

# The Course of the First World War

## THE FIRST WORLD WAR: STALEMATE

### The Schlieffen Plan and Why It Failed

Germany expected a war on two fronts – France in the west and Russia in the east. The Schlieffen Plan (created in 1905) aimed to avoid this by defeating France quickly, then turning to fight Russia, who would take longer to mobilise. The plan depended on German troops sweeping through Belgium in just a few days, then surrounding Paris from the north. It also assumed Britain would stay neutral and Russia would be slow to act.

The plan failed. Germany invaded Belgium on 4 August 1914, but Belgian resistance was stronger than expected, slowing the Germans down. Britain also entered the war to protect Belgian neutrality, sending the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to fight at Mons. At the Battle of the Marne (6–10 Sept 1914), French and British forces stopped the German advance just 40km from Paris and forced a retreat. Germany now had to fight a two-front war after all.

This failure caused the stalemate. The Germans dug trenches to defend the ground they held. The Allies did the same. Soon both sides were stuck in long, heavily defended trench systems stretching from the Swiss border to the North Sea. The war became defensive, not fast and mobile like Germany had planned. The chance to win quickly was lost.

### The Western Front: Trench Warfare and Key Battles

The trench system became the main feature of the Western Front. Soldiers lived in deep, muddy trenches, protected by barbed wire and machine guns. “No Man’s Land” between the two sides was filled with craters, mud, and corpses. Attacking was difficult, because defenders had stronger positions and new weapons like machine guns, poison gas, and artillery. Trench warfare made battles deadly and slow.

To try to break the stalemate, both sides fought massive battles. One of the worst was Verdun (Feb–Dec 1916), launched by Germany to bleed France dry. The French slogan was “They shall not pass.” Over 300,000 men died. France held the city, but both sides suffered huge losses. The British launched the Battle of the Somme (July–Nov 1916) to help the French at Verdun and to wear down the Germans. On the first day, Britain lost 57,000 men – its worst ever day in battle. The Allies only advanced about 6 miles by the end, and 1.2 million men were killed or wounded. It showed how hard it was to break the trench deadlock.

In 1917, the British tried again at Passchendaele (also called the Third Battle of Ypres). It rained heavily and the battlefield became a swamp. Men drowned in mud. Around 275,000 Allied and 220,000 German casualties achieved only a few miles of gain. These battles show the nature of attrition: wearing the enemy down with massive losses. They also led to tactical changes, like using creeping barrages (artillery moving just ahead of troops) and small unit attacks.

The trench system, new technology, and strong defences meant neither side could win easily. Fighting dragged on with millions dead and little territory gained.

### The Wider War: Gallipoli and the War at Sea

While trench warfare dominated the Western Front, the war was global. In 1915, the Allies tried to defeat the Ottoman Empire by capturing the Dardanelles and opening a route to Russia. British and ANZAC troops landed at Gallipoli in April 1915. Poor planning, strong Turkish resistance, and terrible conditions led to disaster. Troops were stuck on beaches under constant fire. After 8 months, the Allies withdrew. About 250,000 Allied and 250,000 Turkish soldiers were killed or wounded. It was a major failure and a boost for Turkish morale.

At sea, Britain’s Royal Navy blockaded Germany to stop food and supplies reaching it. This blockade caused shortages in Germany and helped weaken German morale by 1918. Germany’s navy tried to challenge British control. The only major naval battle was Jutland (May 1916), between the German High Seas Fleet and the British Grand Fleet. Britain lost more ships (14 vs 11), but Germany failed to break the blockade and stayed in port after the battle. So Britain kept control of the sea.

Germany then turned to unrestricted submarine warfare. U-boats sank Allied supply ships, hoping to starve Britain into surrender. In 1915, the sinking of the Lusitania (a passenger ship with 128 Americans on board) caused outrage. Germany paused the campaign but restarted it in 1917, believing it could win before the USA entered the war. In response, the Allies used convoys – groups of merchant ships protected by warships – to reduce losses. This helped Britain survive, but also pushed America towards war.

## **ENDING THE WAR**

### **Changes in the Allied Forces: Russia Out, USA In**

In 1917, two major changes affected the war. First, Russia left the war. The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 overthrew the Russian government. Lenin took power and signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, ending fighting between Russia and Germany. This allowed Germany to move 1 million troops from the Eastern Front to the West.

Germany now had a chance to win before new American troops arrived. But this plan had risks: the German army was already tired, short of supplies, and low on morale. At the same time, the USA had declared war in April 1917 after the Lusitania sinking and the Zimmermann Telegram (in which Germany promised Mexico land if it attacked the USA). By mid-1918, fresh American troops and supplies were arriving fast – 10,000 troops per day by June.

The loss of Russia made Germany stronger in the short term, but the entry of the USA made the Allies stronger overall. Germany's window to win was closing.

### **The Spring Offensive and Allied Counterattack**

In March 1918, Germany launched the Ludendorff Offensive (also called the Spring Offensive), using troops from the East. New tactics helped at first: they used stormtroopers – small, fast-moving units – to break through weak points. Germany gained more ground in a few weeks than in the previous four years. They came within 40 miles of Paris.

But there were problems. German troops outran their supply lines and were exhausted. There were no reserves to follow up. Allied resistance stiffened, especially with fresh American troops arriving. By July, the offensive had failed. Germany had lost 800,000 men and gained no final victory.

From August to November 1918, the Allies counterattacked in the Hundred Days Offensive. New tactics – coordinating tanks, planes, and infantry – broke German lines. At Amiens (August 8), Germany suffered a major defeat; Ludendorff called it “the Black Day of the German Army.” The Allies advanced steadily, recapturing land. German morale collapsed. Soldiers mutinied and the navy refused to fight. By October, Germany was retreating everywhere.

The Spring Offensive was Germany's last gamble. When it failed, the war turned decisively in the Allies' favour.

### **Germany Surrenders**

By late 1918, Germany was facing collapse. The British naval blockade had caused major food shortages – people were starving, and support for the war was vanishing. The army was losing and morale was gone. On 29 October, sailors mutinied at Kiel, triggering the German Revolution. Soldiers and workers set up councils (like in Russia), and the Kaiser lost control.

On 9 November 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and fled to Holland. A new German Republic was declared. The government asked for peace. On 11 November 1918, an armistice (ceasefire) was signed in a railway carriage in Compiègne, France. The fighting stopped at 11am.

Allied generals had played a key role. Marshal Foch (France) coordinated the Allied attacks. Field Marshal Haig (Britain) had pushed for the continuous pressure that wore Germany down. Some people criticised Haig for the high casualties, but others said he helped win the war through determination and learning from earlier mistakes.

Germany didn't feel totally defeated on the battlefield, but it had lost the ability to fight on. The combination of economic collapse, military failure, and political revolution forced it to surrender.