

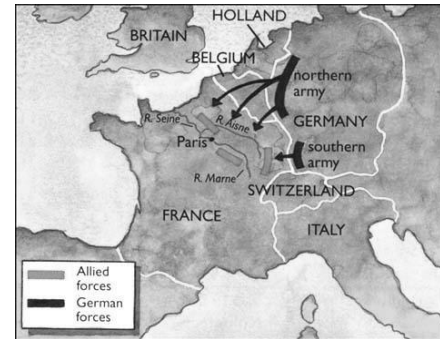
World War I Warfare

Schlieffen Plan

Facing a war on two fronts, Germany had developed a battle strategy known as the Schlieffen Plan, named after its designer, General Alfred Graf von Schlieffen (SHLEE•fuhn). The plan called for attacking and defeating France in the west and then rushing east to fight Russia. The Germans felt they could carry out such a plan because Russia lagged behind the rest of Europe in its railroad system and thus would take longer to supply its front lines. Nonetheless, speed was vital to the Schlieffen Plan. German leaders knew they needed to win a quick victory over France.

Early on, it appeared that Germany would do just that. By early September, German forces had swept into France and reached the outskirts of Paris. A major German victory appeared just days away. On September 5, however, the Allies regrouped and attacked the Germans northeast of Paris, in the valley of the Marne River. Every available soldier was hurled into the struggle. After four days of fighting, the German generals gave the order to retreat.

The defeat of the Germans left the Schlieffen Plan in ruins. A quick victory in the west no longer seemed possible. In the east, Russian forces had already invaded Germany. Germany was going to have to fight a long war on two fronts. Realizing this, the German high command sent thousands of troops from France to aid its forces in the east. Meanwhile, the war on the Western Front settled into a stalemate.



Western Front

The Western Front in World War I is a term referring to Germany's western border (with Belgium and France). By early 1915, opposing armies on the Western Front had dug miles of parallel trenches to protect themselves from enemy fire. This set the stage for what became known as trench warfare. In this type of warfare, soldiers fought each other from trenches. And armies traded huge losses of human life for pitifully small land gains.

Life in the trenches was pure misery. "The men slept in mud, washed in mud, ate mud, and dreamed mud," wrote one soldier. The trenches swarmed with rats. Fresh food was nonexistent. Sleep was nearly impossible.

For many veterans who were asked to recall their memories of life in the trenches the overriding feature that lingered in the mind was the problem - and horror - of trench rats. Rats in the millions infested trenches. Trench conditions were ideal for rats. Empty food cans were piled in the thousands throughout No Man's Land, heaved over the top on a daily basis. Gorging themselves on human remains (grotesquely disfiguring them by eating their eyes and liver) they could grow to the size of a cat. A single rat couple could produce up to 900 offspring in a year, spreading infection and contaminating food.

Frogs by the score were also found in shell holes covered in water; they were also found in the base of trenches. Slugs and horned beetles crowded the sides of the trench.

Trench Foot was another medical condition peculiar to trench life. It was a fungal infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and unsanitary trench conditions. It could turn gangrenous and result in amputation. Trench Foot was more of a problem at the start of trench warfare; as conditions improved in 1915 it rapidly faded, although a trickle of cases continued throughout the war.

The space between the opposing trenches won the grim name "no man's land." When the officers ordered an attack, their men went over the top of their trenches into this bombed-out landscape. There, they usually met murderous rounds of machine-gun fire. Staying put, however, did not ensure one's safety. Artillery fire brought death right into the trenches. "Shells of all calibers kept raining on our sector," wrote one French soldier. "The trenches disappeared, filled with earth . . . the air was unbreathable. Our blinded, wounded, crawling, and shouting soldiers kept falling on top of us and died splashing us with blood. It was living hell."

The Western Front had become a "terrain of death." It stretched nearly 500 miles from the North Sea to the Swiss border. Military strategists were at a loss. New tools of war—machine guns, poison gas, armored tanks, larger artillery—had not delivered the fast-moving war they had expected. All this new technology did was kill greater numbers of people more effectively. The slaughter reached a peak in 1916. In February, the Germans launched a massive attack against the French near Verdun. Each side lost more than 300,000 men. In July, the British army tried to relieve the pressure on the French. British forces attacked the Germans northwest of Verdun, in the valley of the Somme River. In the first day of battle alone, more than 20,000 British soldiers were killed. By the time the Battle of the Somme ended in November, each side had suffered more than half a million casualties. What did the warring sides gain? Near Verdun, the Germans advanced about four miles. In the Somme valley, the British gained about five miles.



Eastern Front

Even as the war on the Western Front claimed thousands of lives, both sides were sending millions more men to fight on the Eastern Front. This area was a stretch of battlefield along the German and Russian border. Here, Russians and Serbs battled Germans and Austro-Hungarians. The war in the east was a more mobile war than that in the west. Here too, however, slaughter and stalemate were common.

By 1916, Russia's war effort was near collapse. Unlike the nations of western Europe, Russia had yet to become industrialized. As a result, the Russian army was continually short on food, guns, ammunition, clothes, boots, and blankets. Moreover, the Allied supply shipments to Russia were sharply limited by German control of the Baltic Sea, combined with Germany's



relentless submarine campaign in the North Sea and beyond. In the south, the Ottomans still controlled the straits leading from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. The Russian army had only one asset—its numbers. Throughout the war the Russian army suffered a staggering number of battlefield losses. Yet the army continually rebuilt its ranks from the country's enormous population. For more than three years, the battered

Russian army managed to tie up hundreds of thousands of German troops in the east. As a result, Germany could not hurl its full fighting force at the west.

Germany and her allies, however, were concerned with more than just the Eastern or Western Front. As the war raged on, fighting spread beyond Europe to Africa, as well as to Southwest and Southeast Asia. In the years after it began, the massive European conflict indeed became a world war.

The Frozen Front

For soldiers on the Eastern Front the overall misery of warfare was compounded by deadly winters. "Every day hundreds froze to death," noted one Austro-Hungarian officer during a particularly brutal spell. Russian troops suffered too, mainly due to their lack of food and clothing. "I am at my post all the time—frozen [and] soaked . . .," lamented one soldier. "We walk barefoot or in rope-soled shoes. It's incredible that soldiers of the Russian army are in rope-soled shoes!"

Beck, Roger B. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell, 2005. Print.