



>> Austrian soldiers advance into Russian Poland during the winter of 1915.

7.2

World War I—known at the time as the “Great War”—was the largest conflict in history up to that time. The French mobilized almost 8.5 million men, the British nearly 9 million, the Russians 12 million, and the Germans 11 million. For those who fought, the statistics were more personal. “One out of every four men who went out to the World War did not come back again,” recalled a survivor, “and of those who came back, many are maimed and blind and some are mad.”



Interactive Flipped Video

### >> Objectives

**Understand** how trench warfare led to a stalemate on the Western Front.

**Identify** and describe the impact of modern military technology on the fighting.

**Outline** the course of the war on multiple European fronts.

**Explain** how World War I was a global conflict.

### >> Key Terms

stalemate  
zeppelin  
U-boat  
convoy  
Dardanelles  
T. E. Lawrence

## Fighting the Great War

### A New Kind of War

The early enthusiasm for the war soon faded. There were no stirring cavalry charges, no quick and glorious victories. This was a new kind of war, far deadlier than any before.

**Stalemate on the Western Front** As the war began, German forces fought their way through Belgium toward Paris, following the Schlieffen Plan. The Belgians resisted more than German generals had expected, but the German forces prevailed. However, Germany's plans for a quick defeat of France soon faltered.

The Schlieffen Plan failed for several reasons. First, Russia mobilized more quickly than expected. After Russian forces won a few small victories in eastern Prussia, German generals hastily shifted some troops to the east. This move weakened their forces in the west. Then, in September 1914, British and French troops pushed back the German drive along the Marne River. The first battle of the Marne ended Germany's hopes for a quick victory on the Western Front.

Both sides then began to dig deep trenches to protect their armies from fierce enemy fire. They did not know that the conflict would turn into a long, deadly **stalemate**, a deadlock in which neither side is able



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to defeat the other. Battle lines in France would remain almost unchanged for four years.

**Trench Warfare** On the Western Front, the warring armies burrowed into a vast system of trenches, stretching from the Swiss frontier to the English Channel. An underground network linked bunkers, communications trenches, and gun emplacements.

There, millions of soldiers roasted under the broiling summer sun or froze through long bitter winters. They shared their food with rats and their beds with lice.

Between the opposing trench lines lay "no man's land," an empty tract, pocketed with shell holes. Through coils of barbed wire, soldiers peered over the edge of their trenches, watching for the next enemy attack. They themselves would have to charge into this man-made desert when officers gave the order.

Sooner or later, soldiers obeyed the order to go "over the top." With no protection but their rifles and helmets, they charged across no man's land toward the enemy lines. With luck, they might overrun a few trenches. In time, the enemy would launch a counterattack, with similar results. Each side then rushed in reinforcements to replace the dead and wounded. The struggle continued, back and forth, over a few hundred yards of territory.

**High Casualty Rates** To break the stalemate on the Western Front, both the Allies and the Central Powers launched massive offensives in 1916. German forces tried to overwhelm the French at Verdun (vur DUN). The French defenders held firm, sending up the battle cry "They shall not pass." The 11-month struggle cost more than a half a million casualties, or soldiers killed, wounded, or missing, on both sides.

An Allied offensive at the Somme River (sum) was even more costly. In a single grisly day, nearly 60,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded. In the five-month battle, more than one million soldiers were killed, without either side winning an advantage.

Some soldiers wrote about their experiences on the front lines:

The blue French cloth mingled with the German grey upon the ground, and in some places the bodies were piled so high that one could take cover from shell-fire behind them. The noise was so terrific that orders had to be shouted by each man into the ear of the next. And whenever there was a momentary lull in the tumult of battle and the groans of the wounded, one




**>> Analyze Maps** Who do you think was in a better strategic position at the start of the war, the Allies or the Central Powers? Why?

**Interactive Map**



>> This German soldier was one of the many casualties of the fighting during World War I. Massive offenses and new military technology combined to produce extremely high casualty rates.

 **Interactive 3-D Model**



>> Poison gas and machine guns are two examples of the military technology that killed and wounded so many. These British machine gunners wear gas masks during the Battle of the Somme, in July 1916.

 **Interactive Gallery**

heard, high up in the blue sky, the joyful song of birds! Birds singing just as they do at home in spring-time! It was enough to tear the heart out of one's body!

—German soldier Richard Schmieder, writing from the trenches in France

**2 IDENTIFY CAUSE AND EFFECT** How did the failure of Germany's Schlieffen Plan to quickly defeat France affect the future course of the war?

## Modern Military Technology

The enormous casualties suffered on the Western Front were due in part to the destructive power of modern weapons. Two significant weapons were the rapid-fire machine gun and the long-range artillery gun. Machine guns mowed down waves of soldiers. Artillery allowed troops to shell the enemy from more than 10 miles away. The shrapnel, or flying debris from artillery shells, killed or wounded even more soldiers than the guns.

**Poison Gas** Efforts to overcome the stalemate of trench warfare led to the use of poison gas. Early on, the French used tear gas grenades, but by 1915, the Germans began employing poison gas on a large scale. Even though the Allies condemned the use of poison gas, both sides developed and used different kinds of poison gases. Poison gas blinded or choked its victims or caused agonizing burns and blisters. It could be fatal. Though soldiers were eventually given gas masks, poison gas remained one of the most dreaded hazards of the war.

One British soldier recalled the effects of being gassed:

I suppose I resembled a kind of fish with my mouth open gasping for air. It seemed as if my lungs were gradually shutting down and my heart pounded away in my ears like the beat of a drum. . . . To get air into my lungs was real agony.

—William Pressey, quoted in *People at War 1914–1918*

Poison gas was an uncertain weapon. Shifting winds could blow the gas back on the soldiers who launched it. As both sides invented masks to protect

against gas attacks, it became less useful. After the war, disgust and horror with the use of poison gas led to its ban in 1925, which is still in effect today.

**Tanks, Airplanes, and Submarines** During World War I, advances in technology, such as the gasoline-powered engine, led the opposing forces to use tanks, airplanes, and submarines against each other. In 1916, Britain introduced the first armored tank. Mounted with machine guns, the tanks were designed to move across no man's land. Still, the first tanks broke down often. They failed to break the stalemate.

Both sides also used aircraft. At first, planes were utilized simply to observe enemy troop movements. In 1915, Germany used **zeppelins** (ZEP uh linz), large gas-filled balloons, to bomb the English coast. Later, both sides equipped airplanes with machine guns. Pilots known as "flying aces" confronted each other in the skies. These "dogfights" were spectacular, but had little effect on the course of the war on the ground.

Submarines proved much more important. German **U-boats**, nicknamed from the German word for submarine, *Unterseeboot*, did tremendous damage to the Allied side, sinking merchant ships carrying vital supplies to Britain. To defend against the submarines, the Allies organized **convoys**, or groups of merchant ships protected by warships.

**? INFER** How did U-boat attacks affect the fighting on land?

## Other European Fronts

From the outset of World War I, Germany and Austria-Hungary battled Russia on the Eastern Front. There, battle lines shifted back and forth, sometimes over large areas. Even though the armies were not mired in trench warfare, casualties rose even higher than on the Western Front. The results were just as indecisive.

**Mounting Russian Losses in the East** In August 1914, Russian armies pushed into eastern Germany. Then, the Russians suffered a disastrous defeat at Tannenberg. Reeling from the disaster, the Russians retreated. After Tannenberg, the warring armies in the east fought on Russian soil.

As the least industrialized of the great powers, Russia was poorly equipped to fight a modern war. Although Russian factories geared up to produce rifles and other machinery for war, Russia lacked the roads and railroads to carry goods to the front. As the war



**>>** On the Italian front, soldiers trekked through the Alps using snowshoes and skis. At times, they even engaged in battle while wearing their skis. **Analyze Visuals** Based on this image, what else besides deadly weapons caused high casualty rates?

raged on, some troops even lacked rifles. Still, Russian commanders continued to send masses of peasant soldiers into combat.

**War in Southern Europe** Southeastern Europe was another battleground. In 1915, Bulgaria joined the Central Powers and helped defeat its old rival Serbia. Romania, hoping to gain some land in Hungary, joined the Allies in 1916, only to be crushed by the Central Powers.

Also in 1915, Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary and later on Germany. The Allies had agreed in a secret treaty to give Italy some Austrian-ruled lands on its northern border. Over the next two years, the Italians and Austrians fought numerous battles, with few major breakthroughs. In October 1917, Italy suffered a major setback during the battle of Caporetto, but French and British forces stepped in to stop the Central Powers from advancing into Italy. Still, Caporetto proved as disastrous for Italy as Tannenberg had been for Russia.

**? CONTRAST** How was the Eastern Front different from the Western Front?