

1: The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War - Hew Strachan - Oxford University Press

"The Oxford History of Modern War" offers a series of scholarly essays on the changing nature of war from the late 18th century to the late 20th century. Among the principal themes are the effects of technological innovation and mass mobilization on the conduct of war.

Its origins were complex. Its scale was vast. Its conduct was intense. Its impact on military operations was revolutionary. Its human and material costs were enormous. And its results were profound. The war was a global conflict. Thirty-two nations were eventually involved. They were opposed by the Central Powers: The war began in the Balkan cockpit of competing nationalisms and ancient ethnic rivalries. Hopes that it could be contained there proved vain. Expansion of the war was swift. Germany declared war on France on 3 August and invaded Belgium. France was invaded on 4 August. German violation of Belgian neutrality provided the British with a convenient excuse to enter the war on the side of France and Russia the same evening. Austria-Hungary declared war on Russia on 6 August. France and Great Britain declared war on Austria-Hungary six days later. The underlying causes of these events have been intensively researched and debated. Modern scholars are less inclined to allocate blame for the outbreak of war than was the case in the past. Fears were more important than ambitions. Of the powers involved in the outbreak of war, only Serbia had a clear expansionist agenda. The French hoped to recover the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine lost to Germany as a result of their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, but this was regarded as an attempt at restitution rather than acquisition. Otherwise, defensive considerations were paramount. The states who embarked on the road to war wished to preserve what they had. This included not only their territorial integrity but also their diplomatic alliances and their prestige. The Austrians feared for the survival of their multi-racial Empire if they did not confront the threat of Serb nationalism and Pan-Slavism. The Germans feared the consequences to themselves of allowing Austria, their closest and only reliable ally, to be weakened and humiliated. The Russians feared the threat to their prestige and authority as protector of the Slavs if they allowed Austria to defeat and humiliate Serbia. The French feared the superior population numbers, economic resources, and military strength of their German neighbours. This it was imperative to defend. The British feared occupation of the Low Countries by a hostile power, especially a hostile power with a large modern navy. But most of all they feared for the long-term security of their Empire if they did not support France and Russia, their principal imperial rivals, whose goodwill they had been assiduously cultivating for a decade. All governments feared their peoples. Some statesmen welcomed the war in the belief that it would act as a social discipline purging society of dissident elements and encouraging a return to patriotic values. Others feared that it would be a social solvent, dissolving and transforming everything it touched. The process of expansion did not end in August. Other major belligerents took their time and waited upon events. Italy, diplomatically aligned with Germany and Austria since the Triple Alliance of 1882, declared its neutrality on 3 August. In the following months it was ardently courted by France and Britain. On 23 May the Italian government succumbed to Allied temptations and declared war on Austria-Hungary in pursuit of territorial aggrandizement in the Trentino. The road to Constantinople was opened to the Central Powers. It was a fatal miscalculation. The German response was swift and decisive. Romania was rapidly overwhelmed by two invading German armies and its rich supplies of wheat and oil did much to keep Germany in the war for another two years. Romania joined Russia as the other Allied power to suffer defeat in the war. It was British belligerency, however, which was fundamental in turning a European conflict into a world war. The British had world-wide interests and world-wide dilemmas. They also had world-wide friends. Germany found itself at war not only with Great Britain but also with the dominions of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa and with the greatest British imperial possession, India. Concern for the defence of India helped bring the British into conflict with the Ottoman Empire in November and resulted in a major war in the Middle East. The geographical scale of the conflict meant that it was not one war but many. On the Western Front in France and Belgium the French and their British allies, reinforced from onwards by the Americans, were locked in a savage battle of attrition against the German army. Here the war became characterized by increasingly

elaborate and sophisticated trench systems and field fortifications. The first phase of the war in the west lasted until November. The plan met with initial success. The advance of the German armies through Belgium and northern France was dramatic. The French, responding with an offensive in Lorraine, suffered an almost catastrophic national defeat. France was saved by the iron nerve of its commander-in-chief, General J. The German armies were forced to retreat and to entrench. Their last attempt at a breakthrough was stopped by French and British forces near the small Flemish market town of Ypres in November. By Christmas trench lines stretched from the Belgian coast to the Swiss frontier. Although the events of did not result in a German victory, they left the Germans in a very strong position. The German army held the strategic initiative. It was free to retreat to positions of tactical advantage and to reinforce them with all the skill and ingenuity of German military engineering. Enormous losses had been inflicted on France. These included a tenth of the officer corps. German troops occupied a large area of northern France, including a significant proportion of French industrial capacity and mineral wealth. These realities dominated the second phase of the war in the west. This lasted from November until March. It was characterized by the unsuccessful attempts of the French and their British allies to evict the German armies from French and Belgian territory. The French made three major assaults on the German line: These attacks were characterized by the intensity of the fighting and the absence of achievement. Little ground was gained. No positions of strategic significance were captured. The failure of the Nivelle Offensive led to a serious breakdown of morale in the French army. For much of the rest of it was incapable of major offensive action. The British fared little better. Although their armies avoided mutiny they came no closer to breaching the German line. During the battles of the Somme 1 July 1914, 11 November and the Third Battle of Ypres 31 July 1917 they inflicted great losses on the German army at great cost to themselves, but the German line held and no end to the war appeared in sight. The final phase of the war in the west lasted from 21 March until 11 November. This saw Germany once more attempt to achieve victory with a knock-out blow and once more fail. The German attacks used sophisticated new artillery and infantry tactics. They enjoyed spectacular success. The British 5th Army on the Somme suffered a major defeat. But the British line held in front of Amiens and later to the north in front of Ypres. No real strategic damage was done. By midsummer the German attacks had petered out. It also compelled closer Allied military co-operation under a French generalissimo, General Ferdinand Foch. The Allied counter-offensive began in July. For the rest of the war in the west the Germans were in retreat. Here the distances involved were very great. Artillery densities were correspondingly less. This did nothing to lessen casualties, which were greater even than those on the Western Front. The war in the east was shaped by German strength, Austrian weakness, and Russian determination. German military superiority was apparent from the start of the war. They also established the military legend of Field-Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff, who emerged as principal directors of the German war effort in the autumn of 1914. These defeats proved costly to Russia. They also proved costly to Austria. Austria had a disastrous war.

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