

THE WESTERN FRONT

In 1914, Central Europe had divided into a system of alliances: Germany with Austria-Hungary and France with Russia. Facing conflict with Russia in the east, and fearing a war on two fronts, the German Army invaded Belgium and France in August, in accordance with the 'Schlieffen Plan', almost reaching Paris.

Britain had a loose arrangement to assist France in such a situation, and deployed the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

Under severe pressure, the Allies retreated to the River Marne, then

counter-attacked and drove the German Army back to the River Aisne. Here both sides dug trenches facing each other (Photograph 1¹). Stretching 440 miles from the Swiss border to the North Sea, the line of trenches, dug-outs and barbed-wire fences moved very little between 1914-1918, despite attempts on both sides to break through (see map²). The British Army was reinforced by troops from countries throughout the British Empire, notably Canada.



In March 1915, the British attacked Neuve Chapelle but failed to follow up their initial success. The Germans then sought to capture Ypres in Belgium using poison gas for the first time. They



¹ © IWM (Q 1). Troops of the Royal Irish Rifles resting in a communication trench during the opening hours of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916.

² Map courtesy of www.greatwar.co.uk.

were unsuccessful and there were some 95,000 casualties. In September 1915, the Allies launched fresh assaults: the British in the area of Loos. These attacks also came to a halt.



In 1916, the Germans concentrated on attacking the French at Verdun, but this failed, partly due to the British and French offensive on the Somme in July 1916. Here, some 750,000 men attacked the German defences over an 18-mile front, preceded by a 7-day bombardment. Whilst there was some success, the German defences survived the preliminary barrage and there was appalling attrition amongst the attacking troops: some 420,000 British and 195,000 French casualties. The offensive

had come to an end by November. Nevertheless, the battle convinced the Germans that they did not wish to face a similar assault, and they pulled back to the heavily-defended 'Hindenburg Line' in March 1917.

In July 1917, the British attacked the German lines successfully at Arras and Vimy but took heavy casualties. They also attacked the German trenches opposite Ypres but, in terrible weather, this ground to a standstill and some 325,000 British soldiers were lost. In November, the British launched an offensive at Cambrai using massed tanks for the first time, but most territory gained was retaken by a German counter-attack (Photograph 2³).

After the 1917 Russian revolution, the war in the east ended and Germany transferred a million troops to the Western Front. With these reinforcements, and in order to win the war before the arrival of substantial numbers of American forces, the Germans launched a massive Spring Offensive in March 1918. After initial success, it came to a halt due to some gallant defensive operations and the Germans exceeding their supply lines.



In August, the Allies counter-attacked over a wide front, using combinations of infantry, artillery, tanks, communications and aircraft (Photograph 3⁴) in the first open warfare since 1914. They broke the Hindenburg Line, driving the German forces back and ending the war.

Britain and its Empire lost almost a million men during World War One. Most of them died on the Western Front.



³ © IWM (Q 6299). Tank F4 ascending a slope at the Tank Driving School during the special training for the Battle of Cambrai at Wailly, 21 October 1917.

⁴ National Library of Scotland N.400 - One of our planes over the German lines taking observations.

World War 1

Gallipoli Campaign

Salonika Campaign

Mesopotamia Campaign

Introduction

Notes

Western Downland Contribution

Roll of Honour Names