

HISTORY · MILITARY HISTORY SUB-SERIES

Military History: World War I

The First World War as a war — from the July Crisis and the failure of the Schlieffen idea, through the trench stalemate, Verdun, the Somme, Jutland and the U-boats, and Russia's collapse, to the 1918 offensives that finally broke the deadlock — closing with the Armistice and the lessons armies carried into the next war.

10 Chapters

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: SCOPE & THE DISTINCTION FROM WORLD HISTORY III, GERMAN
POLITICAL HISTORY & MILITARY HISTORY: THE BRITISH EMPIRE

Military History: World War I

Chapter 1 · Introduction: Scope & the Distinction From World History III, German Political History & Military History: The British Empire

This is the ninth entry in this site's Military History sub-series. It follows the First World War (1914–1918) as a war: the plans that failed, the stalemate that followed, the weapons and tactics armies invented to break it, and the campaigns of 1918 that finally did. The US Civil War course ended by calling that war a bridge to 1914. This course starts on the other side of the bridge.

What This Course Covers, and What It Doesn't

The war already appears in several places on this site. This course deliberately covers only what they don't.

Topic	Where it's covered
The war's global, political, and colonial dimensions	World History III: The Modern World (Chapter 5)
The war's effect inside Germany: the Kaiser's fall and the November Revolution	German Political History I (Chapter 3)
Imperial and Commonwealth troops: Gallipoli, the Indian Army, Vimy Ridge, labour corps	Military History: The British Empire (Chapter 8)
The Ottoman defence of Gallipoli	Military History: The Ottoman Empire (Chapter 10)
War plans, the Western Front, trench warfare, Verdun, the Somme, the war at sea, the Eastern Front's collapse, and 1918	This course

THE WESTERN FRONT AT THE CENTRE

The war was fought on many fronts — the Eastern Front, Italy, the Balkans, the Middle East, Africa, and at sea. This course gives the most space to the Western Front in France and Belgium, where the main German, French, and British armies faced each other and where the war was eventually decided, with separate chapters on the naval war (Chapter 7) and the East (Chapter 8).

The Two Sides

Allies (the Entente)	Central Powers
France, the British Empire, and Russia (until its collapse in 1917–18)	Germany and Austria-Hungary
Serbia and Belgium (from the start); Japan (1914)	The Ottoman Empire (from November 1914)
Italy (from 1915), Romania (1916), the United States (from April 1917), and others	Bulgaria (from 1915)

The Scale of the War

DURATION

From 28 July 1914, when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, to the Armistice with Germany on 11 November 1918 — just over four years and three months.

MILITARY DEATHS

An estimated 9–11 million soldiers died. About two-thirds were killed in battle; most of the rest died from disease, including the 1918 influenza pandemic.

ALL DEATHS

Counting civilians, estimates run from about 15 to 22 million. Numbers vary so widely because each country

recorded and classified deaths differently.

THE NUMBERS ARE UNCERTAIN

Like the Civil War death toll (Military History: The US Civil War, Chapter 1), First World War figures are estimates, not counts. Russian and Ottoman losses in particular are poorly documented. When this course gives a number, treat it as the best available estimate, not an exact fact.

What Made This War Different

FIREPOWER BEAT MOVEMENT

Machine guns, magazine rifles, barbed wire, and above all massed artillery made defending far easier than attacking. Artillery caused more casualties than any other weapon.

WHOLE NATIONS MOBILISED

Tens of millions of men were called up, and whole economies were turned over to producing shells, guns, and supplies. The war became a test of industrial endurance.

NEW WEAPONS

Poison gas, tanks, military aircraft, and submarine warfare were all used on a large scale for the first time — mostly as attempts to break a deadlock the older weapons had created.

LESSONS THAT WERE ALREADY AVAILABLE

Almost none of this was completely new. Trenches and mines appeared at Petersburg and Vicksburg (Military History: The US Civil War, Chapters 7, 9, 10); smokeless-powder rifles fired from entrenched positions were devastating in the

Boer War (Military History: The British Empire, Chapter 7). What was new was the scale — and the fact that every major army faced the same problem at once.

"THE GREAT WAR"

People at the time called it the Great War or simply the World War. The phrase "First World War" was used as early as September 1914 — a grim prediction that there would be another — but only became standard after 1939.

The Real Arc This Course Traces

- **July–August 1914**
The July Crisis and the German war plan (Chapter 2).
- **September 1914**
The Battle of the Marne ends hopes of a short war (Chapter 3).
- **1915–1917**
Trench warfare and the search for a way to break the stalemate (Chapter 4).
- **1916**
Verdun (Chapter 5) and the Somme (Chapter 6).
- **1914–1918**
Jutland and the U-boat campaign (Chapter 7).
- **1914–1918**
The Eastern Front and Russia's collapse (Chapter 8).
- **1918**
The German Spring Offensive and the Allied Hundred Days (Chapter 9).
- **11 November 1918**
The Armistice and what the war taught armies (Chapter 10).

Questions to Sit With

If warning signs about trench warfare were visible in earlier wars, why might European armies still have been unprepared in 1914?

Why might it be useful to separate the military history of a war from its political and social history — and what might you lose by doing so?

What does it tell you that people named it the "First" World War as early as 1914?

Quick Reference — Chapter 1

- This course covers war plans, campaigns, tactics, and technology; the war's global politics, its effect inside Germany, and imperial troops are covered in other courses
- Allies: France, the British Empire, Russia (to 1917–18), Italy (1915), the US (1917), and others; Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria
- The war ran from 28 July 1914 to the Armistice of 11 November 1918
- An estimated 9–11 million military deaths and 15–22 million total deaths; figures vary widely between sources
- Firepower, especially artillery, favoured defence; mass mobilisation made it a war of industrial endurance; gas, tanks, aircraft, and submarines were used on a large scale for the first time

What's Next

Chapter 2: The July Crisis & the Real Schlieffen Plan.

CHAPTER 2: THE JULY CRISIS & THE REAL SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

Military History: World War I

Chapter 2 · The July Crisis & the Real Schlieffen Plan

In late June 1914 an assassination in the Balkans set off a diplomatic crisis. Five weeks later, five great powers were at war. This chapter looks at how that happened from a military angle: how war plans and mobilisation timetables narrowed the room for diplomacy, and what Germany's famous plan for a quick victory really was.

Five Weeks: The July Crisis

28 June 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie are shot dead in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a young Bosnian Serb nationalist linked to a secret Serbian society, the Black Hand.

5–6 July

Germany promises Austria-Hungary full support against Serbia, even at the risk of a wider war — the so-called "blank cheque."

23 July

Austria-Hungary sends Serbia an ultimatum with a 48-hour deadline, written to be hard to accept.

25 July

Serbia accepts most of the demands but refuses to let Austro-Hungarian officials run investigations on Serbian soil.

28 July

Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.

30 July

Russia, Serbia's protector, orders general mobilisation.

1–3 August

Germany declares war on Russia (1 August) and France (3 August), and demands free passage through neutral Belgium.

4 August

German troops enter Belgium. Britain, a guarantor of Belgian neutrality since the 1839 Treaty of London, declares war on Germany.

"A SCRAP OF PAPER"

According to the British ambassador in Berlin, the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, complained that Britain was going to war over "a scrap of paper" — the 1839 treaty. British propaganda used the phrase heavily as proof of German contempt for international law.

Mobilisation: When Plans Took Over

In 1914, going to war meant calling up millions of reservists and moving them by railway to the frontiers, following timetables worked out years in advance. Whichever country mobilised faster had a real advantage, so each government came under pressure not to fall behind.

RUSSIA'S PROBLEM

Russia's plans assumed mobilising against both Austria-Hungary and Germany together. Partial mobilisation against Austria alone was hard to organise, so the Tsar agreed to full mobilisation.

GERMANY'S PROBLEM

Germany's only war plan assumed a war on two fronts, and began with an attack on France through Belgium. Russian mobilisation meant, in German military logic, attacking France first — even though France hadn't been at the centre of the crisis.

"WAR BY TIMETABLE"

The historian A.J.P. Taylor argued that railway timetables made the war

almost automatic once mobilisation began. Most historians now think that's too simple: decisions by political leaders still mattered at every step.

WHO WAS TO BLAME? A REAL DEBATE

The 1919 peace treaty placed responsibility on Germany and its allies. In 1961 the German historian Fritz Fischer argued Germany had deliberately pursued a war of expansion, causing a storm in West Germany. More recently, Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* (2012) argued that responsibility was shared across several governments who stumbled into a war none fully intended. Historians still disagree. The political side belongs mainly to World History III; this course focuses on how military planning shaped the choices.

The "Schlieffen Plan"

Count Alfred von Schlieffen was chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1906. His famous memorandum of 1905 set out how Germany might defeat France quickly in a war where Russia was, at that moment, weak after losing to Japan.

THE IDEA

Avoid France's heavily fortified eastern border. Swing a very strong right wing through Belgium (and, in Schlieffen's version, the southern Netherlands), sweep west of Paris, and trap the French army.

THE TIMING

Defeat France within about six weeks, before Russia's larger but slower army was ready, then move troops east by rail to face Russia.

THE COST

Attacking through neutral Belgium was almost certain to bring Britain

into the war. German planners accepted that risk.

MOLTKE'S CHANGES

Schlieffen's successor, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger (nephew of the Moltke mentioned in Military History: The US Civil War, Chapter 10), changed the plan. He dropped the march through the Netherlands, to keep it neutral as a trade route, and strengthened the left wing facing France's border. After the war, German officers blamed these changes for the failure — arguing Moltke had "watered down" a war-winning plan.

WAS THERE REALLY A "SCHLIEFFEN PLAN"?

In 1999 the historian Terence Zuber argued that the famous plan was largely a myth built up after the war, and that the 1905 memorandum was a thought experiment rather than an operational plan. Other historians disagree strongly, and later archival finds have fed the argument. What's clear is that the idea of a perfect plan ruined by Moltke suited German generals who wanted to explain their defeat. The famous deathbed words "keep the right wing strong," often attributed to Schlieffen, are also doubtful. Even supporters of the plan's existence agree it had real problems: the roads and railways of Belgium and northern France couldn't easily supply the huge armies it required.

August 1914: Plans Meet Reality

LIÈGE

The Belgian fortress city held out for about twelve days until German super-heavy siege howitzers smashed its forts. The delay was short but real.

PLAN XVII

France's own plan sent its armies straight into Alsace and Lorraine. In the Battle of the Frontiers, French infantry attacking in the open suffered enormous losses; on 22 August 1914 alone, the French army lost an estimated 27,000 men killed

— one of the deadliest single days of the war.

MONS

The small British Expeditionary Force (Military History: The British Empire, Chapter 7) first fought at Mons in Belgium on 23 August, then joined the long Allied retreat southward.

THE INVASION OF BELGIUM

German troops, fearing attacks by civilian snipers, carried out mass reprisals in Belgium. Several thousand civilians were killed, and in Leuven the university library, with its medieval manuscripts, was burned. Allied propaganda exaggerated some details as "the Rape of Belgium," which led people later to dismiss the whole story. Modern research confirms that the killings and destruction were real.

BACK TO THE BIG QUESTION

By the end of August German armies were deep in France and heading toward Paris, exactly as planned. Both sides had suffered huge losses, and the German right wing was exhausted and short of supplies. Whether the plan would actually work was decided in early September, on the River Marne — the subject of Chapter 3.

Questions to Sit With

How far do you think military plans and timetables, rather than political decisions, drove the countries of Europe into war?

Why might German generals after the war have preferred the story of a "perfect plan" spoiled by Moltke?

Germany accepted war with Britain as the price of going through Belgium. Was that a military calculation, a political one, or both?

Quick Reference — Chapter 2

- 28 June 1914: Franz Ferdinand assassinated by Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo
- Germany's "blank cheque" (5–6 July); Austria's ultimatum (23 July); declaration of war on Serbia (28 July); Russian mobilisation (30 July)
- Germany declared war on Russia (1 August) and France (3 August); invading Belgium brought Britain in on 4 August ("a scrap of paper")
- Mobilisation timetables created pressure to act first; "war by timetable" is now seen as too simple; blame is still debated (Fischer, Clark)
- The 1905 Schlieffen memorandum proposed a quick defeat of France via Belgium; Moltke modified it; whether it was a real plan is disputed (Zuber, 1999)
- August 1914: Liège delayed the Germans; Plan XVII's French offensives were bloodily repulsed (about 27,000 French killed on 22 August); the BEF fought at Mons; German reprisals killed thousands of Belgian civilians

What's Next

Chapter 3: The Marne (1914) & the Real Failure of a Quick War.

CHAPTER 3: THE MARNE (1914) & THE REAL FAILURE OF A QUICK WAR

Military History: World War I

Chapter 3 · The Marne (1914) & the Real Failure of a Quick War

At the end of August 1914 the German plan from Chapter 2 seemed to be working: German armies were pouring into northern France, and the French and British were in full retreat. Within two weeks the Germans were falling back, the idea of a quick war was dead, and the armies had begun digging the trench lines that would define the next four years.

The Great Retreat

After the Battle of the Frontiers and Mons, French and British forces retreated south for about two weeks. It looked like a disaster, but the French commander-in-chief, General Joseph Joffre, kept his armies together, sacked commanders he didn't trust, and moved troops by rail from his eastern border to build up a new army, the Sixth, around Paris.

GERMAN EXHAUSTION

German soldiers on the right wing had marched hundreds of miles in intense heat, often 20 miles or more a day, outrunning their supplies. Destroyed Belgian and French railways made resupply slow.

TROOPS SENT EAST

Alarmed by a faster-than-expected Russian invasion of East Prussia, Moltke took troops away from the Western Front and sent them east — where they arrived too late for the victory at Tannenberg (Chapter 8), but were missing in France.

WEAK COMMUNICATION

Moltke ran the campaign from headquarters far behind the front, relying on slow, unreliable radio and

messengers. He often didn't know where his armies actually were.

The Fatal Turn

KLUCK SWINGS EAST OF PARIS

The German plan had the right wing sweeping west of Paris. Instead, General Alexander von Kluck's First Army, the outermost German army, turned south-east to chase the retreating French and keep in touch with its neighbour, Karl von Bülow's Second Army. That took it past Paris on the *east* side — and exposed its flank to the new French army gathering in the city.

3–4 September

French airmen and cavalry spot the German First Army moving east of Paris. General Joseph Gallieni, military governor of Paris, urges an immediate attack.

5–6 September

Joffre orders a general counter-offensive along the whole front. The French Sixth Army attacks Kluck's flank from Paris.

6–8 September

Kluck turns his army to face west against the Sixth Army. That opens a gap of about 50 km between him and Bülow — and the British Expeditionary Force and French Fifth Army advance slowly into it.

8–9 September

Moltke sends a staff officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Hentsch, to assess the situation. After meetings with Bülow, who is shaken and fears being cut off, Hentsch agrees to a withdrawal. The retreat begins.

9–12 September

The German armies fall back about 65 km to the River Aisne and dig in on the high ground above it.

THE TAXIS OF THE MARNE

The most famous image of the battle is of Paris taxis rushing soldiers to the front. It's true: several hundred taxis carried around 4,000–6,000 men on the nights of 6–7 September. But that was a tiny fraction of the troops involved, and most reinforcements came by train. The taxis were far more important as a symbol of Paris rallying to its own defence than as a military factor.

DID ONE STAFF OFFICER LOSE THE WAR?

After the war, some Germans blamed Hentsch personally for "losing" the Marne by ordering a retreat that wasn't necessary. A German inquiry in 1917 cleared him, finding he had acted within his orders. Most historians now see the retreat as a reasonable response to a genuinely dangerous gap — and the real problem as Moltke's distance from the battle and loss of control.

The Cost

Army	Estimated casualties (5–12 September 1914)
French	About 250,000
British	About 12,700
German	About 300,000

"THE MIRACLE OF THE MARNE"

The French called it a miracle, but it wasn't one. It was the result of Joffre's calm management of the retreat, the use of railways to move troops across the front, air reconnaissance spotting Kluck's turn, and German exhaustion, overstretched supply lines, and weak command. Moltke suffered a breakdown and was replaced by Erich von Falkenhayn on 14 September.

The Race to the Sea

The Germans held firm on the Aisne. Neither side could break through the other's front, so each tried to get round the other's open northern flank. From mid-September to mid-October 1914 the two sides leapfrogged north, each trying and failing to outflank the other, until they reached the North Sea coast in Belgium.

THE YSER

The Belgian army, retreating from Antwerp, held a line on the River Yser. In late October the Belgians opened sluice gates near the coast and flooded the low-lying land in front of them, stopping the German advance there for the rest of the war.

FIRST YPRES

From 19 October to 22 November, German attacks around the Belgian town of Ypres were held by British, French, and Belgian troops. The original, pre-war British regular army was largely destroyed there.

A LINE IS DRAWN

By the end of 1914 a continuous line of trenches ran from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border — roughly 700 km. It would move very little for more than three years.

THE "MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS"

In Germany, attacks near Langemarck during First Ypres in November 1914 became a legend of young student volunteers marching into British fire singing the national anthem. Many of the men really were young, hastily trained volunteers, and losses were heavy. But the story was polished for propaganda, and later used heavily by the Nazis. It's a good example of a battle turned into a myth almost as soon as it was over.

CHRISTMAS 1914

In December, in parts of the British and German lines, soldiers stopped fighting for an unofficial Christmas truce, exchanging greetings and burying the dead. It was

real, but local and short-lived — and it was never repeated on anything like that scale.

Questions to Sit With

Was the Marne lost by the German plan, by Kluck and Bülow, or by Moltke? What evidence supports each?

Why did the war of movement in 1914 turn into trench warfare in only a few months?

Why might a symbol like the taxis of the Marne become more famous than the railways that actually moved most of the troops?

Quick Reference — Chapter 3

- Joffre kept his armies together during the Great Retreat and built a new Sixth Army around Paris by rail
- German forces were exhausted, short of supplies, weakened by troops sent east, and poorly controlled by Moltke
- Kluck's First Army swung east of Paris, exposing its flank; a 50 km gap opened between Kluck and Bülow
- The Marne, 5–12 September 1914: after Hentsch's visit, the Germans retreated about 65 km to the Aisne; around 250,000 French and 300,000 German casualties
- The taxis of the Marne carried only a few thousand men; Moltke was replaced by Falkenhayn on 14 September
- The Race to the Sea (September–October), Belgian flooding of the Yser, and First Ypres (19 October – 22 November) ended in a continuous trench line of about 700 km

What's Next

Chapter 4: **Trench Warfare: Real Technology & Tactics of Stalemate.**

Military History: World War I

Chapter 4 · Trench Warfare: Real Technology & Tactics of Stalemate

By the end of 1914 a line of trenches ran about 700 km from the Belgian coast to Switzerland (Chapter 3). This chapter looks at why that line was so hard to break: how trenches were built, what made attacking them so costly, what daily life in them was actually like, and the first attempts to find a way through.

How a Trench System Worked

A "trench" was really a network. A typical British system had three parallel lines, joined by communication trenches running back from the front.

Part	What it was for
Front-line trench	Faced the enemy; held lightly most of the time, fully manned at dawn and dusk ("stand-to"), when attacks were most likely
Support trench	About 200–300 yards behind, holding troops ready to counter-attack
Reserve trench	Another 200–300 yards back, holding more reserves and supplies
Communication trenches	Ran from front to rear, so men, food, and ammunition could move without crossing open ground
No man's land	The ground between the two front lines: usually about 90–275 metres wide, but in places only 25 metres

ZIGZAGS

Trenches weren't straight. They were dug in short sections separated by

BARBED WIRE

Belts of wire in front of each line were often 15 metres deep or more.

traverses, so a shell burst or an enemy soldier who got in could only hit one section, not fire down the whole line.

Repairing it, and cutting the enemy's, was done by wiring parties at night.

DUGOUTS

German dugouts were often dug at least 4 metres deep, sometimes several storeys, lined with concrete, with multiple exits. British dugouts were generally shallower, partly because British commanders saw their positions as temporary starting points for an advance.

WHY GERMAN TRENCHES WERE BETTER

After 1914 the Germans were mostly defending ground they had captured, so they could choose the best positions — often on higher ground — and build for the long term. The Allies wanted to push them out, so they didn't want their troops too comfortable in positions they hoped to leave. That difference matters enormously for the Somme in Chapter 6.

Why Attacking Was So Costly

ARTILLERY

By most estimates, artillery caused the majority of all casualties in the war. It could smash trenches and wire, but it also churned the ground into craters that slowed attackers, and it rarely destroyed deep dugouts completely.

MACHINE GUNS

A few machine guns could stop an entire battalion crossing open ground. Germany invested in them heavily before the war; the British Army took longer to see their value.

THE DEFENDER'S RAILWAYS

Even when attackers broke into an enemy line, they moved forward on foot across wrecked ground, while the defenders rushed reserves in by rail and road. The defender could almost always seal a gap faster than the attacker could widen it.

BREAK-IN VS. BREAKTHROUGH

Historians often distinguish a *break-in* — capturing the enemy's front trenches — from a *breakthrough* into open country behind them. Armies managed break-ins many times. Real breakthroughs were almost impossible until 1918, because once attackers got beyond the range of their own artillery and their communication links, they lost the support that made the break-in possible.

"TWO MACHINE GUNS PER BATTALION"

A quote often attributed to Douglas Haig, later the British commander in France, claims he thought two machine guns per battalion was "more than sufficient." It's repeated as proof that British generals were backward, but its sourcing is uncertain. What is clear is that the British Army greatly increased its number of machine guns during the war and formed a specialist Machine Gun Corps in 1915.

Life in the Trenches

ROTATION

Soldiers usually didn't stay in the front line for long. A typical pattern was a few days in the front trench, then time in support and reserve, then a period of rest behind the lines.

MUD, RATS AND LICE

Flooded trenches caused "trench foot," a painful condition that could lead to amputation. Rats and lice were everywhere; lice spread "trench fever."

Most of a soldier's time was spent away from the front line itself.

CONSTANT LOW-LEVEL DANGER

Even on "quiet" days, snipers, shelling, and night raids caused a steady stream of casualties — a daily drain the British called "wastage."

SHELL SHOCK

The term was coined in 1915 by the British doctor Charles Myers. At first doctors thought it was physical damage caused by exploding shells; when men who had never been near an explosion showed the same symptoms, it became clear that it was psychological. Treatment ranged from rest to harsh methods such as electric shocks. Some men who were probably suffering from it were executed for desertion or cowardice: the British Army carried out 346 death sentences during the war. In 2006 the UK government pardoned the men executed for these offences. Today shell shock is recognised as an early form of what's now called post-traumatic stress disorder.

First Attempts to Break the Stalemate: Poison Gas

YPRES, 22 APRIL 1915

German troops released about 167 tonnes of chlorine gas from cylinders near Ypres. The wind carried a grey-green cloud onto French and colonial troops, who broke and fled, opening a gap of several kilometres. The Germans hadn't prepared enough reserves to exploit it, and Allied troops, including Canadians, closed it within days. The gas programme had been developed by the chemist Fritz Haber.

Gas	Effect
Chlorine (1915)	Visible, choking; relatively easy to protect against once masks were issued
Phosgene (1915)	Colourless, smelled faintly of hay; deadlier, and symptoms could appear hours later
Mustard gas (July 1917)	Caused severe blisters on skin and lungs, and stayed in the ground for days or weeks

TERRIFYING, BUT NOT DECISIVE

Gas caused an estimated 1.3 million casualties and about 90,000 deaths — only around 3% of all casualties in the war. Masks improved quickly, and most British gas casualties returned to duty within six weeks. Gas added fear and misery but never produced the breakthrough its inventors hoped for. It's a pattern this course keeps meeting: new technology created a temporary advantage, then the defence adapted.

WHAT WOULD ACTUALLY WORK?

Over the next three years armies tried many answers: longer and heavier bombardments (Chapters 5–6), tanks (Chapter 6), mining under the enemy's lines, and new infantry tactics. The eventual solution (Chapter 9) wasn't one weapon but a combination of them all.

Questions to Sit With

Why was it so much easier to capture an enemy trench than to break through into open country behind it?

Most soldiers spent only part of their time in the front line. How might that change the popular image of trench life?

Why do you think poison gas has such a powerful place in memory of the

war, even though it caused only a small share of casualties?

Quick Reference — Chapter 4

- A trench system had front, support, and reserve lines joined by communication trenches, dug in zigzags and protected by deep belts of barbed wire
- No man's land was usually about 90–275 metres wide; German dugouts were generally deeper and stronger than British ones
- Artillery caused most casualties; machine guns stopped attacks in the open; defenders could bring up reserves faster than attackers could advance
- "Break-ins" were common, true "breakthroughs" almost impossible before 1918
- Soldiers rotated between front, support, reserve, and rest; trench foot, lice, rats, and constant "wastage" were part of daily life
- "Shell shock" (Myers, 1915) is now recognised as combat trauma; the British executed 346 soldiers, pardoned in 2006
- Chlorine gas was first used on a large scale at Ypres on 22 April 1915; gas caused about 1.3 million casualties and 90,000 deaths, around 3% of the total

What's Next

Chapter 5: **Verdun (1916): Real Attrition as a Deliberate Strategy.**

CHAPTER 5: VERDUN (1916): REAL ATTRITION AS A DELIBERATE STRATEGY

Military History: World War I

Chapter 5 · Verdun (1916): Real Attrition as a Deliberate Strategy

Chapter 4 showed why breaking through a trench line was almost impossible. In 1916 the German commander, Erich von Falkenhayn, is said to have drawn a radical conclusion: don't try to break through at all. Instead, attack somewhere the enemy can't afford to lose, and kill so many of his soldiers defending it that his army collapses. The result was the longest single battle of the war.

Why Verdun?

A SYMBOL

Verdun was an ancient fortress city on the River Meuse, with a ring of modern forts. For France, it had deep historical and national meaning.

A SALIENT

The front bulged around Verdun, so German artillery could fire on it from three sides, while its supply routes to the rest of France were limited.

WEAKENED FORTS

After seeing Belgian forts crushed in 1914 (Chapter 2), the French had stripped many of Verdun's forts of their guns and garrisons to use elsewhere.

"Bleeding France White" — Plan or Excuse?

THE CHRISTMAS MEMORANDUM

In his memoirs, published in 1919–1920, Falkenhayn said he had written to the Kaiser at Christmas 1915 proposing to attack a point France would defend "to the last man," so that "the forces of France will bleed to death" whether or not Germany captured the place.

THE MEMORANDUM HAS NEVER BEEN FOUND

No copy of this memorandum has ever been found in the German archives. Some historians think Falkenhayn invented or rewrote it after the war to present a failed attempt to capture Verdun as a deliberate strategy of attrition. Others argue it genuinely reflects his thinking, supported by other evidence of his ideas at the time. The debate is still open. What's certain is that German commanders on the ground, like the Crown Prince whose army attacked, clearly believed they were trying to take Verdun.

The Battle: 21 February – 18 December 1916

21 February

After a bombardment of around a million shells on a narrow front, German troops attack. French defences are shattered.

25 February

Fort Douaumont, the strongest of the forts, falls almost without a fight — it was held by only a small maintenance crew. It's a huge blow to French morale.

25–26 February

General Philippe Pétain is put in command at Verdun. He organises artillery and supply and rotates troops through the battle.

March–May

Germany extends the attack to the west bank of the Meuse, around the hills known as Le Mort Homme ("Dead Man") and Hill 304. Both change hands repeatedly.

7 June

Fort Vaux surrenders after days of underground fighting in its corridors, when the defenders run out of water.

June–July

The German advance reaches its high point near Fleury, which changes hands sixteen times, but can't reach Verdun itself. The Allied offensive on the Somme (Chapter 6) begins on 1 July, drawing German resources away.

October–December

French counter-attacks under Robert Nivelle and Charles Mangin, using carefully planned artillery barrages, retake Fort Douaumont (24 October) and Fort Vaux.

How France Held On

THE SACRED WAY

Verdun's only good supply route was a single road from Bar-le-Duc. Thousands of trucks ran along it day and night carrying men, ammunition, and food, while labourers kept throwing stone onto the surface to keep it usable. It became known as the *Voie Sacrée*, the Sacred Way.

THE "NORIA"

Pétain rotated divisions in and out of the battle quickly, like buckets on a water wheel (a *noria*). It spread the strain — but it also meant that a large majority of the whole French army passed through Verdun at some point.

"THEY SHALL NOT PASS"

The slogan "Ils ne passeront pas" is linked with Verdun, and especially with Nivelle's orders of the day. It later appeared on French propaganda posters and in other wars.

The Cost

	French	German
Estimated casualties (killed, wounded, missing, captured)	About 377,000	About 337,000
Combined	About 700,000 over ten months — an average of around 70,000 a month	

ATTRITION CUT BOTH WAYS

If the aim was to bleed France white, it failed: the German army lost almost as many men as the French. Attrition only works if the enemy loses far more, or can replace losses far less easily. At Verdun, Falkenhayn's own army was drawn into the same slaughter he had meant to inflict. He was replaced in August 1916 by Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, the commanders from the Eastern Front (Chapter 8).

THE LANDSCAPE ITSELF

Hundreds of thousands of shells turned the ground into a moonscape of overlapping craters. Several villages were destroyed so completely they were never rebuilt; they still officially exist today as "villages that died for France." The Douaumont Ossuary holds the bones of about 130,000 unidentified soldiers from both sides.

Why Verdun Mattered

FOR FRANCE

Verdun became the central French memory of the war — a battle France fought largely alone and survived. Its heavy losses also help explain French exhaustion and the army mutinies of 1917.

FOR THE SOMME

Pressure from Verdun forced the British to take on a larger role in the planned joint offensive on the Somme, and to start it sooner — the subject of Chapter 6.

FOR PÉTAIN AND NIVELLE

Nivelle's apparent success made him French commander-in-chief, and his disastrous offensive in 1917 followed. Pétain became a national hero — a reputation later destroyed when he led the Vichy government that collaborated with Nazi Germany in the Second World War.

Questions to Sit With

Does it matter whether Falkenhayn really planned an attrition battle, or whether he claimed it afterward? What would each version say about him?

Why does attrition only work as a strategy if the losses are uneven? Why weren't they uneven at Verdun?

How can one person, like Pétain, be seen as a national hero in one war and a traitor in the next?

Quick Reference — Chapter 5

- Verdun: a symbolic fortress city in a salient, with forts partly stripped of guns; battle lasted 21 February – 18 December 1916
- Falkenhayn later claimed his aim was to "bleed France white"; his Christmas 1915 memorandum has never been found, and historians debate whether it existed
- Fort Douaumont fell on 25 February; Pétain took command; Fort Vaux fell on 7 June; Fleury changed hands sixteen times
- The Voie Sacrée kept Verdun supplied by truck; Pétain's "noria" rotated most of the French army through the battle

- Nivelle and Mangin's counter-attacks retook Douaumont (24 October) and Vaux by December
- About 377,000 French and 337,000 German casualties; Falkenhayn was replaced by Hindenburg and Ludendorff in August 1916

What's Next

Chapter 6: **The Somme (1916): The Real First Day & the Debut of the Tank.**

CHAPTER 6: THE SOMME (1916): THE REAL FIRST DAY & THE DEBUT OF THE TANK

Military History: World War I

Chapter 6 · The Somme (1916): The Real First Day & the Debut of the Tank

The Somme was planned as a joint Anglo-French offensive, then reshaped by Verdun (Chapter 5) into a mainly British one. Its first day remains the worst in the history of the British Army. But the battle lasted almost five months, and the story of what happened after 1 July — including the first tanks ever used in battle — is more complicated than the famous opening.

The Plan

WHY THE SOMME?

It was where the British and French sectors met, so the two armies could attack side by side. It was chosen for alliance reasons, not because it was a good place to attack — the Germans held most of the higher ground.

WHO PLANNED IT

The British commander-in-chief, General Sir Douglas Haig, hoped for a breakthrough. General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commanding the Fourth Army that would attack, preferred more limited "bite and hold" steps. The final plan mixed both ideas awkwardly.

THE NEW ARMY

Most of the attacking British troops were volunteers who had joined in 1914–15. Many served in "Pals battalions," recruited from the same towns, workplaces, or sports clubs, so friends and neighbours fought — and died — together.

The Bombardment

For seven days before the attack, British guns fired more than 1.5 million shells at the German lines. The idea was that the bombardment would destroy the wire, the trenches, and the defenders, so the infantry could simply walk across and occupy what was left.

WHY IT FAILED

Many of the shells were shrapnel, designed to burst in the air, which was nearly useless against deep dugouts (Chapter 4) and often failed to cut barbed wire. There was too little high-explosive ammunition for field guns, and many shells, made in a hurry by a newly expanded munitions industry, didn't explode. The bombardment was also spread across the whole front rather than concentrated. German soldiers sheltered in dugouts many metres below ground, then climbed out with their machine guns when the shelling stopped.

The First Day: 1 July 1916

7:20 a.m.

A mine under Hawthorn Ridge is exploded ten minutes early, warning the Germans that the attack is coming.

7:28 a.m.

Other large mines are exploded, including one at La Boisselle that leaves the huge Lochnagar Crater, still visible today.

7:30 a.m.

The whistles blow. British and French infantry leave their trenches along a front of about 25 km.

Morning

In the north and centre, many British attacks are cut down by machine-gun and artillery fire in no man's land or at uncut wire. In the south, British troops take Montauban, and the French, with heavier artillery and more experience, reach their objectives.

Casualties on 1 July 1916

British 57,470, including 19,240 killed

French About 1,590

German About 10,000–12,000

BEAUMONT-HAMEL

The Newfoundland Regiment, from what was then a separate British dominion, attacked at Beaumont-Hamel and was almost destroyed in about half an hour: of roughly 800 men who went forward, only a small fraction answered the roll call the next day. In Newfoundland, 1 July is still a day of remembrance.

DID THE TROOPS JUST WALK SLOWLY INTO MACHINE GUNS?

The popular picture is of soldiers ordered to walk upright, in straight lines, carrying heavy packs. Some units did advance at a walking pace, and many carried heavy loads for holding captured ground. But the attack was carefully organised into waves with different jobs, and many units used other methods, such as creeping out into no man's land before zero hour. Where the wire was cut and the defenders suppressed, those methods worked; where it wasn't, almost nothing would have.

After the First Day: July – November 1916

The battle didn't end on 1 July. It continued for another four and a half months as a long series of attacks, with Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, and South African troops joining in.

A NIGHT ATTACK, 14 JULY

An attack on the German second line after a short, heavy bombardment and an approach in darkness was a

THE CREEPING BARRAGE

Artillery learned to lay down a moving curtain of shells just in front of advancing infantry, lifting forward step by step, so defenders stayed in

real success — showing the British Army was learning quickly.

their dugouts until the attackers were almost on top of them.

RAIN AND MUD

By autumn heavy rain turned the battlefield into mud. The offensive was halted in mid-November with the Allies about 10 km forward at the deepest point.

The First Tanks: 15 September 1916

FLERS–COURCELETTE

Britain had secretly developed armoured, tracked vehicles to cross trenches, crush wire, and survive machine-gun fire. They were called "tanks" to disguise them as water tanks. At Flers–Courcelette 49 of the new Mark I tanks were available, but many broke down or got stuck before or during the attack; only a minority actually went into action. Those that did helped capture the village of Flers and frightened German defenders.

TOO EARLY, OR JUST IN TIME?

Critics argued that using only a few dozen unreliable tanks gave away the surprise before enough could be built to make a real difference. Supporters argued that combat experience was essential to improve them. Either way, the first tanks were slow, hot, mechanically fragile, and far from decisive. They became truly effective only as part of combined attacks in 1917–1918 (Chapter 9) — the same pattern as gas in Chapter 4.

The Cost and the Verdict

Army	Estimated casualties, 1 July – 18 November 1916
British Empire	About 420,000
French	About 200,000
German	Estimates range widely, from about 240,000 to over 400,000

"LIONS LED BY DONKEYS"?

For decades the Somme stood for the idea of brave soldiers wasted by stupid generals. The phrase "lions led by donkeys" became famous through Alan Clark's 1961 book *The Donkeys*, which attributed it to a German general — but Clark later admitted he couldn't source it, and he may have made it up. Since the 1980s many historians have argued for a "learning curve": the British Army, expanded from a small regular force into a mass army almost overnight, made terrible mistakes in 1916 but learned from them, laying the foundation for the victories of 1918. Others argue the learning was too slow and too costly. Both sides agree the first day was a disaster.

THE GERMAN SIDE

The Somme was also devastating for the German army, which lost many experienced soldiers and junior officers it couldn't replace. A German staff officer later called it "the muddy grave of the German field army." Early in 1917 Germany withdrew to a shorter, stronger defensive line — the Hindenburg Line — partly to avoid another battle like it.

Questions to Sit With

The bombardment was enormous but failed. Was the problem the plan, the ammunition, or the belief that artillery alone could win?

Why might Pals battalions have made the losses of the Somme feel so much more devastating at home?

Is it fair to judge the whole battle by its first day? What does looking at July to November add?

Quick Reference — Chapter 6

- The Somme was chosen for alliance reasons where British and French sectors met; Verdun made it a mostly British battle
- A seven-day bombardment of over 1.5 million shells failed to destroy German dugouts or cut much of the wire
- 1 July 1916: mines at Hawthorn Ridge and La Boisselle; British losses of 57,470, including 19,240 killed, the worst day in British Army history; the French and British XIII Corps succeeded in the south
- The Newfoundland Regiment was almost destroyed at Beaumont-Hamel; Pals battalions concentrated losses in particular towns
- Later phases saw the creeping barrage and a successful night attack on 14 July; the battle ended on 18 November about 10 km forward
- First tanks: 15 September 1916 at Flers–Courcellette; 49 Mark I tanks available, many broke down
- About 420,000 British Empire and 200,000 French casualties; German figures disputed; "lions led by donkeys" vs. the "learning curve" debate

What's Next

Chapter 7: The War at Sea: Jutland (1916) & the Real U-Boat Campaign.

CHAPTER 7: THE WAR AT SEA: JUTLAND (1916) & THE REAL U-BOAT CAMPAIGN

Military History: World War I

Chapter 7 · The War at Sea: Jutland (1916) & the Real U-Boat Campaign

Before 1914 Britain and Germany had raced to build huge battleships, and both expected a great sea battle early in the war. It took nearly two years to come, and it didn't settle much. The war at sea was really decided by two slower struggles: Britain's blockade of Germany, and Germany's submarine campaign against the ships that kept Britain fed.

Two Fleets, Two Strategies

BRITAIN'S GRAND FLEET

Based at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands, it didn't need to win a battle. Simply by existing, it kept the German fleet in port and enforced a blockade that cut Germany off from overseas trade.

GERMANY'S HIGH SEAS FLEET

Smaller, and unable to win a straightforward battle. Its hope was to trap and destroy part of the British fleet, evening up the odds before a larger battle.

THE STAKES

Winston Churchill later wrote that the British commander, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, was "the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon." Losing the Grand Fleet would have left Britain open to invasion and starvation.

THE REAL CONTINUITY WITH EARLIER CHAPTERS

This is the same logic as Trafalgar's century of command of the sea (Military History: The British Empire, Chapter 4) and the Union blockade (Military History: The US Civil War, Chapter 4): the side that controls the sea lanes can slowly strangle the other without ever winning a dramatic battle.

Jutland: 31 May – 1 June 1916

In late May 1916 the German fleet under Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer came out, with a scouting force of battlecruisers under Vice-Admiral Franz Hipper ahead of it, hoping to draw out and destroy British battlecruisers. British codebreakers in the Admiralty's "Room 40" had detected the German fleet was about to sail, so the whole Grand Fleet was already at sea.

	British (Jellicoe & Beatty)	German (Scheer & Hipper)
Dreadnought battleships	28	16 (plus 6 older pre-dreadnoughts)
Battlecruisers	9	5
All warships	151	99
Men killed	About 6,100	About 2,550
Ships sunk	14, including 3 battlecruisers (about 113,000 tons)	11, including 1 battlecruiser (about 62,000 tons)

Afternoon, 31 May

Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty's battlecruisers clash with Hipper's. Two British battlecruisers explode and sink within minutes. Beatty reportedly remarks: "There seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today."

Late afternoon

Beatty turns north, leading the unsuspecting German fleet toward Jellicoe's main battle fleet.

Early evening

Jellicoe deploys his battleships across the German line of advance. Twice the German fleet runs into overwhelming fire, and twice Scheer turns away under cover of torpedo attacks and smoke.

● Night, 31 May – 1 June

In confused night fighting, the German fleet slips through the rear of the British fleet and gets home.

WHY DID BRITISH SHIPS EXPLODE?

Three British battlecruisers blew up almost instantly. They carried less armour than battleships, but the bigger problem was unsafe handling of propellant: to fire faster, crews had left cordite charges and flash-proof doors open between the gun turrets and the magazines. A single hit could send a flash down to the magazine and blow up the whole ship.

WHO WON?

Germany sank more ships and killed more men, and claimed a victory. But the German fleet had narrowly escaped destruction and never again seriously challenged the Grand Fleet. Britain's control of the North Sea, and the blockade, continued unchanged. A popular summary, often attributed to an American newspaper, put it neatly: the German fleet had assaulted its jailer, but was still in jail.

The British Blockade

From 1914 Britain enforced a "distant" blockade, closing the English Channel and the northern exits to the North Sea rather than sitting off German ports. Neutral ships were stopped and searched, and cargo headed for Germany was seized — including, increasingly, food.

HUNGER IN GERMANY

Combined with poor harvests and the demands of the German army, the blockade caused real food shortages. The winter of 1916–17 became known as

the "turnip winter," when turnips replaced potatoes as a staple. The German government later claimed hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths from malnutrition; the true figure is debated, but hunger badly weakened German morale by 1918.

The U-Boat War

Germany's answer to the blockade was the submarine, or *U-boat* (from *Unterseeboot*). It could sink ships without ever facing the Grand Fleet.

22 September 1914

A single submarine, U-9, sinks three old British cruisers in under an hour, killing about 1,460 sailors. Navies suddenly take submarines seriously.

February 1915

Germany declares the waters around Britain a war zone where merchant ships may be sunk without warning.

7 May 1915

U-20 sinks the British liner *Lusitania* off Ireland; 1,197 people die, including 124 Americans. Outrage in the United States forces Germany to restrict its submarine attacks.

1 February 1917

Germany resumes unrestricted submarine warfare, sinking any ship in the war zone, including neutral ones.

April 1917

The worst month of the war for Allied shipping: over 600,000 tons sunk.

A DELIBERATE GAMBLE

German naval planners calculated that sinking enough shipping would force Britain to seek peace within about five or six months — before the United States, which they expected to join the war, could make a difference. They were right that America would join: the US declared war on 6 April 1917, helped along by the Zimmermann

Telegram, a German proposal of a military alliance to Mexico decoded by Room 40 and published. They were wrong about Britain collapsing.

The Answer: Convoys

SAFETY IN NUMBERS

The Admiralty had resisted grouping merchant ships into escorted convoys, believing large groups would be easier targets. When convoys were finally introduced from May 1917, the results were dramatic: in the following months, of nearly 9,000 ships sailing in convoy, only 27 were lost to U-boats, compared with hundreds of ships sailing alone.

WHY CONVOYS WORKED

The ocean is huge. Scattered single ships gave submarines many chances to find a target; a convoy made the sea look empty most of the time, and when a U-boat did find one, it had to attack under the eyes of escort warships. It's the same pattern this course keeps finding: a new weapon (the U-boat) gained a big advantage until the defence adapted with an organisational answer rather than a technical one.

A REHEARSAL FOR 1939–1945

Both the U-boat campaign and the convoy system were repeated on an even larger scale in the Second World War's Battle of the Atlantic.

Questions to Sit With

Can a battle where one side lost more ships and men still be a victory for that side? What makes Jutland a good test case?

Was unrestricted submarine warfare a reasonable gamble for Germany in 1917, given what its leaders knew at the time?

Why do you think the Admiralty resisted convoys for so long, when they turned out to be so effective?

Quick Reference — Chapter 7

- Britain's Grand Fleet (Scapa Flow) kept Germany's High Seas Fleet in port and enforced a blockade; Jellicoe could "lose the war in an afternoon"
- Jutland, 31 May – 1 June 1916: 151 British vs 99 German warships; Britain lost 14 ships and about 6,100 men, Germany 11 ships and about 2,550 men
- British battlecruisers exploded because of unsafe cordite handling; the German fleet escaped but never seriously challenged the Grand Fleet again
- The British blockade caused food shortages in Germany, including the 1916–17 "turnip winter"
- U-boats: U-9 sank three cruisers (September 1914); the *Lusitania* was sunk on 7 May 1915 (1,197 dead, 124 Americans)
- Unrestricted submarine warfare resumed on 1 February 1917; over 600,000 tons were sunk in April 1917; the US declared war on 6 April 1917
- Convoys from May 1917 cut losses dramatically (27 of nearly 9,000 convoyed ships lost in the first months)

What's Next

Chapter 8: The Eastern Front & Russia's Real Collapse (1917).

CHAPTER 8: THE EASTERN FRONT & RUSSIA'S REAL COLLAPSE (1917)

Military History: World War I

Chapter 8 · The Eastern Front & Russia's Real Collapse (1917)

The Eastern Front looked very different from the West. It was far longer, armies were spread more thinly, and it never settled into a single fixed trench line. Huge advances and retreats happened there that were impossible in France. This chapter follows the war between Russia and the Central Powers from its opening disaster to Russia's exit from the war in 1918.

WHERE THE POLITICS ARE COVERED

The revolutions of 1917 — the Tsar's fall, the Provisional Government, and the Bolshevik seizure of power — are covered in depth in Russian Political History I (Chapters 3–4). This chapter focuses on the military side: how the war broke the Russian army, and how Russia's collapse changed the war.

A Different Kind of Front

SPACE

The front stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, far longer than the Western Front, with fewer soldiers per kilometre. Breaking through was easier; supplying an advance was much harder.

RUSSIA'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Russia had enormous manpower but a weak industrial base and poor railways. By 1915 its army was short of rifles, shells, and trained officers.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY'S PROBLEM

A multinational army with officers and soldiers who often didn't share a language, fighting on several fronts at

once. It relied more and more on German help.

1914: Tannenberg

Responding to French pleas, Russia invaded German East Prussia in August 1914 faster than Germany had expected. Two Russian armies advanced, under Generals Paul von Rennenkampf and Alexander Samsonov, separated by a chain of lakes and forests. The alarmed Germans sent a new command team east: Paul von Hindenburg, a retired general, with Erich Ludendorff as his chief of staff.

26–30 AUGUST 1914

Using the railways, the Germans concentrated almost their whole force against Samsonov's army while leaving only a screen facing Rennenkampf. They were helped enormously by Russian radio messages sent without code, which told them where the Russian units were going. Samsonov's army was encircled and largely destroyed. Around 90,000 Russian soldiers were captured. Samsonov walked into the woods and shot himself.

A NAME CHOSEN FOR REVENGE

The battle was fought nearer other villages, but Hindenburg named it Tannenberg after the place where the Teutonic Knights had been defeated by Polish and Lithuanian forces in 1410 — presenting it as historical revenge. It made Hindenburg and Ludendorff national heroes; by August 1916 they commanded the whole German army (Chapter 5). The plan owed much to a staff officer, Max Hoffmann, whose role was later overshadowed.

In September 1914 the Germans also drove Rennenkampf's army out of East Prussia at the Masurian Lakes. Further south, though, Russia beat the Austro-Hungarian army badly in Galicia, showing the weakness that would force Germany to keep propping up its ally.

1915: The Great Retreat

May 1915

A German-Austrian offensive at Gorlice–Tarnów, using a massive concentrated artillery bombardment, breaks through the Russian line.

Summer 1915

Russian armies, short of shells, fall back hundreds of kilometres, giving up Russian Poland and much of Lithuania. Millions of refugees flee east.

September 1915

Tsar Nicholas II takes personal command of the army — tying himself directly to every future defeat.

1916: The Brusilov Offensive

RUSSIA'S GREATEST SUCCESS

In June 1916 General Aleksei Brusilov attacked the Austro-Hungarian armies along a very wide front instead of one narrow sector, so the enemy couldn't tell where the main blow would fall. His troops dug forward trenches close to the enemy, rehearsed their attacks, used a short, precise artillery bombardment, and sent small assault units at weak points. The Austro-Hungarian front collapsed: one Austrian army lost about 70% of its strength in four days.

RELIEF FOR THE ALLIES

Germany had to send divisions east, helping the French at Verdun (Chapter 5) and drawing forces away during the Somme (Chapter 6).

ROMANIA JOINS

Encouraged, Romania joined the Allies in August 1916 — and was quickly overrun by German and Austro-Hungarian forces.

A RUINOUS VICTORY

Total losses on all sides are estimated at 2–3 million, including over a million Russians. It crippled Austria-Hungary, but it also exhausted the Russian army.

A PREVIEW OF 1918

Brusilov's methods — surprise, short bombardments, and small assault groups finding weak points — were the same basic ideas that would later break the stalemate on the Western Front (Chapter 9).

1917: The Army Falls Apart

March 1917

Strikes and food riots in Petrograd; soldiers refuse to fire on the crowds. Tsar Nicholas II abdicates. A Provisional Government takes over and promises to keep fighting.

July 1917

The Kerensky Offensive, named after the war minister Alexander Kerensky, makes early gains, then collapses as whole units refuse to keep attacking and desertion soars.

September 1917

At Riga, the Germans use a short, accurate surprise bombardment and infiltrating assault troops to take the city quickly — a test run of methods used in France in 1918.

November 1917

The Bolsheviks, promising "peace, land, and bread," seize power and seek an armistice, agreed in December.

WHY THE ARMY BROKE

Years of defeat, huge losses (an estimated 1.7–2.25 million Russian military deaths), shortages, and distrust of officers had worn the army down. After the Tsar's fall, soldiers' committees challenged officers' authority. Most soldiers were peasants, and

news that land might be shared out at home gave them a strong reason to stop fighting and go back to their villages.

1918: Brest-Litovsk

At the peace talks, the Bolshevik negotiator Leon Trotsky tried a policy of "neither war nor peace," refusing to sign but also refusing to fight, hoping revolution would spread to Germany. In February 1918 Germany simply resumed its advance, meeting almost no resistance. Lenin insisted the Bolsheviks accept whatever terms they could get.

THE TREATY OF BREST-LITOVSK, 3 MARCH 1918

Russia gave up Ukraine, Poland, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and territory in the Caucasus. These lands held about a third of the old empire's population, more than half its industry, and about 90% of its coal mines.

GERMANY'S VICTORY IN THE EAST DIDN'T FREE ITS WHOLE ARMY

Russia's exit let Germany move many divisions to the Western Front for a final offensive in spring 1918 (Chapter 9). But Germany also kept a large force — often estimated at around a million men — in the east to occupy and exploit its new territory. The treaty was cancelled by the Armistice in November 1918, only eight months later.

Questions to Sit With

Why were large advances and retreats possible in the East but not in the West?

The Brusilov Offensive was Russia's greatest success, yet Russia collapsed the next year. How can a victory help cause a defeat?

Was Brest-Litovsk a real victory for Germany, if it still needed a large army to hold the territory it gained?

Quick Reference — Chapter 8

- The Eastern Front was longer and more open than the Western; Russia had manpower but weak industry, and Austria-Hungary depended on German support
- Tannenberg, 26–30 August 1914: uncoded Russian radio messages helped Hindenburg and Ludendorff encircle Samsonov's army; around 90,000 captured
- 1915: the Gorlice–Tarnów breakthrough and the Great Retreat; the Tsar took personal command
- 1916: the Brusilov Offensive shattered Austria-Hungary using surprise and wide-front attacks, at a cost of over a million Russian casualties
- 1917: the Tsar abdicated (March); the Kerensky Offensive collapsed (July); Riga (September) previewed new German tactics; the Bolsheviks took power (November)
- Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 3 March 1918: Russia lost about a third of its population and most of its coal and industry; Germany moved many, but not all, of its eastern forces west

What's Next

Chapter 9: **1918: The Real German Spring Offensive & the Allied Hundred Days.**

CHAPTER 9: 1918: THE REAL GERMAN SPRING OFFENSIVE & THE ALLIED HUNDRED DAYS

Military History: World War I

Chapter 9 · 1918: The Real German Spring Offensive & the Allied Hundred Days

For three years the Western Front barely moved. In 1918 it moved dramatically — twice. In the spring, German armies broke through further than anyone had since 1914. By the summer, the Allies had learned to do the same thing better, and in about a hundred days they pushed the German army into defeat. This chapter shows how both sides finally solved the problem set out in Chapter 4.

Germany's Last Chance

A WINDOW OF TIME

The United States had joined the war (Chapter 7), but its army would take months to arrive in large numbers. Germany had perhaps half a year of numerical advantage.

TROOPS FROM THE EAST

Russia's collapse (Chapter 8) let Germany move around 50 divisions to the Western Front, though many troops stayed in the east.

A WEAKENING HOME FRONT

The blockade (Chapter 7) had left Germany short of food and materials. Ludendorff knew the army couldn't fight a long war of attrition much longer.

New Tactics: How Germany Broke In

Method	What it did differently
Short, intense bombardment	Instead of days of shelling (Chapter 6), the artillery expert Georg Bruchmüller planned a few hours of accurately targeted fire, mixing gas and high explosive, aimed at artillery, headquarters, and communications. The enemy got little warning.
Storm troops	Specially trained assault units moved forward in small groups, bypassing strongpoints rather than attacking them, and pushed deep into the enemy's rear. Follow-up troops dealt with the bypassed positions.
Defence in depth	Rather than trying to hold the front line at all costs, attackers aimed to disrupt the whole defensive zone so reserves couldn't react in time.

TESTED IN THE EAST

These ideas had been tried at Riga in September 1917 (Chapter 8) and at Caporetto in Italy in October 1917, where Austro-German forces broke the Italian army. They were close cousins of Brusilov's methods from 1916.

The Spring Offensive: 21 March – 18 July 1918

21 March

Operation Michael strikes the British Fifth and Third Armies near St Quentin, in thick fog. The British front is overrun and the Germans advance further in a few days than in the previous three years.

26 March

With the Allies in real danger of being split apart, the French general Ferdinand Foch is given the job of coordinating the Allied armies — soon becoming supreme commander on the Western Front.

April

Operation Georgette attacks in Flanders. Haig issues his "backs to the wall" order on 11 April, telling his troops there must be no retreat.

May–June

The Blücher-Yorck offensive against the French on the Aisne reaches the River Marne again, about 90 km from Paris. Newly arrived American troops fight at Château-Thierry and Belleau Wood.

15–18 July

A final German attack near Reims fails; on 18 July French and American forces counter-attack at the Second Battle of the Marne. The initiative passes to the Allies for good.

WHY A TACTICAL SUCCESS BECAME A STRATEGIC FAILURE

Ludendorff reportedly summed up his approach as: "We chop a hole. The rest follows." The offensives had no clear strategic goal and kept switching direction. Storm troops carried supplies for only a few days, and German soldiers advancing across the old Somme battlefields often stopped to loot Allied food stores. The Germans gained large areas of ground — but it was mostly worthless, and they now held a longer line with fewer men. Around 688,000 German soldiers became casualties, including many of the irreplaceable elite storm troops, against about 863,000 Allied casualties.

THE PARIS GUN

From March to August, a German super-long-range gun shelled Paris from more than 100 km away, killing around 250 people. It was a remarkable piece of engineering with almost no military value — a weapon meant to frighten.

The Allies' Answer: Combined Arms

By mid-1918 the British, French, and American armies had learned to combine every tool developed since 1915 into a single, coordinated system — far more effectively than any one weapon on its own.

ARTILLERY THAT HIT WHAT IT AIMED AT

New methods let gunners fire accurately without warning "registration" shots, and locate enemy guns by sound and flash. Surprise returned.

TANKS AND AIRCRAFT

Hundreds of improved tanks crushed wire and machine-gun posts, while aircraft spotted for artillery, attacked ground targets, and fought for control of the air.

BETTER INFANTRY TACTICS

Allied infantry now attacked in small groups built around light machine guns, rifle grenades, and Lewis guns — the same basic idea as the German storm troops.

THE "LEARNING CURVE" PAYS OFF

Chapter 6 introduced the debate over whether the British Army learned from the Somme. 1918 is the strongest evidence that it did: the same army that lost 19,240 men killed on one day in 1916 was, two years later, winning a long series of battles with far lower losses per mile gained.

The Hundred Days: 8 August – 11 November 1918

AMIENS, 8 AUGUST 1918

A surprise attack led by the Australian and Canadian Corps, planned in large part by the Australian commander John Monash, used over 500 tanks, careful artillery, and aircraft. The Allies advanced about 11 km on the first day, and thousands of German soldiers surrendered. Ludendorff called it "the black day of the German Army" — not because of the ground lost, but because German troops were surrendering in large numbers.

● August–September

The Allies attack in a series of short, hard blows at different points along the front, stopping each attack before it outran its artillery, then striking somewhere else.

● 12 September

The American First Army, under General John Pershing, takes the Saint-Mihiel salient in its first big independent operation.

● 26 September

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive begins — the largest and deadliest battle in American military history, with around 26,000 Americans killed by November.

● 29 September

British and Australian forces break the Hindenburg Line at the St Quentin Canal; British troops cross the canal using lifebelts and rafts. The same day, Ludendorff tells the German leadership it must seek an armistice.

● October–November

The German army retreats across Belgium and northern France, fighting as it goes. Its allies collapse: Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire, and Austria-Hungary all sign armistices.

WHO WON THE WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT?

British memory tends to focus on the British Army, American memory on the US arrival, and French memory on France's long endurance. In reality, all three mattered: the French army held the longest share of the line throughout; the British Empire's forces, including Australians and Canadians, did much of the attacking in the Hundred Days; and American manpower, even more than American fighting, convinced German leaders they couldn't win.

Questions to Sit With

Germany's spring offensive won more ground than any attack since 1914, yet

Why did combining many weapons work in 1918, when no single new weapon had worked before?

it lost the war. Why can capturing ground be a mistake?

Why does each Allied country tend to remember itself as the one that won the war? Is any of them right?

Quick Reference — Chapter 9

- Germany attacked in 1918 before American troops arrived in force, using about 50 divisions freed by Russia's collapse
- New methods: Bruchmüller's short, accurate bombardments and storm troops infiltrating past strongpoints — tested at Riga and Caporetto
- Spring Offensive, 21 March – 18 July 1918: Michael, Georgette, Blücher-Yorck, and the final attack near Reims; Foch became Allied coordinator; Haig's "backs to the wall" order
- The offensives gained ground but had no clear goal, outran supplies, and cost about 688,000 German casualties, including irreplaceable storm troops
- The Allies used combined arms: accurate artillery, hundreds of tanks, aircraft, and small-group infantry tactics
- Hundred Days, 8 August – 11 November: Amiens ("the black day of the German Army"), Saint-Mihiel, the Meuse-Argonne, and the breaking of the Hindenburg Line on 29 September
- Ludendorff demanded an armistice on 29 September; Germany's allies collapsed in October and November

What's Next

Chapter 10: Capstone: The Real Armistice (1918) & the Military Legacy of the First World War.

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — THE REAL ARMISTICE (1918) & THE MILITARY LEGACY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Military History: World War I

Chapter 10 · Capstone: The Real Armistice (1918) & the Military Legacy of the First World War

The fighting stopped at 11 a.m. on 11 November 1918 — the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. This capstone looks at how the war actually ended, why many Germans refused to believe they had been beaten, and what armies took away from four years of fighting — lessons that shaped the next war.

How the War Ended

After Ludendorff’s demand for an armistice on 29 September (Chapter 9), events moved quickly. German sailors mutinied at Kiel, revolution spread across Germany, and on 9 November the Kaiser was forced to abdicate. The political story is told in German Political History I (Chapter 3). The military end came two days later.

THE RAILWAY CARRIAGE AT COMPIÈGNE

In a railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne, north of Paris, Marshal Ferdinand Foch and the British Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss received a German delegation led by a civilian politician, Matthias Erzberger. The armistice was signed at around 5 a.m. on 11 November and took effect at 11 a.m.

Main military terms	What they meant
Evacuate France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Alsace-Lorraine within about two weeks	Give up all the ground won since 1914
Allied occupation of Germany west of the Rhine, plus bridgeheads across it	Leave Germany open to invasion if fighting resumed

Main military terms**What they meant**

Hand over 5,000 artillery pieces, 25,000 machine guns, and 1,700 aircraft

Make it physically impossible to restart the war

Surrender all submarines and intern the surface fleet

End the U-boat threat and the High Seas Fleet (Chapter 7)

The Allied naval blockade continues

Keep up pressure until a peace treaty was signed

THE LAST SIX HOURS

Although everyone knew the fighting would stop at 11 a.m., many commanders kept attacking until the last moment. An estimated 2,738 soldiers were killed on the final day. The American private Henry Gunther is generally recognised as the last soldier killed in action, at about 10:59 a.m.; the Canadian private George Price was killed two minutes before the end.

THE FLEET'S LAST ACT

The interned German fleet was held at Scapa Flow. On 21 June 1919, as the peace treaty was about to be signed, its commander ordered the ships scuttled. Most of them sank in the harbour — often described as the largest loss of warships in a single day in history, without a shot being fired.

The "Stab in the Back"

In November 1918 German troops were still standing on French and Belgian soil, and no Allied army had entered Germany. Wartime censorship had hidden how bad things were. To many Germans, the armistice seemed inexplicable.

THE GENERALS STEP ASIDE

Ludendorff and Hindenburg had demanded the armistice themselves. But they made sure civilian politicians

"NO ENEMY HAS VANQUISHED YOU"

Welcoming returning troops in Berlin, the new Social Democratic

signed it — so that civilians, not the army, would carry the blame.

leader Friedrich Ebert told them that no enemy had defeated them — a well-meant phrase that fed the idea that they hadn't really lost.

HINDENBURG'S TESTIMONY

In November 1919 Hindenburg told a parliamentary inquiry that the army had been "stabbed in the back" by the home front. The claim became central to nationalist and, later, Nazi propaganda.

A MYTH WITH A CLEAR ANSWER

Military historians agree the German army was beaten in the field in 1918: its spring offensives had failed, it was losing hundreds of thousands of men as prisoners, its allies had collapsed, and its own commanders asked for an armistice before the revolution at home. The "stab in the back" was a conspiracy theory, used especially against Jews, socialists, and the new republic. Some accounts even credit the phrase to a British general over dinner, but that story is itself uncertain.

Versailles and the German Army

The Treaty of Versailles (June 1919) set strict limits on Germany's armed forces:

A SMALL ARMY

No more than 100,000 men, with no conscription and no General Staff.

BANNED WEAPONS

No tanks, no military aircraft, no submarines, and only a small navy.

THE RHINELAND

The land along the Rhine was to be occupied for years and permanently

demilitarised.

What Armies Learned

Lesson	How it shaped the next war
Combined arms and infiltration (Chapter 9)	The small post-war German army studied 1918 closely; its ideas about fast, coordinated attacks with tanks, aircraft, and infantry developed into the German campaigns of 1939–1940
Defence won for four years (Chapters 4–6)	France, remembering Verdun, invested heavily in the Maginot Line of fixed fortifications along its border with Germany
Aircraft mattered (Chapter 9)	Britain created the first independent air force, the Royal Air Force, on 1 April 1918; theorists argued bombing could win future wars on its own
Blockade and submarines (Chapter 7)	Both returned in the Battle of the Atlantic; convoys were used again from the start
Whole nations fight wars (Chapter 1)	Industrial mobilisation, rationing, and propaganda became standard features of war

THE SAME RAILWAY CARRIAGE

In June 1940, after defeating France, Hitler insisted the French surrender be signed in the same railway carriage at Compiègne, deliberately reversing 1918. It's a vivid reminder of how directly the first war fed into the second.

Looking Back Across the Course

Thread	Where it appears
Plans for a short war failed immediately	The Schlieffen memorandum and Plan XVII (Ch. 2); the Marne and the Race to the Sea (Ch. 3)

Thread	Where it appears
Defence was stronger than attack — until 1918	Trench systems (Ch. 4), Verdun (Ch. 5), the Somme (Ch. 6), and finally the combined-arms answer (Ch. 9)
New weapons gave a short advantage, then defences adapted	Gas (Ch. 4), tanks (Ch. 6), U-boats and convoys (Ch. 7)
Endurance and economics decided the war	Attrition at Verdun (Ch. 5), the blockade (Ch. 7), Russia's collapse (Ch. 8), American manpower (Ch. 9)
Famous stories need checking	The "Schlieffen Plan" itself (Ch. 2), the taxis of the Marne (Ch. 3), the Christmas Memorandum (Ch. 5), "lions led by donkeys" (Ch. 6), and the "stab in the back" (Ch. 10)

FROM STALEMATE TO SOLUTION

Chapter 1 described a war where firepower made defence far stronger than attack. This course has traced how, at enormous cost, armies worked out how to attack again — not with any single new weapon, but by combining artillery, infantry, tanks, and aircraft. The tragedy is that the solution arrived only at the very end, after millions of deaths, and that its lessons were learned best by the army that had just lost.

Questions to Sit With

Why do you think commanders kept attacking on the morning of 11 November, when they knew the war would end at 11 a.m.?

How did the way the war ended — with no invasion of Germany — make the "stab in the back" myth easier to believe?

France learned "defence works" and Germany learned "combined attack"

works." Why might the losing side have learned the more useful lesson?

Quick Reference — Chapter 10

- The armistice was signed at about 5 a.m. on 11 November 1918 in a railway carriage at Compiègne and took effect at 11 a.m.
- Terms: evacuate occupied territory, Allied occupation west of the Rhine, surrender of 5,000 guns, 25,000 machine guns, 1,700 aircraft, and all submarines; the blockade continued
- About 2,738 soldiers died on the last day; Henry Gunther is recognised as the last killed in action; the German fleet was scuttled at Scapa Flow on 21 June 1919
- The "stab in the back" myth blamed civilians for a defeat the army's own leaders had acknowledged; Hindenburg promoted it in November 1919
- Versailles limited Germany to a 100,000-man army with no tanks, military aircraft, or submarines
- Legacy: combined-arms ideas developed in Germany, France's Maginot Line, the RAF (founded 1 April 1918), and a return of blockade and convoys in the next war

Course Complete

This closes **Military History: World War I**. For the war's global and political side, see **World History III**; for Germany's revolution and the Weimar Republic, **German Political History I**; for imperial troops and Gallipoli, **Military History: The British Empire**; and for how the next war's aftermath was handled differently, **Military History: World War II — the Marshall Plan**.