

1 The military and strategic background of the war 1914–15

Why during 1914–15 did the war of movement turn into static trench warfare?

KEY TERMS

Strategy The military planning and management of war.

Plan 17 The French plan to make a frontal attack on Germany if war broke out.

KEY FIGURES

Helmut von Moltke (1848–1914)

Chief of the German general staff 1906–14. Commanded the invasion of Belgium and France, but was replaced by General von Falkenhayn after the Battle of Marne when his health broke down.

Paul von Hindenburg (1847–1934)

Hindenburg formed a remarkable partnership with General von Ludendorff, his chief of staff in Russia, whose organisational skills complemented Hindenburg's great popularity. In 1925 Hindenburg was elected president of Germany.

Initial war plans and strategy, August–December 1914

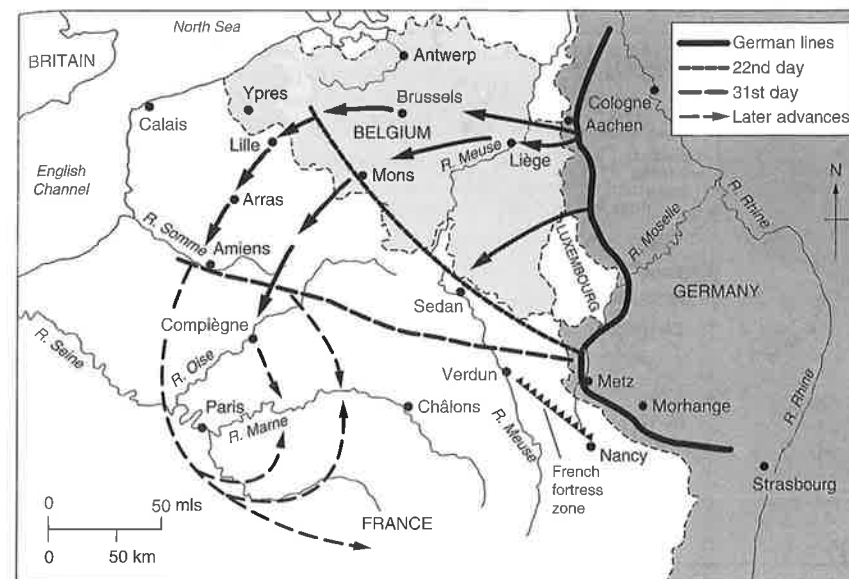
The initial strategy of the German invasion of France was determined by the Schlieffen Plan (see the map on page 63). It was imperative for the Germans to defeat the French army, which was the most effective in the Triple Entente, in a lightning campaign before Russia had completed mobilisation, and then turn east to deal with Russia.

At first, the German advance under the command of General von Moltke made good progress. The Germans swung through Belgium and Luxembourg and on into north-eastern France. The French meanwhile, in accordance with Plan 17, attempted to retake Alsace-Lorraine, but were repulsed with huge casualties. Soon, however, the German strategy began to go very wrong. Contrary to expectations, the Russians advanced into east Prussia. This necessitated the dispatch of two army corps from France to Prussia, although by the time they had arrived, the Russians had already been defeated at Tannenberg by Hindenburg.

The German's absence on the Western Front had fatal consequences. By the end of August the French had slowed down the German advance and prevented the encirclement of Paris. Then, together with the small British Expeditionary Force of 120,000 men, they counterattacked across the river Marne on 6 September and forced the Germans to retreat behind the river Aisne, where they dug in and repulsed the Allied attack.

By the autumn of 1914 the war was beginning to settle into the pattern it retained until 1918. In the west, German attempts to outflank the Allies in northern France and Belgium failed after they were halted in the first Battle of Ypres in November. The war of movement was turning into static trench warfare, and a line of makeshift trenches now ran from the North Sea to the Swiss border.

On the Eastern Front, East Prussia was cleared of Russian troops but the Russians were still able to invade Austria and threaten Silesia. Clearly, Russia was far from being knocked out of the war; a new Austro-German campaign would have to be mounted in 1915.



How the Schlieffen Plan was supposed to work in the west. The Schlieffen Plan was drawn up in December 1905.

What does this map and key tell you about the aims of the Schlieffen Plan in the west?

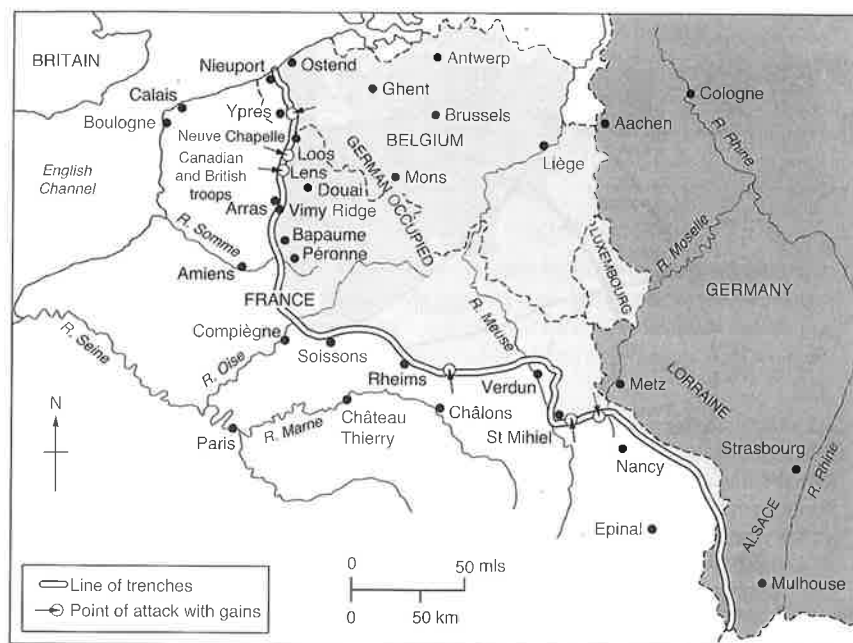
The widening war 1914–15

Japan declares war on Germany

Japan quickly seized the chance to declare war on Germany on 23 August 1914 to capture German territory in the Chinese province of Shantung as well as the German Pacific islands. Japan refused to send any troops to the Western Front but its navy helped Britain to ensure the security of the Pacific Ocean. Japan's primary interest was to strengthen its hold on China.

Turkey joins the Central Powers

Both the Germans and the Allies also attempted to secure Turkish support, at least by rival offers of concessions. In the end, the Germans were able to outbid their enemies by promising their support for the Turkish annexation of Russian border territory and possibly the restoration of the Aegean islands, which had been ceded to Greece. Britain also seriously damaged its bargaining position by refusing to hand over two Turkish warships which had just been constructed in British dockyards. Turkey declared war on the Entente powers on 28 October 1914.



The Western Front, 1915. This map shows the line of trenches stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border.

? What does this map tell you about the nature of the war on the Western Front in 1915?

KEY TERMS

Anzac Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

Mesopotamia An ancient Greek term literally meaning 'the land between two rivers'; the Tigris and Euphrates. Today this area consists of Iraq, as well as some parts of north-eastern Syria, south-eastern Turkey and south-western Iran.

Turkey's entry into the war was a direct threat to Britain's position in Egypt and led to the dispatch of the **Anzac** Corps to defend the Suez Canal. In November, an Anglo-Indian force captured Basra to secure Britain's oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. From there, over the next three years British forces advanced ever deeper in **Mesopotamia**. Despite defeat at Kut in April 1916, Baghdad was finally occupied nearly a year later.

Italy abandons neutrality

Throughout the winter of 1914–15 the Italian government negotiated with both the Central Powers and the Allies to gain the maximum concessions for abandoning neutrality. In the end, Italy entered the war on the Allied side in May 1915, and by the Treaty of London was promised not only the Austrian territories of South Tyrol, Istria and nearly half the Dalmatian coastline (see the map on page 97), but also territory in Africa and the Middle East.

SOURCE A

From Bernhard Fürst von Bülow, *Denkwürdigkeiten*, volume 3, Ullstein, 1931, p. 220 (translated by the author). Von Bülow, who was sent on a special mission to Rome in December 1914 to negotiate a German–Italian alliance, later recorded in his memoirs that the Italian foreign minister, Sonino.

... did not hesitate to make clear his views of the position ... As war objectives the Allies had promised Italy all Austrian territories populated by Italian subjects. If Austria wishes to avoid war with Italy ... she must offer definite binding concessions. Such concessions must then be made in a generous and correct manner. They must not be grudgingly granted to Italy rather as if one was throwing a burdensome beggar some money. They must be the expression of the genuine wish between the old enemies of Austria and Italy to create a lasting, strong and friendly relationship.

The minimum was ... the immediate and unconditional handing over of the purely Italian parts of the Tyrol, the Trentino, autonomy for Trieste within the Austrian Empire as well as better treatment of Italians in Istria and in Dalmatia.

Study Source A. What light does this source shed on Italy's attitude to the war in December 1914?

The war in Africa

With Germany unable to send reinforcements as a result of British naval power, German colonies in west Africa (Togoland and the Cameroons) were quickly seized by Allied forces. In July 1915 German South West Africa surrendered to British South African forces. It was only in German East Africa (present-day Tanzania) that the Germans, under the leadership of General von Lettow-Vorbeck, managed to win a successful **guerrilla war** against the British right up to November 1918.

Military stalemate in the west: the development of trench warfare

By 1915 the key element of the defensive war on the Western Front was the trench. Only through the construction of trenches could troops gain protection from enemy firepower. The trenches were protected with massive barbed-wire entanglements and machine guns. Over the course of the next three years the trench system on both sides of the Western Front became far more elaborate. Trenches were shored up with timber and sandbags, and deep concrete dugouts were built.

In 1915 both Allied and German attacks followed a depressingly similar pattern. Air reconnaissance first located the enemy machine-gun nests and trench system, which were then pounded with heavy artillery shells. The infantry then went 'over the top' in waves about 100 metres (100 yards) apart with men only six to eight metres (6–8 yards) distant from each other. The attackers often took the first line of trenches but were then repulsed by a counterattack. In 1915 no British or French attack managed to gain more than five kilometres of land.

KEY TERM

Guerrilla war An irregular war fought by small groups of troops acting independently.

KEY TERMS

Creeping barrage

A moving curtain of artillery fire aimed to eliminate opposition in front of advancing troops.

Howitzer A gun for firing shells at relatively high trajectories, with a steep angle of descent.

New science and technology

To break the trench warfare deadlock both sides attempted to develop new techniques and new weapons.

Artillery

From the early days of the war it had been clear that only artillery could effectively destroy trench defences and give a frontal attack some chance of success. Throughout 1915, both sides sought to improve their deficiencies in heavy guns and devise new techniques for their use, such as the creeping barrage. By 1916 the Germans had developed enormous howitzers – ‘Big Berthas’ as they were called – which could fire a shell weighing nearly a ton.

SOURCE B



British troops in sandbagged trenches in France in 1917. Trenches were sandbagged to prevent them from collapsing as a result of enemy artillery fire.

Gas

As early as October 1914 the German Second Army was considering employing gas as a means to achieve a breakthrough, but it was not until April 1915 that it was first used at Ypres. It failed, largely because the Germans did not exploit the initial surprise and panic. Later, with the development of gas masks, the impact of gas was minimised, but it marked another stage in the development of modern scientific warfare.

SOURCE C



What does Source C indicate about the role of artillery on the Western Front?

In this photograph, taken during the First World War, a British soldier stands among a massive pile of artillery shell cases, the remains of what had been fired into German lines.

Tanks

Essentially, at this stage of the war, military technology favoured defence rather than attack. However, in March 1915 an eventual technical solution to the problem of barbed wire, trenches and machine guns was foreshadowed by the invention of the tank. It linked two ideas: the use of armour plating to protect soldiers while advancing, and caterpillar tracks to help them cross trenches and surmount barbed wire. Trials were first held in February 1916, but it was not until the battle of Cambrai in November 1917 that tanks first effectively displayed their potential (see page 75).

The use of sea power 1914–15: the Gallipoli landing

By January 1915 the Royal Navy unquestionably controlled the seas. The flow of British and Empire troops to France and the Middle East was unimpeded. The German **China Squadron** under Graf von Spee, after some brilliant successes against the British, had been destroyed and Germany itself was blockaded.

Given the stalemate on the Western Front, British politicians increasingly wondered whether sea power could somehow break the military deadlock and lead to a speedy end to the war. Inspired by Winston Churchill, the decision was taken to force the Dardanelles. The plan, according to the British **official historian**, was ‘one of the few great strategical conceptions of world war’. It would have knocked Turkey out of the war, opened up Russia to military supplies from western Europe and the USA, and in turn enabled it to export

KEY TERMS

China Squadron Units of the German navy used for protecting their possessions in the Far East.

Official historian

A historian appointed by the government to write the history of the war.

Winston Churchill

- 1874 Born into an aristocratic family
- 1900 Entered parliament as a Conservative
- 1904 Joined the Liberal Party
- 1910 Home secretary
- 1911–15 First Lord of the Admiralty
- 1917 Minister of munitions
- 1918–21 Secretary for war and air
- 1924 Rejoined the Conservative Party
- 1924–9 Chancellor of the exchequer
- 1940–5 Appointed wartime prime minister
- 1951–5 Elected as prime minister

1965 Died and given a state funeral

Churchill was one of the most original and gifted politicians of the twentieth century. He had great energy and powers of leadership, but at the same time these gifts could lead him into making disastrous errors of judgement. During the 1930s he was excluded from government because he opposed concessions to Indian nationalists and irritated the government with his repeated warnings about the dangers of German rearmament.

In May 1940, Churchill was appointed prime minister and proved to be a charismatic wartime leader, leading Britain to victory in 1945.



wheat supplies to Britain. It could well have altered the course of the war and perhaps even have prevented the Russian Revolution. British and Anzac troops landed on 25 April on Gallipoli but an earlier naval bombardment had deprived them of the element of surprise. The campaign rapidly degenerated into trench warfare and the troops were withdrawn in December.

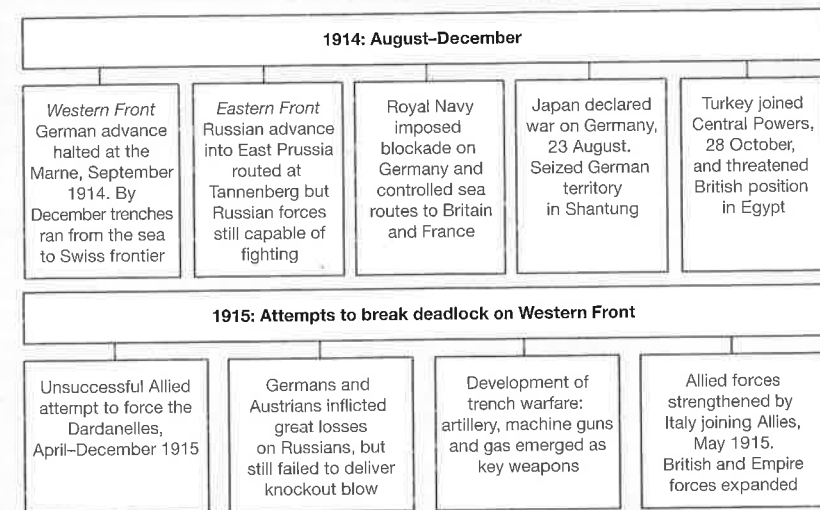
In October 1915 further Allied troops were landed in Salonika to help Serbia, but they had little success until September 1918 (see page 79). The failure of the Gallipoli campaign and the absence of any early success in Salonika showed that there was no 'easy fix' and that only on the Western Front could a decision be obtained.

The Germans attempt to achieve a decision in the east

In France the Germans remained on the defensive throughout 1915. Eight German divisions were removed from the Western to the Eastern Front and formed the basis of a new German army there. The intention was that they, together with Austrian troops, would deliver a knockout blow against Russia. A brilliantly successful attack was launched against the Russians in southern Poland in early May. The Central Powers broke through the Russian lines between Gorlice and Tarnow and advanced 150 km within two weeks. In August, Warsaw was taken and by September the Central Powers' troops had advanced 200 km to the east of Warsaw. Again, as in the autumn of 1914, spectacular results were achieved. The Russians suffered nearly 2 million casualties.

One consequence of this success was that Bulgaria joined the Central Powers in September. However, great as this success was, Russia had not been defeated. By the autumn the Russians had consolidated their positions. The Central Powers were still locked in a two-front war with no decisive victory in sight.

Summary diagram: The military and strategic background of the war 1914–15



2 1916: The deadlock still unbroken

► Why was neither side able to achieve a decisive victory in 1916?

Allied plans

What options had the Allied and Central Powers in January 1916? Both had failed to achieve a decisive breakthrough in 1915. The Allies needed to bring to bear on Germany their huge reserves of strength. France had been weakened but its army was still the most effective on the Allied side. The British Empire was mobilising its resources effectively and the British now had over a million men in France. Italy too was an ally, while Russia had unlimited reserves of manpower if only they could be exploited.

The answer, of course, was to plan a co-ordinated attack on the Central Powers by all four Allied nations, which was agreed on in principle at the Inter-Allied Military Conference at Chantilly in December 1915.

German plans

The situation was more difficult for the Germans and Austrians. They had limited manpower resources and needed to force one of their enemies out of the

KEY FIGURE

Erich von Falkenhayn (1861–1922)

German chief of the general staff until August 1916. He then commanded armies on the Eastern Front and in Mesopotamia.

? Why, according to Source D, was it so important to defeat France and how did Falkenhayn intend to achieve this?

war. Should they renew the offensive against Russia; concentrate on weakening France, as the major military power on the Western Front, to the point where it could no longer take the strain of fighting; or eliminate the British army by driving its troops into the sea?

General von Falkenhayn, the German chief of staff, argued that if France could be defeated, Britain would be fatally weakened by the loss of its ally. To achieve this he came to the conclusion given in Source D.

SOURCE D

General von Falkenhayn, the German chief of staff, quoted in John Terraine, *The First World War, 1914–1918*, Papermac, 1984, p. 97.

As I have already insisted, the strain on France has almost reached a breaking point – though it is borne with the most remarkable devotion. If we succeeded in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense, they have nothing more to hope for, that breaking point will be reached and England's best sword knocked out of her hand. We can probably do enough for our purposes with limited resources. Within our reach behind the French sector of the Western Front there are objectives for the retention of which the French General Staff would be compelled to throw in every man they have. If they do so, the forces of France will bleed to death – as there can be no question of a voluntary withdrawal – whether we reach our goal or not.

Verdun

The place Falkenhayn chose for his decisive attack was the historic fortress of Verdun. He calculated correctly that, while it had only limited military value, its defence would become a priority because its fall would be perceived by the French as a major defeat and so weaken the fighting morale of the nation. Falkenhayn's plan was simple: the Germans would mount a series of limited attacks. These, preceded by brief, intense artillery bombardments, would allow the Germans to make short advances and then consolidate their positions before the French counterattacked. Falkenhayn calculated that the French would be destroyed by the 'mincing machine' of the German artillery.

The attack began on 21 February. The French did indeed suffer terribly, but as the siege wore on until it ended in a German withdrawal in November, it became clear that the Germans too had been sucked into a 'mincing machine'. The Germans sustained 336,831 casualties and the French some 362,000.

France's allies attack

To relieve the pressure on Verdun, the Italians, the Russians and the British all launched offensives in the summer of 1916. The Italians attacked on the Trentino front in May. The Russian attack under General Brusilov (1856–1926) was launched in June and on 1 July the British army advanced on the German positions north of the Somme.

The Italians were quickly halted by 10 June. The Russians initially achieved a brilliant success against the Austrians on the Carpathian front, taking some quarter of a million prisoners, which persuaded Romania to join the war on the side of the Allies and forced Falkenhayn to transfer reserves from the Western Front. However, Brusilov's success was not exploited by any of the other Russian army corps and ground to a halt in the autumn.

The British attack on the Somme in July was successful in taking some of the pressure off the French. It was, too, the first battle in which a small number of tanks were used, but when the advance halted in November it had cost about 415,000 British casualties (killed and injured) for the gain of a strip of land of some 50 km with a maximum depth of 11 km.

The Battle of Jutland

There was also a possibility that the Germans could achieve a major naval success by severely damaging the British fleet, even if in the process the German navy was itself defeated. This would, as the Germans put it in 1898, 'so substantially weaken the enemy that, in spite of a victory he might have obtained, his own position in the world would no longer be secured by an adequate fleet'. In other words, Britain would find it much more difficult to find sufficient ships to escort troops and supplies to France and the Middle East. Admiral Jellicoe, the commander-in-chief of the British Grand Fleet, was aware

? What does Source E indicate about the weather and conditions during the Battle of Jutland?

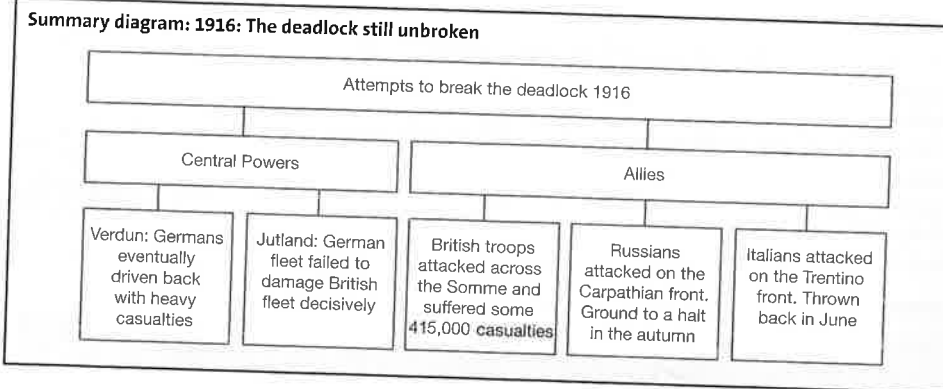
SOURCE E



The German fleet is deflected from bombarding the British coast by Admiral Beatty's battle cruiser squadron, which forms a protective screen during the Battle of Jutland in June 1916.

of this risk and appreciated that if he led the fleet into defeat he could 'lose the war in a single afternoon'!

On 31 May, Rear-Admiral von Scheer succeeded in tempting the British fleet out of its bases. Although in the subsequent Battle of Jutland, he inflicted more damage on the British than his own fleet sustained, aided by bad weather and poor visibility he rapidly withdrew back to the German North Sea bases. He may have given the Royal Navy a bloody nose but strategically the situation was not changed. The German fleet was not destroyed but it was confined to its bases in northern Germany. The British fleet retained its overwhelming numerical superiority, and the blockade was still in place. As one US newspaper observed: 'The German fleet has assaulted its jailor, but it is still in jail.'



3 1917: 'No peace without victory'

What were the consequences of the German decision to declare unrestricted submarine warfare against the Allies?

Why was no compromise peace negotiated between the Central Powers and the Entente in 1917?

KEY TERM

Unrestricted submarine warfare Sinking by German submarines (called U-boats) of all merchant ships, Allied or neutral, engaged in carrying goods to or from Allied states.

The declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare, January 1917

Bethmann Hollweg was reluctant to risk a rupture with the USA. Yet in January 1917, against his better judgement, he was pushed by the German high command into sanctioning **unrestricted submarine warfare** against all shipping trading with the Allies, on the optimistic assumption that this would

rapidly defeat Britain. Inevitably, this ran the risk of drawing the USA into the war on the Allied side, because since 1914 the US economy had become increasingly dependent on exporting to the Allies munitions, food and a wide range of industrial products.

Predictably, US shipping and commerce suffered severely from the U-boat attacks. On 6 April **President Wilson** declared war on the Central Powers as an '**associated power**' rather than an ally of Britain and France. Potentially, this was a development of immense importance because the manpower reserves and economic strength of the USA would now be available to the Allies. On the other hand, it would take the USA at least a year to train and equip an army that could fight in France.

The development of the convoy system

Initially, Germany's gamble that unrestricted submarine warfare would drive Britain out of the war appeared to be paying off. By April a million tons of Allied shipping had been lost, and Admiral Jellicoe told his US counterpart that 'it is impossible for us to go on with the war if losses like this continue'.

In May the **convoy system** was introduced, however, and by the autumn, with the help of the US navy, Allied shipping was escorted in both directions across the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. This, combined with the introduction of rationing in Britain, prevented starvation and thwarted German hopes that they could knock Britain out of the war.

The Hindenburg line

At the end of 1916 General Ludendorff (see page 76) told Bethmann Hollweg that if the war were prolonged without the collapse of one of the Allies, Germany would inevitably be defeated. He feared above all that a renewed offensive on the scale of the Somme would break clean through the German lines. As a result of this advice, the Germans constructed a strongly fortified line in north-eastern France, called the Hindenburg line, to which they retreated in March 1917. The line would also save the Germans manpower because they would require thirteen fewer divisions to defend it.

The Nivelle offensive and the exhaustion of the French army

The strength of the Hindenburg line forced the Allies to abandon plans for a fresh attack across the Somme. Instead, they were persuaded by the new commander-in-chief of the French armies, General Nivelle, that a massive attack, just south of the Hindenburg line, composed of over 50 French divisions, would drive right through the German lines and roll them up in a mere 48 hours.

KEY FIGURE

Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924)

President of the USA 1912–21. In April 1917 he was compelled to declare war on Germany by the resumption of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare. On 8 January 1918 he issued his Fourteen Points as the basis for a negotiated peace.

KEY TERMS

Associated power The USA was not bound by any treaties with Britain and France in 1917–19, and was free, if necessary, to pursue its own policies.

Convoy system Group of ships travelling together under escort.

KEY FIGURE

Philippe Pétain (1856–1951)

Commander-in-chief of the French army 1917–18, appointed prime minister in June 1940 and concluded an armistice with Hitler. He was head of state of Vichy France and in 1945 was tried as a traitor.

What does Source F reveal about German tactics during the offensive of March–July 1918 (see page 78)?

SOURCE F



Past a twisted iron bed frame, a relic of the civilian world that once existed here, and the body of a French soldier fallen on the edge of a shell hole, German troops advance through smoke and fire. This head-on combat photograph, including the action of a man about to hurl a grenade, was taken as Hindenburg's army overran Allied lines near the Somme in March 1918.

The attack opened on 16 April. Once again, to quote the military historian John Terraine, 'the machine guns ... survived the bombardment – machine guns in undreamt-of numbers, spaced in depth to trap and decimate the French infantry'. Such was the slaughter that by the middle of May the French army was paralysed by a series of mutinies. By the beginning of June there were only two reliable divisions on the French central front covering Paris.

A French collapse was prevented by Nivelle's replacement, General Pétain, who managed by a well-judged combination of firmness and improvement in the living conditions of the French soldier to restore morale and discipline. Miraculously, the extent of the mutinies was concealed from both the Germans and France's allies.

On the Western Front, the main burden of the war now fell on the British, who launched a major offensive at Ypres in July, but by early November, when it ended, only a few miles had been gained. The Germans had suffered heavy losses of over 200,000 men, and Ludendorff was concerned about 'the demoralising effect of the battle' on his troops, but the British losses of 245,000 were even higher.

The Battle of Cambrai

Briefly, in November 1917, the future was glimpsed in the battle of Cambrai: 381 British tanks attacked the Hindenburg line at Cambrai. The tank force was divided up into groups of twelve machines each supported by infantry. The tanks carried great bundles of brushwood. These were dropped in the enemy trenches and served as bridges for the tanks to pass over. The Germans were caught completely by surprise and their front lines, which had been considered impregnable, were overrun. The barbed wire was crushed flat and the tanks rolled forward to a depth of six to ten kilometres (four to six miles) on a ten-kilometre (six-mile) front. However, owing to a lack of tank and infantry reserves, the attack ran out of steam and over the next week the Germans won back nearly all the land they had lost.

The Russian Revolutions, February–October 1917

In Russia the February Revolution had swept away the tsarist regime. The new **Provisional Government** initially promised to fight a 'people's war' against the Germans. It hoped that carrying on the war under a new democratic regime would ignite a great burst of popular enthusiasm, but the Russian army was in no state to fight. Its morale was low and discipline was undermined by the Bolsheviks. In July a badly planned attack against the Austrians in Galicia ended in a rout. In October the Bolsheviks seized power and were determined to pull Russia out of the war.

Why no negotiated peace?

In 1917 there seemed to be a brief window of opportunity for peace negotiations. Karl, the new Austrian emperor, desperate to save his empire from disintegration, had already put out peace-feelers to the Allies in the autumn of 1916. The Pope also appealed to the warring powers in August 1917, as did the International Socialist Conference, which met in Stockholm in June. In Germany the **Reichstag** in July 1917 actually passed a resolution 'for a peace of understanding'.

Both sides were suffering from the war of attrition. Why then did the war not end in 1917? In the past such a situation of mutual exhaustion would have led to a compromise peace, but the First World War was not a war waged by professional armies and diplomats. On the contrary, it was a people's war where whole nations were mobilised against each other. To persuade them to work, fight and ultimately to die for their country, the popular nationalism, militarism and imperialism of the pre-war period (see pages 1–4) had to be appealed to and exploited. The enemy had to be demonised, and the population inspired with the prospect of an absolute victory that would make worthwhile their present suffering. If that failed, then the population might indeed turn against the war and the regime which had led them into war.

KEY TERMS

Provisional Government
A government in power until the holding of elections.

People's war Popular war fought by the mass of the people.

Reichstag German parliament.

KEY TERM

Fatherland's Party The party was founded close to the end of 1917 and represented political circles supporting the war. By the summer of 1918 it had around 1,250,000 members.

In Russia, war weariness did produce revolution, but in 1917 the key belligerents, Britain, France and Germany, were not yet ready to make peace. The entry of the USA into the war gave Britain and France the hope of ultimate victory. In December 1916 Lloyd George (see page 89) came to power to head a political coalition with a mandate to fight on for victory. In France, too, eleven months later Georges Clemenceau (see page 88) was appointed prime minister, and was committed to waging total war against the Central Powers.

In Germany the collapse of Russia also held out the prospect of eventual victory, which would make the struggle worthwhile after all. Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff, backed by a mass nationalist party, the **Fatherland's Party**, reacted to the Reichstag's peace resolution by insisting on the dismissal of Bethmann Hollweg in July 1917 and his replacement by a chancellor who was essentially a puppet of the high command.

SOURCE G

From the Peace Resolution passed by the German Reichstag on 19 July 1917, quoted in D.G. Williamson, *Germany Since 1815*, Palgrave, 2005, p. 406.

As on 4 August 1914, the German people, on the threshold of the fourth year of the war, stand behind the words of the speech from the throne: 'we are not driven by a desire for conquest!' Germany took up arms only for the defence of its freedom and independence and for the preservation of its territorial integrity.

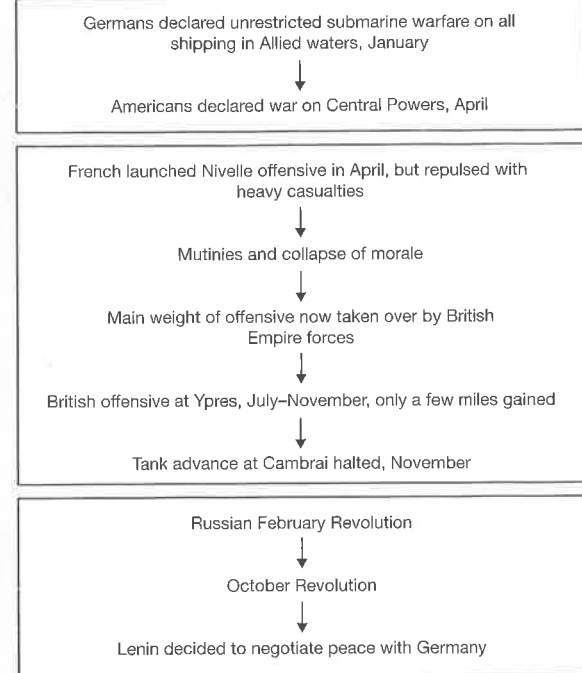
The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding and lasting reconciliation of nations. Such a peace is not in keeping with forcible annexations of territory or forcible measures of political, economic or financial character.

The Reichstag also rejects all plans which would result in economic isolation and hostility among nations after the war. The freedom of the seas must be made secure. Only economic peace will prepare the ground for the friendly living together of the nations.

The Reichstag will actively support the creation of international judicial organizations.

So long as the enemy governments will not agree to such a peace ... the German people will stand together as one.

Summary diagram: 1917: 'No peace without victory'



4 1918: The final year of the war

► How did the Germans benefit from the Bolshevik Revolution?

The impact of the Bolshevik Revolution

In Russia, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in October 1917. This not only led to a two-year civil war, but also gave the Germans their best chance of victory since August 1914. **Lenin**, the Bolshevik leader, although hoping that the revolution in Russia would trigger similar revolts throughout Europe, realised that if his regime was to survive he needed to make immediate peace with Germany.

On 22 December Lenin began negotiations with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk after announcing to the world that he supported a peace without annexations or reparations. As the Allies ignored his calls for a general peace, Lenin had

KEY FIGURE

Vladimir Ilych Lenin (1870–1924)

Leader of the Bolshevik Party from 1903. In 1917 the Bolsheviks seized power but were then faced with a bitter civil war, which they won under Lenin's leadership. In 1922–3 he suffered a series of strokes and power passed to Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev.

no option but to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia was forced to give independence to Poland, the Baltic provinces, the Ukraine, Finland and the Caucasus.

The final German offensive, March–July 1918

In January 1918 on the Western Front, the initiative now lay with Germany. The majority of German troops on the Russian front had been moved to France, and by early March there were 193 German divisions as against 173 Allied. Despite warnings of an imminent offensive, the Allies were slow to withdraw troops from other fronts to make up this deficiency.

Ludendorff's intention was to split the Allied armies and push the British back to the coast. The Germans attacked at the juncture between the British and French fronts where they had a local superiority of 69 divisions to 33. Specially trained groups of storm-troopers armed with light machine guns, light trench mortars and flame throwers infiltrated the enemy trenches and managed to penetrate to the artillery. By the end of March the Germans had advanced nearly 65 km.

The Allies responded by setting up a joint command under **General Foch**, which was able to co-ordinate military operations against the Germans. Troops were recalled from the other theatres and for the first time US divisions were committed to battle. By mid-July the Allies were in a position to counterattack. On 8 August a Franco-British force attacked east of Amiens using over 400 tanks and overwhelmed the forward German divisions. Ludendorff was later to describe this as 'the blackest day of the German army in the history of the war ... it put the decline of our fighting power beyond all doubt'.

SOURCE H



The Allied generals photographed in Alsace-Lorraine in 1918. From left to right: Joffre (France), Foch, the Supreme Commander on the Western Front (France), Haig (UK), Pershing (USA), Gillain (Belgium), Albricci (Italy) and Haller (Poland). The generals are attending a ceremony marking the French reconquest of Alsace-Lorraine, which had been taken by Germany in 1870 (see page 14).

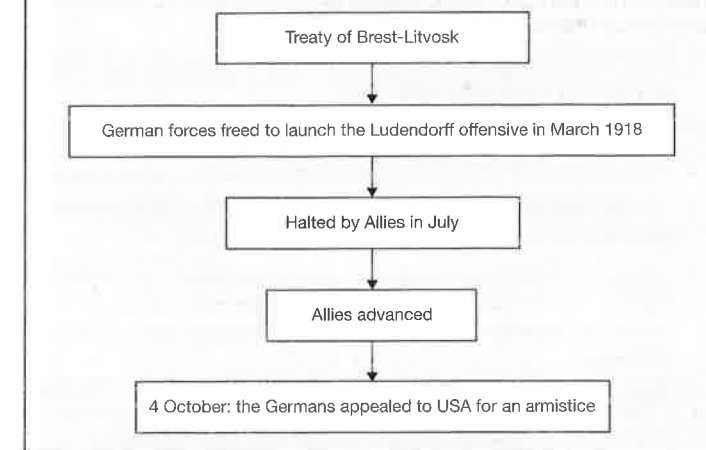
KEY FIGURE

Ferdinand Foch (1851–1929)

Commanded a French army group on the Somme, 1916, then in 1917 chief-of-staff to Pétain, and in April 1918 appointed commander-in-chief of the Allied armies on the Western Front. He played a prominent part in the Paris Peace Conference and retired in 1920.

? Study Source H. To what extent does this photograph indicate that France was the major military power among the Allied and associated powers?

Summary diagram: 1918: The final year of the war



5 The armistices of October and November 1918

► Why were the terms of the armistice agreement with Germany so severe?

► To what extent did the armistice terms contain the key war aims of the Allies and associated powers?

By September the Germans were in full retreat on the Western Front. The Austrians were coming under ever greater pressure from Italian forces and the Bulgarians were decisively defeated in Macedonia by an allied army advancing from Salonika in Greece (see page 68 and the map on page 97). On 28 September, Ludendorff and Hindenburg had little option but to concede defeat and advised the Kaiser to form a new **parliamentary government**, which would impress President Wilson with its democratic credentials and facilitate the negotiation of an armistice on the basis of the Fourteen Points. Summing these points up in February 1918, Wilson had proclaimed that the USA wanted a peace of 'no annexations, no contributions, no punitive damages'.

On 4 October the new German government asked Wilson for 'an immediate armistice' on the basis of the Fourteen Points. Similar requests then came from Bulgaria, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, all of which faced imminent defeat by Allied forces.

KEY TERM

Parliamentary government A government that is responsible to a parliament elected by the people.

SOURCE I

From the Fourteen Points speech delivered by President Woodrow Wilson to a joint session of the US Congress on 8 January 1918.

1. *Open covenants [agreements], openly arrived at ... diplomacy shall always proceed frankly and in the public view.*
2. *Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters ...*
3. *The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers ...*
4. *Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.*
5. *A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims ... the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.*
6. *The evacuation of all Russian territory ...*
7. *Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty, which she enjoys in common with all other free nations.*
8. *All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine ... should be righted ...*
9. *A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.*
10. *The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.*
11. *Romania, Serbia and Montenegro should be evacuated ... Serbia afforded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality ...*
12. *The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities ... should be assured an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently open as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations ...*
13. *An independent Poland should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea ...*
14. *A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.*

The armistice agreement with Germany

Germany's hopes of dividing its enemies were dashed when Wilson asked the Allies to draft the details of the armistice agreements. They produced tough terms, which anticipated their key aims at the coming Peace Conference:

- In the west, the Germans were to evacuate all occupied territory, including Alsace-Lorraine, and to withdraw beyond a ten-kilometre (six-mile)-wide **neutral zone** to the east of the Rhine.
- Allied troops would move in and occupy the west bank of the Rhine.
- In eastern Europe all German troops were similarly to be withdrawn from the occupied territories.
- The German navy was also to be interned in either a neutral or a British port.

Events in Germany, October–November 1918

Once news of the armistice negotiations became public, the demand for peace by the German people after the years of deprivation caused by the Allied blockade and false hopes of victory became unstoppable.

Rashly, on 28 October, the German Admiralty ordered the fleet out on a suicide mission against the British. In protest, the sailors at the Wilhelmshaven base mutinied. When the ringleaders were arrested, their colleagues organised mass protest meetings and formed **soviets**, which by the evening controlled all the naval bases and prevented the fleet from setting sail. Over the next few days unrest spread, and soviets also sprang up in the cities. On 9 September the Kaiser was forced to abdicate and the German government had little option but to accept the armistice on 11 November.

The armistice agreement with Austria-Hungary

In the summer of 1918, under US pressure, the Allies decided to abandon their former policy of dealing with Austria-Hungary as a sovereign state. Instead, they recognised the right of its subject peoples, especially the Czechs and the **Yugoslavs**, to independence. In Paris, the exiled leaders of the Austrian Yugoslavs had already agreed to form a South Slav state (later to be called Yugoslavia), together with the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In October, Wilson brushed aside attempts by Vienna to negotiate on behalf of its empire, and the Czechs and Yugoslavs seized the chance to declare their independence. On 1 November the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved, and two days later the former imperial high command negotiated an armistice with the Italians.

The Turkish armistice

In the meantime the Turkish armistice was signed at Mudros on 30 October. The Turks surrendered their remaining garrisons outside **Anatolia**, and gave the Allies the right to occupy forts controlling the straits of both the Dardanelles and

KEY TERMS

Neutral zone A belt of territory which would be occupied by neither German nor Allied troops.

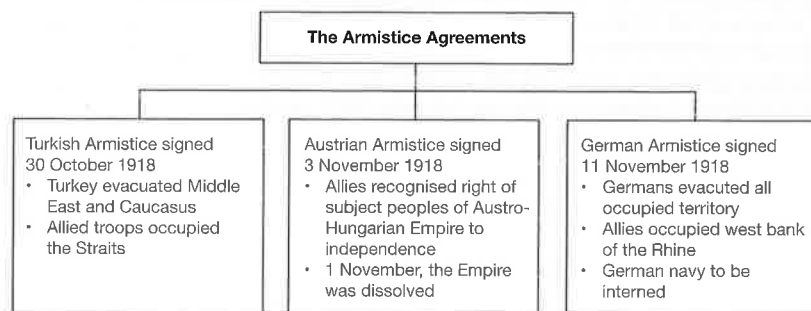
Soviets Elected councils.

Yugoslavs A term for the South Slav inhabitants of Austro-Hungary.

Anatolia The core territory of the Turkish Empire, covering most of the modern Turkish republic.

the Bosphorus. The Ottoman army was demobilised, and ports, railways and other strategic points were made available for use by the Allies. In the Caucasus, Turkey had to withdraw its troops back to its pre-war borders.

Summary diagram: The armistices of October and November 1918



Chapter summary

The Germans in 1914 attempted to defeat France first before moving eastwards to Russia. However, the Russian advance into East Prussia necessitated the transfer of two German army corps to the east, which enabled the French to counterattack. By the autumn the war settled into a deadlock on the Western Front. Over the next year the war spread: Turkey joined Germany in October 1914, while Japan allied with Britain and France in August 1914 and Italy also became an ally of the *Entente* in May 1915.

Both sides attempted to break the deadlock on the Western Front, but failed. The British plan to knock Turkey out of the war was unsuccessful, as was the German attempt to defeat France at Verdun and sink the British fleet at Jutland. In 1917 two momentous events occurred: the German submarine campaign against Britain brought the USA into the war, while in eastern Europe Russia was paralysed by the revolutions of February and October. In March 1918 Russia made peace with Germany, which then concentrated forces on the Western Front. By July 1918 this attack had been halted, and in October Germany and its allies had little option but to accept stringent armistice terms from the Allied and associated powers.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- Why did Turkey join the Central Powers?
- Why did Italy enter the war on the Allied side?
- What were the main features of trench warfare?
- What advantages would the defeat of Russia bring to the Central Powers?
- What were the German plans for 1916?
- What did the Germans achieve at Verdun?
- How did France's allies try to relieve the pressure on the French at Verdun?
- Why did the Germans declare unrestricted submarine warfare against the Allies?
- Why did the USA enter the war in April 1917?
- Why did the German submarine campaign fail?
- How did the Russian Revolutions weaken the Allied war effort?
- Why did the German offensive of March–July 1918 fail?
- Why were the terms of the armistice agreement with Germany so severe?
- Why was the Austrian Empire dissolved on 1 November 1918?
- What were the terms of the armistice negotiated with Turkey?

Question practice

ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Assess the reasons why the fighting in the First World War only came to an end in November 1918.
- 'Germany's greatest mistake in the First World War was to declare unrestricted U-boat warfare in January 1917 against all neutral shipping trading with the Allies.' How far do you agree?
- 'In 1918 Germany won the war in eastern Europe, but lost in the west.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.
- To what extent was the First World War essentially a European conflict rather than a global conflict?

INTERPRETATION QUESTION

- Read the interpretation and then answer the question that follows. 'German mobilization sustained a remarkable military feat, a comprehensive national exertion that for more than four years defied material odds to hold at bay a far superior coalition of enemies' (from R. Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914–1918*, 1998, p. 200). Evaluate the strengths and limitations of this interpretation, making reference to other interpretations you have studied.

SOURCE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

- With reference to Sources 1 and 2 (page 84) and your understanding of the historical context, which of these two sources is more valuable in explaining why Germany's fortunes declined so dramatically in 1918?
- With reference to Sources A (page 65), D (page 70) and G (page 76), and your understanding of the historical context, assess the value of these sources to a historian studying the First World War.