

# THE GREAT WAR

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# CONTENTS

Maps	vii
Preface	xix
<b>1</b> The Road to War	1
<b>2</b> The Western Front, 1914	32
<b>3</b> The Eastern Front, 1914	81
<b>4</b> The Sea War, 1914–15	94
<b>5</b> The Western Front, 1915	124
<b>6</b> The Eastern Front, 1915	157
<b>7</b> Gallipoli, 1915	167
<b>8</b> Salonika, 1915–18	187
<b>9</b> The Western Front, 1916	196
<b>10</b> The Eastern Front, 1916	242
<b>11</b> The Sea War, 1916	250
<b>12</b> Mesopotamia, 1914–18	268
<b>13</b> The Eastern Front, 1917–18	295
<b>14</b> The Sea War, 1917–18	305
<b>15</b> The Western Front, 1917	326
<b>16</b> Italy, 1915–18	378
<b>17</b> Palestine, 1915–18	393
<b>18</b> The Western Front, 1918	410
<b>19</b> A World Without War?	468
Notes	477
Acknowledgements	493
Picture Credits	494
Index	495

# PREFACE

THE GREAT WAR was the single most important event of the twentieth century, shaping the world that we live in today. Yet it is often regarded as a pointless war; a catastrophic mistake fought for little or no reason. Historians, politicians and economists may testify to its over-arching importance, but somehow the popular belief remains that it was all for nothing. Yet how could that be? Was everyone afflicted by a communal madness? Or were there really some very important issues at stake in this frontal collision between forces whose vision of Europe and the world could no longer co-exist peacefully? In 1914 there was an absence of any real attempts by statesmen on either side to resolve their difficulties through compromise and meaningful negotiation, making war all but inevitable given the aggressive posture adopted by the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand on 28 June. Once started the Great War had to be fought to the finish as none of the participants could countenance a defeat that would mark the end of their economic, political, military and imperial ambitions. This was not a 'war to end war' but rather an attempt to resolve the main issues of the day in one fell swoop. When industrial nation states resorted to armed conflict they generated a monstrous capacity for death and destruction, while at the same time the vastness of their populations meant that there were a lot of people to kill before victory could be proclaimed.

The men who fought in those epic battles may all be dead, but the direct consequences of their collective actions still surround us. The war subverted the rules by which men had hoped wars would be fought, unequivocally sucking in the civilian non-combatants that had been hitherto at least partially excluded from the mayhem. Of course this was not the first time that armed conflict had strayed from the path of civilised

behaviour. But it was the sheer scale of the transgressions that distinguished the Great War. This was an all-embracing conflict reaching far and wide across the continents. It premiered devilish new weapons and created new methods of mass slaughter. Most awful of all, it gave birth to the twin concepts of 'a nation at arms' and 'total war'. Previously the Thirty Years War, Seven Years War, Napoleonic Wars and American Civil War had seemed the benchmarks for horror; but these were as nothing in comparison to the long years of frantic mayhem that stretched from August 1914 to November 1918. By the end of the Great War the old European order that had ruled the world had been swept away. Once mighty empires had fallen as the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman hegemonies were all trampled into the dust. The French and British were left drained of energy, wealth and prestige even as they drank from the poisoned chalice of victory. New world powers would rise in the aftermath of the war. Most obviously, the United States converted her hitherto unrealised military potential into a reality, while her economy began to achieve worldwide pre-eminence. The Japanese too were stirring. They had been involved only on the periphery of the fighting, but they watched with interest the humiliating exposure of the traditional Western imperial powers. In the post-war years Japan would attempt to expand her role in the Far East, seeking to establish a new Empire of the Rising Sun. Powerful political forces were unleashed by the war. Communism had been lurking in the wings for a while, but the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia would spread its spectre, real and imagined, across the globe for the rest of the century. The ugly creed of fascism was created from the fall-out of the war: a pernicious amalgam of racism, nationalism and right-wing dogma all nurtured by the dreadful post-war social and economic conditions which left millions looking for easy answers to impossible questions. The war had even created a fertile breeding ground for a new plague, the influenza virus known as 'Spanish flu', which spread across the globe, causing a loss of life on a scale that would dwarf even the slaughter of war.

In this book we will look at the whys and wherefores of the military conduct of the Great War in an attempt to discern what was really going on, rather than attempt to reference every political, social or artistic movement. At heart, this is a history that will examine the nature of the immense problems encountered by the commanders who bore the ultimate responsibility in battle; the strategic imperatives that drove them

into battle; and the tactics they devised to achieve success. Direct quotes from the generals and admirals will show that there was usually a rhyme and a reason to their decisions, while evocative accounts from the men they commanded will show the terrible consequences of those orders for the men who had to enact them. In this, the book will reflect what they knew, or thought they knew, at the time, rather than offer insights vouchsafed by hindsight. Sadly, there was no easy way to victory for either of the great power blocks. If there was a madness then it surely lay in the initial decision to go to war, not in the tactical decisions of the commanders in the field. Whatever they did the war would still have bitten deep, killing millions, as millions fought to the death. This was the modern industrial age and flesh and blood would have to face new weapons of war deployed in an ever-changing tactical clash between attack and defence, whoever was in charge. While it is only human to feel pity at the terrible suffering endured over the four years of war, the intention here is to explain the desperate nature of the fighting, not to create a false aura of victimhood for the soldiers who died as they tried to kill. The military history of the Great War is often misrepresented by academics from other disciplines, who settle for the easy clichés such as the ‘butchers and bunglers’ calumny, spouting as gospel the sort of unreferenced nonsense which would make them blanch within their own fields.

I have followed the course of battles primarily from a British perspective, but also taking into account what was really significant in this truly global conflict. In a single-volume history the main narrative line must follow the most dramatic battles and those that actually had the potential – in theory, at least – to end the war. As such, battles and campaigns against the German Army, the driving force of the Central Powers, have generally taken precedence. The Eastern Front is fully reviewed as it had a huge influence on our main narrative: in fact, you cannot understand what was happening on the Western Front without understanding events on the Eastern Front. Those with special interest in the more obscure campaigns, such as the capture of Tsingtao, the Russo-Turkish Caucasian Campaign, the Senussi Rebellion, naval actions in the Baltic and Black Sea, or the heroic German resistance in East Africa, will find them omitted in favour of more detail on the dramatic key campaigns that still shape our lives today. For British readers, used to their forces being presented as always at the centre of affairs, their occasional demotion to the sidelines

may seem strange, especially during the first two years of the war, when the French and Russian forces were battering away at the Germans with only peripheral help from the British Army. With the Somme Offensive in 1916, the British began to play a far greater part, but it was only from mid-1917 that they began to take the lead role. The input of the Americans was crucial as, despite the lateness of their appearance on the Western Front, their expanding armies offered such a threat that it did much to undermine German resolve in 1918. All these immense contributions to Allied victory must be acknowledged and due tribute paid. But the Germans themselves knew who had beaten them. The determined enmity and resilience of France, their most serious military foe, was taken for granted, but it was the participation of the British in the war that had tipped the balance against Germany. The combination of the unyielding Royal Navy blockade, the key role of British troops in the dogged attritional battles of 1916–17, followed by the brutally effective campaign spearheaded by British troops during the ‘Advance to Victory’ on the Western Front – these were the nails that hammered down the lid on the German coffin.

The Second World War saw the British Empire cast very much as a supporting player. Of course, British forces in the early stages helped ensure that the Allies did not lose. But it is indisputable that the hard graft to destroy the armed might of Germany and Japan was carried out primarily by Russia and the United States respectively – the two great powers whose subsequent Cold War would dominate the remainder of the twentieth century. The era when Great Britain could be ranked as a first-rank global power had vanished and the origins of that decay lay in the Great War. The loss of nearly a million dead had fatally undermined British resolve to make military sacrifices, while the excruciating financial cost of the war had injured an economy that was already falling back from its nineteenth century primacy. The rise of concepts like nationalism and communism had further loosened Britain’s grip on its polyglot empire. Within a few decades of the end of the Great War the British Empire had collapsed.

# 1

## THE ROAD TO WAR

‘Anyone who has ever looked into the glazed eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war.’<sup>1</sup>

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck

**GERMANY WAS AT THE HEART** of the Great War. Wherever you begin to examine the causes of that terrible conflagration, your eye will be unerringly drawn to the crucial role played by the German Empire. It was a creation of the late nineteenth century, a federation of German states, pulled together and then dominated by the Kingdom of Prussia. The guiding hand during the crucial period from 1862 had been Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who had proved an exceptionally astute pilot through some remarkably choppy waters. Taking advantage of the temporarily fractured balance of power between Russia, France, Turkey and Britain in the aftermath of the Crimean War in 1854–6, Prussia had provoked, fought and won the Austro-Prussian War in 1866, thereby ending any chance of an Austrian-based unification of the German states. This was followed by the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, which resulted in a humiliating defeat for the French, leaving a unified Germany as the dominant power in Europe, a moment cruelly symbolised when Kaiser Wilhelm I was crowned German Emperor at Versailles in 1871. Bismarck then devoted himself to avoiding any further wars and trying to maintain the international isolation of France. This policy reached its apogee with the formation of



## 2 ❖ THE GREAT WAR

the League of the Three Emperors between Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany in 1873. This inherently unstable alliance soon collapsed as the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia fell out over Russian activities in the Balkans, which the Austrians considered within their sphere of interest. Although it was briefly reincarnated in 1881, the Balkan pressures were not resolved and the alliance finally ended in 1887. Meanwhile, Bismarck had secured the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879, a defensive arrangement which promised support should either be attacked by Russia, or a benevolent neutrality if one was attacked by another European power – which at that stage clearly meant France. This alliance was augmented by the newly unified Italy to form the Triple Alliance in 1882. As a further precaution Bismarck also signed the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1887, guaranteeing neutrality unless Russia attacked Austria-Hungary. His motives in building this web of treaties were exemplified by a prescient speech made to the Reichstag in 1888 during yet another Balkans crisis:

Bulgaria, that little country between the Danube and the Balkans, is far from being an object of adequate importance ... for which to plunge Europe from Moscow to the Pyrenees, and from the North Sea to Palermo, into a war whose issue no man can foresee. At the end of the conflict we should scarcely know why we had fought.<sup>2</sup>

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck

But the accession of Kaiser Wilhelm II that same year led quickly to Bismarck's downfall. The new Kaiser had a very different vision for Germany, concerned with the possibilities of new territorial gains and becoming a leading voice on the world stage, whereas Bismarck concentrated on the more mundane business of securing what had already been achieved. Wilhelm II grew increasingly impatient with the cautious foreign policy and conservative social policies of his 75-year-old Chancellor, until he finally 'dropped the pilot' in 1890.

There was no doubt that Germany had several inherent strengths. Her unification had coincided with an impressive surge in industrialisation which, by the dawn of the twentieth century, had converted a predominantly agricultural economy into the pre-eminent industrial power in Europe. Production of coal, iron and steel had rocketed; these were the essential bedrock for any modern nation. But Germany also had an excellent education system which had resulted in almost universal literacy

among the population at large. This created a constant stream of experts in every conceivable subject as well as an exceptionally lively scientific, literary and artistic community. Germany could also be regarded as one of the great centres of progressive thought. But lurking deep at the very heart of state was the Army. This remarkable construct had been swiftly welded together from the Prussian, Bavarian, Baden and Saxon state armies by highly trained staff officers who inculcated a common military doctrine into the units and ensured that they were trained to the highest standards. Underpinning it was a system of compulsory conscription by which some 60 per cent of young men were called up at twenty years old, whereupon they would be diligently trained for two years (three years in the artillery and cavalry) before being returned to civilian life. They then had a commitment to annual training with a reserve unit until they were twenty-seven, before joining a secondary reserve unit (the *Landwehr*) until they were thirty-nine, when they were finally transferred to the tertiary reserve (the *Landsturm*). Only at forty-five years old were they finally free of military commitments to the state. This created a reservoir of trained reserves which could be called up quickly in the event of war to allow a massive expansion in the size of the army. The German Army could not be regarded as a defensive expression of a nation's desire for security within its own borders. It posed a clear threat, which in turn forced most of the nation states of Europe to increase their military strength by dint of similar conscription schemes.

For all its strengths, Germany also had fundamental problems. Political modernisation had not kept pace with economic progress and an imperfect system of universal suffrage was undermined further by the opaque nature of the fragmented constitution which left a great deal of power in the hands of the Kaiser. The accession of Wilhelm II only exacerbated this situation. His personality tended towards self-important posturing, without the intellect or sense of purpose to allow the evolution of a mature and consistent policy. Unpredictability and the love of the dramatic gesture proved to be his defining characteristics. Yet he had direct control of the Army and of foreign policy. In addition, he was responsible for all major government appointments and had the right of unfettered direct access to all elected officials, which allowed him to exercise undue influence on multifarious affairs of state. Unfortunately for Germany, the image of the Kaiser, in all his blustering militaristic pomposity, came to