On 4 August 1914, after weeks of tension, hesitation and uncertainty, Europe plunged into war. The conflict was welcomed on all sides as an opportunity for glory, patriotism and adventure. Soldiers rushed to be in ‘the show’ in the firm belief that it would be over by Christmas. After four years when the guns fell silent and over 9.5 million people lay dead, this enthusiasm had largely been replaced by disillusionment, and a conviction that there must be no more wars. The League of Nations was created to ensure that discussion and ‘right’ replaced warfare and ‘might’. Yet the seeds for the next war had already been sown.
## Timeline

### 1914

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>August</strong></td>
<td>Schlieffen Plan results in the German invasion of Belgium and war begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>September</strong></td>
<td>Battle of the Marne—the Schlieffen Plan fails, leading to trench warfare and stalemate. Falkenhayn replaces Moltke as German commander.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oct–Nov</strong></td>
<td>First battle of Ypres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December</strong></td>
<td>Unofficial Christmas truce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>August</strong></td>
<td>Recruits flock to enlist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home front</strong></td>
<td>Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) introduced in Britain to impose wartime restrictions. Germans declare the Burgfrieden or political truce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>August</strong></td>
<td>Royal Navy blockade of Germany begins.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1915

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>March</strong></td>
<td>Battle of Neuve Chapelle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>April–May</strong></td>
<td>Second battle of Ypres—poison gas is introduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December</strong></td>
<td>Sir Douglas Haig replaces Sir John French as British commander-in-chief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>January</strong></td>
<td>First Zeppelin raid on Britain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>June</strong></td>
<td>Ministry of munitions set up by Lloyd George in Britain to increase production of munitions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December</strong></td>
<td>Peace demonstration in Berlin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>February</strong></td>
<td>German U-boat campaign begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May</strong></td>
<td>German U-boat sinks the <em>Lusitania</em> with the loss of 1198 lives, including 128 Americans.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1916

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Feb–Dec</strong></td>
<td>Battle of Verdun.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>July–Nov</strong></td>
<td>Battle of the Somme. Tanks are used for the first time in September.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>August</strong></td>
<td>Hindenburg replaces Falkenhayn as German commander-in-chief, with Ludendorff as his quartermaster-general. Nivelle replaces Joffre as French commander-in-chief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May</strong></td>
<td>Britain introduces conscription.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>December</strong></td>
<td>Lloyd George becomes British prime minister, replacing Asquith.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other developments</strong></td>
<td>The Auxiliary Services Law in Germany states that every male aged 17–60 can be conscripted into the workforce. Ministry of food is set up in Britain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May–June</strong></td>
<td>Battle of Jutland, the only major encounter between the British and German fleets, ends indecisively.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 1917

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>March</strong></td>
<td>Germans withdraw to the Hindenburg Line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>July–Dec</strong></td>
<td>Third battle of Ypres, usually known as Passchendaele.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>April</strong></td>
<td>Miners go on strike in the Ruhr coalfields objecting to a cut in the bread ration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>July</strong></td>
<td>Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg resigns in Germany.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other developments</strong></td>
<td>Zimmermann telegram offers German support to Mexico if an alliance against the United States is formed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>February</strong></td>
<td>Germans begin unrestricted U-boat warfare.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>April</strong></td>
<td>The US enters the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>November</strong></td>
<td>Bolshevik revolution ends Russia’s participation in the war.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Key Features of Modern History

## 1918

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Ludendorff offensive begins as an attempt by the Germans to break through the Allied lines to end the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>General Foch becomes Allied commander-in-chief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July–Aug</td>
<td>Second battle of the Marne marks the farthest point of the German advance and the tide turns in the battle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Armistice—the war ends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Home front

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>A German army representative tells the Reichstag that victory is no longer possible. Naval mutiny at Kiel begins the German revolution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Kaiser abdicates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Lloyd George wins British election with slogans such as ‘Hang the Kaiser’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other developments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, Germany’s most famous air ace, is killed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 1919

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

## Timeline exercise

Study the timeline, then match a clue from List A with an answer from List B.

### List A

- One of the specialist ministries set up in Britain to boost shell production
- A new weapon used in 1915
- A famous German air ace who was killed
- A town that was the scene of three battles
- The name of an offensive, and an army commander
- The British commander-in-chief in 1914
- He became British prime minister during the war
- A river in France where two battles were fought
- A year when one country left the war and another joined
- A line of fortifications to which the Germans withdrew
- The French commander-in-chief in 1914
- A girl’s name that stood for government restrictions on the home front.
- The loss of this ship hardened American opinion against the Germans
- The third man to be in charge of British forces during the war
- Venue for the peace conference that ended the war
- When the Kaiser abdicated
- New weapon used on the Somme
- When Germany began unrestricted U-boat warfare
- The only major naval battle of the war
- He succeeded Moltke as German commander-in-chief

### List B

- French
- gas
- Manfred von Richthofen
- Joffre
- 1917
- Marne
- November 1918
- Ludendorff
- Ypres
- tanks
- February 1917
- Paris
- munitions
- Hindenburg Line
- Falkenhayn
- Foch
- DORA
- Jutland
- Lloyd George
- Lusitania
WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT

THE REASONS FOR STEAMATE

The Schlieffen Plan 1905

When Count Alfred von Schlieffen took over the position as Germany’s leading soldier in 1891, he devised a plan that became Germany’s only war strategy, which was designed to avoid the problem of simultaneously fighting a war against France and Russia on two fronts. The plan was based on the following assumptions:

- Although Russia had a large army, Russian mobilisation would be slow, giving Germany the opportunity to defeat France in a brief six-week campaign, before dealing with the Russian threat.
- German armies would stand on the defensive in East Prussia and hold back any attempted Russian advance.
- The French war plan—Plan 17—called for a major offensive on the border of Alsace–Lorraine. German armies would also fight defensively against the expected French attack. The Germans would even be prepared to retreat, luring the French deeper into the provinces.
- The key to such a plan was speed in bringing massive force to bear at a critical point at the right time. Neutral Belgium was the critical point. Railways would be used to transport German troops to their point of attack for a rapid advance across the flat country of Belgium and southern Holland. The main force of sixty-two divisions would cross the unfortified Franco-Belgian frontier, capture Paris then attack the main French armies from the rear. This would place great demands on the First Army, which would be at the northern end of this ‘right hook’. If France was to be defeated in six weeks, as the plan specified, they would have to cover, mostly on foot, a distance of over 600 kilometres, fighting at least some of the way, with the prospect of a major battle at the end of their journey.
- With its armies defeated and its capital city captured, France would have to surrender. German troops would then be transferred to the Eastern Front.

Figure 8.1 Scenes like this in Munich, Germany, were common throughout the cities of Europe, where the war was greeted with enthusiasm. The anonymous figure in the crowd (circled) was to serve on the Western Front, be decorated for bravery, blinded temporarily by poison gas and, later, conquer half of Europe. It is Adolf Hitler.
Modifications to the plan 1911

When Schlieffen retired in 1906 he was replaced by Helmuth von Moltke. Moltke was more cautious than Schlieffen, but the ideas behind Schlieffen’s plan had become so much a part of German military thinking that the plan could not be abandoned. All Moltke could do was modify it. These modifications have been the subject of debate by soldiers and military historians ever since. Did they weaken the plan and rob Germany of a real chance of victory? Or was the plan basically flawed from the start?

Schlieffen argued that luring the French into Germany through Alsace–Lorraine would ensure their destruction at the hands of the German right wing sweeping through Holland and Belgium. Moltke shrank from this bold strategy, and strengthened the Lorraine armies at the expense of the right hook through Belgium, instructing them to hold the initial French onslaught and then be ready to go on the offensive. Wishing to preserve free communications along the Rhine, he abandoned the sweep through neutral Holland.
**DOCUMENT STUDY: THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN**

**Source 8.1**

[Moltke said] ‘It will be very important to have in Holland a country whose neutrality allows us to have imports and supplies ... however awkward it may be, the advance through Belgium must therefore take place without the violation of Dutch territory’ ... [thus] the threat of a British blockade had led Moltke to make a substantial modification in the Schlieffen Plan and one which probably doomed the German campaign in the west before it was ever launched. From the very start of the offensive in August 1914 the German first and second armies were faced with chronic supply problems, which they would not have encountered if the railways and roads of southern Holland had been at their disposal.


**Source 8.2**

Subsequently German military critics held that Moltke failed to capture Paris in 1914 because he had departed from the plan of the ‘masterly strategic genius’. This view was challenged by Dr Gerhard Ritter, who published in 1956, for the first time, the text of the full plan with its author’s emendations and Moltke’s comments. It is clear that there was not such a difference between the strategy of Schlieffen and Moltke as earlier historians had maintained. It may however be doubted whether the Schlieffen Plan deserves its high reputation, for its author had underestimated the strength of the Russians and the near panic that their advance would cause in Berlin, the power of Belgian resistance, the effectiveness of the British Expeditionary Force, and the importance of the French railway system in bringing up reserves.


**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Why did Moltke alter the original plan with regard to Holland?
2. According to Turner, what problem did this alteration cause?
3. How do Turner and Palmer differ in their view of the effectiveness of Schlieffen’s original plan?
The German army invaded Belgium on 4 August. Though its advance was unstoppable, the attempt to maintain the timetable imposed by the Schlieffen Plan met with difficulties. Belgian resistance delayed the advance. Desperate to avoid any delay, the German high command ordered severe reprisals against any Belgian community that hampered their progress. In retaliation for what they claimed was the work of civilian snipers in Louvain, the Germans went on a rampage through the ancient city. Whole streets were set on fire, the ancient library was destroyed, and women and children were shot, along with priests and male civilians.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why was the Schlieffen Plan devised?
2. State two advantages of attacking France via Belgium.
3. What was the French war plan called? What strategy did it involve?
4. When did Moltke replace Schlieffen as German chief-of-staff?
5. What changes did Moltke make to the Schlieffen Plan?
6. Which plan would you criticise more: Schlieffen’s original one or Moltke’s modifications of it?

THE WAR OF MOVEMENT

The German army invaded Belgium on 4 August. Though its advance was unstoppable, the attempt to maintain the timetable imposed by the Schlieffen Plan met with difficulties. Belgian resistance delayed the advance. Desperate to avoid any delay, the German high command ordered severe reprisals against any Belgian community that hampered their progress. In retaliation for what they claimed was the work of civilian snipers in Louvain, the Germans went on a rampage through the ancient city. Whole streets were set on fire, the ancient library was destroyed, and women and children were shot, along with priests and male civilians.

DOCUMENT STUDY: PROPAGANDA AND FACT IN THE INVASION OF BELGIUM

**Figure 8.4**  ‘Bravo Belgium’—a cartoon from *Punch*, 12 August 1914

**Figure 8.5**  ‘The triumph of culture’—a cartoon from *Punch*, 26 August 1914
**Source 8.3**

‘Frightfulness’ was the Germans’ own word ... If the Germans were to advance and advance quickly, the civil population of the occupied countries must be smartly brought to heel and harsh measures against *saboteurs* ... were calculated to spread terror and implant in the civil population ... a wary respect for German discipline ... The rules were laid down efficiently and categorically. As soon as a district was occupied, hostages would be taken into custody as a matter of course. If a single German was molested or injured the hostages would be shot. If a German column was attacked on a road between two villages, reprisals would be taken on the nearest.


**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. Analyse carefully the portrayal of the two countries in Figure 8.4 on page 120. How has the artist attempted to influence your feelings about each character?

2. What famous biblical story is brought to mind by Figure 8.4? What does the artist want you to feel about the eventual outcome of this encounter?

3. How has the portrayal of Germany changed in Figure 8.5? How are the feelings of the reader towards Germany expected to change, compared with Figure 8.4?

4. How does Source 8.3 help to explain the change of mood reflected by the two cartoons?

Meanwhile, true to their pre-war doctrine, French troops launched an all-out assault against the well-defended German positions in Lorraine and in the Ardennes. On 20 August the German forces defending the frontier cut the attacking French troops to ribbons with artillery and machine-gun fire. The French lost over 200,000 men in twelve days. They abandoned ‘Plan 17’ and regrouped to defend Paris from the advancing Germans.

The German army, its troops underfed and exhausted and already delayed, on nearing Paris suffered a further blow when it lost 100,000 men, who were transferred to the Eastern Front because the Russians had mobilised quicker than expected and had invaded Germany.

General von Kluck commanded the German First Army on the western edge of the advance. On 5 September, fearful that a gap was opening up between his army and that of General von Bulow to the east, von Kluck abandoned the move to surround Paris and moved the line of march east of the city to close the gap, in the mistaken belief that in doing so he was driving the French armies away from their capital. Kluck’s intelligence information was exceptionally poor. He had, in fact, left the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the French Sixth Army to his west, exposing his flank to the Allies. The French commander, Joffre, had become aware of Kluck’s move by aerial observation and took advantage. The battle that followed on the Marne was a desperate Allied victory.

The Germans had come so close to Paris they could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance—but they got no further.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

The British army conscripted 120,000 horses in the first two weeks of the war. Zealous authorities took farm horses, to the annoyance of many farmers wanting to get the harvest in, and the powerful horses that pulled trams. In Morecambe, none were left to pull the trams!

**Figure 8.6** ‘Taxi!’ When 6000 fresh troops arrived in Paris, the police, on the orders of General Gallieni, the commander of the city, roamed the streets and bundled passengers out of every taxi they could find. Each taxi made two journeys to the front and in this way the new troops were taken into action.
The battle of the Marne was a turning point. The Schlieffen Plan had failed and Germany was caught in a two-front war. The German army retreated to the River Aisne and began to dig in. The Allied armies, equally exhausted, did not have the strength to push the Germans out of France. Moltke was replaced by Falkenhayn, who tried to outflank (get round the end of) the Allied lines. This led to the ‘race to the sea’ as each side extended their trench systems and fortified them with barbed wire, machine-guns and artillery defences. At the battle of Ypres in Belgium from 16 to 22 November the deadlock was firmly established. By the end of the year a line of trenches stretched from the sea to the Swiss Alps, movement had ended and the war was at stalemate.

An important factor to consider in accounting for the stalemate which endured on the Western Front for the next three years was the new type of war which had begun to unfold. This was not to be a war of dash, excitement and adventure but an ‘industrial’ war, where the products of modern armaments factories were set against flesh and bone. In this uneven contest, the power of defence was much greater than the power of offence. It was much easier to defend a trench line than to capture one. In 1914 the British infantryman had his rifle and bayonet when he attacked the enemy trenches (the hand grenade or Mills bomb was not developed until 1915). He had little chance of overcoming the German defences of barbed wire, machine-guns and artillery shells.

Over the course of the war the ordinary soldier was to change, according to historian J. M. Bourne, from looking like a gamekeeper to looking like an industrial worker.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The soldier in 1914</th>
<th>The soldier in 1918</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soft cap</td>
<td>Safety helmet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puttees and pack</td>
<td>Gas respirator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rifle and bayonet</td>
<td>Lewis gun, grenades, rifle grenade, flame-thrower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walked into battle</td>
<td>Trucked into battle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported by shrapnel-firing field guns</td>
<td>Supported by high-explosive artillery barrage, tanks, planes, smoke and gas shells and armoured cars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the close of 1914 the soldiers knew nothing of these later refinements of the science of warfare. The war had not ended by Christmas, as both sides had promised, and soldiers now settled down to the new experiences of trench warfare.

THE NATURE OF TRENCH WARFARE AND LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

There were usually at least three lines of trenches, called the front line, support, and reserve, which were linked to the rear by communications trenches to enable soldiers and supplies to move to and from the front line, out of sight of the enemy. The front-line trenches of either side were separated by ‘no man’s land’, which could be up to a kilometre wide, though most often the distance was around 200 metres.

The first two years of the war were the time of greatest amateurism and blundering on the British side. At this time, most of the serious fighting was left to the French. The BEF was heavily engaged in major battle for little more than thirty days between Christmas 1914 and 30 June 1916.

Fighting was not continuous along the front line—timing and location could give soldiers vastly different experiences of war. When the British took over the Somme region in 1915 it was a quiet area. Two-thirds of the line might have been quiet on any given day. Anywhere near Ypres was always bad, yet if a man served near Festubert, near Arras, after 1915 the war passed him by.

An Allied soldier’s experience of the war could be directly influenced by whom they were fighting. Prussians were seen as very aggressive, while the Saxons were known to paint their trenches with signs advertising their peaceful nature. Clearly a report, letter or diary entry from a soldier fighting a Prussian unit would be different from one facing the Saxons.

People were told that the war would be over by Christmas. Write a report to explain why it wasn’t. Consider the ways the report could be written: a formal report to parliament, a letter from a soldier, or a newspaper article. Adjust your style of writing according to the form you choose.
Figure 8.9 An aerial photograph of the trench system. The main trench area is German. The British trenches are on the right. The white colouration around the trenches is due to the chalk soil that was thrown up during the digging. (Imperial War Museum Negative Number Q45786)

Figure 8.10 The ‘perfect trench’ (Imperial War Museum Negative Number Q15857)

Figure 8.11 A trench in Guedecourt, December 1916 (Imperial War Museum Negative Number E(AUS)575)

DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Refer to Figure 8.9 and suggest why the trenches do not run in straight lines, but have zigzag patterns.

2. What are the differences between the ‘perfect’ trench and the ‘real’ trench? How would this affect trench life for the soldier?

3. Comment on how useful and reliable these photographs would be to a historian studying trench conditions on the Western Front.
How long a man spent in the trenches varied widely over the course of the war, depending, for example, on whether his division was considered adept at simply holding the line or at launching an assault on the enemy’s positions. The British high command had an unofficial ‘pecking order’ of divisions, in which the reputedly trustworthy formations would be given the hardest jobs, more frequently. Hence the 18th division saw action thirty-two times; the 35th division only eleven times. The reward for fighting well was to be asked to do it all again, thus increasing the chances of becoming a casualty!

From his diaries for 1916, author and soldier Charles Carrington calculated that he had been in the front line for sixty-five days, and thirty-five in support, making a total of a hundred days under fire, with a further 120 days in reserve, where he would have remained in danger from shelling. During the year, Carrington was in action four times, venturing six times into no-man’s land on patrols and working parties. It would therefore be wrong to think that soldiers rarely left the front line or, alternatively, that it was action all the time. Going over the top was, in fact, a rare experience. Life in the line was generally a time of unrelieved boredom punctuated by occasional heart-stopping moments of action. Many veterans claimed to be 80 per cent bored stiff, 19 per cent frozen stiff, and 1 per cent scared stiff.

Unlike their German counterparts who tended to stay put, British soldiers were switched with their units from front to front with alarming regularity. Few soldiers saw the same trenches on more than two or three occasions, Carrington estimating that he moved his equipment eighty times during 1916, sixty-six times on a route march and another fourteen times by rail.

From 1915 until 1918 warfare on the Western Front took on the characteristics of what is commonly called a ‘war of attrition’, in which each side mobilises all its resources to gradually wear down the ability and will of the enemy to keep fighting. This was a kind of war that Germany could not win. Even before the entry of the United States in 1917, the Allies shared an advantage in the vital resources of war.

**THE CHALLENGE OF TRENCH WARFARE**

From 1915 the Germans and the Allies adopted significantly different approaches to trench warfare. The Germans sensed that they had to make the best of their situation of facing a long, two-front war. Their aim was, essentially, to bide their time and hang on. With the exception of attacks on the French stronghold of Verdun in 1916 and the 1918 Ludendorff offensive, they were more defensive than the Allies.

For the French generals the situation was very different. The hated Germans were on the sacred soil of France; French people and French towns were behind the German lines. The expectation was that the armies of France would drive the invader from their land, which meant that the French generals had to take the offensive against entrenched opposition.

The British, as France’s ally, were obliged to support this offensive strategy. The BEF, however, had a problem of its own. The British front line in Belgium and northern France was only 80 kilometres from the Channel ports. A major German breakthrough could see them take these vital ports and isolate the British army from contact with home. Therefore, the British commanders Sir John French, and from 1915 Sir Douglas Haig, felt an offensive approach was needed to push the front farther from these ports to give the BEF more ‘breathing room’.

**THE TRENCHES**

It is generally acknowledged that the German trenches and their location were superior. After the Marne the Germans withdrew to the best available defensive positions. Their trench lines took every advantage of the available terrain—ridges, hills and small villages could be turned into fortified strong points. By contrast, the French felt obliged to reoccupy every possible bit of native soil. Therefore their trenches were not generally as well positioned; they dug them as close to the German lines as they could.
Figure 8.13 illustrates the main features of a trench. Troops would use the firestep when repelling attacks, when on alert, called stand-to, or when on sentry duty. The parapet and parados consisted of sandbags (actually filled with earth). The parados was designed to be higher than the parapet and was meant to prevent troops being silhouetted against the skyline at dawn or dusk, or when going over the top in attack. The parados also protected front-line troops from being shot by their own over-eager comrades in support trenches behind them. The sides of trenches were reinforced using sandbags, timber and corrugated iron. Reinforced shelters, called dugouts, were also part of the trench system. The Germans on the Somme made extensive use of a system of dugouts, cut into the firm chalk of the region, to improve both the strength and comfort of their trenches. Soldiers dug funk holes—little man-sized shelters—into the trench walls that provided protection from the weather, especially when a waterproof groundsheet was hung across as a curtain.

**Figure 8.13** A cross-section of a trench on the Western Front

**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What advantages in siting their trenches did the Germans have?
2. What features of the trench shown in Figure 8.12 make this a good example of trench building?
3. What comments would a historian make about how reliable and useful the photograph is as an indication of trench conditions?
No trench ran in a continuously straight line. The British and Germans used a system of right-angled bays, while the French used a zigzag pattern. The angles and changes of direction were designed to lessen the effect of a shell burst or grenade, and allowed parts of the trench to still be defended even if the enemy occupied another section.

British generals were obsessed with getting as close to the enemy as possible and with keeping up an offensive type of trench warfare, even when they were not preparing a major attack. This involved two types of action. The first was continued threat from snipers, who were soldiers trained to try to pick off any enemy careless enough to show himself; and trench raids, which were small attacks across no man’s land at night to disrupt the enemy and perhaps capture prisoners and gain information. The second action concerned salients: points where the German line pressed in on the British, forming an indentation in the line. The British often launched local offensives to straighten the line and eliminate the salient.

Field-Marshal Hindenburg’s decision to give up more ground in March 1917 and withdraw to well-established and better defensive lines, known as the Hindenburg Line, was the clearest example of the contrasting German view of trench warfare.

LIFE IN THE TRENCHES

The famous war poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote that anyone who had been in the trenches would be everlastingly different from those who had not shared the experience. We imagine battles, artillery and the rattle of machine-gun fire, but one of the most lasting memories many veterans of the trenches had was the smell. Robert Graves, a gifted scholar who was a captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, vividly described trench life in his classic memoir Goodbye to All That. He wrote about the distinctive odour produced by the combination of the decaying flesh of humans and horses, the latrines, rotting sandbags, stagnant mud, fumes from explosives, and body odour. ‘The trenches stank with a gas–blood–lydolite–latrine smell’. Accounts of the day-to-day details of life in the trenches are regularly marked by references to lice, rats, latrines, sickness, food and the routine.

**Lice** These small insects made their homes in the seams of clothing and their eggs were hatched by body heat. Bites left red marks on the skin and could also cause a disease called trench fever. On the front line, soldiers might not change their clothes for up to a week and it was impossible to live lice-free.

**Rats** These rodents thrived on the plentiful supplies of decomposing flesh available on the battlefields, and numbered in the millions. There was, in fact, so much food available to them that the rodents became selective and veterans record that rats preferred to eat the livers, eyes and tongues of the dead.

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**DID YOU KNOW?**

English speaking troops had difficulty coping with foreign names. Hence, Moquet farm, a scene of fierce Australian fighting on the Somme, became ‘Moo-cow farm’; ‘Funky villas’ became the name of the village of Fonquevilliers; and Ypres became ‘Wipers’.
Latrines These were either holes dug 15 metres deep or were buckets. Latrines were normally located at the end of specially dug small trenches or saps behind the front line. Some officers, however, concerned that their men were taking too long, had latrines dug between the front line and the wire. The exposed position was meant to encourage a speedy return to duties. Latrine saps were also popular targets with enemy snipers, who would wait patiently for a soldier to ‘answer the call’. Little wonder then that soldiers would often defecate on a shovel in the bottom of the front-line trench, then hurl the contents out into no man’s land.

Sickness The harsh conditions led to hospitalisation for illnesses such as pneumonia, dysentery, frostbite and kidney disease. Trench foot was an affliction caused by being constantly immersed in water, having poor circulation, and being unable to change into dry
footwear. Often gangrene set in, leading to the loss of toes or the whole foot. Non-battle casualties, caused by sickness or accidental injury, stood at 3,528,468 in the BEF—roughly a million more than battle casualties.

**Food** Typical front-line rations were tinned beef, biscuits and tins of jam. Other foods included condensed milk and sometimes boiled eggs or potatoes. At times, parties from the rear would bring up hot soup or stew. Rum was issued at stand-down at dawn. There was enough food, but it always had an unvaried sameness about it.

**Figure 8.16** British troops try to get some sleep in cramped conditions in their dug-out, 1916.

**DOCUMENT STUDY: CONDITIONS IN THE TRENCHES**

**Source 8.4**

During the time we remained in ‘Death Valley’ we were considerably troubled by hundreds of bluebottles [large blowflies]; they were full bodied ones too, and appeared quite bloated. I found out the reason later for their number and their rotundity, and the discovery filled me with a feeling of revulsion. I went up on to a ridge ... and at one spot as I put my foot down there was a loud buzzing, and dozens of bluebottles flew up. There to my astonishment I saw a face—the face of a dead German. The whole ridge was covered with German and French dead, upon which swarms of bluebottles had settled. These same insects no doubt were going to follow their fellows down into the valley and were going to settle on our food.


**Source 8.5**

One morning when Davidson and I got up to make breakfast, we found everything frozen. The lids were tight on the dixies, and our bread was as hard as rock. A pot of syrup was as solid as toffee ... as the days went on the cold got more intense. On one occasion I took a dixie of boiled water off the fire and stood it six feet away from the blaze, and within half an hour the water was frozen hard. The tea in our mugs became a solid mass; and we began to realise the hardships of a winter campaign!


**DOCUMENT STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What health problems were caused by the presence of so many unburied dead on the battlefields?
2. Refer to Source 8.5 and the text and explain the difficulties encountered during trench life in winter.
Routine  Soldiers’ lives were dominated by routine. When in the front line, the day for British soldiers was broken up as follows:

- **Stand-to**—half an hour before dawn the firestep was manned because this was regarded as the most likely time for an attack
- **Breakfast**—after stand-to came stand-down and a quiet time for breakfast
- **Shave and wash time, and housekeeping**—this time was early in the morning and in some sectors an informal truce existed
- **Jobs**—one-third of the soldiers did sentry duty, one-third went back for rations, and one-third had ‘rest’, which usually involved some manner of work, filling, digging, repairing, etc., around the trench
- **Stand-to**—at dusk
- **Dinner**—ration parties arrived after dusk, hopefully with some hot food from the rear
- **Night**—this was the most active time: above-ground repairs, night patrols to check enemy positions, and trench raids to capture information or enemies, or just causing a nuisance.

**REVIEW TASK**

Write a letter from the front or a series of diary entries to convey the difficulties of trench life.
THE WESTERN FRONT

NEW WEAPONS
  e.g. gas, tanks

WAR OF ATTRITION
  Sending men ‘over the top’ in hopeless attacks

MAJOR BATTLES
  e.g. Ypres, Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele (or 3rd Ypres)

DECISIVE FACTORS LEADING TO A BREAKTHROUGH
  US entry into the war; the naval blockade of Germany; German war-weariness at home and at the front.

SCHLIEFFEN PLAN FAILS
  War of movement ends

STALEMATE
  Trench warfare

HAZARDS FROM THE ENEMY
  Shells, snipers, gas, mines, etc.

OTHER HARDSHIPS
  Lice, trench feet, severe cold, etc.

DEFENSIVE WEAPONS DOMINATE
  Machine-guns, barbed wire

FAILED ATTEMPTS TO BREAK STALEMATE

SOLDIERS’ DISILLUSIONMENT WITH WAR

Figure 8.18  The Western Front

BREAKING THE STALEMATE: STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

GOING ‘OVER THE TOP’ — THE FRONTAL ATTACK

One of the commonest images of the Great War is of soldiers climbing from their trenches to advance across no man’s land, usually with great loss of life and for very little, if any, gain in territory. Most of these offensives were launched by the Allies in their attempts to drive the Germans from French soil, and until the latter stages of the war followed a predictable pattern.

An artillery bombardment would precede the attack. This might last for hours, even days, with the aim of annihilating everyone in the enemy front-line trench, cutting the barbed wire that protected the trench-line in order that soldiers could advance through, and wiping out the defensive artillery behind the enemy lines. Unfortunately, until about 1917, artillery fire was notoriously inaccurate due to technological inefficiencies.

At a pre-arranged time the bombardment or barrage would stop. At ‘zero hour’ a piercing whistle signalled the moment to clamber up the ladders, which was difficult because men were loaded down with equipment: water bottles, ammunition, gas masks, field dressings, mess tins and rations, adding up to about 30 kilograms. Some men also carried machine-guns and their ammunition, or other extra equipment. All this made it difficult even to climb out of the trench, or to move faster than a slow walk across no man’s land.

Once in the mud and shell-holes of no man’s land, order and organisation began to break down as men came under fire from the defenders. Machine-guns poured out 600 rounds per minute, rifle bullets flew and artillery shells burst among the exposed advancing soldiers. Artillery shells were responsible for 75 per cent of all casualties in the war. Life could be snuffed out in an instant. A medical officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers wrote in his diary about how he saw a man step from a dugout
and when a shell burst on top of him, they couldn’t find any remains to bury. At other times artillery left horrible mutilating wounds from shrapnel—fragments of metal spread as the shell exploded.

The advantage was always with the defender, and more attacks ended in failure as the second and third wave got no further than the first. Sometimes the enemy front line was taken, but breakthroughs, even minor ones, were rare.

Table 8.1 Use of gas on the Western Front

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Date of first use</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chlorine</td>
<td>April 1915</td>
<td>Ypres</td>
<td>Greenish-yellow cloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phosgene</td>
<td>October 1915</td>
<td>Champagne</td>
<td>Colourless; faint smell of old hay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustard</td>
<td>July 1917</td>
<td>Ypres</td>
<td>Looked ‘like a pool of sherry’; smelt of onions or garlic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**GAS—A BREAKTHROUGH WEAPON?**

Gas was one of the scientific developments of war designed to break the deadlock. At first it was released from cylinders, thousands of which had to be carried up to the front line and placed in position. However, the vagaries of the wind made gas difficult to control and even though from 1916 the French and Germans used the gas shell to release the gas, the weapon had a limited use.

Chlorine caused difficulty in breathing, a burning sensation in the throat and chest pain. Phosgene was more sinister and deadly because it didn’t lead to coughing and irritation on first contact, as did chlorine; thus, victims were exposed to larger doses for longer without realising it. Mustard gas led to blistering of the skin, airways and lungs.

Germany was the first to use each type of gas. It should be remembered that the German chemical industry was the most advanced in Europe prior to 1914. The Allies did not develop mustard gas until 1918.
For protection against gas, soldiers were at first told to urinate on a sock or piece of cloth and place it over their mouth and nose. Apparently the ammonia in the urine reduced the effects of the chlorine. Various types of gas mask were tried until in 1917 the small-box respirator was developed, which gave effective protection.

To experience a gas attack must have been frightening, but, nonetheless, L. F. Haber argues in The Poisonous Cloud that it was not gas, but the fear of gas that was the main problem on the Western Front.

General William Sibert, who headed the US Chemical Warfare Service, was asked in a post-war Congressional hearing whether he considered gas to be a cruel method of warfare. He replied, ‘Not a cruel method. I look upon it as the most humane element in war. It should be said that of our gas casualties only 3 or 4 per cent died and of those that lived nearly all of them are getting well’ (Richter 1994, p. 219).

Gas was not the new breakthrough weapon hoped for. On the Western Front, the use of gas was occasionally effective, never decisive.

THE TANK—A BREAKTHROUGH WEAPON?

Tanks or ‘land battleships’ were developed to break the dominance over no man’s land of machine-gun use. Trials for tanks began in Britain as early as February 1915. For security reasons during development the story was put about that the new constructions were water tanks and the name ‘tank’ stuck.

Tanks were first introduced to the battlefield on the Somme in September 1916. The tank lacked the capacity to seriously affect the course of events as only small numbers were available, and they were used on muddy and churned up ground. The tank could neither spearhead an attack, because