

5 The First World War: Total War

Global context

- dominant forces in European history reach zenith in nationalism, industrialization, militarism, science and imperialism in leading years up to 1914
- First World War produces social, political and economic change of enormous scope

5.1 Causes of the First World War

- causes are number of trends that develop through end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century leading to fateful events of July 1914 (July Crisis)
- causes do not work in isolation: interconnected; militarism is dependent on industrial capacity

Long-term causes

- cause: developments that make war more likely: fuel suspicion, fear and tension
- trend towards larger military, industrial capacity and empires limits likelihood that war is short, limited and regional with only couple of countries

Militarism

- overall societal emphasis on military; trend to massive armies and navies
- many believe that large armies can help avoiding war
- deterrence: policies to discourage attacks by making its consequences prohibitive
- deterrence may have worked if militaries remained static: problem is that they are growing
- state is worried the enemy is growing faster: attacks before difference is too big
- European powers have immense military forces at disposal in 1914
- France passes Three Year Law (1913) increasing conscription from two to three years
- Russian army has many men, but poor infrastructure massive distance between military depots and poor military organization so only fifth of able-bodied men can be called into service
- Russia knows that mobilization must be undertaken before any potential enemy can mobilize
- technology also plays role in different armies
- Anglo-German naval race as illustration of militarism: British Royal Navy launches HMS *Dreadnought* it makes every other battleship obsolete; any modern navy after 1906 has to spend money on *Dreadnoughts*: Germany's desire for navy to rival Royal Navy
- growing militaries engender suspicion and fear in rival states

Industrialization

- revolution of production spreads across Europe
- industrialization helps determining nature of the war to come
- problem that increase in industrial output is uneven: competitive economic tension
- resources are needed: empires strive for neo-mercantilism (emphasis on self-sufficiency): drive for colonies in second half of 19th century
- trade increases (total of German exports is equal to British)
- powers harness their huge industrial potential once war begins
- connection between economic and military rivalry is evident

The alliance system

- Europe in 1914 is split into two rival alliances, connected by treaties, agreements and alliances
- Bismarck wants to preserve German Empire from war: major part is Dual Alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary (1879); three years later Italy joins (Triple Alliance)
- Bismarck adds Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (1887); cumulative effect is that France is isolated (which is the intention) from rest of Europe
- Bismarck refuses to approve German loans to Russia (1887) and post-Bismarckian foreign office does not renew Reinsurance Treaty in 1890: Russia is isolated as well

- 1894: Franco-Russian Alliance: German nightmare of two-front war is now a possibility
- Britain emerges from isolation: alliance with Japan and then a rapprochement with France
- Entente Cordiale (1904): Britain and France agree to settle differences in Africa and some smaller disputes; Entente Cordiale contains no military commitments
- 1907: British settle differences with Russian Empire: Triple Entente
- Triple Entente less rigid as Triple Alliance: Britain refusing to agree to any binding military action
- each alliance system is complicated by other agreements, some are public some are secret
- white dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand are committed to war if Britain declares it: if Britain supports one Entente partner it results in a global war
- 1839: Britain guarantees Belgium's perpetual neutrality
- Russia has interests in Balkans which draws her into alliance with Serbia
- net result of interlocking, secretive and fairly rigid set of alliances increases tension and suspicion between the great powers

Imperialism/nationalism

- imperialism of a state will generally aggravate nationalist feelings
- imperial tensions are high in second half of 19th century: scramble for Africa
- Bismarck attempts to create rules for Africa, in order to prevent European war
- after Bismarck's retirement: new Kaiser Wilhelm II wants Germany on the world stage, develops a proactive and dangerous Weltpolitik
- Wilhelm feels that Germany is becoming isolated and victimized

The Balkans

- Serbia used to be split between Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empire; with decline of Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary strives for expansion; flux in region reawakens Russia's age-old Balkan aspirations: very unstable part of European political system
- Serbia has aspirations to create a pan-Slavic state (Slavic nationalism)
- Serbia creates Balkan League with Bulgaria, Montenegro, Greece (sultan's attention is divided as Italy attacks Tripoli in 1911); Bulgaria has lot of gains in First Balkan War, so Serbia attacks and defeats Bulgaria in Second Balkan War
- Russia supports Serbian claims but backs down when faced with Austria-Hungary
- Austria-Hungary is determined to stop pan-Slavic nationalism while Serbia is determined to increase it; Russian Empire is twice-humiliated and wants to reassert her authority

Short-term causes

The July Crisis

- 28. June 1914: Archduke Franz Ferdinand (heir to Habsburg throne) and his wife Sophie are shot while visiting Sarajevo
- not the death, but inability to manage the ensuing crisis sparks the war
- Austrian officials wish to use assassination as opportunity to crush South-Slav nationalism: means war with Serbia; after pledge of unlimited support from Germany (Blank Cheque by Kaiser Wilhelm II to Franz Joseph), Austrians formulate an ultimatum to Serbia
- Serbs capitulate to demands and Kaiser believes there is no reason for war; Austria-Hungary goes to war with them within hours of the response
- Russians see Austrian mobilization as threat to frontiers: Tsar orders partial mobilization against Austria on the night of 29 July
- Russian War Minister (Vladimir Sukhomlinov) understands Germany's obligations to Austria and persuades Tsar to order full mobilization
- Kaiser demands his cousin, the Tsar, to cease military action; he is not forthcoming and so Wilhelm orders full mobilization of German army which includes the Schlieffen Plan which is directed against France through neutral Belgium
- when Germany crosses into Belgium on 3. August 1914, Britain's treaty obligations bring her and her empire into the world war

War plans

- all major European powers have to move millions of men to positions on their frontiers, to be able to carry out war plans of varying degrees of complexity
- most famous plan is Schlieffen Plan: designed to deal with nightmare of two-front war; force would sweep through Luxembourg and Belgium in an arc that would conquer Paris within 41 days of mobilization; Russia would be held at bay with combination of Austro-Hungarian armies
- Schlieffen Plan as immediate use of war: dependent on Germany mobilizing first
- France's Plan XVII calls for massing of French armies on eastern frontier
- Schlieffen Plan is built on meticulous timetabling and planning, Plan XVII rests on ideas of "élan vitale" (preference of attack at expense of defense, deficiencies in sound planning and tactical considerations can be overcome with sufficient enthusiasm and vigor)

5.2 Combatants

Central Powers 1914

- Central Powers can muster 1.4 million troops in 1914
- German army has an advanced system of command and control, allowing a flexible and efficient movement of troops
- Central Powers enjoy geographic adjacency and internal lines of communication; allows to move troops between fronts and engage in combined military operations
- Germany can concentrate naval force (14 *Dreadnoughts*, 22 older battleships) in North Sea due to relatively few colonial defense responsibilities

Allied Powers 1914

- France, Russia, Britain have combined population of 265 million in 1914
- Russia and France have conscript army, while Britain has a volunteer force in 1914
- combined they have 2.8 million men (in Russia this is hindered by equipment of poor quality and insufficient quantities)
- communications, command, control are antiquated in Tsar's army
- French army is large and relatively well equipped, but is geographically separated from her Russian ally and they cannot concentrate nor coordinate their forces and operations
- Britain contributes little in the beginning
- US army in 1917 is small by European standards, but potential is enormous (conscription in 1917, Selective Service Act); in 19 months of First World War they send 4.3 million men
- US has a world-class navy (10 *Dreadnoughts*, 23 older battleships)
- British Royal Navy has a massive fleet at her disposal (20 *Dreadnoughts*, 39 older); however, she also has a lot larger empire to patrol and is not self-sufficient in food or industry: is dependent on safe shipping lanes (alliance with France patrols them in Mediterranean)

5.3 Operations on the Western Front

Opening moves

- Germany throws „iron dice“ by declaring war on Russia on 1. August 1914
- leaders feel that they are reacting rather than acting
- armies from all major powers begin to move toward each other: railways make initial part of this process more efficient than in previous wars; mass transport soon reaches its limits
- as they are on foot, it would take two weeks before they would engage in battles

Belgium

- according to plan, German army sweeps through Belgium en route to Paris

- Belgians defend themselves as best as they can; army is small but Belgium invested in heavy frontier fortifications which are imposing on any standards; are concentrated around city of Liège which commands the most accessible route through Belgium
- Germans take the city with bomb dropping Zeppelins and then massive siege howitzers to neutralize surroundings; 11 days later, Germans capture the forts and Belgium is open

Technology and war: aircraft

- airplane is not immediately recognized as having military potential; in the beginning the plane is bad; technology advances fast and aircraft is soon armed
- fighters: air-to-air combat, maneuverability and firepower as key factors
- bombers: fewer models are produced, improved in range and weight they can carry
- airships: German Zeppelins fly too high for most fighter planes, used for bombing British cities; as technology improves, they get obsolete as they can be shot by fighter planes

The Battle of the Frontiers

- while Schlieffen's Plan unfolds in the north, it is time to put Plan XVII into action
- Battle of Frontiers is series of offensives mounted by the French as part of Plan XVII and counteroffensives by German Sixth and Seventh armies
- French plan relying on doctrine of offensive and combination of boldness and *élan* seems to be working well; Germans fall back and French retake cities such as Mulhouse
- French advance is not uniform: opens gaps which the Germans exploit in their counteroffensive
- 24. August the French advance is halted and with it the hopes of Plan XVII

The Battle of the Marne (5-12 September 1914)

- Plan XVII is a massive failure for French army; defeat also indicates that Schlieffen Plan works
- as Germans push forward, Anglo-French forces pull towards Paris and factors emerge making it beneficial for defenders: by retreating the Anglo-French shorten their supply and communication lines while Germans are extending theirs, principle of "diminishing power of the offensive" (while advancing, casualties, need to garrison, physical exhaustion, lengthening supply lines require more men to maintain: the further they advance, the weaker they are), Belgian resistance allows military governor of Paris to prepare new army to defend capital
- French aviator spots German First Army wheeling in front of Paris (not around as Schlieffen intended) which exposes its right flank to French Sixth Army guarding Paris
- when Germany turns to meet the threat, it opens a 50km gap between the First and Second Armies; French drive into gap with Fifth Army: German advance is stopped
- German Chief of Staff (von Moltke) in Luxembourg has a delayed and imperfect picture

The Race to the Sea

- French and British armies attempt to outflank the Germans from north and west
- Germans attempt to do the same
- series of movements and counter movements with entrenching of the grounds causes the front to be extended to the English Channel; same happens southwards to Alps
- result is front stretching 700km from Alps to Channel, where both sides are digging furiously

Trench warfare

- stalemate develops on the Western Front; massively complex system of entrenchments
- tanks are the only hope to breach the strengthening defenses of the Germans
- no strategy is ready to overcome the topography of the Western Front; military strategy is always based on some movement; feints, outflanking, encirclement require a degree of mobility: trenches deny this on both sides
- getting around the flank is out of question as it stretches from the Alps to the Channel
- technology does not allow troops to be transported over front lines, amphibious landings are incredibly dangerous and logistically taxing

- breaking through seems to be only feasible alternative
- Second Battle of Ypres erupts five months after Germans abandon the first one; introduce a new weapon: poison gas (22. April 1915)
- success of the attack shocks defenders and attackers; opens a huge gap in Allied lines
- second gas attack is repeated two days later
- Germans call halt to offensive on 24. May; take important high ground to north and east, but city and a pocket around it is still in Allied hands, Allies suffer twice as many casualties

Technology and war: gas

- three types: tearing agents, asphyxiants, blistering agents
- tearing agents are used on eastern front, generally ineffective
- chlorine as first common gas used, causing irritation of eyes and corruption of lungs, death by asphyxiation; phosgene as deadlier variant of chlorine that is harder to detect
- mustard gas is most common blistering agent, causes severe burns on contact with skin especially in moist areas, death comes days or weeks after inhalation; heavier than air so it stays in low areas of shell holes for days, impeding an enemy's movement on battlefield

The Battle of Verdun (February-October 1916)

- German attempt to break stalemate on Western Front centers on French army around Verdun
- goal is to attack with such ferocity that they cannot surrender ("bleed the French white"): requires stockpiling of a massive amount of resources
- opening of battle is postponed due to weather, allows French to bolster their defenses
- finally erupts on 21. February and bombardment comes close to smashing the French
- German plan calls for cautious advance; intentions to kill as many French soldiers as possible rather than seize territory
- increasingly difficult for Germans to move their heavy guns forward across the torn landscape
- doctrine of active defense (fight for every bit of ground, only to counter-attack later) of French means that it is hard to keep track which side holds what ground
- key to French resistance is a single road supplying Verdun which Germans never manage to cut
- Germans continue to press French throughout spring; problem is that they are being drawn into a battle of attrition which they want to draw the French into

Technology and war: communications

- with small armies, runners or riders can carry the commands verbally
- as armies grow in size and complexity, sounds or visuals are used; smoke and noise produced in a Napoleonic or American Civil War make these impractical
- telephone holds some promise, but is dependent on stable wires
- in WWI, generals are far behind and fronts are long; timely information can take hours and the tactical situation is often different by the time new orders reach the soldiers
- telephone wires are generally cut within the first minute of a battle
- wireless sets are huge, unreliable and easily intercepted
- trench runners: armies employ soldiers only for conveying messages through the labyrinth system; is dangerous and requires good knowledge of continuously changing system
- flags: semaphore flags are used, good signalers can send up to 12 words a minute if visibility is uninterrupted which is a problem with trench warfare
- heliographs and lamps: communication based on concentrating sunlight (useless at night), paraffin and battery lamps solve that limitation but still need line of sight
- carrier pigeons: remarkably reliable, only 2% fail to return

The Battle of the Somme (July-November 1916)

- Allied generals on Western Front aspire to breach enemy's lines with combination of massive artillery followed by waves of infantry
- between 1915 and 1916 both sides amass enormous resources to undertake large operations
- British army is decided to attack jointly with French along Somme River

- plan seems straightforward: week-long artillery bombardment targeting barbed wire and artillery with such devastating effect that there would be nothing left to oppose the advance of infantry
- artillery assault on 1. July 1916 would be supplemented by the detonation of massive underground mines which are dug 18 meters under German lines
- is to be launched in August, but is moved up to take pressure of French at Verdun
- bombardment does not destroy the barbed wire, only throws it around and jumbles it further
- the creeping barrage advances too fast and offers little protection to advancing infantry
- most of attacking force is stopped in “no man’s land” with horrific losses

Technology and war: machine guns

- quintessential weapon of the industrial age, mass killing and mass production
- many attempt to develop an automatically repeating weapon in 19th century, but is an American (Hiram Maxim) who achieves it
- by outbreak of hostilities, all modern armies have a version of Maxim’s innovation
- jamming and overheating are constant problems
- smaller, more portable machine guns are developed which can be mounted on aircraft or carried forward in infantry assaults

Passchendaele (July-November 1917)

- after great bloodletting of 1916, Allies are near the point of exhaustion; Russian army is near collapse as is the Russian Provisional Government (after abdication of Tsar, Feb. 1917)
- strategy for British assault at Battle of Passchendaele (Third Battle of Ypres) does not evolve much from Battle of Somme but expectations are higher
- barrage different only in intensity: twice as long as before with twice as many guns firing four times as much on a narrower front
- new element of warfare (tank) seems to work well at first but German counter-attack and the onset of torrential rain makes any advance impossible
- British win couple of smaller engagements in September when battle resumes but it only causes another stalemate within a stalemate

1918

- dawn of 1918 on Western Front sees three exhausted armies across a moonscape
- both sides have reason for hope: Germans would soon see new troops from the non-existent Russian front while Allies are attending thousands of American soldiers arriving weekly
- Germans know that their economy and society cannot outlast the economic juggernaut (US)
- Germans can use their new forces and submarines to knock Britain out of the war and force the French to negotiate before they are crushed by the US mobilization
- German offensive strikes British on 21. March which is based on the tactics of speed: “storm troopers” move deep into rear areas, bypassing strong points and leaving them to the infantry; though they have many gains, they also lose many troops they cannot replace; their goals are not met, they do not “roll up” the British forces and they do not separate the French and British forces: Germans lose the race
- by August it is the Allies’ turn to end the war with a knockout blow: launch massive attack on 8. August that coordinates tank forces, artillery, infantry, air support on a huge scale
- in series of actions (“Hundred Days”), Allied forces progressively push Germans back toward the place they started four years earlier
- once German army, monarchy and government acknowledge this fact, Germans ask for armistice: hostilities cease by agreement at 11AM on 11. November 1918

5.4 The war beyond the Western Front

The Eastern Front

- Schlieffen Plan does the opposite to what its author envisions; entire plan is based on the assumption of slow Russian mobilization

- the Russian First Army invades East Prussia well before many expect
- Schlieffen envisions a quick victory in the west and a long drawn out war in the east
- Russians invade Germany with two armies that vastly outnumber the German defenders: bloodies defenders who see Generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg after a hasty reorganization
- Germans realize that the two Russian armies do not cooperate: allows Germans to transport troops by train and defeat each army in turn without facing their combined strength which is considerably greater than their own
- topography and space of east ensure that the war of movement lasts longer than in the west
- Austrian forces are not as successful and at one point Russians threaten to sweep through Hungary; comes to nothing and Eastern Front settles into stalemate, but not as trench bound
- Austrians are obliged to move troops to Italian Front once Italy enters the war

Gallipoli

- Allies search for alternative to stalemate in France: plan to attack Ottoman Empire takes shape
- plan is for squadron of older battleships to force their way up the narrow Dardanelle Straits; Turkish fixed guns are destroyed but mobile guns prove elusive
- on 25. April 1915 British forces land on southern tip of Gallipoli peninsula followed four days later by soldiers of Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC): two landings only manage to carve out small patches of beach and surrounding hills, but nothing more
- by end of 1915, Allied leadership acknowledges the fiasco and withdraws all forces
- war drags on in the east as in the west: brings economic and social pressures that are too great for Russian Empire which descends into revolution in 1917

The War at Sea

- though Britain and Germany have the naval arms race as a long-term cause of the war, the fleets only clash once during the war
- two critical problems facing the German High Seas Fleet: despite the pre-war shipbuilding they fall short of numerical advantage of the Royal Navy and they have a geographical disadvantage
- goal of German fleet is to wage economic warfare on the enemy (bombard ports) and sink merchant ships in shipping lanes of the open ocean; to get there the Germans have to pass through English Channel or North Sea between Norway and Scotland, both of which are bottlenecks controlled by the Royal Navy
- 1914/15: Germany adopts hit and run approach: fleet emerges in less than full force, engage the Royal Navy advance force and retire before the Grand Fleet can arrive
- May 1916: Royal Navy decrypts German ciphers giving them advanced notice; clash is the biggest naval battle in history with both sides claiming victory
- Germany is unwilling to risk rest of fleet, return to bases and do not emerge for rest of war

Technology and warfare: submarines

- German Imperial Navy begins war with 30 U-boats which are deployed against the Royal Navy and British merchant fleet in the waters between North America and Britain
- early models are equipped with one torpedo tube, later models can discharge multiple self-propelled torpedoes
- U-boat brings new ethical dilemmas to naval warfare: unable to take on survivors of attacks and lose all advantage when surfacing to warn them as maritime law demands
- unrestricted submarine warfare attacks any ship deemed to be headed to an enemy port and solves problem of having accurately identify targets
- countermeasures as convoys, depth charges and rudimentary sonar turn tide in favor of Allies

The Home Front

- process of feeding, clothing and arming vast armies is a massive undertaking
- total war: nation mobilizes all resources in the war effort, including industrial resources, financial resources, educational resources, agricultural resources, cultural resources, human resources
- logic of total war is, that these resources will become military targets
- government agencies are created to manage and coordinate the Home Front

- Germany is able to maintain fairly high level of steel and coal production and feed its army, it is at the expense of consumer goods and food for civilians
- Britain and France need to import vast amounts of food and munitions from the US, Australia, Canada and other countries not physically affected by the war
- resources have to be reallocated and consumer goods and even foods have to be rationed
- places of men that have to leave, are filled by women taking “non-traditional” jobs
- Allies and Central Powers take economic warfare to a new level
- naval blockade is the cornerstone of Britain’s national defense
- international law permits blockading contraband (war materials) only which is meaningless once war starts: Britain uses its fleet to turn back all ships bound for Germany: blockade takes its toll on the German army and population; in last two years of war an estimated 800’000 german civilians die of undernourishment and related disorders
- Germans use new military technology to conduct economic warfare, attempting to cut the vital flow of supplies to Britain with the submarine fleet

5.5 Effects of the First World War

Political

- before leaders, diplomats, economists, functionaries gather in Paris to create peace settlement, the war already imposes a number of significant political changes on Europe
- new Bolshevik state is beginning to rule in Russia
- Germany becomes a republic and is rocked by revolution
- Dual Monarchy of Austria collapses and is split

Economic

- WWI is economically disastrous for all countries apart from the US
- each nation incurs staggering amounts of debt
- coupled with skyrocketing demand, expansion of money supply creates disastrous inflation
- demobilization brings high unemployment
- requirement and schedule of reparation payments imposed on Germany is unrealistic

Social

- women flood into the workplace like never before
- with independent income comes also a degree of social independence
- arts is affected by the war; horrors of trenches spawn movements such as Dada and Surrealism
- entry of United States brings Jazz music to Europe