

# WORLD WAR ONE

## WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT

Germany launched the Schlieffen Plan (defeat France within 6 weeks) on 4 August. The Belgian resistance bought time for British and French troops to mobilize. A British Expeditionary Force landed in France - and met German troops at **MONS** (23 August). The British troops did not stop them or defeat them but they did slow the German advance.

The French troops faced bigger problems. According to Plan 17 (*French troops should charge across the frontier and attack deep into Germany, forcing surrender*) France launched a direct attack on Germany. From the 20<sup>th</sup> of August to the beginning of September (during 12 days) France lost over 200.000 men! France abandoned Plan 17 and regrouped their forces to defend Paris.

Russian troops invaded eastern Germany already in August. This forced Germany to pull 100.000 troops out of France. This unexpected fast Russian mobilization helped ruin the Schlieffen Plan!

Another problem for Germany was the fast advances on some fronts. Supplies of food and ammunition could not keep up. German soldiers were soon underfed and exhausted.

At the River **MARNE** the combined forces of France and Great Britain were able to stop the German advance. A counter-attack pushed the Germans back to the River **AISNE**.

By the 8<sup>th</sup> of September troops on both sides were digging trenches, setting up machine guns and barbed wire. The war of movement became the **WAR OF TRENCHES**. A sign of stalemate!

At the Battle of **YPRES** (16-22 November) the deadlock was well established. The western front had reached a stale mate which was to last until 1918.

**1915** - The stalemate at the western front continued. Small offensives led to great loss of lives.

**1916** - This year saw some of the most heavy battles of the western front. In February the Germans tried to capture the strategic forts surrounding **VERDUN**. Attacks were followed by counter-attacks. By July over 700.000 men had fallen. By the end of summer the French were close to defeat... To relieve this pressure the British launched an offensive at the **SOMME**. An eight days bombardment pounded 52.000 tons of ammunition on the German positions. Contrary to General Haigs calculations the German positions were not weakened sufficiently. On the first day of the Allied attack (July 1<sup>st</sup>), the British suffered 57.470 casualties, with over 19.000 dead! On that day the Germans lost 185 men. The fighting continued until November with the loss of over 1 million men (600.000 Allied - 400.000 British).

At the time the Battles of Verdun and especially Somme was seen as expensive failures. The military leadership of General Haig was publicly criticized. Though later some Revisionist historians have claimed that these battles were the turning point of the war!

### **WHY?**

- The German army lost the best of its soldiers - especially their experienced non-commissioned officers.
- Britain got to try some new and more effective weapons + infantry and artillery tactics;
  - Tanks
  - Creeping barrage
  - Artillery ambush

**1917** - A new French General - Nivelle started another offensive. The Germans knew of his plans and retreated to new stronger positions (the Hindenburg Line). General Nivelle refused to change his plans so the casualties were huge! Several units from the French army mutinied... General Pétain was called in. He solved the crisis by ruthlessly punish the leaders of the mutiny and at the same time improving the conditions for the ordinary soldiers. The British and Canadians had some successes - like the Canadian capture of **VIMY** Ridge in April 1917. This was the same month USA joined the war!

### WHY?

- **Economy/trade:** Since 1914 bad feelings had grown between Germany and the USA. The US was officially neutral but supplied loans and equipment to the Allies. The economy was an important factor for the US!
- **The sinking of Lusitania** in May 1915 (a German submarine torpedoed *LUSITANIA*, a British transatlantic cruiser, on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 1915 - with the cost of 128 US lives).
- **The policy of unrestricted submarine warfare** was resumed in the beginning of February 1917! German submarine warfare had been stopped after the strong American reactions 1915/1916 (Sinking of Lusitania and Sussex leading to the “*Sussex pledge*” – May 4<sup>th</sup> 1916). Now a new German military government tried a desperate measure with the aim to try to starve the British to submission and they were counting on doing that without US involvement. Now the US severed the diplomatic relations with the Germany.
- **Zimmermann telegram:** In January 1917 the British had intercepted and decoded message from the German Foreign Office to the German minister in Mexico City - Alfred Zimmermann. This message, called the *Zimmermann telegram*, suggested an alliance with Mexico if war broke out between Germany and USA. The reward to Mexico would be the territories lost to the US in the war of 1848. For the Americans this was the straw that broke the camel’s back – In April 1917 the US declared war against Germany!

When the Americans joined the war in April 1917 the Allies thought that “*the tide was turning*”, but late 1917 the situation was not any different than before...

### WHY?

- The Americans had not arrived in force
- The French armies were still reeling from the mutinies of early 1917
- The Russians had decided to make peace with Germany (Russian Revolution!) so several 100.000 German troops were transferred to the western front.

**1918** - It was not until 1918 that the stalemate was broken...

### WHY?

- The Allies blockade of German ports had starved the German economy of raw materials and the population of food (including the soldiers!).
- USA now moved about 50.000 new troops into France every month.
- The German army, do to the casualties, was not the quality fighting machine it had been.
- In March 1918 the German Commander Ludendorff launched a desperate attack in an attempt to win the war. The Germans advanced and broke the through the Allied Lines in many places. The Allies retreated in order and forced the German troops to stretch themselves. More American troops arrived every week and now the French called in reserve troops. In making this breakthrough Germany lost 400.000 men and they had no reserves to call in! The German soldiers lacked food and supplies which made them stop

the advance at times to loot food and supplies from captured trenches or villages. Between May and August the Germans made no further progress. Now it was only a matter of time before the Allies would defeat Germany!

### **WHY?**

- The Allied army was large in numbers and they were well fed and well equipped.
- The Allied troops were also supported by tanks, aircraft and improved artillery

On August 8 1918 the Allies started a counter-attack along much of the western front. By late September they had reached the Hindenburg Line. By October the Germans were in full retreat and at 11.00 am the 11/11 1918 the armistice (cease-fire) came into effect. Germany was the last country to accept an armistice – The First World War was now over!

## **WAR ON THE EASTERN FRONT**

The Russian mobilization went much faster than the German Schlieffen Plan had assumed. On August 17<sup>th</sup> the Russian Army moved into East Prussia. General Alexander Samsonov advanced slowly into the south-west corner. The intention of this attack was to link up with the other major Russian army coming from the north-east (under General Paul von Rennenkampf).

**Battle of Tannenberg and Battle of the Masurian Lakes:** August 20<sup>th</sup> 1914 – the Russian General von Rennenkampf defeated a German force at Gumbinnen. Paul von Hindenburg and Erich von Ludendorff realized the threat and decided to move a few divisions from the Western front to the Eastern front (around 100 000 men – this ruined the Schlieffen Plan). They made contact with the Russian troops August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1914. The two Russian armies were separated by 80 km. This made it possible for Hindenburg and Ludendorff to tackle them individually. Samsonov's troops were surrounded and defeated outside Tannenberg (“Battle of Tannenberg” August 26<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> 1914) and Rennenkampf's Army was defeated two weeks later at the “Battle of the Masurian Lakes”. Out of 150 000 Russian soldiers only around 10 000 managed to escape. General Samsonov committed suicide!

**Russian initial success against Austria-Hungary:** Russian troops invaded Galicia. Lvov (Lemberg) was captured by Russian troops in September 1914. This revealed the fact that the Austrian-Hungarian army was poorly organized. The Russian army fought well but they also had some problems which would make a difference in the long run; poor and split leadership, not enough equipment and they were underfed! The Austrian-Hungarian armies were forced to retreat to the Carpathian Mountains. Then German re-enforcements under General Ludendorff arrived. The German soldiers were in general better equipped, well supplied, better trained and they were often transported by trains between the different battle zones which made them arrive fairly rested. During the German Austrian-Hungarian campaign in the Carpathian Mountains (May 1915) and the German campaign through Poland (Warsaw captured August 1915) the Russian forces were forced to retreat. By the end of 1915 the Russian lines had withdrawn some 450 km.

**Brusilov offensive 1916:** Russia started a new big offensive in June 1916. The main purpose was to relief two other fronts; the Western front where the French were struggling at Verdun and the Italian front where the Italians had faced several defeats. Three of General Brusilov's armies reached an immediate success – within less than a week Russia had broken through the

lines and taken over 70 000 prisoners. By early August the offensive came to a halt. Russia lacked resources; both reserve soldiers and supplies. At headquarters different groups of militaries tried to change the original plan which led to confusion and weakened the offensive and then Austria-Hungary received German support. The Austrian-Hungarian poor performance had a very negative effect on its fighting forces. Russia had been very close to defeat Austria-Hungary – it was only with German assistance the Dual Monarchy stayed in the war...

**Russian casualties and economic hardship leads to revolution;** The enormous losses in human life's as well as the strained Russian economy brought Russia into a collapse in February 1917. What first looked like a normal strike turned into a revolution and within a few weeks the Tsar abdicated. The Romanov dynasty came to an end after over 300 years of rule! The new Provisional Government continued the war. The period between February and October 1917 saw several Russian defeats. The most serious one hit the country in June 1917 (Galician offensive). In October 1917 Lenin and the Bolsheviks made a second revolution. They had promised to end the war. Germany granted Russia an armistice but after waiting nearly two months for some kind of agreements Germany continued the war. Russia gave up after just a few weeks and another armistice was granted.

**Treaty of Brest-Litovsk – March 1918!** In March 1918 a Peace Treaty was signed in Brest-Litovsk. Russia lost an enormous amount of land as well as both good agrarian areas as industrial regions. Germany could now also send 100 000's of men to the Western front...

## WAR IN THE BALKANS

**WWI starts with strong Serbian resistance;** Austria-Hungary started the First World War by attacking Serbia July 29<sup>th</sup> 1914 (the Declaration of War had been sent by telegram the day before). Austro-Hungarian troops bombarded and took the Serbian capital Belgrade during the two first weeks of the war. Then they were pushed back by Serbian forces with the loss of over 100 000 men.

**Retreat through Serbia;** Huge casualties as well as diseases weakened the Serbian resistance. In the later half of 1915 she was forced to retreat towards the south after German troops had intervened and Bulgaria had entered the war (September 1915 – after the Bulgarian King had noticed Russian losses in Gorlice (the German-Austro-Hungarian campaign in the Carpathian Mountains) and Entente losses at Gallipoli (Turkey) he joined the Germany, the Dual Monarchy and Turkey in WWI). The combined German-Bulgarian-Austro-Hungarian Army managed to push the small Serbian Army south. Eventually they reached Albania and Montenegro where French ships carried the few remains of the army and Serbian civilians to Greek islands (especially Corfu). The Serbian troops would then be transported to Salonika in Northern Greece. Here some French and British troops had landed in an attempt to divert the attack on Serbia. Unfortunately for the Entente, the pro-German King Constantine I (he had been educated at Heidelberg University in Germany, trained in the Prussian army, and he was married to Kaiser Wilhelm II's sister, Princess Sophie of Prussia) dismissed the pro-Entente Greek government of Eleftherios Venizelos, before the allied expeditionary force had even arrived.

**Salonika and Greece 1915-1918;** Due to the views of the Greek King Constantine I the Entente troops in Salonika were stuck for the moment. It became a joke in 1915 that Salonika

was the largest German prisoner of war camp. The Commander of the Entente forces, the French General Sarrail broke this situation. He forced the Greek Army to demobilize and then move their troops to the south of the country. The front then stabilized roughly around the Greek border. In 1917 General Sarrail threatened King Constantine I with large Entente reinforcements which would be used against the Greek if they did not join the war on the Entente side. This made the King abdicate. His second son Alexander replaced him (the first son was not accepted by General Sarrail since he had also received his education and military training in Germany).

**Breaking the stalemate in Greece 1918;** Only at the very end of the war were the Entente powers able to make a breakthrough, which was after most of the German and Austro-Hungarian troops had been removed, leaving the Front held by the Bulgarians alone. The Bulgarians suffered their only defeat in the war in the battle of Dobro Pole (present day Macedonia – at this time part of Bulgaria) but days after this they decisively defeated the English and the Greeks in the battle of Doiran, which saved the country from enemy occupation. The defeat in Dobro Pole and threats of Entente reinforcements led to Bulgaria's signing an armistice on September 29, 1918. Bulgaria was now out of WWI!

**Offensive through Serbia;** The French General Franchet d'Esperey led a combined French, Serbian, Greek and British army out of Greece. After the battles against the Bulgarian Army he attacked north and defeated the German and Austrian forces that tried to halt his offensive. By October 1918 his army had recaptured all of Serbia and was preparing to invade Hungary proper. The offensive halted only because the Hungarian leadership offered to surrender in November 1918.

## WAR IN MESOPOTAMIA (IRAQ)

The **Mesopotamian Campaign** was a campaign in the Middle East fought between the Entente, troops from the British Raj (mostly Indian troops), and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey).

**British and Turkish interests in the area;** The British interests were to protect their oil refinery at Abadan and to defend their allies in the area (Persia and Kuwait). Ottoman interests were to maintain the status quo. Shortly after the war started in Europe, the British sent a military force to protect Abadan, one of the world's earliest oil refineries. The British didn't use much oil at the start of the war but they had already started building warships which would be fueled by oil instead of coal by 1912 so the oil refineries were not unimportant.

**British occupation and advance 1914-1915;** In 1914 a British force attacked and took the Turkish fort at Fao Landing. Two weeks later, the British occupied the city of Basra. In 1915 the British General Townshend was ordered to advance to Kut or Baghdad if possible. The Ottoman Empire sent an old German general, Baron von der Goltz, to take command of the Ottoman army in the field.

**Battle at Ctesiphon 1915;** General Townshend and Goltz fought a battle at Ctesiphon, 25 miles south of Baghdad. The battle was inconclusive as both the Ottomans and the British ended up retreating from the battlefield. However, Townshend concluded a full scale retreat was necessary so he withdrew in good order back to Kut, then halted and fortified the position.

**Siege of Kut 1915-1916;** Defending Kut as opposed to retreating back to Basra was a mistake. Kut was isolated, and while it could be defended, it could not be resupplied. The Turkish forces built defensive positions around the land side of Kut, laid siege to the British, and built fortified positions down river designed to fend off any attempt to rescue Townshend. The British made three major attempts to break the siege, but each effort was unsuccessful. Townshend surrendered April 29, 1916 and his 8,000 soldiers became captives of the Ottomans.

The British viewed the loss of Kut as a humiliating defeat. It had been many years since such a large body of British Army soldiers had surrendered to an enemy. This loss followed only four months after the British defeat at the Battle of Gallipoli. Nearly all the British commanders involved in the failure to rescue Townshend were removed from command. The Turks proved they were good at holding defensive positions against superior forces.

**Battle of Baghdad 1916-1917;** For the next six months the British trained and organized a new army under the command of General Maude. An offensive was launched on December 13 1916. The British advanced up both sides of the Tigris river, forcing the Ottoman army out of a number of fortified positions along the way. General Maude's offensive was methodical, organized, and successful. The British recaptured Kut in February of 1917, destroying most of the Mesopotamian-based Ottoman army in the process.

On March 11, 1917 the British entered Baghdad. Amidst the confusion of the retreat a majority of the Ottoman army (some 9,000 soldiers) were captured.

**End of the War;** The British resumed their offensive in late February 1918 capturing Kifri and Hit (previously called Khanaqin). In October the British went on the offensive for the last time and fought a battle at the Battle of Sharqat, routing the Turkish army. General Marshall accepted the surrender of Khalil Pasha and the Turkish 6th Army on October 30 1918. British troops marched unopposed into Mosul on the 14 November 1918. The British lost 92,000 soldiers in the Mesopotamian campaign. Turkish losses are unknown but the British captured a total of 45,000 prisoners of war. The vast majority of the British Empire forces in this campaign were recruited from India.

## **WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

The Ottoman Empire's entry into World War I occurred on October 29, 1914 when ships of the Ottoman navy shelled Odessa (Russian Navy Base at the Crimean peninsula). Their entry threatened Russia's Caucasian territories and Britain's communications with India and the East via the Suez Canal.

**1914:** The first battles were on the **Mesopotamian Campaign**, which was opened during the 1914. It was fought in Mesopotamia mainly in the Tigris River valley region of what is now Iraq and included battles on the Persian Gulf coast, Basra, numerous struggles around Kut, and Baghdad.

The **Caucasus Campaign** was fought in the Caucasus and eastern-Anatolia. The Ottoman Empire in Battle of Sarikamis had a defeat in December-November.

**1915:** Initially the Ottomans were successful in repelling enemy incursions in Mesopotamia. However after the disastrous Siege of Kut things reversed.

The Russians went on the offense in the Caucasus. The mountains were very high, which made the military movement very difficult, but Russians gained significant achievements.

April 25 sets the **Dardanelles Campaign** which was also known as in Australia, New Zealand and Newfoundland it is known simply as **Gallipoli**. A combined British and French operation was mounted in order to eventually capture the Ottoman capital of Constantinople (Istanbul). The campaign started with a Naval attempt to force the Dardanelles. When this failed the decision was taken by the Allies to seize the European side of the Dardanelles. The land campaign took place on the Turkish peninsula of Gallipoli in 1915 during the First World War. The land attempt failed, and an estimated 131,000 soldiers were killed and 262,000 wounded.

Starting in 1915, the British based in Egypt tried to incite the Arabs living near the Red Sea and inland (in modern-day Saudi Arabia) to **revolt** against the Ottoman Empire. The British High Commissioner in Cairo negotiated with Husain Ibn Ali, the Sherif of Mecca. The British government promised to support the restoration of the Caliphate under his leadership...

**Sinai and Palestine Campaign:** The Ottoman Empire launched an attack across the Sinai with the objective of destroying or capturing the Suez Canal. The attack was unsuccessful.

**1916:** In 1916 the Sherif Hussein Ibn Ali of Mecca began the **Arabian revolt**. The leadership of this revolt was given to two of his sons: Faisal and Abdullah though the planning and direction for the war was largely the work of Lawrence of Arabia.

The Ottoman Empire launched two attacks across the **Sinai** with the objective of destroying or capturing the Suez Canal. Both attacks (1915 and 1916) were unsuccessful, though not very costly by the standards of the Great War. The British then went on the offensive and attacked east into Palestine. Two failed attempts to capture the Ottoman fort of Gaza resulted in sweeping changes to the British command and the arrival of General Allenby, along with many reinforcements.

The British and French governments concludes a secret agreement in May 1916 concerning the future of the Middle East. It's often called the **Sykes-Picot Agreement**.

**1917:** British Empire forces reorganized and captured Baghdad in March 1917 in the **Mesopotamian Campaign**. When Russia withdrew from the war in 1917 the Ottoman Empire managed to regain the prewar territories under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

The **Arab revolt** was a success, aided immensely by **General Allenby's conquest of Palestine** in 1917. Late in 1917, Allenby's Egyptian Expeditionary Force had smashed the Ottoman defences, captured Gaza and then captured Jerusalem. This victory was widely promoted in the Allied press. The British capture Jerusalem and the surrounding area was strategically of minimal importance, this event was later the key in the creation of Israel as a separate nation in 1948.

**1918:** The **Battle of Megiddo** of September 19 - 21, 1918, and its subsequent exploitation, was the culminating victory in British General Edmund Allenby's **Palestine Campaign** during WWI.

The Turks were taken by surprise when the British attacked Megiddo in a sudden storm. The Turkish troops started a full scale retreat, the British bombed the fleeing columns of men from the air and within a week, the Turkish army had ceased to exist as a military force.

Australian Lighthorse troops marched unopposed into Damascus on September 30, 1918. T.E. Lawrence and his Arab troops entered Damascus the next day to receive an "Official" surrender. The war in Palestine was over. The Turkish government signed an armistice on October 28, 1918 and outright surrendered two days later. **600 years of Ottoman rule over the Middle East had come to an end.**

## **WAR ON THE ITALIAN FRONT**

**Changing partners;** The History of Italy during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is clearly anti-Hapsburg. The Entente offered old Hapsburg territories in South Tyrol and some down the Adriatic coast for Italy to join the war. Since France and Italy had earlier reached an agreement about the colonies in North Africa and the fact that Italy had this anti-Hapsburg feelings made it easy for her to change partner 1915 – from the Triple Alliance to the Triple Entente.

When the war broke out 1914 Italy declared neutrality. In May 1915 Italy joined the war on the Entente side – after she had been promised Trento, South Tyrol, Trieste, Dalmatia and some other areas along the Adriatic coast.

**War of attrition;** The Italian campaign started with an attack along the line of the river Isonzo (north-west of Italy). Austria-Hungary occupied a line of mountainous defensive positions. Italian Historian P. Pieri said; “the river could not be crossed until the mountains had been seized and the mountains could not be seized until the river had been crossed.”

Between June 1915 and August 1917 the Italian troops engaged in 11 separate battles along the Isonzo river without being able to break this stalemate situation. Italy lost nearly a third of her army strength and it was fairly easy for a few Austrian divisions to keep the Italian Army down. This meant that the Entente (Italy) saw no success at the Italian front and it was not good for diversion either...

**Battle of Caporetto;** In October 1917 a combined German-Austrian/Hungarian offensive at Caporetto (near Kobarid in today's Slovenia) nearly defeated Italy. She lost territory, the morale was low due to the high casualties (over 300 000 men) and so was the ammunition. An allied campaign in the Balkans, an exhausted Austrian army and domestic problems inside the Dual Monarchy diverted the attack. This gave the Italians a chance to regroup. First of all - the Italian Supreme General Luigi Cadorna was replaced by General Armando Diaz. He was the one that now reorganized the troops, blocked the enemy advance and stabilized the front-line around the Piave River. This situation would remain over half a year.

**Battle of the Piave River;** The main assault, fought 15-22 June 1918, was a response to German demands upon their ally to launch an offensive across the Piave River. The Austro-Hungarian army of June 1918 was quite different from the one that had triumphed at

Caporetto eight months earlier. It was demoralized, equipment and other supplies were perilously low, and even if Austria-Hungary had as many divisions (or even a few more) they were weak. The attack failed and the Austro-Hungarian Army had to go back into their old positions after losing over 190 000 men...

**Battle of Vittorio Veneto;** As part of an all Entente offensive in September 1918 the Entente Command tried to talk General Diaz to launch an attack over the Piave River. He had after the success of the Battle of the Piave River preferred smaller local operations. Now the Entente leaders tried to convince him to launch a bigger advance. After the continuous success of the Entente on the Western front and the fact that it seems like the war was close to an end it was important for Italy to gain as much as possible before the Peace Treaties would be discussed. The attack opened on 23 October 1918 with an Italian advance in the mountains. After some initial problems the Italian army managed with the help of British and French forces to advance. A week later Vittorio Veneto fell. This split the defending Austro-Hungarian Army. With the Allies' succeeding in advancing 24km along a 56km front a truce was finally agreed on 2 November with the capture of Tagliamento; an armistice came into effect the following day, signed at Padua. Hostilities were formally concluded on 4 November 1918. The Italians lost some 38,000 casualties, a figure dwarfed by the 300,000 prisoners suffered by the Austro-Hungarians. Simultaneous political turmoil completed the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The war was over for the Dual Monarchy!