

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 bound 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

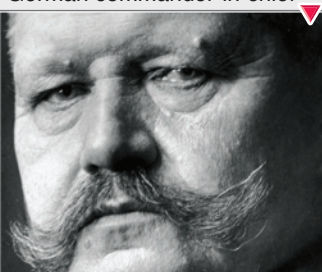
Feb-Dec: **Battle of Verdun**, designed to “bleed France white”, claims up to one million French and German casualties but no overall gains



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 **Amiens** and **Marne** 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 11th hour of 11th day of 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	11.0m	1,800,000
Austria-Hungary	7.8m	1,200,000
Turkey	2.8m	380,000
Bulgaria	1.2m	87,500

Source: Imperial War Museum
Pictures: Associated Press, Getty Images
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