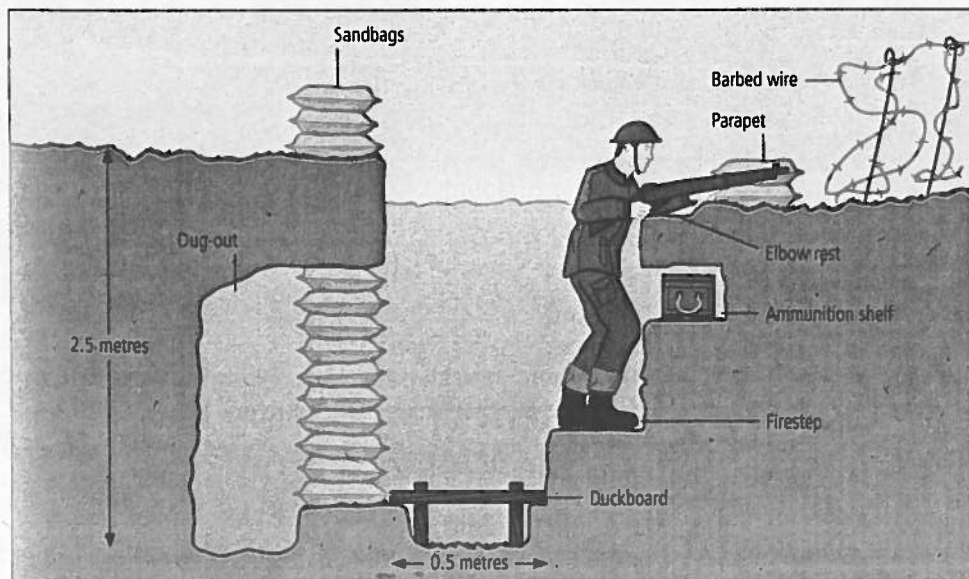
The feature of the Western Front that most affected the way the war was fought was the development of trench warfare. After the ‘race to the sea’, the conflict settled into static ‘positional’ warfare. The war of movement was over. In order to hold their positions, and keep out of the line of machine-gun and artillery fire, soldiers had to dig down into defensive positions; thus trenches were dug along the entire length of the front. As it became clear that these hastily dug ditches were to become permanent, they evolved into complex defensive systems on both sides, with the area between opposing trenches known as ‘no-man’s land’.

The Western Front, according to John Keegan:

*...rapidly became a maze of duplicates and dead ends, in which soldiers, sometimes whole units rapidly lost their way. Guides who knew the trench geography were an essential accompaniment in unit reliefs, when one battalion took the place of another at the end of a front-line stint [tour of duty]. So, too were signboards pointing to the more enduring trenches and the ruined remains of human habitation; in the Ypres salient in the winter of 1914–15, there were still traces of the buildings the Tommies had named Tram Car Cottage, Battersea Farm, Beggar’s Rest, Apple Villa, White Horse Cellars, Kansan Cross, Doll’s House.*

From John Keegan, *The First World War*, 1999

The diagram below shows the key features of this system:



◀ Cross section of a typical World War I trench system.



### Conditions on the Western Front

Soldiers on the Western Front experienced appalling day-to-day living conditions. Sanitation was poor and soldiers had to deal with the effects of limited washing and toilet facilities, as well as being surrounded by rotting corpses. Rats swarmed everywhere and soldiers became covered with lice. When it rained, the trenches could fill with water, which could lead to a soldier getting 'trench foot' after standing for hours with wet feet; this was an extremely painful skin condition that could lead to amputation if left untreated. When soldiers were not involved in an attack, life at the front could also be monotonous, and days were spent repairing trenches, writing letters, resting and keeping guard. Not all soldiers spent all their time in the trenches, the trench systems stretched far back on both sides and soldiers would also spend time in the support trenches or behind the lines.

Trench warfare was deadlier for attackers than defenders; attackers suffered twice as many casualties during an assault on the enemy trench line. A major attack would begin with an artillery barrage, followed by the attacking troops going 'over the top' – climbing out of their trenches and attempting to reach and capture the enemy trenches on the other side of no-man's land. Soldiers had to walk or run into the direct firing line of the defenders, while mines and thick rolls of barbed wire slowed down their progress and made the chances of being hit by enemy machine-gun fire even more likely.

The nature of this type of warfare is described by John Keegan, who here looks at the battle of the Somme:

*Descriptions of zero hour on 1 July abound, of the long lines of young men, burdened by the sixty pounds of equipment judged necessary to sustain them in a long struggle inside the German trenches, plodding off almost shoulder to shoulder; of their good cheer and certainty of success, of individual displays of bravado, as in the battalions which kicked a football ahead of the ranks; of bright sunshine breaking through the thin morning mist; of the illusion of an empty battlefield, denuded of opponents by the weight of bombardment and the explosion of twenty-one chambers, laboriously driven under the German front lines, as the attack began. Descriptions of what happened later abound also; of the discovery of the uncut wire, of the appearance of the German defenders, manning the parapet at the moment the British creeping barrage passed beyond, to fire frenziedly into the approaching ranks, of the opening of gaps in the attacking waves, of massacre in the wire entanglements, of the advance checked, halted and eventually stopped literally dead.*

From John Keegan, *The First World War*, 1999

Because of the difficulties of attacking and taking the enemy's trenches, the Western Front became one of stalemate, with little change in the position of the front over the whole four years. Increasingly, the aim of battles became not so much to win territory held by the enemy, but to destroy or wear down the opposing army; it was a war of attrition intended to break the morale of the enemy and reduce their numbers.

Clearly the military education and mindset of the generals were inadequate to meet the demands of this new type of warfare. Similarly, the soldiers themselves were ill-prepared in their training to deal with the horrors in which they found themselves.

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### Research question

Find out more about:

- The Christmas truce
- Shell-shock
- Trench foot
- The work of miners tunnelling beneath the trenches
- Communication systems used in the trenches
- Conscientious objectors
- Those who were shot for 'cowardice'

## How did the development of weaponry lead to a change in tactics on the Western Front?

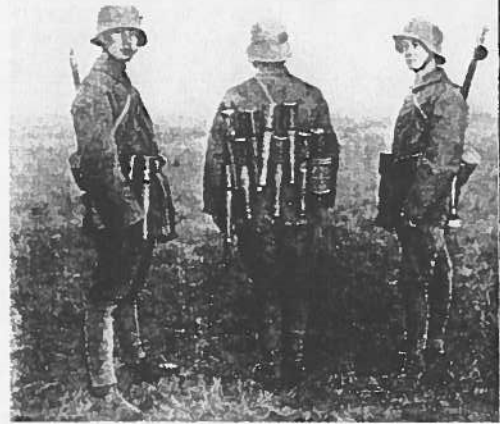
Both sides in the war utilized a wide range of weapons in order to try to break the deadlock. The infantry charge explained above remained the key battle tactic used throughout the

war, and most weapons were applied or developed with the aim of making this strategy more effective.

## Machine guns and grenades

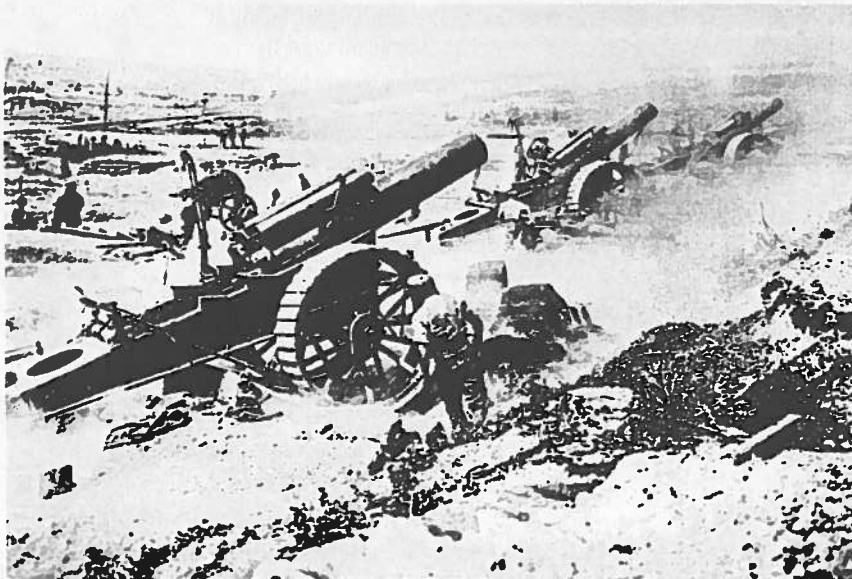
The main weapon of the British soldier was a .303in, bolt-action Lee-Enfield rifle with a magazine that held ten rounds of ammunition; a bayonet could be attached to the end of the rifle for use in hand-to-hand fighting. Each side had similar types of rifle. The machine gun, however, was far more lethal against mass targets. Whereas an infantryman could fire 25 rounds a minute with a bolt-action rifle, he could fire 600 rounds a minute with a machine gun. The effects were devastating on attackers, as a German machine-gunner here recounts: '... the [British] officers walked in front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and re-load. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them.' Soldiers also used hand grenades – essentially small hand-thrown bombs. The British, for example, used the pineapple-shaped Mills bomb, while the Germans used stick-shaped grenades nicknamed 'potato-mashers'.

Another weapon innovation of World War I was the submachine gun, a lightweight hand-held automatic weapon that fired pistol-calibre ammunition. (By using low-power ammunition, the soldier could control the recoil better than if he was using high-power rifle ammunition.) The submachine gun was known as a 'trench sweeper', a weapon that could deliver heavy firepower at close-quarters during a trench assault.



▲ German soldiers carrying Model 24 stick grenades.

## Heavy artillery



◀ British artillery position on the Western Front.

Although machine guns killed many thousands of people during World War I, nevertheless it was artillery that was the real killer. In World War I, artillery inflicted 70 per cent of all casualties. With the war being so static, the huge guns could take up permanent positions in strategically good locations, from where they could launch massive numbers of high-explosive shells. Commanders saw artillery as the key to overcoming the defences of the enemy and thus every major attack was preceded by a prolonged artillery barrage.

Yet the reality was that the artillery was not accurate or effective enough to destroy enemy trench systems completely – unless a shell fell directly into a trench, the occupants were relatively well protected behind their earthen walls. In the battle of the Somme, for example, the British fired more than 1.5 million shells in five days, but these failed to cut the barbed wire or destroy the German trenches. Even if the infantry made a breakthrough, the artillery was not mobile enough to be brought forward to protect the attackers. Another problem with the barrage was that it gave the enemy warning of the attack to come; when the barrage stopped that was the signal for the attack. The effect of the artillery on soldiers was nevertheless grim: brain damage, bleeding ears, shell-shock. It also churned up the land into a sea of mud and craters, which made attacking across no-man's land even more difficult.

Artillery tactics and **fire-control** technologies evolved over the course of the war to become more versatile, using techniques such as the 'creeping barrage' (a steadily advancing wall of fire) and 'artillery ambush' (a sudden storm of shells against a specific target). It also became possible to locate and attack enemy artillery more effectively; thus British guns could remain silent until the actual attack and then blanket the German guns with fire, bringing back the element of surprise.

## Chemical warfare

The first poison gas attack was made at Ypres by the Germans in April 1915. Carried on the wind, the chlorine gas caused panic amongst the Allied soldiers and disabled 6.5km of trenches. More lethal gases were soon developed: phosgene gas, which was 18 times stronger than the chlorine gas, and the most feared of all, mustard gas, which burned, blinded or slowly killed the victims over several weeks. Gas, however, although a useful weapon for causing panic among troops, did not actually play any key role in breaking the stalemate. Its big disadvantage was that it was dependent on the wind for distribution and so it could blow back towards the side that was using it; this happened to the British at the battle of Loos in 1915. In addition, gas masks were quickly developed by scientists, making gas as a weapon much less effective.



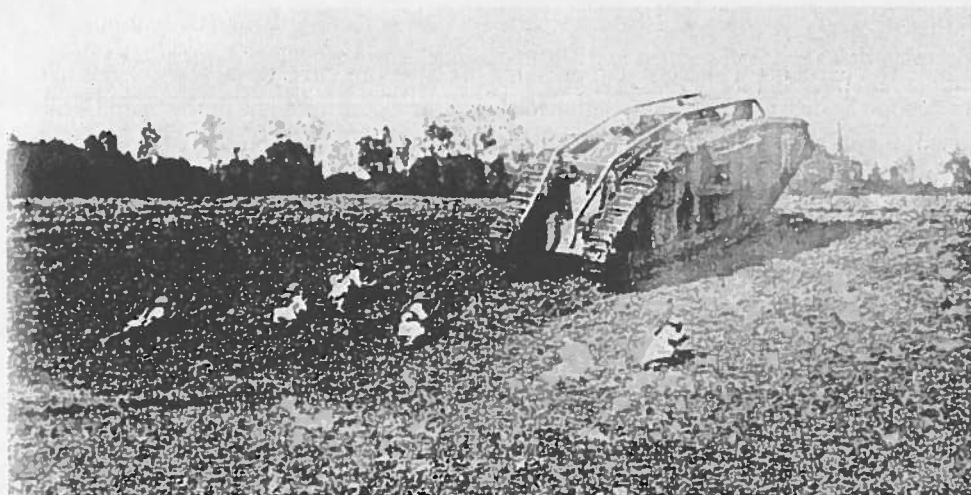
British soldiers man a Vickers machine gun while wearing gas masks.

## Tanks

The tank was another attempt to break the stalemate. Developed by the British and the French, 49 of them were first used at the battle of the Somme. The tank was able to advance ahead of the infantry, crushing barbed wire fences and attacking the enemy at the same time with machine-gun and cannon fire. Inside the tank, the crew was protected from small-arms fire by the outer metal armour. Yet the tank was not yet able to break the stalemate. It was slow and unreliable and many tanks broke down before they reached the German trenches. Their armour plating was also not strong enough to resist artillery, and the use of tanks at the Somme did not have any major effect other than causing initial panic amongst the Germans. The conditions for the tank operators were also appalling; the heat generated inside the tank was tremendous and fumes from the engine and guns nearly choked the men inside.

Larger numbers of tanks were used in the battle of Cambrai in 1917, but here initial successes were not sustained and breakthroughs were quickly reversed. 'As a result of the tank's limitations, there was little real agreement within the British Expeditionary Force on whether mechanical warfare truly offered a substitute for manpower. In that sense, tanks during the war remained what GHQ concluded in August 1918, a "mechanical contrivance" with potential usefulness only as an adjunct to combined infantry and artillery assault' (Ian Beckett, *The Great War 1914–1918*, 2001).





◀ An official British photo of a British tank going into action during the battle of the Somme.

## What impact did the technological advances during World War I have on the nature of the fighting?

As suggested above, none of the technological developments in weaponry or the variations in tactics were ultimately decisive during the fighting on the Western Front. Nevertheless, the developments that did take place during the course of war – in artillery, tanks, combat aircraft and aerial reconnaissance (see p.56 for more discussion of the air war) – did allow for a change of tactics by the final campaigns of 1918.

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*In 1914 the British soldier went to war dressed like a gamekeeper in a soft cap, armed only with rifle and bayonet. In 1918 he went into battle dressed like an industrial worker in a steel helmet, protected by a respirator against poison gas, armed with automatic weapons and mortars, supported by tanks and ground-attack aircraft, and preceded by a creeping artillery barrage of crushing intensity. Firepower replaced manpower as the instrument of victory. This represented a revolution in the conduct of war.*

John Bourne in Charles Townshend (ed.), *The Oxford History of Modern War*, 2005

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## War at sea

### What was the importance of naval warfare in World War I?

From the beginning of the war, it was clear that control of the seas was crucial to both sides. Britain needed to be able to transport men (including from places as far afield as Australia and Canada) and supplies to the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East. As an island, Britain's need for food and industrial supplies from other countries, particularly from the USA, was key to the country's survival. Thus Britain was also cautious in its use of its navies; it could not risk losing many ships to mines and submarines or in surface battles. As Winston Churchill (who served as First Lord of the Admiralty for part of the war) said, it would have been possible for Admiral Jellicoe, the commander of the British Fleet, to lose the war in an afternoon.

Germany did not need naval routes to supply and help its allies. However, Germany also needed food and other supplies from overseas. Thus control of trade routes was vital to both sides, both for their own needs and to stop supplies reaching the enemy.



#### ToK Time

The *Lusitania*, sunk by German U-boats on 7 May 1915, was a luxury liner built to convey its passengers between Britain and the United States. The Germans claimed they had evidence that the liner was transporting munitions as well as civilian passengers across the Atlantic. US President Woodrow Wilson had resisted public outrage, particularly in Britain, to respond to the attack with a declaration of war. This choice was seen by some as 'cowardice', and a shell that failed to explode was nicknamed a 'Wilson' in the British trenches.

At the time it was widely believed that the German claim about the ship was false, and was an attempt to justify the effects of unrestricted submarine warfare. In 2006, however, a dive team from Ireland claimed to have found munitions on board the sunken vessel. These included 15,000 rounds of rifle ammunition in the bow of the ship. These rounds were the same calibre as those used by the British in their rifles and machine guns on the Western Front.

Discuss as a class the implications of this new evidence. What does it suggest about our understanding of the past? Do we have more 'truth' about the past today than was possible at the time of the war? Does the 'truth', or our understanding of the past, change over time?



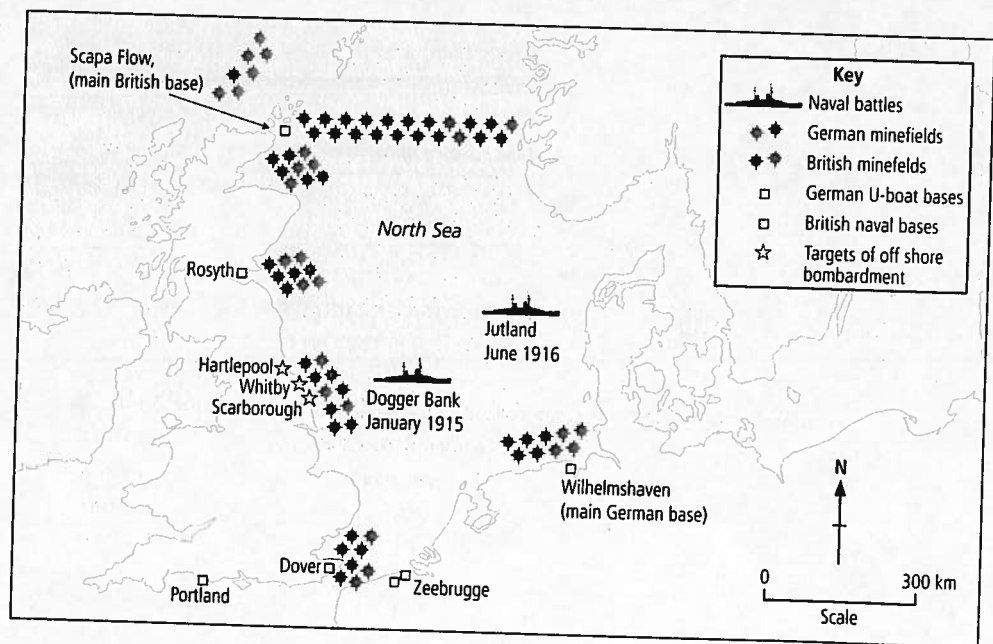
Britain was particularly successful in pursuing the latter objective. Royal Navy vessels went into action against German units stationed abroad, and destroyed one of the main German squadrons at the battle of the Falkland Islands in 1914. The Allies also started blockading German ports; British naval vessels enforced the right of search on neutral shipping to ensure that Germany and its allies were not getting supplies via other countries.

## Mines and submarines

With their surviving warships vulnerable to the might of the Royal Navy, the Germans turned instead to submarine attacks and tried to enforce their own blockade of Britain using U-boats (*Unterseebooten* – meaning ‘underwater boats’) to sink merchant ships. Submarines, and also the use of sea mines, changed the conduct of naval warfare. Previously, naval actions had been carried out on the surface, often at close range. The development, however, of the torpedo and submarine made the large battleships vulnerable and almost defenceless, and the submarine campaign caused serious losses of Allied ships and cargoes. Yet it was also politically dangerous warfare. Some of the ships sunk belonged to neutral countries. The sinking of the *Lusitania* by torpedo attack and the loss of 1,000 lives, including 128 Americans, led to strong protests from the USA. Although the Germans scaled down their U-boat campaign in September 1915 in an attempt to keep America out of the war, the failure at Jutland (see below) to harm significantly the British Grand Fleet led to a decision to renew the campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917. The Germans hoped that the underwater blockade would starve Britain and France into surrender before the USA could have any impact on the war. They were very nearly successful. In February 1917, Britain lost 464,000 tons of shipping. In April it lost 834,000 tons. Britain was soon down to only six weeks’ worth of supplies of corn.

To access worksheet 3.3 on German submarine warfare, please visit [www.pearsonbacconline.com](http://www.pearsonbacconline.com) and follow the on-screen instructions.

Sea minefields and major naval engagements around Britain and Western Europe.



## Why was Britain able to survive the U-boat blockade?

The success rate of the U-boats was due to the fact that they were attacking unarmed merchant ships that were travelling alone or in small groups without any protection. Lloyd George supported the idea of a convoy system in which large numbers of merchant ships would sail together with a naval escort. Neither the Admiralty nor the shipping companies

were enthusiastic about this idea, but they eventually agreed. It was the turning point. By October 1917, a total of 99 homeward-bound convoys had reached harbour safely and only 10 vessels had been lost. The last quarter of 1917 saw 235 ships lost compared to 413 ships in the second quarter of the year.

The convoy system did not eliminate the threat of the U-boats completely, but other factors now also came into play to help defeat the U-boat threat:

- As losses went down due to the convoy system, the total tonnage of Allied shipping increased due to the vast increases in output from American shipyards; thus the U-boat campaign was unable to achieve a reduction in the overall volume of Allied shipping.
- Weapons technology progressed so that surface vessels could locate and attack U-boats even when they were submerged. The hydrophone passive listening device enabled ships to 'listen' for U-boat engine noises, and depth charges were developed to attack submarines. By 1918, sonar had been developed and the French were also using echo ranging, both technologies that allowed U-boat detection. In 1918, the Germans lost 69 U-boats and, at this stage in the war, they were unable to replace them.
- Improved submarine nets were designed and deployed across the entrances to the English Channel, which forced the U-boats to go north around the top of Britain, thus seriously reducing their operational time in the war zone.



German poster of 1917: 'The U-boats are out!'

## The battle of Jutland

Despite the expectations of a major confrontation between the main German and British fleets and the new dreadnoughts, such a clash did not occur until 1916 – mainly because both sides realized that they had too much to lose if they waged a head-on battle. Instead, the war at sea was dominated by submarines and mines, as explained above. Nevertheless, there was one major challenge to British supremacy of the sea at the battle of Jutland (31 May–1 June 1916).

The battle began when German admiral Reinhard Scheer tried to lure part of the British fleet out from its base, so that an attack could be made by numerically superior German forces. However, due to the fact that the British could decipher German radio signals, more British ships came out than anticipated, and so Scheer had to fight an engagement involving some 250 ships in total. After several hours of exchanging artillery fire, the Germans decided to sail back to port. Although the Germans could claim victory, having lost 11 ships to Britain's 14, the major result of this encounter was that the Germans had not destroyed the British fleet – Britain was left in control of the surface waters. The German High Seas Fleet stayed in Kiel for the rest of the war, and instead the Germans switched their focus to the submarine warfare outlined above. 'As one journalist famously remarked, the High Seas Fleet had succeeded only in assaulting its gaoler before returning to gaol' (Ian Beckett, *The Great War 1914–1918*, 2001).

The fact that Britain's navy enjoyed supremacy for the course of the war was central in allowing it to move 8.5 million troops across the British Empire, as well as troops and supplies from Britain across the Channel to France. Imports continued to reach Britain, and the Allies were able to establish and maintain the devastating blockade on Germany. Ultimately, they were also able to sustain the convoy system and transport American men and equipment to Europe for the final battles.

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### Discussion/review questions

To what extent can it be argued that German attempts to destroy British naval supremacy were a complete failure?

**Document analysis**

*The new policy [of unrestricted submarine warfare] has swept every restriction aside. All vessels, irrespective of cargo and flag, have been sent to the bottom, without help and without mercy. Even hospital and relief ships, though provided with the Germans' safe conduct, were sunk with the same reckless lack of compassion and principle...*

*German submarine warfare is no longer directed against belligerents but against the whole world. All nations are involved in Germany's action. The challenge is to all mankind. Wanton, wholesale destruction has been effected against women and children while they have been engaged in pursuits which even in the darkest periods of modern history have been regarded as innocent and legitimate...*

*There is one choice I cannot make. I will not choose the path of submission, and suffer the most sacred rights of the nation and of the people to be ignored and violated.*

*With a profound sense of the solemn and even tragic character of the step I am taking, and of the grave responsibilities involved, but in unhesitating obedience to my constitutional duty, I advise Congress to declare that the recent course of the German government is nothing less than war against the United States, and the United States accept the status of a belligerent which has been thrust upon it, and will take immediate steps to put the country into a thorough state of defence, and to exert all the power and resource in bringing Germany to terms, and in ending the war...*

Speech by President Woodrow Wilson to the joint houses of Congress, 2 April 1917

**Questions**

- 1 What is the overall message of this speech with regard to German actions in carrying out unrestricted submarine warfare?
- 2 What is the value of this speech to an historian studying the reasons for US entry into the war? What are the limitations of the speech?

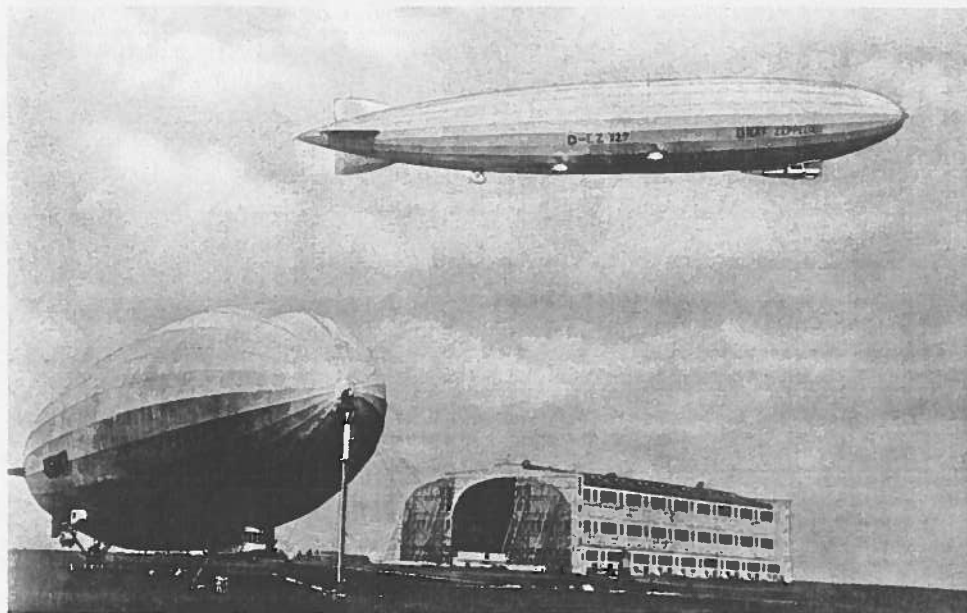
## War in the air

One of the major technological leaps in the Great War was the use of aircraft as military weapons. As the war progressed, the importance of aircraft became increasingly evident.

### Airships, bombs and civilian targets

In the early stages of the war, it was the airship that had the most important role in the air. Certainly, military leaders saw them as more useful than aeroplanes because they were more reliable, could carry heavy loads and had a much greater range. The British used airships mainly for escorting ships and for spotting U-boats (they could then warn the escort ships by radio). The Germans, however, with their more advanced airship called the Zeppelin, soon realized the potential of the airship for carrying out bombing on civilian and industrial targets in Britain. At the start of the war, the Germans had a force of 30 Zeppelins, and although potentially an easy target – they contained 57,000 cubic metres of highly flammable hydrogen – they were initially reasonably safe because of the height at which they flew. Raids on London, the Midlands and the East Coast killed several hundred civilians. As British defences improved, however, Zeppelins became too vulnerable and were replaced with bomber aircraft, the most famous of which was the Gotha. This bomber caused nearly 3,000 casualties in raids against London and south-east England. The British responded with the development of their own bomber fleet as part of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). The British aircraft also made bombing raids into enemy territory in the last year of the war. By February 1918, there were the first 'round the clock' raids, with British DH4 planes attacking the town of Trier by day and Handley-Page aircraft attacking at night. In March, there were raids on Mannheim, Mainz and Stuttgart during the day. Clearly the

idea of attacking civilians from the air had already become a feature of 20th-century war by 1918.



Zeppelin airships were used for air raids against British towns and cities.

## Aircraft – reconnaissance, dog-fights and ground attack

Aircraft were a relatively recent invention, and thus very primitive and unreliable at the start of the war. Yet they soon came to fulfil important functions over the battlefields. First, their speed and mobility meant that they could be used for detailed reconnaissance work over enemy trenches. Pilots were able to report on troop concentrations, artillery positions and enemy movements, in addition to directing the fire of their own artillery onto specific targets. Photographs of trench systems and artillery targets were taken from the air, and by 1918 photographic images could be taken as high as 4,500m. Messages could even be dropped from the aircraft. With the development of the aerial wireless, communication was also possible between aircraft and the ground.

The airmen in these reconnaissance planes soon began to experiment with improvised weapons to bring down rival reconnaissance flights. This innovation led to the emergence of aerial 'dog-fights'. At first pilots tried to attack each other with pistols and rifles, but by 1915 machine guns were fitted and synchronized so that they could shoot through the propeller of the airplane without striking the blades.

Dog-fights became a common sight over the trenches. Aircraft also became increasingly important for attacking enemy ground troops. For example, in 1918 ground-attack aircraft played their part in the Allied victory by dropping 1,563 bombs and firing 122,150 rounds of machine-gun ammunition in support of land offensives.

The growing awareness of the importance of air power meant that the aircraft evolved rapidly during the course of the war. The numbers of aircraft also grew; by 1918, there were more than 8,000 aircraft in operation on all sides. Control of the skies over the battlefield had become essential to victory. Politicians and commanders in all countries realized the potential importance of airpower – including the idea that bombing civilians could play a key role in undermining the enemy's morale. The end of World War I was still determined by what happened on the ground, but in both strategy and tactics, there were signs of what would come in the next war of 1939 to 1945.

### The war in the air

The idea of honourable combat between fighter 'aces' caught people's imaginations during the war, and all countries had their own heroes. While the soldiers in the trenches remained anonymous, the names of the fighter aces became well known, such as Major 'Micky' Mannock in Britain, René Fonck in France and perhaps the most famous of all, Baron von Richthofen, or the 'Red Baron', from Germany, who headed his 'flying circus' squadron and shot down 80 planes. Governments soon realized the propaganda potential of glamorous war heroes and encouraged dramatic accounts of air combat, which were much better for morale than stories of the horrors of the trenches. However, the development of mass air actions with much greater numbers of aeroplanes led to the end of this 'romantic' individual action.

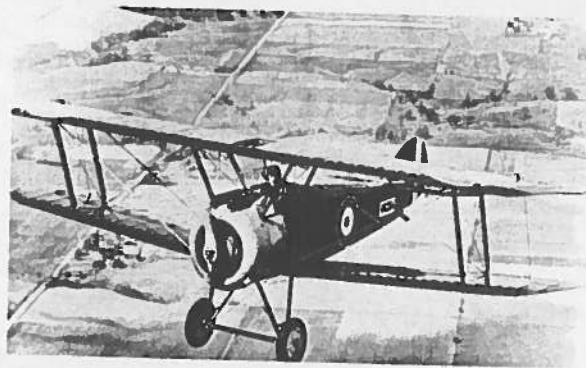




The 'Red Baron' – German fighter ace Baron Manfred von Richthofen.

### Strategy and tactics

A strategy is the overall plan of action. It involves looking at the 'bigger picture' and seeing how all the different battles and engagements are linked together. Strategy is different from tactics. Tactics are the actual ways in which a strategy is carried out, i.e. how a particular battle is conducted.



The Sopwith Camel was one of the best fighter planes of World War I.

## STUDENT STUDY SECTION

### Review activities

Using what you have read in this chapter, copy and fill out the grids below and then answer the questions that follow.

	Western Front (land)	Eastern Front (land)	War in the air	War at sea
Key strategies/ tactics used				
Impact of tactics (consider casualties, land gained, strategic gains)				
Overall impact on outcome of the war				

### Questions

- Looking at the battles on both the Western and the Eastern Fronts, what differences can you see in how the war was fought and how it developed along these two fronts? (Refer to the map on p.45 and notice the amount of territory that changed hands on the Western and Eastern Fronts. Also compare casualty figures between the two fronts.)
- Why do think that there were these differences?
- What impact would the changing frontline in the east have had on the civilian populations of these areas?
- What impact overall did the war at sea have on the outcome of World War I?
- What was the impact of the war in the air?
- Overall, which theatre of war was most important for the outcome of the war?

TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS			
	Technological developments	Impact on tactics	Impact on outcome of the war
War on land			
War at sea			
War in the air			

### Questions

- 1 How important were technological developments in deciding the outcome of the war?
- 2 What do you consider to be the most important of the technological developments made?
- 3 How did these technological developments change the nature of warfare?

## What were the reasons for Germany's defeat in World War I?

Looking back over this chapter, we can see several reasons for Germany's eventual defeat. These can be grouped into Germany's weaknesses and mistakes and the Allies' successes and strengths.

### Germany's weaknesses/failures

Germany made several ambitious gambles that didn't pay off. It gambled on a quick victory with the Schlieffen Plan. Once that gamble had failed, there was no hope of a rapid conclusion to the war. The plan, with its march through Belgium, also resulted in Britain entering the war. The war that resulted on two fronts was the one that Germany had always dreaded and tried to avoid. Another gamble – that of Verdun, with its emphasis on wearing down the strength of France and Britain – also failed. The German high-risk strategy of unrestricted U-boat warfare not only failed, but also helped to bring the USA into the war, which was vital to boosting Allied resources in 1918. By August 1918, US troops were arriving at a rate of 300,000 a month

Germany also suffered from weak allies. As you have read, Germany constantly had to help out the Austrians and Bulgarians. With the defeat of Bulgaria and then the Serbs in September 1918, followed by the defeat of Austria by Italy and then the surrender of Turkey in October, it was only a matter of time before Germany had to surrender.

The failure of the Ludendorff Offensive was critical to overall German defeat. As historian Alexander Watson writes: 'Their [Ludendorff and Hindenburg's] desperate desire for peace derived not from any domestic considerations nor even the weakness of Germany's allies; it was due principally to the parlous state of their army. The war had been above all a contest of endurance and, during the course of 1918, the accumulated strain and the hopelessness of its situation had broken the army's will to continue fighting' (Watson, 'Stabbed at the Front', *History Today*, 2008). The Germans were ultimately unable to sustain their losses after the failure of the 1918 offensive. An epidemic of Spanish flu in 1918 made

the situation much worse, and morale was very low in the German Army. When Ludendorff asked for an armistice in October 1918, he said it was because, 'No reliance can be put on the troops any longer. Since August 8, it has gone rapidly down hill. Continually units have proved themselves so unreliable that they have hurriedly had to be withdrawn from the front ... the High Command and the German Army are finished.'

On top of military factors, the dire economic situation in Germany by 1918 played an important role in Germany's defeat. It meant that supplies were not reaching the German Army, and that the German population was ready for revolution. This situation was due partly due to the Allied blockade, which prevented imports reaching Germany, and also because the German government proved less efficient at organizing the country for war than the Allied countries. Germany spent 83 per cent of total public expenditure on military items, but just 2 per cent on the civilian sector. The figures in Britain were 62 per cent and 16 per cent respectively. Over the course of the conflict, there was a shift in resources away from the production of civilian goods in Germany. German agriculture was particularly hard hit by the war; production fell by 70 per cent in some areas. The economic situation, combined with the continual failures of the troops, meant that Germany was in a state of internal collapse by the end of 1918.

Even Russia's withdrawal from the war and the harsh terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk did not help Germany. The lengthy deliberations over the treaty seriously disrupted planning for the German spring offensive that was to begin on 21 March 1918. The one million men who were needed in the west were also still in the east to enforce the treaty and to occupy the Ukraine. The chaos in Russia and the impact of the civil war on agriculture also meant that Germany was unable to get badly needed resources from Russia to help deal with shortages at home.

## Allied strengths/successes

Ultimately, the Allies had greater men and resources and so the longer the war went on, the harder it was for the Germans to win. Germany could have beaten France on a one-to-one basis, just as Russia could have beaten Austria-Hungary, but all countries working together and helping each other out meant that the war would become one of attrition. This situation, in the long term, benefited the Allies (particularly once the USA had joined the war).

Maintaining control of the sea was decisive for the Allies. The blockade on Germany helped to cause dreadful food shortages, while Britain was still able to import food supplies both from its colonies and from the USA with the help of the convoy system. The British and French were also particularly successful in mobilizing their economies.

In the Allied counter-offensive of 1918, the Allies benefited from a greater coordination of effort and what Beckett calls a 'distinctly "modern" style of warfare' that took advantage of all of the technological and tactical developments that had taken place during the war – using tanks, artillery, aircraft and infantry in relatively close cooperation. The contribution of the USA to Allied victory in 1918 was also critical. US troops started arriving in France in June 1918. The two million soldiers eventually deployed brought a huge advantage to the Allied side in that they lacked the 'war weariness' of European soldiers now on the Western Front. America's massive economic resources were another key factor in the push for Allied victory. The USA made a substantial difference to the Allied fight, contributing money, weaponry and warships. Altogether America lent more than \$7.7 billion to the Allies during the war. As Akira Iriye puts it in *The Globalising of America 1913–1945* (1993), 'American participation spelled the defeat of German ambitions.'

### ToK Time

Before you go on to read about World War I and total war, it is important to consider whether or not there can be effective 'rules' when fighting a war. There had been attempts to limit warfare, and to draw up some rules of engagement, prior to the Great War, at The Hague in 1898 (see Chapter 1).

What rules of engagement *should* there be in war? Should chemical and biological warfare be forbidden? Should civilian targets be outlawed?

What rules of engagement *have* to be tolerated in warfare?

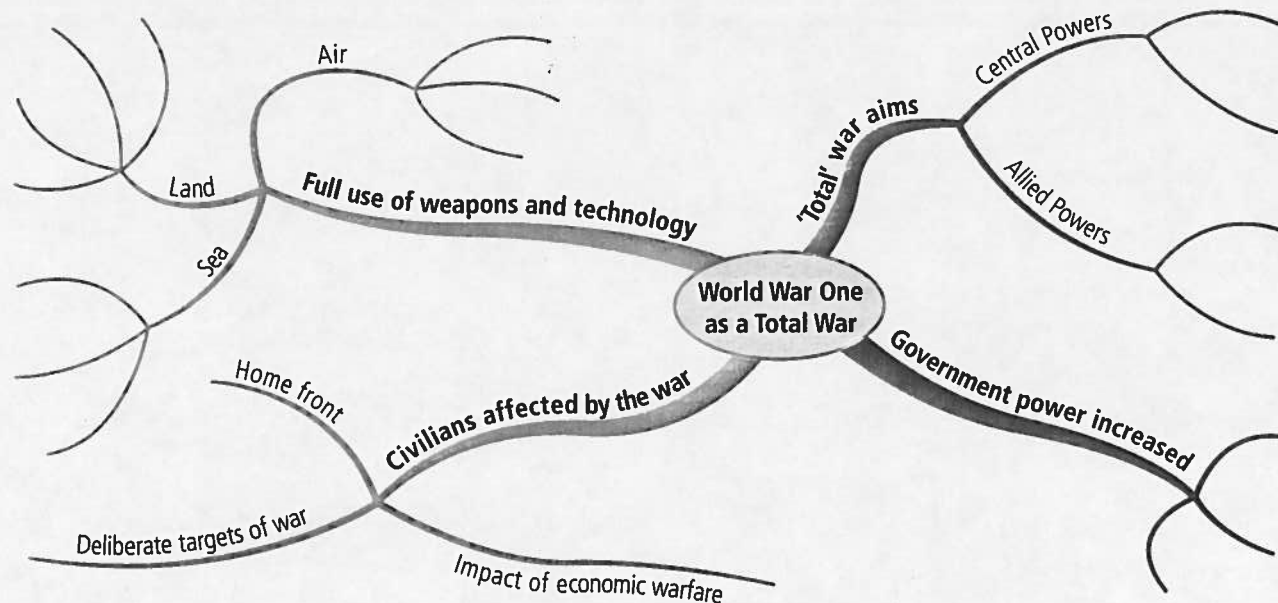
How far do ethics matter in wars? Are morality and warfare mutually exclusive ideas?

Discuss these ideas as a class. Write up the discussion in your ToK journal.



# In what ways was World War I a total war?

The diagram below highlights the key elements of World War I as total war.



## STUDENT STUDY SECTION

### Review activities

Copy out this mind map/spider diagram. As you read through the evidence below, add details to your diagram to make it a useful revision tool on World War I as a total war. Also, add links between the different sections where you see overlap.

▲ Mind map – World War I as a total war.

World War I is considered to be the first total war for several reasons:

- Both sides fought the war, not for limited aims but for total victory.
- Governments used all weaponry that they had at their disposal in order to win the war. They also developed new technologies and weaponry as the war progressed.
- It involved all people of the major countries – not only soldiers but also civilians. Civilians were deliberately targeted during the military conflict and they suffered from the economic warfare carried out by both sides. Women also played a major role in the war effort at home.
- In order to fight the kind of battles waged in World War I, and to weld the state into a united, efficient war-making machine, nations developed new ways of controlling the economy and their own populations. In the process of trying to do this, the countries of Europe experienced major changes in government as well as in established social and economic practices.

These points are discussed in more detail below.

## The aims of the belligerents

The *aims* of the powers involved in the fighting were 'total' and made any negotiated peace very difficult to achieve. Germany's aims in the September Memorandum have already been discussed on p.40. However, all the Great Powers developed ambitious war aims that they were reluctant to give up. France was determined to regain Alsace-Lorraine and both France



and Britain had committed themselves to crushing 'Prussian militarism'. Propaganda on both sides reinforced nationalist sentiment, justifying the war and demonizing the enemy. Governments would have had to do a serious turn around in terms of public opinion if they were to seek a compromise.

'A German "Peace"', from *Punch* magazine, 12 June 1918.

#### STUDENT STUDY SECTION



**A GERMAN "PEACE."**  
(FOR THE INSTRUCTION OF OUR PACIFISTS.)

#### Cartoon analysis

What is the message of this British cartoon?

In 1917, there were several calls for peace, coming from such divergent sources as the Pope, Lenin (the new Bolshevik leader of Russia) and Lord Lansdowne, a British **Conservative** and former Viceroy of India and Foreign Secretary. Pope Benedict XV called for a return to the territorial status quo of 1914 and a renunciation of all financial demands. Lenin also called for a peace without annexations or financial demands. Lord Lansdowne made the point that the war was costing more in terms of human and economic resources than could ever be regained, even by victory.

Yet both sides continued to believe that they *could* win. As P.M.H. Bell writes, 'Only victory would do, and only victory could justify the sacrifices made in the war' (*Twentieth Century Europe*, 2006).

### The use of weaponry

As you have read, both sides used the full arsenal of weapons at their disposal and also developed new technologies for land, sea and air warfare to try to break the deadlock and achieve total victory. This pursuit involved, in the case of gas, breaking international agreements; the Hague Convention of 1899 had prohibited the use of poisons as weapons.

## The role of civilians

### The impact of the fighting on civilians

As you have read earlier in this chapter, civilians were also affected by the actual fighting, and there were many casualties as a result of the new technologies available to both sides. Paris was shelled from a distance of 126km by the massive German gun known as 'Long Max', while first the Zeppelins, and later planes, made raids on Britain. British planes also inflicted severe damage on German factories and towns in the last year of the war.

On the Eastern Front, civilians were actually caught up in the battles. Because there was relatively little movement on the Western Front, civilians, after the initial battles, were able to keep away from the actual fighting and casualties only resulted due to inaccurate artillery fire. By contrast, the great advances and retreats that took place on the Eastern Front meant that civilians were involved in the violence, sometimes accidentally and sometimes deliberately. For example, Jews – viewed with suspicion by the Russian military – were actively attacked by advancing Russians. Other minorities also suffered: Germans, Gypsies, Hungarians and Turks were all deported from Russia's western provinces during the war. Ethnic violence also took place in the Balkans. As Niall Ferguson writes in *The War of the World*:

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*The Western Front had revealed a new level of industrialization of warfare – had seen the introduction of machines of death comparable in their lethal effectiveness with those Wells had imagined in The War of the Worlds. But the Eastern Front had seen an equally important transformation of warfare. There the death throes of the old Central and East European empires had dissolved the old boundaries between combatant and civilian. This kind of war proved much easier to start than to stop.*

From Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World*, 2006

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The lives of civilians in all countries were also affected by the huge losses of soldiers; all families and villages across Europe faced the consequences of the 'lost generation'. The enormous casualties in the early campaigns also led to the introduction of military conscription, in 1915 for France and 1916 for Britain.

### Genocide

World War I also saw the 20th century's first **genocide**. Turkish propaganda at the time presented the Armenians as saboteurs and a pro-Russian 'fifth column'. Hundreds of thousands of Armenians died from starvation and thirst when the Ottoman Turks deported them en masse from eastern Anatolia to the Syrian desert and elsewhere in 1915–16. There is dispute over the number of Armenians killed. Armenians say 1.5 million, while the republic of Turkey estimates the total to be 300,000. According to the International Association of Genocide scholars, the total was 'more than a million'.

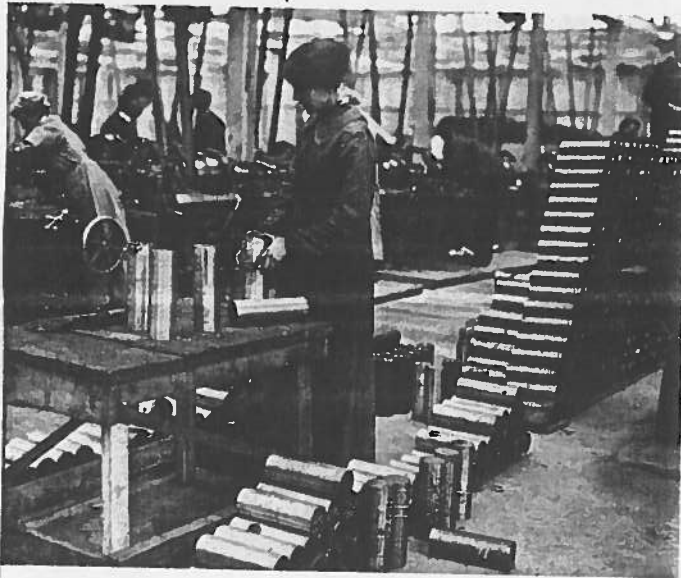
### The impact of economic warfare on civilians

Both sides realized the advantages of cutting off supplies to their enemies. They tried to disrupt each other's trade routes, and prevent vital foods and raw materials getting through by laying minefields at sea or attacking merchant ships with submarines or warships. The British blockade had a devastating effect on Germany, causing desperate food shortages and contributing to Germany's defeat in 1918. The average daily calorie input for a civilian adult dropped from around 1,500 in 1915 to below 1,000 in the winter of 1916–17. Germany's use of submarine warfare also subjected British civilians to shortages, and Russia suffered from the blockade of the Dardanelles. Rationing was introduced in many countries.

Artwork by Käthe Kollwitz;  
'The Children are Starving.'



Women working in a  
munitions factory.



### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### Research activity

##### Artists in World War I

Käthe Kollwitz is one of the many artists who recorded different aspects of the war in their artwork. She was German; an ardent socialist and pacifist who also lost her own son in the war. In her artwork, she portrayed stark images of the suffering caused by conflict.

Research the lives and work of artists from both sides of the conflict. Find artwork that reveals different aspects of the war.

#### Civilians as part of the war effort

The war saw the rapid growth of industry in all countries as governments tried to keep up with the production demands of total war. In Britain, France and Germany, these demands also meant women joining the workforce as more and more men left to fight in the war.

However, in all countries there was resistance to employing women, and it was not until 1915 that serious recruitment of women into industries began. Even then, there was little enthusiasm from employers and trade unions for women entering the workforce, and in Britain there had to be negotiations to reach agreements on women entering 'men's jobs' in munitions and engineering, e.g. that such arrangements were only to be temporary and that the women would not be trained up as 'fully skilled tradesmen'. Women were supposed to receive equal wages to men for similar jobs, but rarely did; their wages remained low, though higher than traditional women's work. This situation was despite the fact that the work in munitions in particular was extremely dangerous, with risks of TNT poisoning and accidental explosions. By 1917, one in four war workers was female, leading Joseph Joffre to claim that 'if the women in the war factories stopped for 20 minutes, we should lose the war.'

### The growth of government power

Other changes on the home fronts came with increased centralization of power in the hands of the governments of Britain, France and Germany. Citizens found themselves being subjected to much greater control from their governments as countries tried to ensure that maximum use was made of human and economic resources. In Britain, the government passed the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) in 1914, which gave the government wide-ranging powers to police many aspects of people's daily lives, such as restricting the hours of pub opening, preventing the use of binoculars and limiting the lighting of bonfires. In France, a 'state of siege' was proclaimed by President Raymond Poincaré, who placed eight departments of government under the control of the commander-in-chief, Joffre, and subject to military law. This number was later increased to 33 departments. In Germany, executive power was given to the deputy commanding generals of Germany's 24 military districts. The Tsar in Russia, meanwhile, used the pro-war atmosphere in 1914 as an opportunity to reassert autocratic powers and rule without the Duma (Russian parliament).



Government control was exercised in several key areas:

## Controlling manpower

To control manpower more effectively, conscription was introduced in most countries. In the UK it was introduced in 1916. This decision was taken not just because of the need for more men, but also because British industry could not afford to lose its skilled workers; so many miners had joined up, for example, that many had to be sent back in order to maintain the essential supplies of coal. The controlled direction of manpower was necessary to ensure that both industry and the armed forces were provided for; it has been estimated that it took three civilian workers to keep a soldier fighting in World War I. The government also took the lead in negotiating with the trade unions to get women to work in the munitions factories (see p.64).

## Controlling production

To increase the efficiency of production, governments started to exercise more control over industry. In the UK, this involved nationalizing key industries such as coal mining and shipping and also regulating wages and prices to ensure that inflation did not get out of hand. In Germany, industrialist Walter Rathenau also tried to bring industry under the control of the War Boards to oversee production, but he was never as successful at achieving this as the British government, and faced frustrating interference from the German military.

In Britain, involvement in the workplace by the government extended to intervention in areas such as canteens and child care, and the setting up of various committees such as the Health of Munitions Workers Committee.

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*By 1918, the Ministry of Munitions owned more than 250 factories, administering a further 20,000 and the government employed 5 million workers. A huge experiment in 'state capitalism' was under way, and the significance of this was not lost on workers, employers, unions and Labour politicians. The change in attitude is aptly illustrated by Lloyd George's famous promise of 'habitations for the heroes who have won the war' the day after the armistice, and the subsequent establishment of the Ministry of Health.*

From Ian Cawood and David McKinnon-Bell, *The First World War*, 2001

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## Controlling morale

In order to motivate the home fronts and keep up morale, governments also spent a great deal of time and energy on wartime propaganda. At first, propaganda was used to emphasize the defensive nature of the war; each side produced propaganda to show that it was simply defending its soil and national pride. Later, propaganda became more important to justify the length of the war and to counter opposition to its continuation. Propaganda portrayed the enemy as an inhuman force that must be defeated at all costs. The British government also created a Ministry of Information, making propaganda a key element of its war policy.

## Controlling the economy

In order to pay for the war, Britain increased direct taxation. It also abandoned its 19th-century policy of **free trade** by adopting tariffs on certain types of imported goods. All countries borrowed immense sums to pay for the war. The Russians, French and Italians borrowed heavily from the British and the Americans; the British also borrowed massive amounts from the USA. The governments of all combatants borrowed from their own people through 'war loans', which would be paid with interest after the war.



In Russia, borrowing led to rapid inflation as the amount of money in circulation increased; this contributed to the disastrous economic situation in Russia leading to revolution in 1917. In Germany, money for the war was raised almost entirely through loans and government **savings bonds**, which the government intended to repay when victory came. Only 6 per cent was raised by taxation as against 20 per cent in Britain. Germany planned to pay for the war through the imposition of severe treaties on its defeated enemies and did not plan for defeat. When defeat came, however, Germany was bankrupt and thousands of Germans lost their savings.

### STUDENT STUDY SECTION

#### Essay plan

Why did World War I last so long?

#### Introduction

Don't forget to put the question into context here. Explain expectations that the war would be over quickly and why there was this expectation. You also need to identify the key points that you will be covering in your essay and give an outline of your main argument.

#### Main body of the essay

Below is a list of points that you could consider in this essay. Look back through this chapter, and in pairs discuss how each of these factors contributed to the length of the war. (You may want to make some of these points whole paragraphs in themselves, or combine two or more into one paragraph.)

- The two sides were of similar strength
- The trench systems on the Western Front
- The tactics of the commanders
- Technological developments
- Failure of the Schlieffen Plan
- Failure to gain command of the seas
- Failure at attempts to negotiate peace
- Failure of diversionary fronts.

#### Conclusion

State your overall argument based on what you have discussed in the main body of your essay.

#### Student Answer

*The tactics of the generals were also a key reason why World War I lasted so long. World War I was a completely new type of war and one for which the generals had not been trained. It took a long time for the generals to adapt to trench warfare and the technological developments of the machine gun and artillery. Initially, for example, the French generals believed in 'élan' and forced their troops to wear red trousers even though this would cause huge casualties. Many generals, for example Haig and Falkenhayn, were and still are criticized for their tactics of 'attrition', resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths at the battles of the Somme and Verdun. They believed the only way of breaking the stalemate was to wear down the enemy until you were the last man standing. However, this would take a very long time which is why the war would last for so long.*

Annotate the above paragraph to indicate:

- The opening 'signpost' sentence (which should relate to the question and make it clear what the topic of the paragraph is going to be about)

#### ● Examiner's hint

Constructing good paragraphs in your essay.

As indicated by the essay planning guideline on p.36, each of your paragraphs should follow a certain structure. The paragraph opposite, taken from a student answer to the essay question, makes a good attempt at doing this.

- An explanation as to why this topic is relevant to the question
- Evidence to support the argument
- The final sentence linking back to the question and restating the relevance of the paragraph.

How could you improve on this paragraph?

Also, plan and write this essay: Why did the Central Powers lose World War I?

Look back at the discussion on pp.59–60 for material on this subject. You may want to structure your essay along the same lines, i.e. failures of Germany and then strengths/successes of the Allies. Alternatively, you could divide the factors into the following sections:

- War on land
- War at sea
- Total war and how Germany organized its resources compared to the Allies
- Economic factors and the collapse of Germany. (Do you consider economic or military factors to be the most important reasons for the Central Powers losing the war?)