

# World War One – Slaughter on the Western Front

Deadlocked from the first months of the war in 1914 until shortly before its end in 1918, the Western Front, the continuous line of trenches stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border, was the main theatre of the “Great War” – the first mass global war of the industrialised age

## EUROPE ON THE EVE OF WAR

### TRIPLE ENTENTE

**Great Britain:** Huge empire threatened by build-up of German navy  
**Lord Kitchener**  
By 1915, 2.5m Britons heeded his call to enlist

**France:** Colonies vulnerable to German ambitions

**Russia:** Strategic and ethnic support for Serbs  
**Tsar Nicholas II**

Italy, seeking to gain Austrian territory, switched sides to join Entente in April 1915

### CENTRAL POWERS

**Germany:** Surrounded by hostile neighbours, denied “colonial rights”  
**Kaiser Wilhelm II:** Determined to project German power beyond Europe

**Austria-Hungary:** Hoped war would crush rising Slav nationalism  
**Emperor Franz Josef**  
Hapsburg Empire in terminal decline

**Ottoman Empire:** Bankrupt but kept afloat by Germany

Bulgaria, with territorial ambitions in Serbia, aligned with Central Powers in October 1915

### EUROPE IN 1914

Central Powers  
Allies



## KEY EVENTS ON WESTERN FRONT

### 1914

**Jun:** **Archduke Franz Ferdinand** of Austria-Hungary assassinated in Sarajevo by Serb nationalist

**Jul:** Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia, precipitating action by other European powers linked by diplomatic alliances

**Aug:** Germany declares war on Russia, then France, and invades neutral Belgium. Britain declares war on Germany



**Aug-Sep:** French forces, led by commander-in-chief **Joseph Joffre**, and British troops halt German invasion of France at **Battles of Mons and the Marne**

**Sep-Nov:** As combatants try to outflank each other in “race to sea”, huge trench systems take shape along Western Front

**Nov-Dec:** Allies victorious at **First Battle of Ypres**. With over 3.5m casualties by Christmas, troops share unofficial truce in trenches

### 1915

**Jan:** First German zeppelin raids on British mainland

**Feb:** Germany declares submarine blockade of Britain in response to British blockade of German ports

**Apr:** Germans use poison gas for first time at **Second Battle of Ypres**



**May:** U-boat sinks British liner **Lusitania**. 1,198 civilians die, including 128 Americans



**Aug-Sep:** Germany halts submarine attacks to placate neutral United States

**Sep-Nov:** Allied offensive in **Artois** and **Champagne**. British first use poison gas at **Battle of Loos**

**Dec:** General **Douglas Haig** assumes command of British forces

### 1916

**Jan:** Conscription introduced in Britain

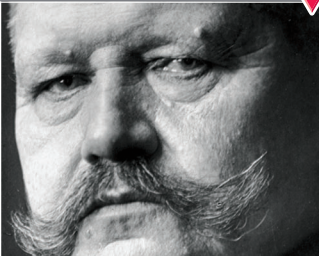
**Feb-Dec:** **Battle of Verdun**, designed to “bleed France white”, claims up to one million French and German casualties and no overall gains



**May:** **Battle of Jutland** in North Sea between British and German fleets results in heavy losses and no clear winner

**Jul-Nov:** Stalemate persists during **Battle of the Somme** despite introduction of tank warfare. Over 1m casualties

**Aug:** Field-Marshal **Paul von Hindenburg** becomes German commander-in-chief



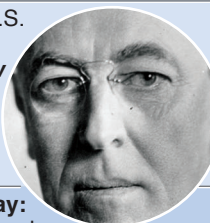
**Dec:** General **Robert Nivelle** replaces Joffre as French commander-in-chief

### 1917

**Feb:** Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare

**Mar:** German forces make strategic retreat to shorter, well-fortified **Hindenburg Line**

**Apr:** U.S. President **Woodrow Wilson** declares war on Germany



**Apr-May:** Nivelle launches disastrous offensive at **Chemin des Dames**. Half a million French soldiers mutiny – Nivelle replaced by hero of Verdun, Gen. **Philippe Petain**

**Battle of Arras** begins in support of French. Canadians seize **Vimy Ridge** but British-led offensive soon stalls

**Jul-Nov:** **Battle of Passchendaele** results in minor gains at cost of 750,000 casualties for both sides

**Nov-Dec:** **Battle of Cambrai**. British use massed tanks for first time but initial breakthrough cannot be supported and all land gained is lost



### 1918

**Mar:** Central Powers and Russia sign peace treaty at **Brest-Litovsk**

**Mar-Jul:** Released from Eastern Front, German forces launch five major offensives on Western Front before U.S. troops arrive in strength

**May:** U.S. forces make first offensive, at **Cantigny**



**Aug-Sep:** Successful allied counter-offensives at the **Marne** and **Amiens** force Germans back beyond Hindenburg line

**Oct:** Bulgaria, Turkey and Austria-Hungary surrender

**Nov 9:** Kaiser **Wilhelm II** abdicates

**Nov 11:** **Armistice signed**. Ceasefire takes effect at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. **War is over**



## CASUALTIES

ALLIES	Mobilized	Dead
Russia	12.0m	1,700,000
France	8.4m	1,400,000
Great Britain	6.2m	800,000
British Empire	2.7m	200,000
Italy	5.6m	650,000
United States	4.3m	116,500
Others	2.9m	440,000

## CENTRAL POWERS

Germany	Mobilized	Dead
Germany	11.0m	1,800,000
Austria-Hungary	7.8m	1,200,000
Turkey	2.8m	380,000
Bulgaria	1.2m	87,500

Sources: Imperial War Museum, Encyclopædia Britannica  
Pictures: Getty, AP © GRAPHIC NEWS

