

2 Nature and practice of the First World War

Timeline

1914 Germany implements Schlieffen Plan and invades France through Belgium; first use of gas as a weapon (by French troops)

Germany defeats Russian advances at the Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes

German advance halted at the Battle of the Marne; both sides establish a defensive line through Belgium and France – the Western Front

1915 German attacks in Russia – Eastern Front formed

British and French attacks on Western Front fail

British and French fail to take Constantinople in Gallipoli attacks

Italy joins war against Austria and Germany; stalemate on all fronts

1916 Battle of Verdun – Germany attempts to ‘bleed France white’

British attacks on Somme – little advance; first use of tanks

indecisive naval battle at Jutland

Russian Brusilov offensive fails

1917 Russian Revolution – last Russian attacks of war fail

some British successes in the west but the Battle of Passchendaele fails

French attacks at Chemin des Dames fail

Italian defeat at Caporetto

USA joins war

1918 major German offensive (Operation Michael)

Allied counter-attacks in France

Austria defeated on Italian front

Turkish defeats in Middle East

11 Nov: Germany signs armistice

Key questions

- What was the nature of the war of 1914–18?
- What were the main events?
- How important was technology in determining tactics and outcome?
- How important was the home front?
- What impact did the war have in provoking resistance and revolution?

Overview

- Although it was a ‘world war’, the struggle of 1914–18 was largely carried out on two fronts. The so-called Western Front extended from the English Channel to the Swiss frontier. The Eastern Front was much more extensive, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea.
- The war was characterised by opening moves of intense activity and the deployment of millions of men. However, for much of the war, movement was restricted and both sides ‘dug in’ behind increasingly complex lines of defence.
- Beyond the two main theatres of war some more fluid campaigns took place – in the Middle East, in the Balkans and in Africa. Fighting also took place in Italy after it joined the war in support of France and Britain in 1915; however, the nature of the conflict in Italy was slow and static.
- A key feature of the war for much of its duration was attrition:
 - Neither side found it possible to achieve a decisive outcome on the battlefield, so they had to wear down the enemy by draining it of men and resources.
 - The war at sea saw few decisive encounters and was characterised by blockades and attacks on merchant shipping as each side tried to starve the other.
 - The use of air power pointed the way to future developments, but the technology of the time was not far enough advanced for air warfare to play a decisive role.
- The final part of the war saw rapid changes that anticipated the nature of the Second World War, and indeed some of the post-1945 conflicts.
- The war led to the development of weaponry on a new scale. Artillery was larger and more precise; air power advanced far beyond the primitive combat of 1914. The great battleships had not proved significant, but submarines had nearly won the war for Germany. The tank was a major military development. After the war it was accepted that future conflicts would rely heavily on both tanks and aircraft.

- The war relied on a great deal of public support and endurance. Civilians supported the war effort in many ways, including working in factories. Propaganda maintained popular support; the public accepted much greater controls by the state, such as rationing and conscription. The difference between soldiers and civilians was also less obvious than in previous wars – civilians themselves became the targets of military action as aircraft were used to bomb cities.
- There was some resistance to occupation by enemy forces, for example in Belgium and northern France, but this was met with severe repression and did not develop in the way it did in the Second World War. Nor was resistance promoted by the Allied powers. Overall, guerrilla warfare and organised resistance movements were not a major feature of this war.
- The war resulted in significant revolutions – two in Russia (in February and October 1917) and the attempted revolutions in Hungary and Germany. It also encouraged the growth of the communist and nationalist movements in China.
- Indirectly, the war encouraged a greater awareness of the need for political change – for example, in Italy and Germany, in the rise of the Labour Party in Britain, in demands for more rights for women, and in African and Asian nationalism.

What was the nature of the war of 1914–18?

A new type of war

The war of 1914–18 was conducted on a scale unknown to previous generations:

- much larger armies were involved
- casualties were much higher
- the whole population was involved in the war effort
- the state controlled the people and the resources of every country to a much greater extent than ever before
- weapons were more destructive and more varied than previously, and included gas, flame throwers, aircraft, huge artillery, more developed machine guns.

The Industrial Revolution, the growth of modern science and technology, larger populations, a revolution in transport (especially railways), the growth of mass communication and national feeling were factors that had revolutionised warfare since 1815. The industries developed in the 19th century allowed the production of weapons on a scale exceeding any previous war. Mass armies could be raised, supplied and transported. The whole nation could be involved in sustaining war.

A Belgian troop train leaving Ostend on the way to the front in 1914



Questions

What changes are described in Source A? How does this source explain the changes? What other elements influenced changes in warfare by 1914?

SOURCE A

The scarlet-and blue-coated infantrymen of Napoleon's age advanced into battle with colours streaming and bands playing. The combatants of 1918 were clad in khaki or field grey, their faces obscured by steel helmets and gas masks had lost their humanity and individuality in fighting industrial warfare. The dramatic change in warfare can be linked, in the first place, to national economic development. ... Between 1815 and 1914, for example, Germany's production of coal increased 200 fold and of pig iron 18 times. From these raw materials were fashioned the steel and then the guns and rifles which affected a revolution in fire-power.

Strachan, H. 1996. *The Oxford History of Modern Europe*. Oxford, UK. Oxford University Press. pp. 170–71.

What were the main events?

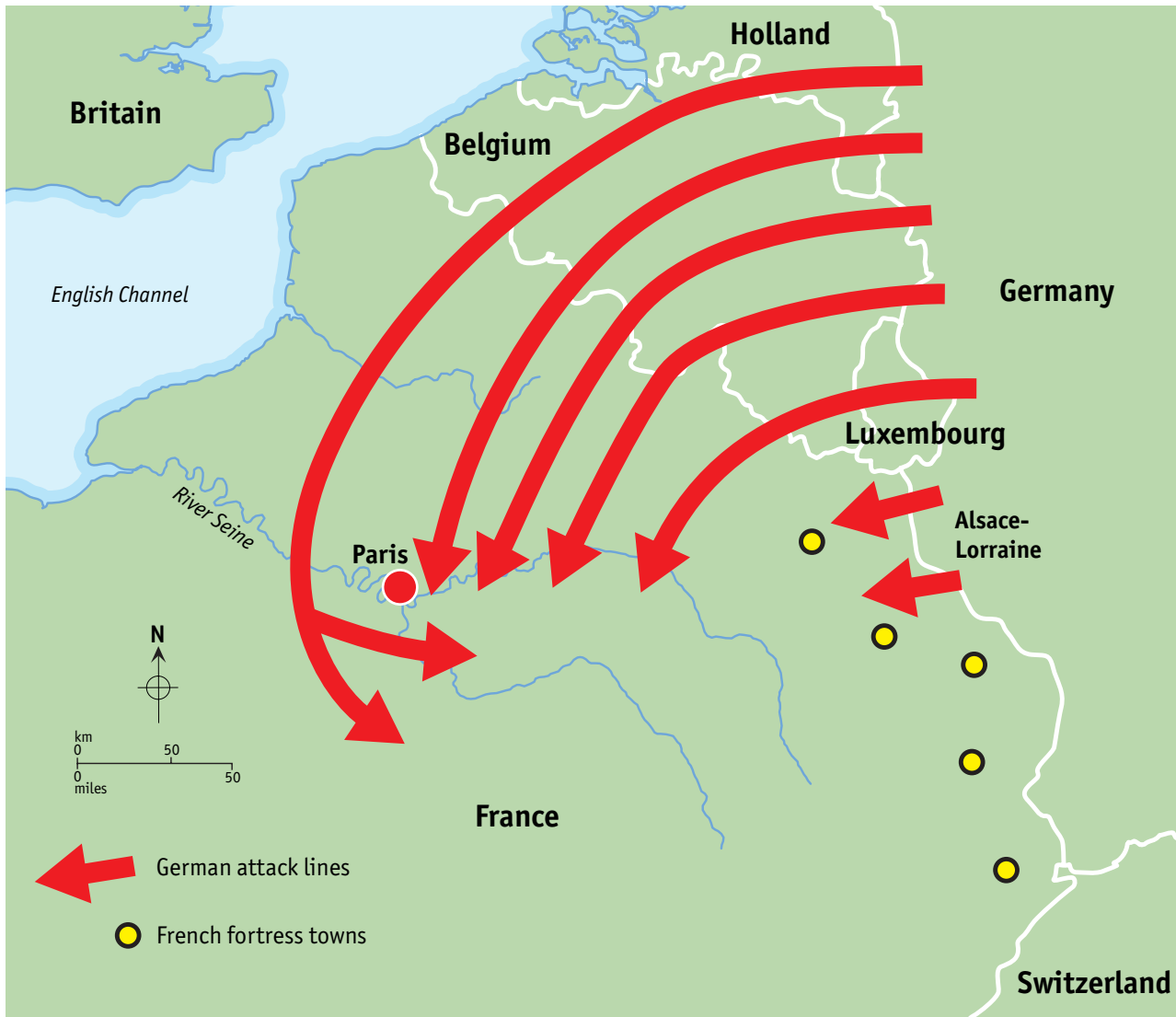
The war of movement, 1914 – the battle for the frontiers

The early stages of the war were dominated by the German Schlieffen Plan and its failure. This bold concept was based on certain key facts:

- 1 Germany needed to avoid a long war on two fronts, given its lack of natural frontier defences.
- 2 The coming war would be waged against France and Russia, both of which had large forces.
- 3 Russia's poor railway system, inefficient military organisation, and the large distances its troops would need to travel to reach the battle fronts, meant that the country would need time to mobilise.
- 4 Germany's railways were efficient and its military planning was well-developed.
- 5 Germany needed to defeat France first. The rapid defeat of France in 1870 gave the military planners confidence that the same could be achieved now.

The Schlieffen Plan thus concentrated large forces against France, leaving smaller forces to defend the East. The key points of the plan were:

- the main German attack on France would take place in the north, on the assumption that France would attack Germany in Alsace-Lorraine
- a massive drive by the German right wing would encircle Paris, taking the French by surprise
- German forces would hold the French attacks until the right wing had taken Paris and moved to attack the French from the rear
- the railways that had been used to concentrate forces against France would then carry German troops to the East, where they would defeat Russia – again by concentrating a large proportion of manpower in one place.



Map showing the Schlieffen Plan

The Schlieffen Plan had been developed in great detail, but as the German offensive began, some major problems appeared:

- 1 By the time the plan was put into operation, Russian railways and organisation had improved, and Russian forces were available for action far sooner than Germany had anticipated.
- 2 Railways could concentrate forces in one area, but after that the German armies had to march to battle. As they travelled further from their own bases and supplies, they lost the advantage to the defenders.
- 3 The Schlieffen Plan did not anticipate resistance from Belgium, nor did it make any provision for British forces stepping in to resist the advance.

- 4 The plan did not take into account France's use of aircraft observation to track German movements and allow counter-measures to be taken.
- 5 The planners had underestimated the impact of modern weaponry. Relatively small numbers of defenders could hold up large numbers of attackers by the use of automatic weapons.

Behind many of these issues lay a fundamental misunderstanding of modern warfare. Victory would not be achieved by brilliant strategic moves or the fall of capital cities, but by the side that destroyed the enemy armies in the field. In a war between peoples, victory could only be achieved by the complete destruction of the enemy's will to win. Germany had achieved remarkably swift and decisive victories against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870, but it was unlikely that the Schlieffen Plan could achieve success in a matter of weeks. Too much had changed by 1914.

Fact

The German advance was held up by the unexpected appearance of the small British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at Mons. The expert rifle fire of these well-trained troops caused heavy casualties in the ensuing battle, on 23–24 August 1914. A legend later spread – exploited by British propaganda – that angels had appeared at Mons to support the British. Despite this, British troops were still forced to retreat.

In the event, the plan failed for a number of reasons. Firstly, the timetable broke down as the Germans face unexpected resistance in Belgium, holding up the all-important advance at Liège. Further delays occurred as the British forces fought fiercely at the battles of Mons and le Câteau, before being forced to retreat in the face of greatly superior numbers. Hot weather also contributed to the slow progress of the advance. Thus, the Schlieffen Plan ran into difficulties from the outset.

In addition, pre-war changes had weakened the numerical strength of German troops in the key thrust through Belgium. The unexpected appearance of Russian forces in eastern Germany threw out the calculations of the planners. Greater numbers of troops than originally intended were dispatched to the East to guard against a Russian invasion.

Finally, a fatal decision was taken to adapt the plan: instead of encircling Paris as originally conceived, the German armies would change direction and attack Paris from the east. This caused confusion on the ground, and the French were able to monitor German movements from their reconnaissance aircraft. Seeing the German flank exposed, the French rallied their forces for a counter-attack and defended Paris on the River Marne. The Germans were forced on the defensive and withdrew to stronger positions.

The war of movement – the next phase

The war of movement now entered a key phase. French attacks further south resulted in heavy casualties and prevented a German breakthrough. The German offensive ground to a halt. Russia invaded eastern Germany but was unable to exploit its advantage by a drive on Berlin. Austrian advances into Serbia had not been as rapid as hoped. As war plans across Europe broke down, both sides resorted to rapid improvisation.

In the West, each side tried to outflank the other – i.e. to extend their lines in the hopes of getting behind the enemy. A race to the sea began, and the front line extended to its furthest point in the south – the Swiss frontier. Each side struggled to gain the most advantageous positions, especially high ground. Once these had been achieved, troops 'dug in' and awaited further instruction. In smokeless battlefields, soldiers on the ground were easy targets, and they simply had to remain out of sight. Temporary trenches became more developed as increasing amounts of men and equipment were brought up to the front line. Engineers constructed more extensive defences. Heavy artillery was also brought up to the battle fronts.

The development of a long, fortified front line, with both sides putting large numbers of troops in trenches and erecting barbed-wire defences, was not something military planners had anticipated, and it resulted in a totally new form of warfare. By November 1914, the rapid-movement phase of the war in the west was over and a new phase began, which dominated the events of the war until March 1918.

In the East, Germany employed traditional tactical warfare to expel the Russians. At the battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, Russian forces were outmanoeuvred and encircled. The Russian failure to exploit its initial successes was the greatest lost opportunity of the war and cost Russia dear. Driven back, the Russian armies had to regroup and defend, and the conflict on the Eastern Front, like that in the West, became one of trench warfare.

Fact

In the Battle of Tannenberg, 25–28 August 1914, the German forces encircled and destroyed the Russian troops that had invaded Germany, taking 95,000 prisoners and killing 30,000 people. The German commanders Hindenburg and Ludendorff became famous, and dominated the war effort from 1916.

The war expands – Turkey, the Far East and Africa

Meanwhile, the geographical scope of the war had expanded. Turkey joined when British naval forces chased two German warships, the *Goeben* and the *Breslau*, into Constantinople.

New weapons of war – gas and machine guns; here British machine gunners are firing during the Battle of the Somme, wearing gas masks



Fact

British attacks were made on German south-west Africa and colonies in east and west Africa. The German commander Paul von Lettow-Warbeck, together with 30,000 men, evaded capture and waged effective war against Britain right up to November 1918, despite being outnumbered. However, most German overseas possessions were taken by the Allies and never regained by Germany.

Though traditionally pro-British, Turkey's new reforming government leaned towards Germany, which had trained its armed forces and seemed more likely to help Turkey resist Russia.

Japan took advantage of the defensive alliance it had signed with Britain against Russia in 1902 to declare war on Germany, and to overrun German colonies in the Pacific and the German port of Kiaochow in China. The overseas empires of the European powers were now involved in the war, and campaigns began in Africa as attacks were made on German colonies in 1915. Italy was persuaded to join France and Britain by promises of gaining Italian-speaking areas under Austrian control and extending its empire. However, although the war was spreading, it was clear that the most decisive battles would occur in Europe.

Characteristics of the war on the Western Front

- The early fighting had shown that defence was easier than attack. Artillery and machine guns, together with rapid-fire magazine rifles, had a devastating effect on attackers.
- Once trenches and support trenches had been dug, barbed wire established and light railways built to carry more men and supplies to the front lines, attack became even more difficult.
- Large numbers of troops and a great deal of heavy artillery and weaponry were concentrated in quite a limited area. The entire industrial capacity of advanced modern states was focused on producing heavy weapons and supplying mass armies. But the troops could not manoeuvre and instead they faced each other over devastated strips of land.
- To win, forces had to break through the trench lines, then engage with the enemy, destroy the opposing armies and move through to take key strategic points to prevent further resistance.
- Breakthrough alone would not achieve victory, but if the war could become more mobile then cavalry could once again be used, and there was the possibility of traditional warfare in which armies were surrounded and destroyed. However, breakthrough was the first step and there were considerable problems in achieving this.

Why was it so hard to break through?

Commanders were faced with large concentrations of enemy forces in developed trench lines, supported by heavy artillery, machine guns, mortars, barbed wire and accurate long-range automatic rifles. The lines could not be outflanked and aircraft were not developed enough for precision bombing. The situation was more like siege warfare, but because of the improvised nature of the battle for the frontiers, the lines were established in open country or in small villages (apart from the large French forts at Verdun). The line was formed quite randomly at points in the French and Belgian countryside where the armies had fought and could advance no further.

The only real plan in 1915 was to accumulate heavy artillery to inflict devastating damage on the enemy line, then to advance troops to gain control of the gap in the line and push forward. These attacks failed to achieve a major breakthrough. The heavy casualties of 1915 continued into 1916, with British attacks in Flanders, French attacks in the Champagne region and German attacks in the east. Italy's entry into the war opened up new, heavily defended lines, while Romania's entry brought it a crushing defeat by Germany. An attack by Britain on Constantinople to knock Turkey out of the war ended in more trench warfare on the Gallipoli Peninsula and eventual British withdrawal.

Fact

Australian, New Zealand and British forces were landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula in April 1915 to take Constantinople after a naval attack had failed. The Turks, under the command of the future leader Kemal, held the high ground and forced the so-called ANZAC forces to dig in on shallow hillsides, where they were trapped. After heavy casualties, the British decided to evacuate. It was a humiliation for Britain, and particularly for Winston Churchill, who had been the architect of the attacks.

A key example – the Battle of the Somme, July 1916

In 1916, one of the most infamous battles in the history of warfare took place – the Battle of the Somme. British and some French forces faced well-established German positions on the River Somme in France. The Allies were anxious to break through to relieve the pressure on France, which was being attacked by the Germans at Verdun, and to support a major Russian attack. For the first time, Britain had amassed a large army and its industries had supplied great amounts of heavy artillery.

The attack was focused on 13 km (8 miles) of front, and millions of shells were fired on to the German line in what was probably the greatest artillery bombardment in history. Aerial photography revealed the position of the German lines and the British gunners focused on these targets. An attempt to destroy the German defences by mining under their lines and setting off high explosives was made. Such large amounts of explosive were used that the explosions could be heard in Britain. The crater left behind German lines by this bombardment amazes even today.

Planning had been intense – attacks were made in both the north and south, intended to divert the Germans. The main attacks had well-defined objectives and the troops were well briefed. There was enormous enthusiasm and high morale on the British side. The commander, **Sir Douglas Haig**, was both experienced and well-respected. Yet these attacks did not achieve a decisive breakthrough any more than those made in 1915 or the German attacks at Verdun in February 1916. There were several reasons for this:

- The artillery bombardment was terrifying and did destroy a lot of the front-line positions, but the defences were deep and they extended to the rear. With troops well dug in defensively, it was impossible to destroy every German unit.
- There was no element of surprise. The Germans knew that when the bombardment stopped an attack would begin, so they were ready to deploy their defenders and use their own long-range artillery behind the lines to pour fire on the attackers.
- The crucial time was the gap between the end of the bombardment, the detonation of the mines, and the start of the assault. Seconds were vital, as once the big guns stopped the Germans would rush their machine guns to the front. Huge forces acting together could not go 'over the top' quickly. Commanders allowed minutes to pass before an attack was launched.
- The mass armies were not long-serving professional soldiers, many of whom had been killed in the initial fighting. The view was that keen, but essentially amateur, troops needed to stay together and effect a concentrated attack. They therefore provided easy targets for the defenders.
- The actual attack – a rush towards a broken and demoralised enemy – had seemed easy in theory, but in practice it was more difficult. The ground between the two sides had been churned up by artillery. Shelling had also caused barbed wire to be distributed throughout '**No Man's Land**', forcing troops to bunch together rather than being spread out.
- There was no effective radio communication between the commanders and their forces. Once the attack began, the troops were effectively on their own. If a unit was successful, it could not radio in and bring other units to the key area. The commanders had a limited idea of what was happening. Forces in areas that met heavy resistance, therefore, did not stop attacking and shift to areas where resistance was light.

Sir Douglas Haig (1861–1928)

A cavalry officer who took over the command of British forces in France in 1915 from Sir John French, Haig was a well-educated but withdrawn commander. He was responsible for the major attacks of the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917), for which he has been seen as a 'butcher', careless of casualties. Haig also commanded the victorious forces in 1918 and rallied his men after the German attacks in March of that year. He founded the Royal British Legion after the war, which continues to look after former soldiers.



No Man's Land The name given to the land between the opposing trenches on the Western Front.

- Once the attack began and the British moved further from their starting point, the Germans had the advantage as they were able to bring up forces from the rear and use their massive heavy artillery. The only way an attack could be successful was if the initial assault achieved all its objectives and the gains were quickly consolidated. The Germans had to be driven back before they could begin an effective counter-attack. However, conditions on the front line made this very unlikely.
- In later wars, even later in the First World War, attacks by small groups with a more flexible command structure managed to break through. Only with more modern field communications could attacks have been successful on the Somme. In later wars, for example, commanders were able to call in strategic air attacks, but these were not available in July 1916.



The only successes on the first day of the Battle of the Somme were the diversionary attacks to the south. Enemy troops in these areas had not been forewarned by heavy bombardment, so the generals maintained the element of surprise and gained their objectives. Elsewhere, little was achieved but heavy losses – 60,000 dead, wounded and missing on the first day on the British side. The resources produced by the great industrial powers were too much to be overcome by bravery alone, but technology had not yet produced the key weapons that might have broken the deadlock – military aircraft, tanks with heavy armour and powerful cannon, and modern communications.

Infantry going to war, circa 1916; this image shows German troops going ‘over the top’



Historical debate – were the generals to blame?

The case against the generals

- 1 The generals were too rigid in their thinking. The same tactics were tried again and again, even after they had failed.
- 2 They were 'butchers', careless of human life, remote in their headquarters away from the battlefield and unaware of the awful conditions in which their men were fighting and dying.
- 3 They were often too old and thinking of past wars. They did not understand modern warfare, and instead dreamed of great cavalry charges and Napoleonic victories.
- 4 They were overly concerned with matters of military honour and allowed battles to continue even when there was little hope of winning.
- 5 They were unrealistic in their plans, preferring grand strategies to more achievable aims.
- 6 They were often remote and dictatorial, and refused to take advice.

Fact

The Battle of Caporetto began on 24 October 1917 and was one of the biggest Allied disasters of the war. Italy had joined the war in 1915 on the promise of regaining Italian-speaking areas still under Austrian rule. Italy lost 600,000 men in the war, but achieved little. The defeat at Caporetto forced the Italians back almost to Venice, and Italy had to be saved by French, British and US forces.

The British commander Sir Douglas Haig has been particularly singled out for blame, but other leaders have not escaped. Erich von Falkenhayn, the German commander in 1916, earned a poor reputation after the attacks on Verdun in which the Germans aimed to 'bleed France white' by simply killing as many French troops as possible. The Italian commanders were seen as upper-class Piedmontese militarists, sending masses of Italian troops to their deaths in pointless conflicts in the mountain regions between Austria and Italy, and then showing their incompetence by allowing a full-scale disaster in 1917 when the Germans and Austrians attacked at Caporetto.

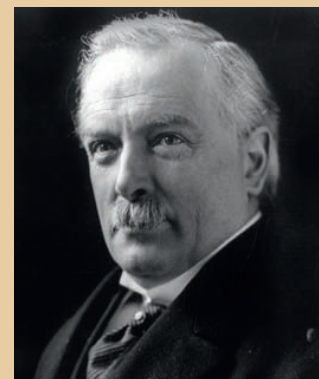
The German general Erich von Ludendorff has been regarded as over-ambitious in his attacks of 1918, and then being weak and hysterical when they failed. Both he and his fellow commander Paul von Hindenburg have been criticised as dictators, dominating the civilian government of Germany. When the US joined the war, its commander John J. Pershing seemed unwilling to learn anything from the events that had taken place, and has been accused of throwing inexperienced troops into poorly planned battles. The French general Robert Nivelle has one of the worst reputations for ordering a suicidal attack in 1917, which led to a mutiny in the French army. Russian generals have also been accused of incompetence and failing to supply their armies properly.

Biographies and campaign histories find military incompetence everywhere. In one famous study, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Norman F. Dixon offers a general theory of poor leadership. John Laffan's *Butchers and Bunglers of World War I* makes his view clear, as does Denis Winter in *Death's Men* – a study of the Western Front which argues that commanders needlessly condemned their troops to suffering and death. In the inter-war years this view was common, curiously more among the victorious powers, and it explains much of the reluctance by Britain, France and the USA to fight another war. The viewpoint was less common in Germany, which, though it had lost more men than Britain, did not see such a reaction against its military leaders. Paul von Hindenburg was even elected president in 1926.



(From left to right) Haig and Joffre, the French commander, appeal to the future British prime minister, **David Lloyd George**, 1916; Lloyd George became increasingly sceptical about Haig's plans and abilities

David Lloyd George (1863–1945) Lloyd George was a radical politician who took charge of munitions in 1915 and rose to be prime minister in December 1916. He led a determined war effort by increasing the power of the state. He remained prime minister until 1922, but never held office again.



The burial site at Verdun – Falkenhayn’s aim to ‘bleed the French white’ succeeded here, but the bones are also those of German troops who were killed in their thousands from February to November 1916



The counter view

Revisionist historians like John Terraine in *Haig, The Educated Soldier* and Gary Sheffield in *The British Army in the First World War* have challenged the hostile view of commanders.

- 1 Although there was incompetence, it strains credibility to blame all generals in all countries for the war’s high cost and indecisive nature.
- 2 The idea of rigidity in military tactics has been challenged. There could not be major developments because of the nature of the weaponry and the strategic situations, but the way in which war was fought did develop.
 - The use of artillery became more sophisticated, with ‘creeping barrages’ that fired shells to positions just ahead of the attackers. Tunnels and mines were used effectively to achieve surprise attacks (for example in the Allied attack on Germany at Vimy Ridge, 1917).
 - Both Germany and Russia developed more flexible tactics, using smaller units with local commanders who had greater freedom to show initiative and avoid pointless assaults on strong points. This can be seen in the Russian Brusilov offensive of 1916, for example, or the German attacks in March 1918, which used ‘storm troop’ tactics developed on the Eastern Front by the German colonel, Oskar von Hutier. Here, a short bombardment

Fact

Poison gas accounted for 1.25 million casualties. Though initiated by French forces in 1914, the first major use was by the Germans in 1915 using chlorine. This triggered reprisals and regular use by both sides. In 1917, mustard gas was used against the Russians on the Eastern Front. Gas masks became a regular feature of war, but gas was not an effective weapon, being dependent on favourable winds.

was followed by attacks by smaller, highly trained units, which probed for weaknesses in the defence and, once a breakthrough had been made, quickly followed up with mass infantry directed at key points.

- The Allies developed a united command and co-ordinated their attacks far more in 1918 using planes, tanks, flexible artillery bombardment and infantry in a way that anticipated the fighting of the Second World War.
 - All sides welcomed new technology: poison gas (though this proved an ineffective weapon); mines; the tank – first used by Britain in 1916 (see page 57); military aircraft. Horses were important for transport but it is not true that commanders were wedded to cavalry charges.
- 3 The issues of heavy losses and military incompetence need to be decoupled. Given the mass armies, the development of heavy weapons and the insistence of national leaders on complete victory, rather than negotiated peace – a view by and large supported by the populations – heavy casualties were bound to occur. The casualties of the Second World War, with better weapons and skilled commanders far more under the control of the political leaders, were higher, yet the generals are not blamed in most historical writing. Napoleon is regarded as a military genius, yet the casualty figures for his battles are huge. Mobile warfare is not less costly than static trench warfare.
 - 4 It is not true that generals were remote and did not fully understand the conditions on the front lines. However, military intelligence was not as developed as it was later, and it was difficult to know what was happening once action started. The death rate in battle among generals was high, but in modern war it was not the place of high-ranking officers to be involved at direct operational level.
 - 5 Though many of the leaders had unattractive character traits, nevertheless they were prepared to take advice. When the French forces mutinied in 1917, Marshal Pétain did not punish excessively and he was cautious in the attacks of 1918. New ideas were adopted and – a point that is often overlooked – there were considerable successes. The German attacks of 1918 might well have achieved victory had there been more reserves available. After initial failures, the British campaigns in the Middle East in 1917–18 successfully defeated Turkey. The final campaigns of Britain, France and the USA brought Germany to an **armistice**, and Austria and Germany were successful in their attacks on Italy in 1917. The Germans and Austrians were able to knock the much larger forces of Russia out of the war by 1917. Not all aspects of the war were characterised by failure or stalemate.

Concluding the main events

In broad terms, after the initial advances and retreats of 1914, 1915 was characterised by German successes in the East and Allied failures in the West.

By 1916, nations had increased the size of their armies and had mobilised their resources for war on a much larger scale. Industrial countries were gearing themselves to produce more and more ammunition and heavier weapons. Militarily, the advantage seemed to lie with Germany and its allies.

- Germany had advanced well into Russia.
- German **U-boats** were posing a serious threat to Britain's shipping and its vital links with North America, which was producing a lot of Britain's supplies.
- British and French attacks in France had failed to achieve breakthrough.
- Italy had joined the Allies but had made little progress in attacking Austria.
- Britain had failed to eliminate Turkey by attacking at Gallipoli, and had been defeated in Mesopotamia (Iraq) by the Turks.



Theory of knowledge

Moral judgements belong to the philosopher, not the historian – do you agree?

Is it part of the historian's task to make moral judgements and to condemn historical figures such as Haig, or is this unhistorical? If a historian explains decisions that cost thousands of lives, must he or she go further and make a moral standpoint clear in order to prevent the recurrence of such tragic events, or is this merely exercising hindsight and introducing an element that the reader should bring as he/she thinks appropriate? However, if a historian is morally neutral, does he or she run the risk of condoning loss of life?

armistice An agreement to stop fighting. This may lead to a formal surrender but is not the same thing. By accepting that hostilities should cease, the Germans did not realise that they would have peace terms imposed on them without the right to attend the peace talks. The word is thus important in understanding future conflict.

U-boat *Unterseeboot*, meaning submarine. Most U-boat attacks occurred on the surface in the First World War, when the submarine would come up, attack and then submerge.

Fact

The *Lusitania* was a famous Cunard Line ship that was sunk off the Irish coast by U-boat U20 on 4 May 1915. Some 128 Americans on board died, and the USA issued a warning that led the Germans to restrict U-boat warfare until 1917. In fact, the *Lusitania* was carrying 4000 cases of ammunition. The incident worsened relations between the USA and Germany, and was one reason for the USA's entry into the war in 1917.

In 1916, the Germans decided to concentrate on the Western Front. In theory, the strongest point here was the fortified area in and around Verdun. The great forts there were thought to be impossible to take. France would never surrender them, as they represented security and historic French honour. It was at Verdun, therefore, that the Germans decided to attack – not for a strategic breakthrough but ‘to bleed France white’ by drawing increasing numbers of troops into battle and causing French strength to ebb away in a bloodbath. It was the fullest expression of the war of attrition – a war that would be won by wearing down enemy resources.

The Battle of Verdun began with unexpected German successes at Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux. It continued as a bloody conflict of mass artillery and costly attack and counter-attack. The battle lasted most of the year, and cost the Germans almost as many lives as the French. To relieve the pressure, Britain attacked on the Somme. This similarly became a drawn-out battle of attrition, in which little ground was gained and thousands died. A more promising Russian advance under General Alexei Brusilov began well but ended in deadlock. The one great naval battle of the war – Jutland – ended with both the British and German fleets returning to port after a costly exchange of fire that settled little. There were British gains in the Middle East, but by the end of 1916 little had been gained in return for the huge expenditure of life and equipment.

The different arenas of war

The war at sea

At the start of the war, Germany attacked Allied shipping with destroyers, but these were defeated by the British and Australian fleets, and Britain was able to blockade German ports. Germany increasingly relied on its U-boats (submarines), but this changed after the U-boat U20 sank the liner *Lusitania*, killing 128 Americans. This prompted the US, not yet drawn into the conflict, to instruct the Germans to restrict their submarine warfare. In 1916, the Germans planned to lure a smaller part of the British fleet into the North Sea and destroy it with a great fleet that would sail out of the major German naval base at Kiel. However, the plan was discovered by British intelligence and instead the Germans faced the might of the entire British grand fleet, which sailed from its base in the Orkney Islands. The ensuing naval battle of Jutland, however, was inconclusive. Technically, the Germans won, but their surface fleet retreated back to base and did not re-emerge for the rest of the war.

Once again the Germans relied on submarines, but to stop the British trade with the USA more and more US seamen were being killed in unrestricted U-boat warfare, which recommenced in 1916. The battle against the submarines was waged first by British and then US naval forces escorting convoys after April 1917, when German naval policy brought about US entry to the war. However, as in the Second World War, the U-boats were a severe threat. In April 1918, the U-boat base at Zeebrugge was successfully attacked and blocked by a British naval raid. The German sailors were restless in Kiel and mutinied in 1918 when they were ordered out for a last great battle with Britain.

Britain had used its navy to maintain trade links with North America, to ensure war supplies, to keep the link with France open and to transport and supply troops fighting in the Middle East. However, after its initial successes against German surface raiders (armed ships made to look like ordinary merchant vessels) in 1914, the British navy had been less successful in direct conflict with the Germans. Naval warfare was significant in bringing the US into the war.

The war in the air

In 1914, the use of planes in war was limited to reconnaissance. The troop movements in the Schlieffen Plan were visible from the air, for instance, and aerial photography rapidly improved. The primitive use of bombing and weapons fired from planes quickly developed. The Germans dropped bombs on Liège from aircraft as early as August 1914. From this developed attempts to shoot down enemy planes, and all countries increased their production of military aircraft. Individual 'dog fights' became a feature of warfare, with the emergence of 'air aces' like the German Count von Richthoven and the British Albert Ball (both of whom were killed in action). The poorly armoured planes were vulnerable and casualty rates were high. However, as machine guns were mounted on planes, and as bombing capacity increased, the potential for aircraft as weapons of war developed rapidly, as did the numbers of planes. In 1914, France possessed 162 aircraft. By 1918, it had 11,836, including 3437 on the front lines. Britain established an effective Flying Corps, which became the RAF. Such developments made it possible to carry the war much further afield, to the enemy home front. The effectiveness of such air warfare was seen dramatically during later conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War.

The Germans terrorised London and Paris by Zeppelin (gas-filled airships) raids until 1916, when inflammatory bullets and better air defences made them less effective. The Germans' heavy Gotha bombers and the subsequent Giants could carry 2000 lb bombs, and by 1918 London's air defences included anti-aircraft guns and barrage balloons. Both sides developed air technology but the Allies took the lead in using their planes in conjunction with infantry, tanks and artillery, anticipating the co-ordination of air and land warfare that was a more significant feature of wars after 1939.

The situation in 1917

The massive losses did not lead to any significant demand for peace, and it was remarkable that the powers sustained such heavy fighting without greater unrest at home. However, this changed in 1917.

In Russia, the disappointments of the campaigns of 1916, the shortages caused by poor management of the war and unexpectedly large demonstrations in the capital, Petrograd (as St Petersburg had been renamed), brought about a crisis in February 1917. Tsar Nicholas II was away from the capital, commanding his own troops, and he lost the confidence of Russian military, industrial and political leaders. His soldiers would not fire on the protesting crowds in Petrograd, and shortly afterwards the tsar abdicated. Germany took advantage of the disruption and encouraged Russian political unrest. The Russian Front virtually collapsed, though it was not until a second revolution brought the Marxist Lenin to power in October 1917 that Russia officially withdrew from the war, in March 1918.

Russia's collapse put considerable pressure on France and Britain to increase their war effort. In an attempt to keep Britain short of materials and vital imported food, the Germans stepped up their submarine campaign. However, in order to make the blockade effective, the U-boats were forced to attack US and neutral shipping as well as British ships – in defiance of the warning the US had issued in 1915 after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. This reversion to unrestricted submarine warfare was seen as provocative by the USA, which was also angered at the discovery that Germany had been plotting with Mexico to wage war against the USA. In April 1917, a combination of these factors led the USA to declare war on Germany.

T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935)

T. E. Lawrence (known as 'Lawrence of Arabia') was a scholar who was recruited to act as liaison officer with the Arab tribes who had rebelled against their Turkish ruler. He took part in guerrilla warfare in Arabia and became a national hero. Lawrence opposed the poor treatment of the Arabs after the war and went into private life, changing his name and joining the RAF. He died in a motorcycle accident in 1935.



storm troopers Small groups of highly trained German soldiers who sought out weak points and used maximum force to break through. Some became Nazis after the war, and Hitler took the name for his own para-military forces. They were first used by the Germans in Russia.

railheads The points to which the railways brought troops and supplies for the front. Capture of the railheads would disrupt the entire supply line.

US forces were small but the country's manpower and industrial potential was huge. With America preparing for war and with Russia on the point of dropping out of it, there was a furious race to settle the conflict in the West. Futile French attacks in the Chemin des Dames offensive led to a mutiny in the French army that effectively reduced its participation. Against all pre-war expectations, the deciding struggle would be between Germany and Britain.

British tactics seemed to be making headway, and the first part of 1917 saw more realistic attacks with limited aims, carefully planned, and achieving surprise. The Battle of Vimy Ridge, though costly, was short, attained its objectives and achieved surprise by using flexible tactics. Inexplicably, Haig then reverted to previous tactics of heavy bombardment and a frontal attack on the German high ground above the town of Ypres. In doing so, he hoped to break through and reach the Flanders coast in preparation for a grand attack on Germany. In rain and mud, the attacks here at Passchendaele floundered. Casualties mounted in possibly the most futile and unimaginative attack of the war. To make matters worse, Germany managed to strengthen Austrian forces and to break the Italian lines at Caporetto and threaten Venice (see page 48). Allied troops had to be diverted to save Italy. The only Allied success was the British advance in the Middle East, aided by Arab irregulars and Colonel **T. E. Lawrence's** guerrilla forces. Damascus fell to the British on Christmas Day 1917.

By early 1918, Germany had transferred large forces to the West, though millions were still held in the East, occupying great areas of former Russian territory. The British had been weakened by the losses at Passchendaele and by having to divert forces to Italy. The French army was too weak and unreliable to be useful in attack. American forces had arrived in France but were inexperienced. All now depended on a final attack by Germany, which began in March 1918. The German offensive, codenamed Operation Michael, broke the stalemate and the Western Front shifted for the first time since 1914. Small groups of **storm troopers** supported by accurate artillery fire broke through the Allied lines.

Amiens – the turning point on the Western Front, 1918

German successes were followed by the arrival of larger forces, and the Allies were driven back. Britain once again found itself defending against large-scale attacks. However, a consequence of concentrating large forces in a relatively small area was that the attackers moved further from their **railheads** and support, while the defenders were closer to theirs. To win, Germany would have needed all the soldiers killed in the great battles of 1916 and 1917. It had neither the men nor the resources to achieve victory.

The industrial might of Britain and the USA now began to tell. Three huge bulges were made in the Allied line, but Paris was saved. The German attacks stalled, and a well-equipped and co-ordinated Allied counter-attack began which deployed fresh American troops, large numbers of tanks, sophisticated artillery able to lay down barrages to support advances, and aircraft used in conjunction with tanks, artillery and infantry.

The defeat of the Germans at Amiens in August 1918 was the turning point in the West, but despite the subsequent advances through the heavy German defences, a considerable amount of fighting would have been required to reach Germany itself. It was only by the standards of the Western Front since 1914 that this could be considered a rapid advance.

Why then did Germany fail?

By 1918, Germany was facing problems on all fronts:

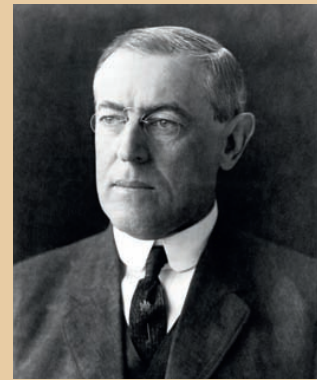
- The Turks had been decisively defeated by British forces in the Middle East in 1918. The great Battle of Megiddo in Syria was decisive.
- Austria had been defeated in another major battle on the Italian Front – Vittorio Veneto – and, with the continual drain of the campaigns in Russia, it was not in a position to continue its involvement in the war.
- Greece was persuaded to abandon its neutrality and an Allied force that had landed at Salonika, but which had been inactive since 1917, began to advance though the Balkans.
- The U-boats had been overcome by superior tactics, which protected Allied shipping by convoys, and they had been weakened by a British naval raid on the U-boat base at Zeebrugge.
- The Allied naval blockade, together with the disruption of agriculture by wartime requisitioning, had created serious food shortages in Germany. These led to growing discontent in German cities. There was a fear that Germany would experience a revolution similar to that in Russia.
- The arrival of American troops and equipment, together with US credit for the Allies to purchase war supplies, left the Germans in an unequal position: they could not match the manpower and production available to the Allies.
- The nerve of the German high command broke at a crucial time, and they handed over power to the civilian parliament and advised that the war could not be won.
- US president **Woodrow Wilson**'s offer of peace terms suggested a way out for a war-weary Germany, isolated by the defeat of its allies and fearful of internal unrest and revolution.

This Austrian poster blames the Jews on the home front for defeat



Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924)

Wilson was a former professor who was elected US president in 1912. A Democrat, he was re-elected in 1916 after the success of his progressive domestic policy and because he had kept the US out of the war. However, he felt obliged to declare war in 1917 because he wanted to ensure that a lasting peace built on a new international morality and co-operation resulted. He suggested peace terms in 1918 and worked towards a fair settlement at Versailles. He was forced to compromise, and the US Congress did not approve the peace treaty or agree to the USA's membership of the League of Nations.



Questions

Why do you think this cartoon is so bitter? Is it true that German military failure alone was not to blame for the defeat? Who should the cartoonist have been blaming?

Fact

The word 'rifle' refers to a groove in the barrel which sends the bullet out spinning, not, as in the case of the musket, out of a smooth bore. The spin gives greater accuracy. The greater charge in the cartridge case gives longer range. So attackers had to face a much greater number of bullets from a much closer range. Those bullets could be aimed specifically at them, not just fired in their general direction.

In March 1918, Germany had acquired great areas of agricultural land and industry in western Russia, but had no time to develop them. German forces were, professionally, superior to those of its enemies, but it was increasingly clear that, though Germany could go on fighting, it could not actually win the war. The armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 without Allied troops on German soil, and with Germany still in possession of large amounts of other nations' land. Germany still had a large and effective army; it still had an intact fleet and it had outgunned and outmanoeuvred the British in their one great naval battle; it still had a largely supportive civilian population; it had potentially large food supplies from its conquered territory. Compared with the situation in 1945, therefore, Germany was not desperate and the Allied victory was not especially decisive. For many in Germany, including Corporal Adolf Hitler, defeat came completely unexpectedly.

How important was technology in determining tactics and outcome?

The Industrial Revolution transformed both weapons and the state. By 1914, there had been many significant changes in the equipment, weaponry, organisation, planning and support for Europe's armed forces.

The main developments lay in the speed and accuracy with which both small arms (rifles and pistols) and artillery (cannon, mortars and howitzers) could fire. Rifles had developed considerably from the old muskets in the course of the previous century.

The deadliest development was that of rifled artillery. Much more powerful shells could be fired longer distances, more rapidly, with cannon developed as a result of the engineering of the Industrial Revolution. The shells could be packed with explosive and could have a devastating effect from a long distance. In addition to this, mines and mortars with considerable destructive power had been developed during the long period of peace after 1815. The huge advances in modern science and engineering meant more destructive weapons were designed. The mass production of steel turned these designs into reality, and the emergence of huge factories meant that these weapons could also be produced in large quantities.

A major development was the machine gun, which could fire hundreds of rounds a minute from relatively long distances. The new weaponry also produced much less smoke. Attacking forces were no longer obscured by masses of smoke and thus became targets for heavy artillery, rapid-firing rifles and machine guns. A dash over open ground to attack the enemy offered little chance of success.

Naval technology had also progressed rapidly after 1815. The age of sail gave way to the age of steam; ships were equipped with formidable long-range guns and armoured with the latest steel plating. When modern European ships encountered older navies, such as those of China and Japan in the mid 19th century, their superiority was overwhelming. European empires expanded on the basis of technological superiority – non-industrialised peoples could not resist the revolution in military power. Also by 1914, military aircraft were being used by all sides, mainly for reconnaissance, but also for limited attacks. Aircraft made surprise attacks difficult to achieve, as troops on the ground could be monitored from the air.

Another significant development was the tank, first used in 1916. However, this did not lead to the breakthrough that was hoped for. The technology available to the generals was not sufficient to break the deadlock of the war. Larger-scale artillery could not destroy all the defences; the machine guns favoured the defenders; air power was not strong enough to destroy trenches. No side possessed a 'wonder weapon' and both relied on similar weaponry. Tactics either did not or could not take enough consideration of the heavier weapons for most of the war. It was not until 1918, when the war of attrition finally took its toll on manpower and resources, that tactics were sufficiently adapted to allow more mobile and decisive warfare.

How important was the home front?

In a total war, there is less distinction between the actual fighting fronts and what came to be known as the home front. The huge demand for weapons meant that industry was vital, and as more and more men were called up to the front lines, women took their place. Women had always worked, but mainly in the textile industry and in agriculture. Women working in engineering and arms manufacturing and, to some extent, in transport was a new development. British women were also urged to join the **Land Army**.

By the later stages of the war, women were also in uniform. In Britain this was in the army and navy, though not as combatants. Russia went further by forming a women's battalion in 1917. The work women did in the war was a strong impetus towards greater women's political rights and the right to vote in several countries.

National enthusiasm had played a part in bringing war about and it was necessary to sustain this enthusiasm when the conflict proved to be longer and more costly than expected. The participating nations did not face serious anti-war unrest at home. Propaganda was often effective in rallying morale. Posters tended to stress the need for service to the nation. When images of the war were shown in cinemas, they were either of troops preparing for action or very limited footage of action. A newsreel of the Battle of the Somme by the official British cameraman Geoffrey Malins was seen by half the population of Britain, so great was the interest, but though it showed the massive explosion that preceded the attacks, it depicted only limited coverage of the fighting itself. It is significant that Malins was given a special concrete shelter from which to film his piece, and that the film was expected to be used as part of a record of victory. The propaganda value of film was being recognised for the first time. **Censorship** prevented anti-war feelings gaining prominence, and conscientious objectors to the war faced persecution, not only from the state but also from their fellow citizens. Britain was unusual in having a legal concept of conscientious objection (see page 58).

The war increased the power of the state in most countries. Taxes rose, communications were controlled, goods requisitioned and men conscripted. Maintaining the home front became a major aspect of fighting the war. Bombing brought the war home to civilians in a way that no one had experienced before. The scale of civilian casualties, together with the economic hardships endured on the home front, meant that this war touched ordinary people as no other had before. In Britain, the policy of encouraging people from the same town to enlist together brought considerable hardship to local communities when losses occurred on the battle fronts.

Fact

The tank was developed by Major Ernest Swinton of the British army, and the first one was produced in 1915 – an armoured container with tracks to overcome the trenches. Tanks were first used in 1916 at Flers during the Battle of the Somme, but they broke down and, because they were slow-moving, they were vulnerable to artillery. However, they were used effectively in conjunction with flexible artillery barrages in 1918, when the Allies had superior numbers. Their potential was recognised by theorists and tank development was a major part of inter-war military thinking. Tanks played a significant part in the Second World War.

Land Army The Women's Land Army was set up in the First World War, when a great deal of farm work had been done by men. With so many young men called up for the armed services, there was a shortage of farm workers. Hence, the government called on women to fill this gap. Women worked 50 hours a week in the summer and 48 a week in the winter. They also wore a special uniform.

censorship The control by the state of communications of all sorts – books, newspapers, journals, even letters sent from combat zones. Later wars also featured censorship of radio, film and television.

blockades In this case, using *naval* power to prevent the enemy trading and bringing in essential supplies. This was a traditional British weapon because of the country's naval superiority. The Germans applied it by using submarines. Both blockades were dangerous, but the British blockade caused much hardship in Germany by the winter of 1916, and was one of the reasons why Germany could not carry on the war in 1918.

conscientious objection

'Conscientious objector' was a name given in Britain to those who refused to join the armed forces because they had moral objections to war. Some religious groups, like the Quakers, considered the taking of human life unjustified under any circumstances. The philosophical and/or religious grounds for objection were investigated by special tribunals. The right to object was reluctantly recognised, but there was considerable stigma attached to it in both world wars.

However, countries or states were largely successful in adapting to the needs of modern industrial warfare – even Russia was able to overcome early problems and sustain a major offensive in the summer of 1916, even if the pressure began to show after that.

Naval **blockades** and the wholesale use of horses and manpower caused severe shortages of food and rationing in some countries. By 1916, much of Germany was suffering food shortages, and by 1918 Britain faced official rationing of food and raw materials, as well as the compulsory cultivation of agricultural land. War was deeply linked to the erosion of personal liberties and an increase in state power.

What impact did the war have in provoking resistance and revolution?

There was a great deal of criticism about the war, especially as losses rose. The British prime minister Herbert Asquith was forced to resign in 1916 in favour of a stronger war leader, David Lloyd George. Even Lloyd George faced strikes, the rapid rise of trade unions and support for socialism. In Germany, shortages on the home front resulted in discontent and there was widespread dislike of a virtual military dictatorship. The disturbances in the German fleet and among the workers by the end of the war led to attempts at revolution. Food and fuel shortages in Russia and discontent among the élite at the poor management of the war by Tsar Nicholas II led to a revolution in St Petersburg in 1917 and the abdication of the tsar. There was recognition of the concept of **conscientious objection** to war in Britain, but those who claimed exemption from service on grounds of conscience often faced considerable hardship in prison, or were placed in dangerous roles in military service while not actually fighting. In the main, organised religion lent its support to the war effort. Newspapers took a pro-war stance and it was difficult to escape involvement.

Mutinies

The Russian Revolution was possible because the tsar's troops did not obey orders to suppress discontent. In 1917, even some front-line troops were refusing to attack. French support for the war had been strong during the initial battles for the frontier and the Verdun campaign of 1916, but the futile Chemin des Dames offensive of 1917 gave rise to the only significant large-scale mutinies of the war. In the end, order was restored by a mixture of concession and severe but limited punishment – targeting only a selection of mutineers rather than whole regiments. However, the French ability to sustain heavy fighting into 1918 was diminished. Arguably, the French army had not recovered by the time of the Second World War, and it did not show the determined resistance to Germany then as it had in 1914 and 1917. There was much excitement about the Russian Revolution, and a strong radical movement emerged in the German navy – the sailors at Kiel mutinied in 1918 and refused to sail out for a final 'death or glory' battle with the British. Mutineers also took part in disturbances in Berlin and Munich in 1919 and 1920.

What seems remarkable is that in many countries, for a long period, there was relatively little demand for an end to the war. Even the more educated and politically aware peoples of Europe simply accepted hardship on both the fighting fronts and home fronts.

End of unit activities

- 1 What evidence is there in this chapter to show that the First World War was a war of attrition? Look again at what this means and find material that shows how this term might be justified.
- 2 Why was there rapid movement only at the beginning and the end of the war and not in the middle years?

A British recruitment poster urging women to join the Women's Land Army



Questions

What does this poster suggest about the involvement of the population in war? Why do you think it was necessary for nations to use this sort of propaganda? How would you explain the possible impact of this poster in the light of what you know about the situation in 1917?

Activity

Find out how women were affected by war in at least four countries and organise your findings into a table like the one below. Rank each example according to how lasting it was on a scale of 1 (temporary) to 5 (long-lasting).

Change	Examples from different countries	How lasting was it?
Different types of employment		
Women in the armed forces		
Social change in the way women lived		
Alliances and ententes		
Political change – any new rights or increased political awareness		