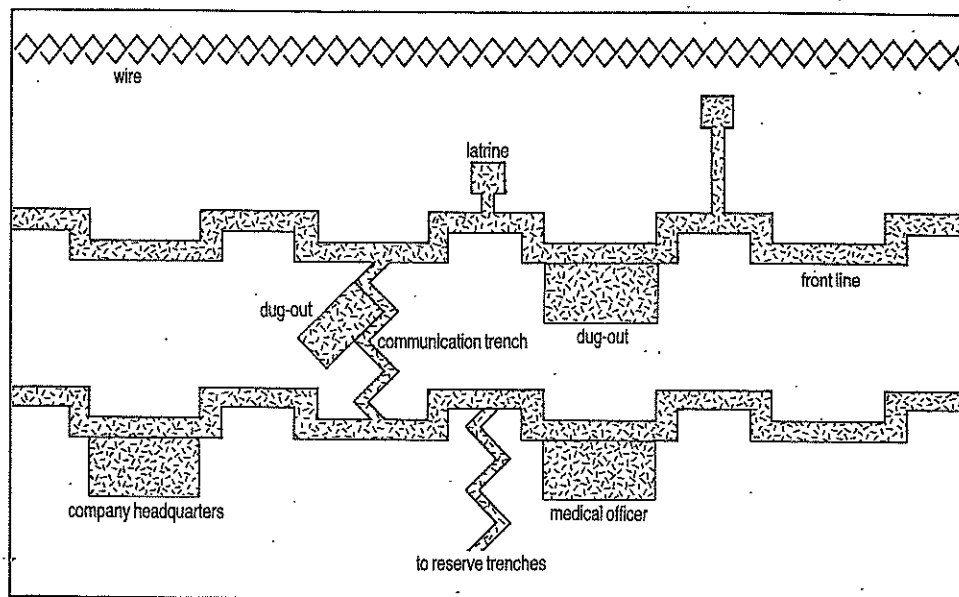


The Western Front 1914-17

'Bullet, spade and wire'

By the end of 1914 it was clear that the old fashioned warfare of dashing cavalry charges and rapid movements of troops was over. As one military historian, J.F.C. Fuller, put it: success 'depended on overcoming the defensive trinity of bullet, spade and wire'. The Germans, occupying French and Belgium soil, were perfectly happy to stay where they were. They dug in and dug deep. German trenches were

therefore much sturdier and their dug-outs set deeper, with concrete and iron girders in the roofs. Both sides protected their trenches with layers of barbed wire and the devastating fire of the machine gun. Most World War One machine guns could, in theory, fire 500 rounds or bullets a minute. Front line trenches had support trenches behind them and finally reserve trenches in the rear. Between these were communication trenches which linked them. The trenches were zig-zagged to make it harder for enemy artillery to destroy them and to prevent enemy soldiers from firing down the length of the trench if one section was captured.

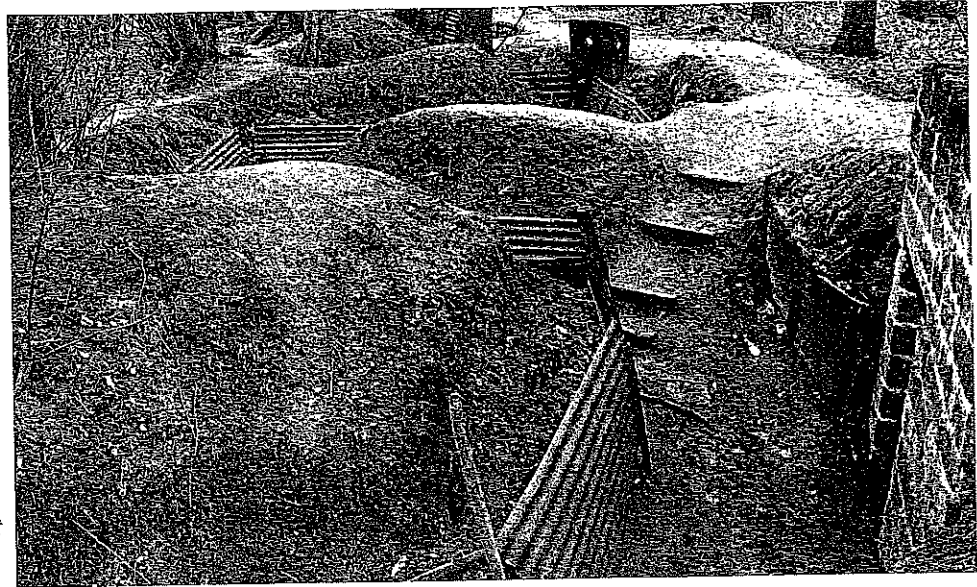


Front-line trenches

Occasionally, running out at right-angles from the front line trench were narrow passages thirty yards or so long, called saps. These led to isolated positions in which sat two or three men whose job was to listen for the slightest enemy movement. Shell craters proved ideal listening posts and were often fought over for that reason. One noise which was especially listened for was the sound of shovels and picks underground. Enemy mining parties often tried to burrow beneath the front line to

plant a huge bomb to blow the trenches and the men in them to pieces. In June 1917 the British placed 19 huge mines under the German lines at Messines – a million pounds of high explosive. At 3.10 am on 7 June they went off and between 10 000 and 20 000 Germans were buried alive. (Two mines, though in place, were not used. Their exact position was lost. One went off in a rain-storm in 1955. The other, containing 40 000 pounds of explosive, has yet to make itself heard).

A section of preserved trenches in the Ypres Salient. Even 70 years later the zig-zagged layout of the trenches is clearly visible



British sappers digging a mine tunnel. Many of these men were recruited from the coal-fields of Britain

The Battles of Verdun and the Somme: 1916

On the Western Front in 1915 no significant advances were achieved by either side - though the Germans did use poison gas for the first time at Ypres. The year 1916 was to see two huge battles at Verdun and on the Somme. The German commander on the Western Front, Falkenhayn, decided to launch an offensive against the fortress town of Verdun. He knew that the French would defend the town and its

surrounding forts to the last, since defeat there would open the road to Paris. The offensive began on 21 February with a barrage of 1400 guns and a million shells. The defence of Verdun was in the hands of General Petain who promised that the Germans 'shall not pass'. Falkenhayn's plan was brutally simple: as the French rushed to defend Verdun they would be smashed by heavy artillery and repeated attacks. France would be 'bled white'. To an extent it worked. The Germans launched offensive after offensive until July by which time the Germans were exhausted. Then in October Petain ordered a counter-offensive to recapture lost ground. The battle finally ended in December. The Germans had inflicted 380 000 casualties on the French but had themselves lost 340 000. Neither had Verdun fallen.

France's allies had not been idle during this great battle. In July on the Eastern Front the Russians had launched the Brusilov Offensive which had forced the Germans to take 15 divisions from their Verdun campaign. Another offensive was launched by the British to force the Germans to take troops away from Verdun. On 1 July, after a week-long

bombardment of the German lines, the assault along the Somme was launched. It was the worst day in the history of the British army: 57 000 casualties were suffered – 20 000 of them dead. When General Haig's offensive finally ground to a halt in the November mud along the 30 mile front, the furthest advance was seven miles. German casualties totalled 650 000, British 410 000 and the French 195 000. But these two battles had greatly worn down the Germans – though Haig was also criticised for the losses. British Prime Minister Asquith paid the penalty and resigned in December, to be replaced by David Lloyd-George.

Exercise 4

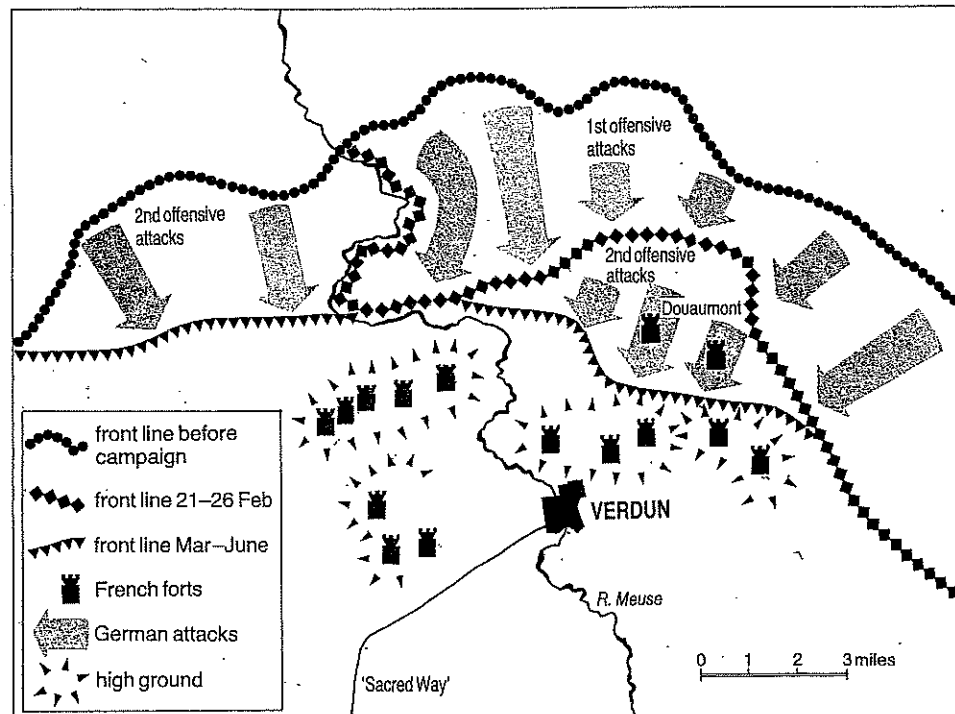
- Why were trenches 'zig-zagged'?
- What was the job of the listening posts?
- Why were the Germans' happy to stay where they were?
- What was Falkenhayn's strategy for the Verdun offensive?
- How did France's allies come to her aid during this battle?
- Why was Verdun really a defeat for the Germans?
- A German soldier of the war described the British troops as 'lions led by donkeys'. What do you think he meant by this and was he right?

Exercise 5

The Verdun offensive

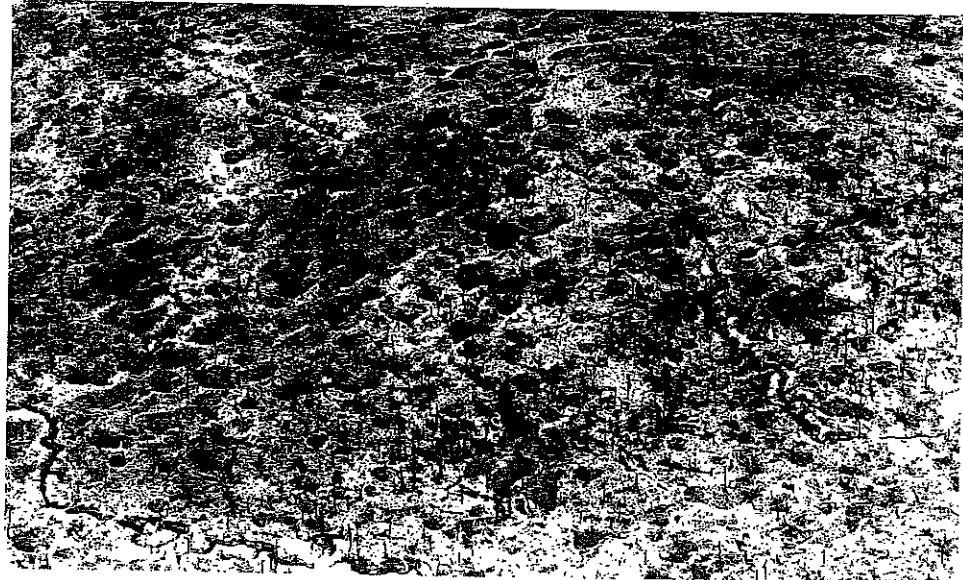
Study the map of the battle and then answer the following questions:

- How many French forts were there protecting Verdun?
- On what sort of ground were these forts built?
- How many of these forts were captured by the Germans?
- What evidence is there in the map that the river Meuse helped to hold up the German advance?



*The Battle of Verdun.
February-June 1916:
The German attacks*

- e Using the scale of the map estimate the closest distance the Germans came to the city of Verdun.
- f Using information provided by the map and the text write a 20 line summary of the strategy, course and outcome of the battle.



An aerial view of the Verdun sector in 1916 showing the thousands of shell craters. Trench lines are visible – especially in the bottom left-hand corner

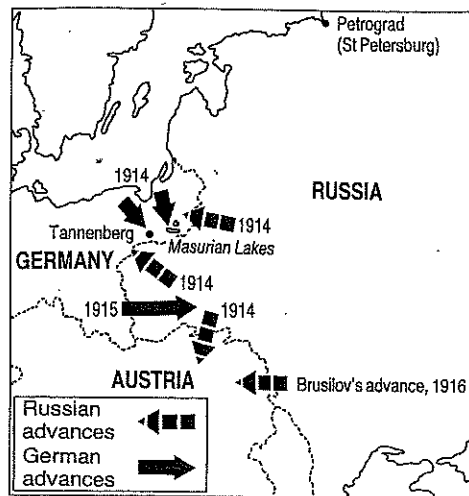
The Eastern Front 1914-17

Tsar Nicholas II hoped that the war would rally public opinion behind his increasingly unpopular rule. For a while it seemed he may have been right, as the outbreak of the war was greeted with the same outburst of patriotic fervour in St Petersburg as in London or Berlin. ('St Petersburg' was later changed to 'Petrograd' as the old name sounded too 'German'). However, two crushing defeats at Tannenberg in late August and the Masurian Lakes in early September at the hands of General Hindenburg and his Chief of Staff, Ludendorff, revealed just how weak the Russian army was. In June 1916, though, the Russians launched their only really successful campaign of the war: the Brusilov Offensive. The Russian army, then under General Brusilov's leadership, launched a sur-

prise offensive along a 300 mile front. Within two weeks over 200 000 Austrian prisoners were taken, but gradually German counter-attacks forced back the Russians who had, in some places, advanced 100 miles. The most important reason for the successful secrecy of the Brusilov Offensive was that there had been no big troop build-up or artillery barrage before. It was a lesson that should have been noted on the Western Front.

Russia's collapse

In March 1917 the Tsar paid the price for the poor quality of the Russian leadership and the defeats. He was overthrown and replaced by a Provisional (or temporary) Government. Despite obvious evidence that the war was now extremely unpopular the new government decided to carry on with the war. In July Brusilov launched another offensive. It failed and he was replaced, but by now the Russian war



The Eastern Front
1914-17

effort was crumbling, with desertions numbering some 40 000 a month. In November the government was itself overthrown by the **Bolshevik (Communist) revolution**. The Bolsheviks immediately started negotiations with the Germans for an end to the war. In December an **armistice**, or cease-fire, was signed. Russia's First World War was over.

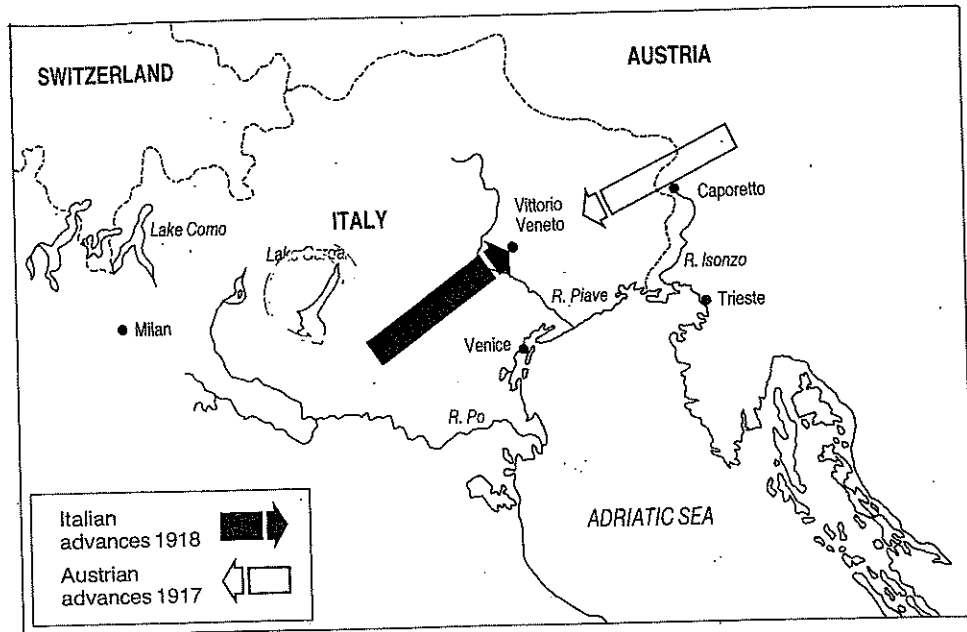
The war on other fronts

The entry of Turkey into the war in November 1914 on the side of the Central Powers (Germany and her allies) opened up another front. Some British war leaders, notably Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, believed that a decisive blow against the Central Powers could be struck in the Balkans. A naval bombardment followed by a landing at Gallipoli in the Dardanelles was planned. The aim was to capture Constantinople, the Turkish capital, knock Turkey out of the war and open another front against Austria-Hungary. Churchill believed that a decisive breakthrough could not be made on the Western Front because of

Germany's strong defensive position. He argued that a new front in the Balkans would lead Germany to weaken herself in the west to come to the aid of her Habsburg ally. The preliminary naval bombardment in February 1915 served only to warn the Turks that a major attack was planned. When the eventual landings did take place only 75 000 troops were used and it was over two months after the naval campaign had started. By this time, 25 April, the Turks were ready and reinforced. The British, Australian and New Zealand forces (ANZACs) made no progress of any significance. By November, when the troops were withdrawn, 252 000 Allied casualties led to the triumph of the 'Westerners' – those that believed that the war could only be won in the west. The battles of Verdun and the Somme were the consequence.

The Italian Front: 1915-18

Another front was created in May 1915 with the entry of Italy into the war against the Central Powers. The fighting, high up in the mountains for much of the time, was bitter. The Italians made repeated efforts to drive the Austrians beyond the river Isonzo. Not until the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo in August and September 1917 did Italy finally force the Habsburg forces back. Germany rushed in reinforcements and the advance was halted. In October the Austro-German forces were ready for a counter-offensive – the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo which is better known as *Caporetto*. The Italians were sent into headlong retreat. Eventually a defensive line was established with the enemy some twenty miles from Venice. There were 40 000 Italians killed or wounded but the numbers of prisoners and deserters, 275 000, reveal how close to collapse Italian morale came. Only in the following September, 1918, were the Italians able to mount another offensive. By this time the Habsburg



The Italian Front 1917-18

Empire was disintegrating as various subject races declared their independence. On 24 October General Diaz launched the final attack at Vittorio Veneto. Six days later the Austrian army had been beaten: 30 000 killed and 427 000 taken prisoner. Austria-Hungary surrendered on 3 November.

Exercise 6

- Why was the Brusilov Offensive of June 1916 such a success at first?
- What serious error did the Provisional Government of Russia make after the Tsar's overthrow?
- What was the basic strategy of those 'Easterners' like Churchill who planned the Gallipoli campaign?
- What indication is there in the text that much of the fighting on the Italian Front took place in the same area?
- What have you learnt so far that tells you that neither the Germans nor the Entente Powers had learnt the lesson of the Brusilov offensive of 1916?

Exercise 7

Historians and the Somme

Read the following extracts from recent books on the Battle of the Somme and then answer the questions which follow.

Extract One

The British themselves often simplified the Germans' task. To allow the troops to get into no mans' land it was necessary to cut gaps in the wire just before the attack. As one soldier who was there remarked: "The advertisement of the attack on our front was absurd. Paths were cut and marked ... days before ... Small wonder the machine gun fire was directed with such fatal precision.

(J. Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell*, 1976)