

5 The First World War

POINTS TO CONSIDER

The First World War represents a fundamental change in the nature of warfare. Its scale, intensity and modernity mark it down as a new type of conflict. Although many of its features were foreshadowed in the nineteenth century, they reached their full potential in World War One and were used on a scale unimaginable to people in the previous century. As you work through the chapter focus on those areas of significant change as well as those areas of continuity.

KEY DATES

1914 August	Outbreak of war. Launching of the plans of attack. Allied blockade begins.
September	Failure of the plans of attack.
December	Trench warfare becomes established.
1915 March	Opening of the Gallipoli 'sideshow'.
April	First use of poison gas at second battle of Ypres. Continuation of mass frontal attacks. Italy enters the war.
1916	Battles of attrition – Verdun and the Somme. Brusilov offensive against Austria.
1917 February	Resumption of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare.
March	Overthrow of the Tsar.
April	USA enters the war.
November	Bolshevik revolution in Russia.
1918 March	Russia withdraws from war and signs Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
	Ludendorff offensive.
August	Successful allied counter offensive.
11 November	Armistice.

1 Introduction: A New Form of War

KEY ISSUE What are the novel features of war in World War One?

World War One represents a fundamental change in the nature of warfare. The war was a combination of new features and those elements that had been developed in the nineteenth century but only reached their full potential during 1914–1918. The degree and intensity of innovation in such a short space of time set the greatest poss-

ible challenges to military and political leaders and their societies. The novel features of war were:

- It was the first great artillery war. Artillery was responsible for 70 per cent of all casualties.
- It was the first truly modern, industrial war; its weapons and its very outcome were dependent on industrial innovation and mass production. It was the first war to make use of the internal combustion engine and wireless telegraphy on a mass scale.
- It was the first great aviation and submarine war.
- The destructive power of the weaponry used on all sides was unprecedented.
- It was the first chemical war, involving poison gasses and napalm.
- It was the first war to be truly described as a world war.
- It was the first total war. Whole societies and their economies were mobilised.
- Its scale exceeded all previous wars. It was a mass war with mass armies, mass production and mass casualties.
- The intensity of the war was unprecedented. Battles were longer and involved far more men than in the Napoleonic age or the wars of 1866 and 1870.

2 Strategy: The Failure of the Plans

KEY ISSUE How did the failure of the Schlieffen Plan demonstrate the weakness of strategic planning in the early years of the war?

In the years preceding 1914 military strategists could not foresee the fundamental changes the war would bring. They followed the traditional military course of looking into the past to learn the 'lessons' of 1870. Universally they concluded that the war would be short and that the most rapid mobilisation and the heaviest opening attack would secure victory. All the major continental powers had detailed plans for mass attacks based upon these assumptions. However, due to the superiority of the German armed forces, it was to be the success or failure of the German Schlieffen plan that would decide whether the war was truly to be 'over by Christmas'. In fact all the strategic plans failed long before Christmas, but this did not mean the end of the war, which dragged on for another four years.

The failure of the Schlieffen plan at all levels demonstrates the weakness of strategic planning, not only in the opening encounters, but also throughout the majority of the war. The more fixed and detailed the plans of distant generals the more likely they were to diverge from reality on the ground. Schlieffen's plan was devised in 1905 to solve the age-old Prussian/German problem of how to fight a

war on two fronts against France and Russia. His solution was to avoid this by concentrating German forces against France, defeat her in six weeks, and then turn round to deal with Russia. The plan was based upon two crucial assumptions that were more relevant to 1870 than to 1914. The first was that the French war effort would be as weak and disorganised as it had been in 1870. The second assumption was that Russia was so disorganised that their vast army would take nearly two months to mobilise and attack. Yet both of these crucial assumptions were wrong. Schlieffen's plan accepted that an attack on France through their shared border around Alsace and Lorraine would be held up by the mass of French troops, huge French fortifications and a lack of room to manoeuvre. His plan was to avoid this well defended zone and put as much of his 1.5 million strong force as he dared into an unstoppable right hook to swing through neutral Luxembourg and Belgium to encircle Paris from the west. The attack would then return eastwards to crush the main French forces on the German border, where they had been pinned down by German defenders. The plan was the most ambitious and intricate of all the plans of 1914. It had been painstakingly calculated, practised and refined for more than a decade yet it failed at all levels and demonstrated the limits of strategic planning, logistics and communications.

There were several key reasons for the failure of the plan. Politically the plan was naïve and had disastrous consequences. An attack through neutral Belgium would almost certainly bring Britain into the war, as she was a long-standing guarantor of Belgian neutrality. In operational terms the 'unstoppable' right wing was weakened before it was launched. Schlieffen's successor as Commander in Chief, Moltke, withdrew forces from the right hook through Belgium to strengthen defensive forces protecting Germany against possible early Russian and French attacks. In tactical terms the men in Schlieffen's right hook were asked to do the impossible. Most of this force was composed of recent conscripts and reserves, and yet they were required to march 450 miles at a rate of over 20 miles a day while dealing with resistance on the way. The plan's shortcomings also reveal the limits of technology and communications at this time. Railways had transformed the movement of men and supplies but they were inflexible and were vulnerable to sabotage. Essential supplies could not keep pace with the advancing armies. Recent developments in wireless communications promised much but were dangerously unreliable in the thick of war. Quite simply, a strategy that involved the rapid deployment of millions of men and horses required reliable transport and communications on a scale not available for another generation.

All other plans failed before the Schlieffen plan. The French plan of attack through Alsace and Lorraine, Plan 17, saw a mass frontal attack by French troops wearing startling red caps and trousers and blue tunics. The smaller German defensive force repelled the attack,



German infantry make their mass advance to the Marne, August 1914, before the deadlock of trench warfare.

inflicting 300,000 casualties in the first weeks of war. The ambitious Schlieffen plan lasted little longer, held up by redirected French and British armies at the Battle of the River Marne on 9 September. By the same time the Russian's attack on Eastern Prussia (Plan B) was smashed by German counter attacks at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. The Austro-Hungarians' plan of attack against the Russians (which the Germans insisted upon) met the same fate as the Russians' disorganised attack against the Germans. Both defeated armies had suffered in excess of 350,000 casualties and prisoners taken in a matter of weeks. By mid-September 1914 all of the ambitious plans of attack, which were the only plans made by the military, had been shattered. Great battles were won and lost but they could not deliver anything like outright victory. Despite dreadful losses every major participant still had vast numbers in the field with arrangements in place to deliver ever greater numbers. Victory would be a long time in coming.

3 Tactics: Trench Warfare

KEY ISSUE Why did trench warfare become the dominant method of war on the Western Front?

Once the German advance had been checked at the Marne there was a further attempt to restart the war of movement by a series of out-flanking manoeuvres to get round the back of one's opponent. This was the 'Race to the Sea' which resulted in a continuous front reaching from the Channel to the Swiss Alps. No flanks were left; the war of sweeping manoeuvres on the Western Front was over. To hold their position, and to remove themselves from direct fire, both sides dug in to form a continuous series of trenches along the whole of the front. Trenches were not unique to the First World War; they had been used for short periods in the American Civil War and many of the wars of the late nineteenth century. But trench warfare was different in the First World War: it was not a temporary arrangement, or limited to certain battles, it was the dominant form of warfare for the entire Western Front, and much of the Eastern Front, for the majority of the war.

Trench warfare was determined by the technology available to the military, the huge numbers facing each other, and the limited room for manoeuvre on the Western Front. The Front extended for some 700 miles but much of this was unsuitable for the movement of mass armies. The dominant weapons of the time, artillery, magazine rifles and the machine gun, had been developed or improved in the latter part of the nineteenth century to provide greater range, accuracy and fire power. Unprotected troops could not expose themselves to this deadly onslaught of fire for long. They had to take cover, and this meant digging into the ground.

The early trenches were natural ditches or hastily constructed shallow holes, as they were expected to be temporary. As it became apparent that they were likely to be more permanent, they evolved into a sophisticated interlocking defensive network, but also one from which attacks could be launched. Ideally the trenches were positioned on the best defensive location, such as on high ground with a clear view of enemy advances. The Germans had the best of these, often giving ground to secure the most favourable locations. The French and British trenches were designed primarily as protected positions from which to launch an attack. The first trench was the firing and command line, which was positioned anything from 50 to 800 yards from the enemy front line. The deadly space between the two sets of trenches was known as 'No Man's Land'. The line was zigzagged to prevent shell blast or rifle fire down the length of the trench. Twenty yards behind this were deeper 'dug-outs' for basic sleeping accommodation. The second line, some 100 yards back, was the support trench. The third line, 500 yards further back, was the reserve trench with troops held back as reinforcements for defence or attack. The German lines were designed primarily for defence, to allow them to deploy an effective 'elastic defence' with lightly held front lines but a much stronger force held back in the reserve trench.

Trench warfare maximised the power of the defensive. In between the front lines, mines and thick rolls of razor sharp barbed wire 30 yards deep also held up the offensive, although this did not prevent further bloody attacks. Twice as many casualties were inflicted on the attackers as on the defenders. The Western Front had degenerated into a bloody stalemate. 'From the end of 1914 to the spring of 1918 there was no change of more than ten miles in the front lines'.¹ On the Eastern Front, after the dramatic sweeping movements of the opening battles, trench warfare also became established. However, the sheer range of the Eastern Front (more than twice the length of the Western Front but manned by only the same number of men) meant that the positions held were more fluid.

4 Weapons and the Evolution of Tactics

KEY ISSUE How did weapons development in a) Chemicals, b) Tanks, c) Artillery, d) Infantry, e) the Air War lead to a change in tactics?

By 1915, after the breakdown of the plans of movement, the war on the Western Front subsided into the stalemate of trench warfare. Frustrated by this and horrified by the losses, political leaders and military strategists began a search to break the deadlock. If the existing weapons had produced the stalemate on the battlefield then the

development of new weapons and tactics might yet achieve breakthrough.

a) Chemical Warfare

One possible solution to the stalemate of the trenches was the use of poison gas. Britain, France and Germany had all considered this in 1914 but it was Germany, with a superior chemical industry, that first used it at Ypres in April 1915. The chlorine gas, carried on the wind toward the British trenches, disabled four miles of the British line. Gas attacks appeared to hold great promise. For the Germans, fighting a war on two fronts, it was seen as a substitute for manpower. Gas had a psychological, as well as physical impact. It retained the element of surprise, it spread panic and it did not destroy the land over which the infantry would advance. 1917 saw the introduction of the more effective phosgene and mustard gasses and shells to deliver the gas on to deeper enemy positions. These proved useful in allied advances in 1918 but even here they were little more than a minor addition to the major weapons of the war. The great disadvantage of a gas attack was that it was dependent on the wind direction and could be blown back in the faces of those who released it. This was the fate of the British at the Battle of Loos in September 1915. In addition to this, all armies rapidly developed and issued protective respirators to their troops. Napalm, in the form of petroleum-based flame throwers, was also developed as a trench-clearing weapon.

b) Tanks

The development of the tank by both the British and the French also led to over-optimistic expectations. The tank seemed to hold out the hope of breaking the deadlock of the trenches by integrating firepower and mobility with protection against the machine gun. The tank had been made possible by the internal combustion engine and inspired by the caterpillar-tracked tractor. Technologically the tank could not live up to the high expectations placed upon it. The early tanks were slow, vulnerable and unreliable. They had a top speed of five miles an hour on roads but this was reduced to one to two miles an hour over the battleground. Their armour plating was vulnerable to artillery and the Germans also developed an armour-piercing bullet. The tanks made their first appearance at the Battle of the Somme, 1916, where the British used 49 tanks. As there were too few of them, they were widely dispersed and were not co-ordinated effectively with the infantry. Tanks were next used in large numbers (378) with infantry support of 80,000 men at the battle of Cambrai in November 1917. No long preliminary barrage was required as the tanks themselves could flatten or cut through the wire and the tanks needed firm ground. The attack therefore achieved surprise and

many German troops fled in terror. However, the attack could not be sustained; many tanks were destroyed and an even greater number broke down. By the end of the battle the British had lost 300 of their 374 tanks and the Germans had retaken most of the ground earlier lost. At Amiens on 8 August 1918 over 400 British tanks were used and helped achieve a significant breakthrough, but four days later only six were still in operation. The French developed their own light tanks and had over 3,000 by the end of the war, the British having nearly the same number. The Germans were less convinced of their usefulness and produced only 20. The tank's greatest asset was psychological, as when first encountered they led to panic. A German war correspondent reported:

- 1 When the German troops crept out of their dug-outs in the morning and stretched their necks to look for the English, their blood chilled. Mysterious monsters were crawling towards them over the craters ... Nothing stopped them ... someone in the trenches said, 'The devil is coming' and word was passed along the line. Tongues of flame leapt from the sides of the iron caterpillars ... the English infantry came in waves behind.²

Local breakthroughs were achieved but quickly reversed as the tanks had a survival rate of just a few days in battle. The tanks revealed great potential, but it was to be the next generation that was to see that potential realised.

c) Artillery

One of the most enduring images of the First World War is the dominance of the machine gun: 'the master of the battlefield' as J.R. Roberts called it.³ Yet that description is more accurately applied to the artillery. The static nature of much of the war meant that the guns could take up near permanent positions in the most favourable locations. In more mobile wars they had struggled to keep up with the battlefield. Their devastating impact is revealed in the breakdown of casualties. In the Russo-Japanese War artillery fire caused 10 per cent of casualties; in World War One it inflicted 70 per cent. Troops at the front were continuously exposed to artillery fire. As J. Terraine puts it, 'Artillery was the killer; artillery was the terrifier. Artillery followed the soldier to the rear, sought him out in his billet, found him on the march.'⁴ The major reason for the huge death toll caused by artillery was the massive number of high explosive shells fired. Literally millions were fired in the days preceding an attack, but bombardment was virtually continuous throughout the war. It has been calculated that even though artillery was the great destroyer it required 1,400 shells fired to achieve each fatality. However, before artillery could reap this grim harvest it had to make fundamental readjustments to the new realities of trench warfare.

At the beginning of the war both sides had the type of artillery required for the predicted war of movement: the quick-firing field gun to support the infantry with shrapnel fire in open battle. Once trench warfare became established they were less useful. They had a flat trajectory of fire and were unlikely to penetrate the trenches. The artillery desperately needed to increase its numbers of howitzers and mortars with their higher, looping angle of fire and the powerful heavy guns with high explosive shells to destroy barbed wire and enemy trenches.

In addition to the wrong type of guns, the artillery also used the wrong tactics. A predictable barrage for a set time was clearly seen as the preliminary to an infantry offensive. The ending of the barrage was an effective call to the defending side to take up firing positions for the inevitable attack. At the same time the bombardment would usually turn the ground to be advanced over into a quagmire. Well defended trenches were not impregnable: they could be taken but there needed to be an overhaul of tactics. Crucially the artillery needed to be integrated into the infantry's attack.

Artillery tactics evolved to become more flexible and scientific and to recapture the element of surprise. Opening barrages were made less predictable and cut short so that the ground would not be rendered impassable and advancing infantry raids could take the enemy unawares. Tunnels were secretly constructed to place massive mines under enemy trenches that were considered impregnable by frontal attack, such as at Messines Ridge in 1917. The creeping barrage was developed and proved one of the most significant developments of the war. This was a barrage that was carefully targeted to slowly move ahead of the advancing infantry, not necessarily to destroy the enemy lines and artillery but to neutralise them, i.e. force them to take cover. A more scientific and accurate approach to the crucial task of destroying enemy artillery and machine gun posts (counter battery fire) was developed. This was particularly noticeable in the increasingly effective British artillery. By these methods the artillery had managed to shift the balance of force on the battlefield from manpower to fire-power.

d) The Infantry

i) Attrition

The greatest change in tactics was required of the infantry and their commanders. As we have seen, all armies began the war convinced that massed attack was the only route to success. Emphasis was placed on moral force and spirit over modern weapons. Even after the destruction of these opening offensives and the massive casualties inflicted most commanders clung to the notion of frontal attack. These attacks foundered on the defensive power of the trenches and men died in their hundreds of thousands. Tactics took a darker turn

in 1916 when commanders used the certainty of mass casualties in their calculations. The battles at Verdun and the Somme were designed not to achieve significant territorial breakthroughs but simply to tie down and kill as many of the enemy as possible. This was the war of attrition. It intended to break the morale of the enemy and to grind down their numbers. The battles led to mass casualties, but they were roughly equal on both sides, with over 700,000 casualties recorded by both sides at each battle. Years later Corporal W. Shaw gave his recollections of the fighting at the Somme:

- i Our artillery had been bombing their line for six days and nights, trying to smash the German barbed-wire entanglements. The result was we never got anywhere near the Germans. Our lads was mown down. They were just simply slaughtered. It was just one continuous go forward, come back, go forward, come back, losing men all the time and there we were, wondering when it was all going to end. You couldn't do anything. You were either tied down by the shelling or the machine guns and yet we kept at it, kept on going all along the line, making no impact on the Germans at all. We didn't get anywhere, we never moved from the line, hardly. The machine guns were levelled and they were mowing the top of the trenches. You daren't put your finger up. The men were just falling back in the trenches. ... It was hopeless. And those young officers, going ahead, they were picked off like flies. We tried to go over and it was just impossible. We were mown down.⁵

ii) The Reintroduction of Mobile Tactics

As the slaughter mounted for little apparent gain, commanders, under political pressure, began to evolve their tactics. The Germans were the first to adapt to the restrictions of trench warfare. During the Battle of the Somme they developed a fluid defensive-offensive that was based upon a lightly held front line prepared to give ground but then to launch an immediate heavy counterattack. Specially selected storm-troops led these counterattacks. By 1917 they were grouped in units of eleven men and were heavily armed with newly developed portable weapons in the form of light machine guns and mortars, grenades and flame-throwers. These well armed rapid strike forces reintegrated firepower and mobility. They would independently sweep through enemy lines leaving strong defensive positions, such as machine gun posts, to be 'mopped up' by the second wave of attackers. The Ludendorff Offensive of March 1918 was the most successful implementation of the German 'infiltration tactics' using manpower released from the Eastern Front after the collapse of Russia. The offensive restored movement to the battlefield. The attack troops had been intensively trained in the new techniques in the months leading up to the attack. Unlike so many previous offensives it was brilliantly co-ordinated with a surprise hurricane artillery bombardment, including gas and smoke shells, and attack aircraft suppressing enemy

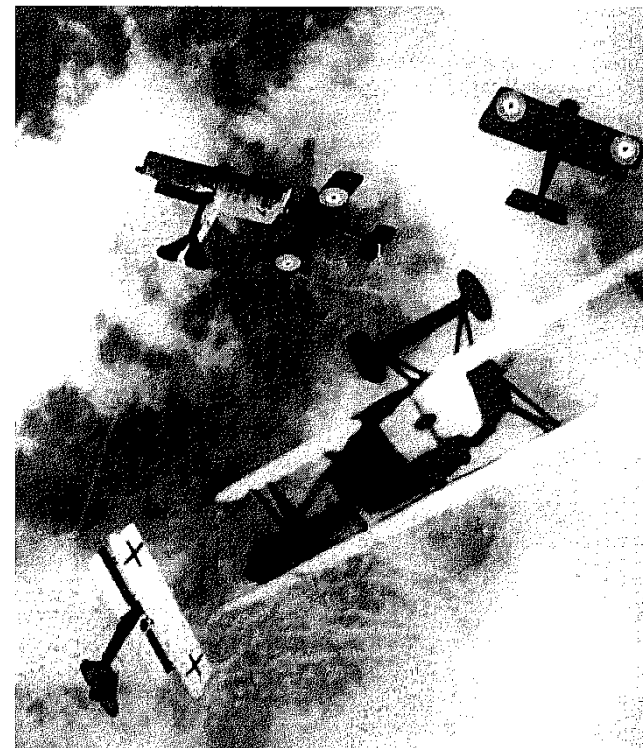
defences and machine guns. The battlefields of 1918 looked more like those of 1940 than of 1916.

The French and British forces also developed mobile infiltration tactics. The Germans picked out and trained only a minority of troops as storm-troopers but it meant that the German second wave of attack was of a lower quality and petered out after big early advances. In contrast the British trained all of their troops in the new techniques. By 1918 the British troops had moved away from the long linear advance; their attacking force was now built around a heavily armed, mobile, semi-independent platoon of 40 men. These units advanced in rushes, taking advantage of cover and shell holes and adopted a diamond formation covering as much as 100 yards to reduce the danger of shells. The troops were trained and specialised in their particular task and armed with weapons developed during the war. The men in the platoon were divided into machine gunners, equipped with the new, lighter Lewis machine gun; bombers, equipped with hand grenades; rifle bombers, using the new grenade firers; and riflemen. Flame-throwers were used for trench clearing operations. With the great array of destructive new weapons, it is tempting to see the First World War as a depersonalised war of long-range modern weaponry and the men as mere operators of this new technology. We must remember, however, that this war, like all wars, was a bewildering mixture of new and old. When troops stormed enemy trenches on night raids, the most effective weapons were not necessarily the modern ones, nor even the rifle with fixed bayonet, which was too unwieldy in the cramped conditions of the trench. Instead troops improvised their own 'medieval' weapons for hand-to-hand fighting, such as heavy clubs or sharpened short trench spades to be used as battle axes.

The allied counter attacks of July and August 1918 had the advantage of surprise, sophisticated artillery cover, hundreds of tanks and over 1,000 aeroplanes, including bombers, ground attack planes, supply and reconnaissance craft. To keep the momentum going, armoured cars, faster light tanks, motorcycle machine guns and troop-carrying lorries drove deep into enemy positions. At last the attacks were co-ordinated, flexible and mobile. They broke through the German lines and shattered the deep-lying Hindenburg Line. The battle tactics of the Second World War had emerged at the very end of the First World War.

e) The War in the Air

The air war represents the most outstanding example of the rapid development of a new technology under the intense pressure of war. All the major powers entered the war with only basic air services amounting to a combined total of only 200–300 aircraft, which were slow reconnaissance planes. By 1918 that number had risen to over



A mass 'dog-fight' over the Western Front. The slow speed of the planes allowed for close manoeuvrability unmatched in any subsequent conflict.

8,000 with a personnel of 300,000 and supplied by hundreds of thousands of workers to manufacture the planes. The aircraft had become an integral feature of total war.

In the opening period of mobile war, reconnaissance aeroplanes provided useful information on the movement of armies. As the war evolved into trench warfare they were the only means of gaining information on the position of enemy artillery and reserves, displacing the historic function of the cavalry. Fighter aircraft evolved as a means of denying the enemy this invaluable information. As pilots took on the role of bombing and the pursuit of enemy craft so planes became more specialised: heavier and sturdier for bombing, and lighter for pursuit and combat. At the beginning of the war the pilots were armed only with pistols and hand grenades. The major breakthrough of 1915 was the development of a fixed, forward-firing machine gun which was synchronised to fire through the spaces between the revolving propeller blades. This turned the aircraft into a flying gun.

The relatively short period of the air war with its individual 'dog-fights' in tiny, highly manoeuvrable planes gave rise to the legend of the air aces. The legend persisted even though the individual air ace was to be overwhelmed by mass warfare in the same way his ground-based counterpart had been. The increased production of planes led to the evolution of massed fighter tactics in which romantic individual action gave way to concentrated attack formations, such as the German 'flying circuses' of as many as 60 aeroplanes. All of the original air aces died in the new phase of mass air actions. In 1917 in what became known as 'Bloody April' the British Royal Flying Corps suffered losses of 30 per cent a week! The air war, just like the ground war, was to be decided by resources and mass production and it was the allies who were able to produce more replacement planes and flyers than the Germans.

The original function of the fighter plane was to achieve dominance of the skies for its reconnaissance planes, but increasingly the fighter was used for ground attack purposes. The fighters were used to attack trenches, suppress infantry advances and disable enemy supplies and gun positions. The Germans developed an armoured plane for this purpose, but losses to all sides were huge with more than 50 per cent losses in pilots. By 1918 aircraft proved a useful, but not decisive, element in the allied breakthrough. Strategic bombing of targets on the home front of the enemy had begun with the Zeppelin raids against Britain in May 1915. Heavier bomber planes replaced these vulnerable craft in 1917. The British responded with the development of their own bomber fleet as part of the newly established independent Royal Air Force. Britain, France and Italy made bombing raids into enemy territory in 1918 but the results were limited. Nevertheless the fateful conviction that bombing civilians could undermine the enemy's morale and potentially end wars was one of the lessons taken from the First World War to be ruthlessly applied in

the Second World War. Modern technology had extended the killing zone to the home front.

5 Leadership: 'The Donkeys'?

KEY ISSUE Do the commanders of the First World War deserve their reputation as 'butchers and bunglers'?

The most contentious issue arising from the First World War is that of leadership. The stalemate on the Western Front, the repeated disastrous attacks and the unprecedented losses have led to an intense scrutiny of the role of the Generals.

a) Germany

The German leadership is often hailed as the best in the war. Yet we have already seen how its only plan (Schlieffen), despite ten years of detailed preparation, failed at every level. Also the German forces were as likely to send mass attacks against heavily armed defenders as any other army was. For the first half of the war the German army did have an advantage in leadership and trained manpower because it possessed a large standing professional army that was well equipped and fought the war according to the German army's plan of attack. A major strength of the German leadership was its ability to delegate command downwards and harness flexibility and individual fighting skills. Again this was made possible by the highly trained German army at lower levels. However, this advantage only lasted as long as the original German army lasted. After 1916, and the massive losses at Verdun and the Somme, that army had been wiped out and the German army was now reduced to a new civilian army, just as Britain's had been since late in 1914. It no longer had the edge. Ludendorff was considered the best general of the war for his sweeping victories on the Eastern Front at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. He almost pulled off an even more remarkable last-ditch victory with the 'Ludendorff offensive' in March 1918. But later that year, Ludendorff, like Moltke before him four years previously, had a breakdown and loss of will that hastened the German defeat.

b) France and Britain

The French commanders are most identified with suicidal mass frontal attacks. In the first weeks of war Joffre lost 300,000 troops in what appeared to be futile Napoleonic attacks. In Nivelle's 1917 offensive France lost 120,000 in the opening two days which sparked a mutiny that involved half of the French army. But in British military history it is the role of the British commanders, especially General Haig, that still arouses passionate controversy. British commanders

were attacked for their inflexibility and failure to adapt to the changed circumstances of trench warfare. This also led to a charge of failing to adopt the newer weapons of war, such as the machine gun and the tank, and sticking with the costly infantry tactics of attack over a broad front. To their critics the massive casualty rate in the battles of attrition for little ground gained is evidence of a callous disregard for human suffering. The criticism of the British commanders, and Haig in particular, began even before the war ended. Lloyd George was their most high profile critic, but the impression was reinforced by the anti-war poets and writers, and post war strategists, such as J.F.C. Fuller and Liddell Hart. Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'The General' created a lasting impression:

- 1 'Good-morning; good-morning!' the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
- 5 'He's a cheery old card', grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

.....

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.⁶

The criticism reached new levels of vitriol in the 1960s with Alan Clark's 1961 book *The Donkeys*, which took its title from a supposed conversation between Generals Ludendorff and Hoffman.

Ludendorff: 'The English soldiers fight like lions.'
Hoffman: 'True. But don't we know that they are lions led by donkeys.'⁷

The 1960s also saw the highly influential theatre and film version of 'Oh What a Lovely War' which ridiculed the bumbling incompetence of the British generals when set against the suffering of their men. This was followed in 1988 by John Laffin's book whose argument is summed up in its title – *British Butchers and Bunglers of World War One*. The image of the bungling British leadership had become so culturally accepted that even the television comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth* could successfully be staged against the ludicrous incompetence of the 'Chateau Generals.' After all, as Captain Blackadder said, the whole purpose of the war was to move General Haig's drinks cabinet ten yards nearer to Berlin.

Although this image remains firmly rooted in the national consciousness, many modern writers, including John Terraine, Paddy Griffith and Peter Simkins, vehemently reject the blanket 'myth' of British command incompetence. These are the new revisionists who seek to 'debunk the debunkers,' namely Clark and Laffin. The revisionists claim that the blanket condemnation of the British Generals denies the fact that the British army under the guidance of its commanders made tremendous improvements, which they could only achieve after hard, bitter experience. The British army at the begin-

ning of the war was a small colonial army that had to take on the strongest army in the world, which was more than 30 times its size. Yet the British army and its leadership grew in strength and sheer fighting ability to take over from the French after Verdun as Germany's deadliest enemy. The Allied leadership knew that they could not remain on the defensive, it was politically unacceptable and it would allow the German army to transfer troops to the Eastern Front to knock Russia out of the war. The German army had to be held in the West and worn down by Allied offensives. Without wonder-weapons to achieve a mobile victory the Allied leadership could only resort to battles of attrition. These battles produced staggering losses on both sides but they inflicted such damage on the German forces that they prepared the way for victory in 1918. In the final defeat of the German army it was the British and Empire forces that achieved the most telling victories with their improved tactics, their readiness to take up new technology, and their delegated command.

6 Morale and the Propaganda War

KEY ISSUES What was the difference between propaganda from above and propaganda from below? What impact did propaganda have on the outcome of the war?

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the years leading up to 1914 were marked by an outpouring of increasingly aggressive nationalistic propaganda. This had helped to reinforce military values in society and psychologically prepare the civilian population for war. Once the war had begun motivation and exaggerated passions were not difficult to arouse. Early propaganda portrayed the honour of one's cause and the barbarity of the enemy. God was enlisted by every army; the massive German force that smashed into neutral Belgium had the words '*Gott mit uns*' (God with us) forged on to their belt buckles. After the failure of the opening plans of attack and the deadlock of trench warfare, nations and their leaders realised they were in for the long haul. The war was not going to be decided quickly by professional armies; many of those armies had been wiped out. Even greater armies had to be raised and supplied by civilians, both men and women. Mass warfare called for a mass, willing contribution from combatant societies. Propaganda was now essential to bind societies together for unquestioning sacrifice and effort. Just as total war was to require the mobilisation of men, labour and supplies, so it also demanded the mobilisation of minds.

a) Propaganda from Below

In increasingly urbanised, literate societies, with advanced means of

RED CROSS OR IRON CROSS?



**WOUNDED AND A PRISONER
OUR SOLDIER CRIES FOR WATER.**

**THE GERMAN "SISTER"
POURS IT ON THE GROUND BEFORE HIS EYES.**

**THERE IS NO WOMAN IN BRITAIN
WHO WOULD DO IT.**

**THERE IS NO WOMAN IN BRITAIN
WHO WILL FORGET IT.**

British poster portrays German cruelty as the Kaiser and his General smile on approvingly. This poster was deliberately targeted at inspiring hatred and determination in British women.

communication and entertainment, propaganda entered every home. The greater volume of propaganda, and certainly the most effective, originated not from official government sources but from independent agencies, commercial interests, community groups and individuals. This was presented via newspapers, posters, cartoons, postcards, and souvenirs such as Kitchener beer mugs, ceramic tanks and toys for children. Influential community figures such as teachers, youth leaders and clergymen added their voice. Commercial interests realised that adverts, which associated their product with the war effort, certainly did not harm their sales figures. The major forms of entertainment, the cinema, the music hall, and the gramophone and

sheet music industry, played an important role in keeping up morale by playing on the usual motivations of the justice and honour of one's cause and the villainy of the enemy. Both sides commonly used the exaggerated (or invented) atrocity story. The incessant message from all sections of society represented the greatest advertising campaign in history up to that date. The effect of this barrage of propaganda was to intensify the public's identification with the war effort. As a result of this, it was virtually impossible for governments to attempt a negotiated peace settlement for anything less than total victory. It would be a fight to the finish.

b) Propaganda from Above

In 1917 the American senator Hiram Johnson famously claimed that 'The first casualty when war comes, is truth'.⁸ Certainly there was official censorship of 'sensitive' information; but propaganda to be effective could not be a byword for lies, it had to be based on a generally accepted truth. That 'truth' might then be shaped, exaggerated and invested with intense emotion, but essentially it had to connect with its audience. The success of propaganda from non-government sources was that it directly tapped in to the intense hopes, prejudices and fears of populations drawn into total war. The more successful government propaganda followed the lead provided by influential campaigns and opinion formed from below. Governments adopted these messages or supported their transmission. The British government did not even see the need for a government propaganda organisation for the home front until 1918. In contrast German propaganda came from above, was more heavy-handed and subsequently less effective. By 1917 the military leaders of Germany recognised the importance of the cinema to morale on the home front and banned American newsreels about the war, replacing them with more 'reliable' German productions. To keep cinemas open during the fuel shortages of 1917-18 they were given priority for coal and electricity supplies. At the Front the major combatants had hundreds of 'field' cinemas for entertainment and morale. However, morale was far more affected by basic material issues, such as the regular rotation of troops in the front line to provide much needed relief, and the provision of adequate food and alcohol supplies.

c) The Impact of Propaganda

The impact of propaganda on the outcome of the war is a contentious issue. Undoubtedly, successful propaganda reinforced unity and determination, its weight and intensity suppressing pacifist or opposition voices. General Ludendorff claimed that the twin reasons for the German defeat in 1918 were the impact of the British blockade and allied propaganda leading to severe hardship and self-doubt. Others

have argued that this claim in itself is propaganda intended to divert attention away from the real reason for the German collapse, namely its comprehensive defeat on the battlefield. Another claim for the impact of government-directed propaganda was the British and French conversion of the Americans to enter the war on the allied side. Sophisticated as this approach was, it paled into insignificance beside the impact of Germany's mistreatment of Belgian civilians and its resort to unrestricted submarine warfare that resulted in the loss of American lives.

Another aspect of propaganda by government agencies was the encouragement and funding of separatist or opposition movements inside the enemy camp. This was not a new strategy; it had been attempted in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period. In the First World War it achieved far greater results. Western propaganda targeted nationalist groups inside the rapidly disintegrating Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Central Powers played the same card by trying to exploit nationalist ambitions within the British and French Empires, especially in Ireland and India. But it was in Russia that Germany achieved its most spectacular, if rather unexpected, success. From March 1915 Germany had been supplying considerable funds to separatist and revolutionary groups in Russia with the intention of sowing discord and division in the Russian war effort. In April 1917, after the fall of the Russian Tsar, the German authorities seized the opportunity of transporting exiled Russian revolutionary leaders, including Lenin, across German held territory and back into Russia. The political, economic and military disintegration of Russia, helped in part by Lenin's propaganda effort, led to the collapse of Russia's Provisional Government and the take-over of the Bolsheviks. Lenin was immediately prepared to make peace with Germany at any price and German policy appeared to have achieved the greatest propaganda coup of the war. The significance of this event and the importance attached to the impact of propaganda by analysts after the war meant that the propaganda effort was to become a major preoccupation in all future wars.

The German Foreign Minister, von Kühlmann, sent the following telegram to army headquarters 3 December 1917.

- 1 The disruption of the Entente and the subsequent creation of political combinations agreeable to us constitute the most important war aim of our diplomacy. Russia appeared to be the weakest link in the chain, the task therefore was gradually to loosen it, and when possible, to remove
- 5 it. This was the purpose of the subversive activity we caused to be carried out in Russia behind the front – in the first place promotion of separatist tendencies and support of the Bolsheviks. It was not until the Bolsheviks had received from us a steady flow of funds through various channels and under different labels that they were in a position to be able
- 10 to build up their main organ, *Pravda*, to conduct energetic propaganda

and appreciably to extend the originally narrow basis of their party. The Bolsheviks have now come to power; how long they will retain power cannot yet be foreseen. They need peace in order to strengthen their own position; on the other hand, it is entirely in our interest that we should exploit the period while they are in power, which may be a short one, to attain firstly an armistice and then, if possible, peace.⁹



Punch cartoon, December 1917: the Bolshevik lures 'Russia' into the arms of Germany.

7 Resources and Economic Warfare

KEY ISSUE What are the two levels on which economic warfare was conducted?

Economic warfare, like the propaganda war, was not new. It had played an important part in the Napoleonic Wars. It was to play an even more crucial role in determining the outcome of the First World War. In the first truly industrialised war the industrial mass production of arms and ammunition would prove decisive and would require the total mobilisation of the entire nation and its resources.

The struggle of economies was conducted on two levels;

- a) The most effective organisation of one's economy, workforce and resources to supply the war effort.
- b) The disruption of the enemy economy; to block supplies reaching the enemy's war effort, including food supplies to the enemy army and workforce.

a) Economic Co-ordination for Total War

As the vast material demands of war in the industrial age became apparent all major combatants began the transformation of their societies from civilian to war economies. In August 1914 the British government introduced the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) which extended government power over the economy, as well as in other areas of society. This was achieved in a spirit of co-operation with the trade unions and avoided the wholesale drafts of civilian labour. DORA was extended several times to cover price controls, the allocation of labour, railways, the mines, shipping, subsidies for agriculture, and in 1918 food rationing. Britain was not alone in introducing these measures, known universally as war socialism. All combatant countries increasingly turned to women workers to replace enlisted men and to produce munitions. Crucially both Britain and France had the strategic and economic advantage of access to a world-wide empire. Consequently neither suffered the extreme shortages that Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia had to endure. For Russia three years of total war were to prove too great a strain for the Russian economy to bear. Inflation ran out of control, food supplies to the towns and cities dried up and by late 1916 the Russian railway system had virtually collapsed. By 1917 Russia faced economic and political meltdown; revolution and withdrawal from the war followed rapidly in its wake. Imperial Russia had clearly failed what Arthur Marwick has termed 'the Test of War'.¹⁰

The Central Powers did not have the material, or manpower, support of an extensive overseas empire. Lack of resources proved to be

the Achilles' heel for the German war effort. As the Reich imported nearly half of its foodstuffs and raw materials it was inevitable that a long protracted war and the effects of the British blockade would prove disastrous for Germany. Throughout the war Germany struggled to overcome this fundamental weakness. During this time the military took an increasingly powerful role in government under the guise of organising the war effort. In August 1914 the War Raw Materials Office (KRA) was set up for the purchase and distribution of raw materials, and controls were extended over the labour force. By January 1915 ration cards for food and price controls were established. Between 1916 and 1918 the army, under the direction of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, increased its control over the economy, national policy and the war effort to such an extent that Martin Kitchen has described this episode as the 'silent dictatorship'.¹¹

b) Economic Blockade

Britain's great historic strength was based upon its naval supremacy, which, as demonstrated in the Napoleonic wars, could ensure the supply of food and war materials to herself and her coalition partners and deny them to her enemies. If the war continued for longer than the nine months which German strategists had envisaged, then this factor would assume vital significance in determining the outcome of the war. From the outbreak of hostilities Britain adopted a distant blockade from the security of its naval bases in the Channel and at Scapa Flow, to the north of Scotland. All German ships were considered legitimate targets and neutral ships were prevented from supplying any materials to Germany and her allies that Britain defined as contraband. In February 1916 the Ministry of Blockade was established to tighten the noose around the neck of the Central powers. It soon extended the definition of contraband from weapons to include metals, oils, cotton, wool and foods. As with bombing raids, the legitimate targets of total war were being redefined to include the civilian. The rationale was simple and deadly: if whole societies were involved in the war effort, then all parts of that society, military, economic and civilian, could be attacked, disrupted and starved. The number of German civilian deaths caused by the blockade has been put as high as 750,000.¹² Supplies to the military were preserved as much as they could be, but by 1918 food shortages were affecting the operational effectiveness of the Central Powers. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the blockade on the Central Powers was its political and psychological impact. The united front at home was undermined by starvation. Hunger and shortages led to calls for peace and provoked political and social division in Germany and terminal national divisions in Austria-Hungary. From 1916 onwards there were hundreds of food riots and strikes culminating in the great strike of January 1918 in which half a million German workers participated.

c) The German Response

The German response to the British blockade was to attempt one of their own. The German surface fleet could not match the Royal Navy, so in February 1915 Germany made the fateful decision to use submarines to blockade the waters around Britain and Ireland. As Tirpitz said, 'England wants us to starve, we can play the same game'. This led to the sinking of the British liner *Lusitania* in May 1915 with the loss over 1,000 lives, including 128 Americans, and helped push neutral United States towards Britain. On 31 January 1917 the Germans decided on a desperate gamble, a kind of Schlieffen plan of the sea – to impose unrestricted submarine warfare on all supplies bound for Britain and thereby to starve Britain out of the war before American supplies could prove decisive. The tactic produced critical losses of food and supplies to Britain but it also meant the sinking of American ships. The gamble failed, Britain and the U.S. were able to develop effective defensive counter-measures and Britain was not forced out of the war. The German action had ensured not only the economic contribution of America but also its direct military involvement on the allied side in April 1917. The massive morale boost of the entry of the Americans, with their potential for almost limitless supplies, funds and fresh troops, was likely to be decisive in itself. The Central powers could no longer evade the inevitable logic of the imbalance of resources. The German economy, weakened by the blockade, could no longer meet the demands of total war for herself and her industrially underdeveloped allies. The Central powers produced 19 per cent of the world's manufacturing output, the allies over 65 per cent. The allies' population figures dwarfed those of the Central powers and their allies. Tim Travers sums this up, 'Whether in artillery, ammunition supplies, tanks, planes, Lewis guns, rifle grenades, machine guns, food supplies, rail lines, or even horses, the allies were irresistibly superior'.¹³ As Ludendorff said despairingly in September 1918, 'We cannot fight against the whole world'.

8 Casualties

KEY ISSUES What countries suffered the greatest casualties in the conflict? What were the long term consequences of these losses?

Casualty figures for the First World War cannot be exact. Casualties include all those who were withdrawn from the battle zone whether through death, sickness or injury. In the case of injuries these could range from life-long disability to wounds of varying severity, often allowing men to rejoin the war where they might become one of the casualty figures once again. Deaths accounted for one-third to one-quarter of all casualties. It has been estimated by various sources that

the total number of deaths lies somewhere between 10 and 13 million. Germany and Russia each lost 2 million dead. Germany also lost a further 750,000 civilian deaths as a result of the blockade. Austria-Hungary suffered 1.2 million deaths, the USA 115,000 and Italy 580,000. Britain lost 725,000 dead and a further 250,000 from the empire and France lost 1,322,000.

Beyond these bare statistics lies a human tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions. The psychological and political impact of these losses shaped the rest of the twentieth century. For France victory seemed indistinguishable from defeat; during the war France mobilised 8.4 million men of whom nearly 60 per cent were either killed or wounded. France's population declined during the inter-war period due to the loss of a generation of potential fathers. Psychologically France knew they could not pay such a cost again. For Italy the losses suffered with such little reward in territory at the ensuing peace conference became known as the 'mutilated victory' and was a major factor in the overthrow of the parliamentary system by Mussolini's Fascists. Hitler's Nazi party was able to feed off similar resentments in Germany. In the USA the unacceptable losses, in what many saw as a European civil war, led to a return to isolationism and non-participation in the League of Nations. For Russia, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, defeat and the losses incurred led to the disintegration of their centuries-old empires and the creation of new nations in their wake. From the wreckage of Imperial Russia arose the first communist state. In Britain the casualties were referred to as the 'lost generation' and the revulsion and despair at such sacrifice inspired a widespread pacifist movement which played a significant part in Britain's foreign policy and rearmament of the 1930s.

9 Conclusion

KEY ISSUE What were the areas of change and continuity in the nature of warfare represented by the First World War?

In many ways the First World War represents a fundamental shift in the nature of warfare yet, as with all conflicts, there was an intriguing balance between new and old elements of war. There were many novel features of war such as the air war, the submarine war and new weapons notably the tank and gas. Yet there were also many features that World War One shares with previous conflicts. Although new weapons were developed for the war they were generally ineffective and played a secondary role to those weapons developed and improved in the nineteenth century. The dominant weapons of the war remained the artillery, the rifle and the machine gun. The propaganda war and the war of economies reached new heights but in both there were clear echoes of Britain's struggle with Napoleon a century

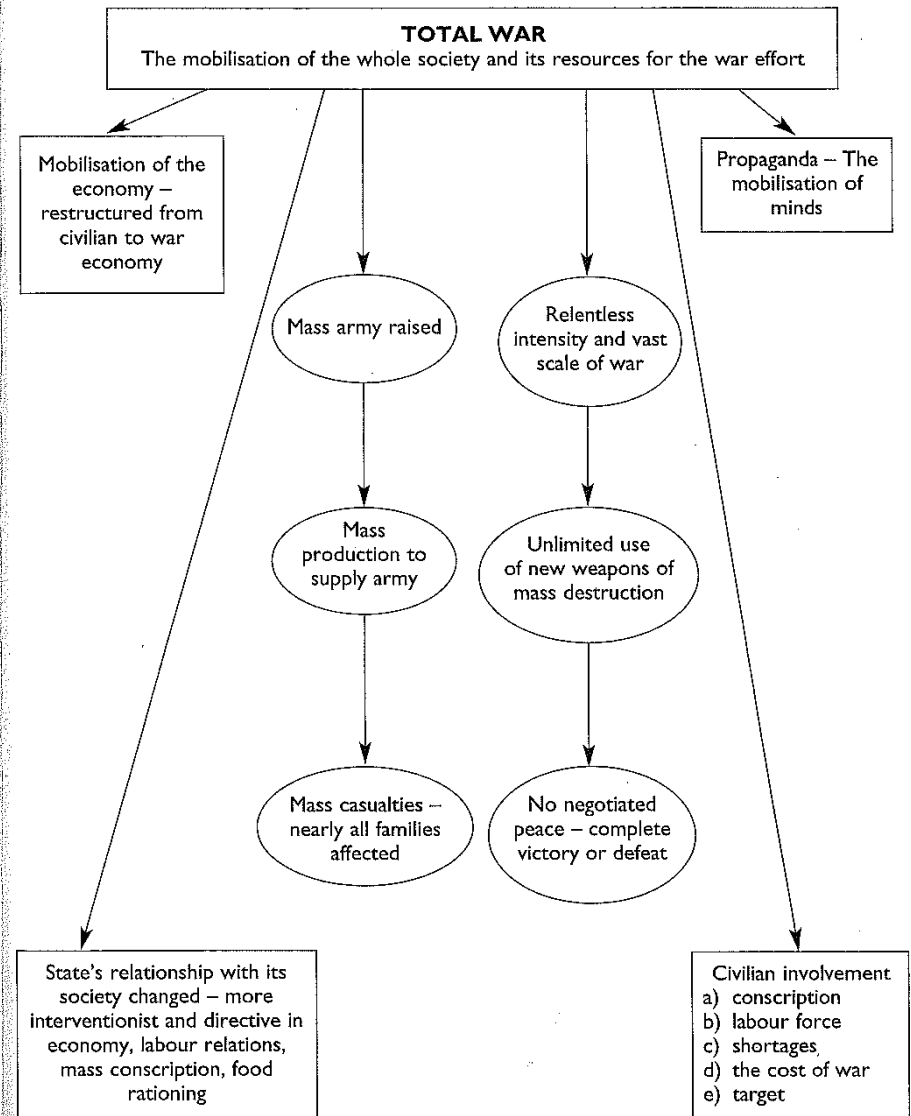
before. The strategy of the war was similarly backward looking as all sides tried to apply the lessons of the Prussian style of war from the 1860s. When this failed whole armies were forced into trench warfare and a bloody war of attrition which would have been familiar to troops in previous ages.

The greatest changes in the nature of warfare were those brought about by the unprecedented scale and intensity of the war. The war with over 80 per cent of the world's population formally at war is the first that can genuinely be described as a world war. The full mobilisation of advanced industrial techniques and mass production represents the first modern industrial war and produced a quantity of weapons unimaginable to previous generations. Battles could now rage with ferocious intensity for months at a time without exhausting supplies. The demands on production and manpower required a total war effort that brought the civilian into the heart of the conflict. The greater scale and intensity of the war, and the wider involvement of the civilian, produced the most memorable novel feature of the war, the unprecedented level of casualties.

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Summary Diagram The First World War as the First Total War



Answering essay questions on Chapter 5

The First World War is a very common subject on exam papers. Typical essay questions are:

1. Why was the First World War so destructive of human life?
2. How far does the First World War represent a fundamental change in the nature of warfare in the period 1792–1918?
3. Was the First World War the first 'Total War'?
4. Do the commanders of the First World War deserve their reputation as 'Butchers and Bunglers'?

For Question 1, start with the obvious:

- a) The sheer scale of the war:
 - i) Size of the armies, these ran into tens of millions. The more people there were fighting, the greater the number of casualties.
 - ii) With the involvement of the British and French worldwide empires and the United States the war was truly a world war.
 - iii) Length of the war.
- b) The intensity of the fighting. Battles raged with ferocious intensity for months at a time.
- c) The highly destructive tactics used:
 - i) Mass opening offensives and frontal attacks.
 - ii) Attrition – Verdun and the Somme.
 - iii) Deliberate targeting of the civilian – blockade, bombing.
- d) More deadly weapons used – modern artillery and rifles, machine guns, aeroplanes, submarines, gas, tanks.
- e) Finally, you should also bring in the militaristic attitudes and beliefs of the peoples of Europe and their leaders, which meant that they were ready and willing to go to war, and to continue with the war, no matter what the cost.

Question 2 requires an assessment of the First World War in the context of the evolution of warfare from 1792 to 1918. You must demonstrate an awareness of the features of warfare in the periods preceding 1914, i.e. the French Wars 1792–1815 and the development of warfare throughout the nineteenth century. The First World War does represent a significant number of changes in the nature of warfare and these are summarised in the introduction to this chapter. Remember that the essay title opens with the phrase 'How far does ...' and this is asking you to present both those areas of change and those areas of continuity.

For the information required for essay 3, see the summary diagram on page 101.

For question 4, see the information in the section on Leadership. Provide a balanced account by outlining the case against the leaders and then their defence. Refer to the leading critics of the generals as well as their defenders.

Source-based question on Chapter 5

- 1 Study the extract from von Kühlmann's telegram, 3 December 1917, on pages 94–95, the *Punch* cartoon from December 1917, on page 95, and the British propaganda poster on page 92.
 - a) What was the purpose behind each of these examples of the use of propaganda? (10 marks)
 - b) How helpful are these sources in demonstrating the different strategies and techniques of the propaganda war? (10 marks)
 - c) Using these examples, and any others you are aware of, assess the impact of propaganda in the First World War. (20 marks)