Chapter

2 The First World War and its aftermath

SUMMARY OF EVENTS

The two opposing sides in the war were:

The Allies or Entente Powers:	Britain and her empire (including troops from Australia, Canada, India and New Zealand) France Russia (left December 1917) Italy (entered May 1915) Serbia Belgium Romania (entered August 1916) USA (entered April 1917) Japan
The Central Powers:	Germany Austria–Hungary Turkey (entered November 1914) Bulgaria (entered October 1915)

The war turned out to be quite different from what most people had anticipated. It was widely expected to be a short, decisive affair, like other recent European wars – all over by Christmas 1914. This is why Moltke was so worried about being left at the post when it came to mobilization. However, the Germans failed to achieve the rapid defeat of France: although they penetrated deeply, Paris did not fall, and *stalemate quickly developed on the western front*, with all hope of a short war gone. Both sides dug themselves in and spent the next four years attacking and defending lines of trenches.

In eastern Europe there was more movement, with early Russian successes against the Austrians, who constantly had to be helped out by the Germans. This caused friction between Austrians and Germans. But by December 1917 the Germans had captured Poland (Russian territory) and forced the Russians out of the war. Britain, suffering heavy losses of merchant ships through submarine attacks, and France, whose armies were paralysed by mutiny, seemed on the verge of defeat. Gradually, however, the tide turned; the Allies, helped by the entry of the USA in April 1917, wore down the Germans, whose last despairing attempt at a decisive breakthrough in France failed in the spring of 1918. The success of the British navy in blockading German ports and defeating the submarine threat by defending convoys of merchant ships was also telling on the Germans. By late summer 1918 they were nearing exhaustion. *An armistice (ceasefire) was signed on 11 November*

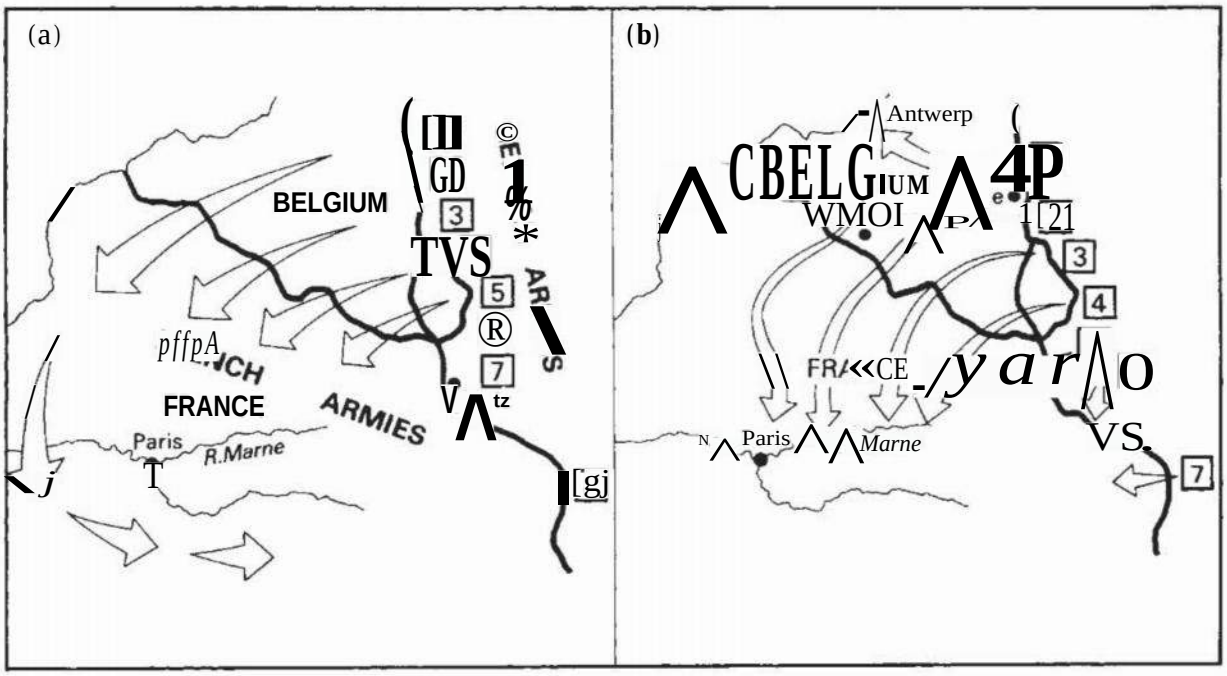
1918, though Germany itself had hardly been invaded. A controversial peace settlement was signed at Versailles the following year.

2.1 1914

(a) The western front

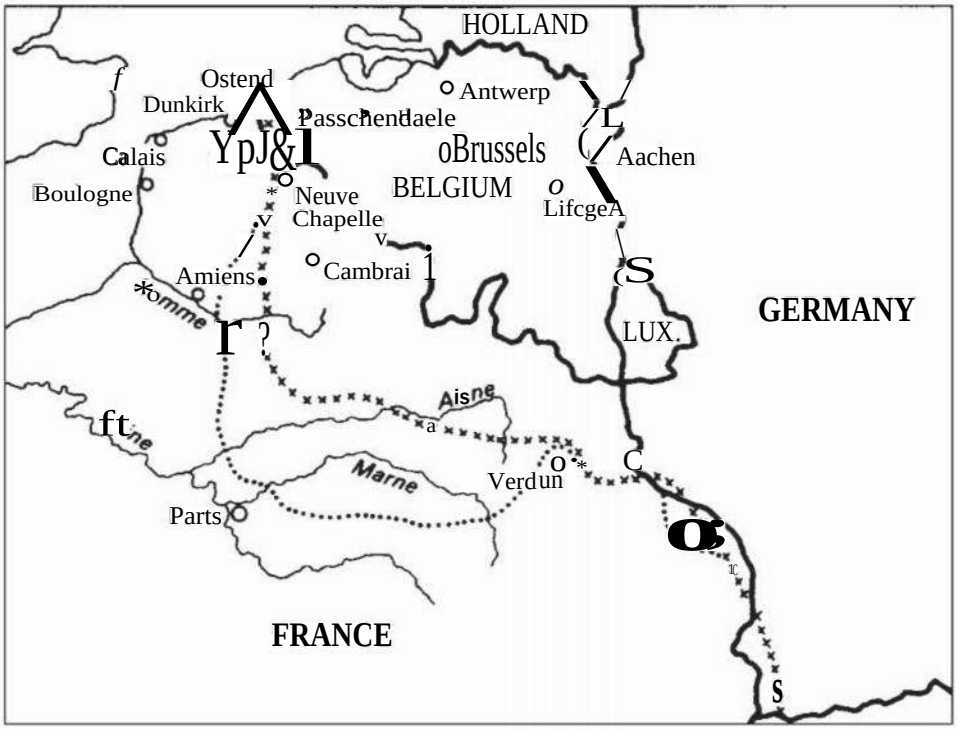
On the western front the German advance was held up by unexpectedly strong Belgian resistance; it took the Germans over two weeks to capture Brussels, the Belgian capital. This was an important delay because it gave the British time to organize themselves, and left the Channel ports free, enabling the British Expeditionary Force to land. Instead of sweeping round in a wide arc, capturing the Channel ports and approaching Paris from the west (as the Schlieffen Plan intended, if indeed the Germans *were* attempting to carry out the plan – see Section 1.4(g)), the Germans found themselves just east of Paris, making straight for the city. They penetrated to within twenty miles of Paris, and the French government withdrew to Bordeaux; but the nearer they got to Paris, the more the German impetus slowed up. There were problems in keeping the armies supplied with food and ammunition, and the troops became exhausted by the long marches in the August heat. In September the faltering Germans were attacked by the French under Joffre in *the Battle of the Marne* (see Map 2.1); they were driven back to the River Aisne, where they were able to dig trenches. *This battle was vitally important; some historians regard it as one of the most decisive battles in modern history.*

- It ruined the Schlieffen Plan once and for all: France would not be knocked out in six weeks, and all hopes of a short war were dashed.



Map 2.1 **The Schlieffen Plan**

The Schlieffen Plan intended that the German right wing would move swiftly through Belgium to the coast, capture the Channel ports, and then sweep round in a wide arc to the west and south of Paris, almost surrounding the French armies – see (a). In practice, the Plan failed to work out. The Germans were held up by strong Belgian resistance; they failed to capture the Channel ports, failed to outflank the French armies, and were halted at the First Battle of the Marne – see (b).



····· Limit of the German advance in 1914

×××××× The trench line for most of the war

Map 2.2 **The western front**

- The Germans would have to face full-scale war on two fronts, which they had probably never intended.
- The war of movement was over; the trench lines eventually stretched from the Alps to the Channel coast (see Map 2.2).
- There was time for the British navy to bring its crippling blockade to bear on Germany's ports.

The other important event of 1914 was that although the Germans captured Antwerp, the British Expeditionary Force held grimly on to Ypres. This probably saved the Channel ports of Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne, making it possible to land and supply more British troops. Clearly the war was not going to be over by Christmas – it was settling down into a long, drawn-out struggle of attrition.

(b) The eastern front

On the eastern front the Russians mobilized more quickly than the Germans expected, but then made the mistake of invading both Austria and Germany at the same time. Though they were successful against Austria, occupying the province of Galicia, the Germans brought Hindenburg out of retirement and defeated the Russians twice, at *Tannenburg* (August) and *the Masurian Lakes* (September), driving them out of Germany. *These battles were important.* the Russians lost vast amounts of equipment and ammunition, which had taken them years to build up. Although they had six and a quarter million men mobilized by the end of 1914, a third of them were without rifles. The Russians never recovered from this setback, whereas German self-confidence was boosted. When Turkey entered the war, the outlook for Russia was bleak, since Turkey could cut her main supply and trade route from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean (Map 2.3). One bright spot for

Map 2.3 **Europe at War**

the Allies was that the Serbs drove out an Austrian invasion in fine style at the end of 1914, and Austrian morale was at rock bottom.

2.2 1915

(a) Stalemate in the west

In the west the stalemate continued, though several attempts were made to break the trench line. The British tried at Neuve Chapelle and Loos, the French tried in Champagne; the Germans attacked again at Ypres. But, like all the attacks on the western front until 1918, these attempts failed to make a decisive breakthrough. *The difficulties of trench warfare were always the same*:

- There was barbed wire in no-man's land between the two lines of opposing trenches (Figure 2.1), which the attacking side tried to clear away by a massive artillery bombardment; but this removed any chance of a quick surprise attack since the enemy always had plenty of warning.
- Reconnaissance aircraft and observation balloons could spot concentrations of troops on the roads leading up to the trenches.
- Trenches were difficult to capture because the increased firepower provided by magazine rifles and machine-guns made frontal attacks suicidal and meant that cavalry were useless.

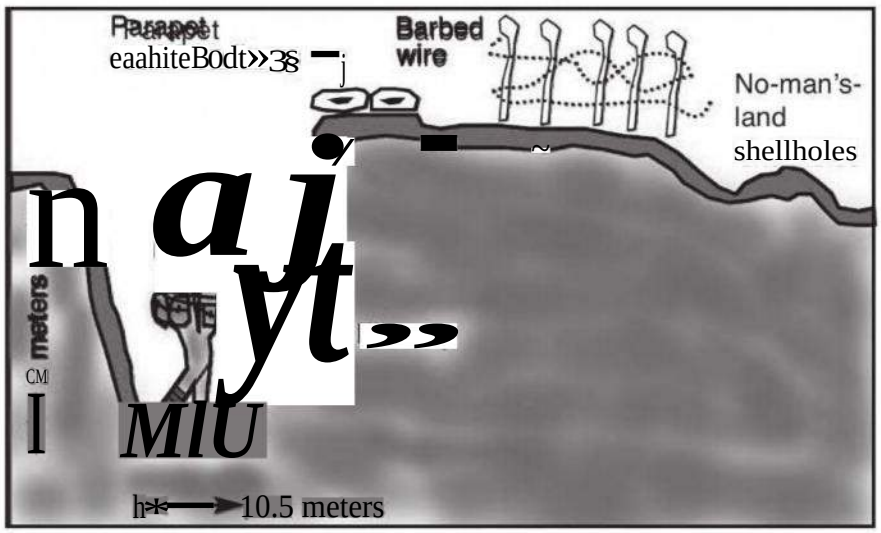


Figure 2.1 **Trench cross-section**

- Even when a trench line was breached, advance was difficult because the ground had been churned up by the artillery barrage and there was more deadly machine-gun fire to contend with.
- Any ground won was difficult to defend since it usually formed what was called a *salient* – a bulge in the trench line. The sides, or flanks, of these salients were vulnerable to attack, and troops could be surrounded and cut off.
- During the attack on Ypres in 1915, the Germans used poison gas, but when the wind changed direction it was blown back towards their own lines and they suffered more casualties then the Allies, especially when the Allies released some gas of their own.

(b) The east

In the east, Russia's fortunes were mixed: they had further successes against Austria, but they met defeat whenever they clashed with the Germans, who captured Warsaw and the whole of Poland. The Turkish blockade of the Dardanelles was beginning to hamper the Russians, who were already running short of arms and ammunition. It was partly to clear the Dardanelles and open up the vital supply line to Russia via the Black Sea that the *Gallipoli Campaign* was launched. This was an idea strongly pressed by Winston Churchill (Britain's First Lord of the Admiralty) to escape from the deadlock in the west by eliminating the Turks. They were thought to be the weakest of the Central Powers because of their unstable government. Success against Turkey would enable help to be sent to Russia and might also bring Bulgaria, Greece and Romania into the war on the Allied side. It would then be possible to attack Austria from the south.

The campaign was a total failure; the first attempt, in March, an Anglo-French naval attack through the Dardanelles to capture Constantinople, failed when the ships ran into a series of mines. This ruined the surprise element, so that when the British attempted landings at the tip of the Gallipoli peninsula, the Turks had strengthened their defences and no advance could be made (April). Further landings by Australian and New Zealand troops (Anzacs) in April and by British troops in August were equally useless, and positions could only be held with great difficulty. In December the entire force was withdrawn. *The consequences were serious*: besides being a blow to Allied morale, it turned out to be the last chance of helping Russia via the Black Sea. It probably made Bulgaria decide to join the Central Powers. A Franco-British force landed at Salonika in neutral Greece to try and

Map 2.4 **War on the Eastern, Balkan and Italian Fronts**

relieve Serbia, but it was too late. When Bulgaria entered the war in October, Serbia was quickly overrun by Bulgarians and Germans (see Map 2.4). The year 1915 was therefore not a good one for the Allies; even a British army sent to protect Anglo-Persian oil interests against a possible Turkish attack became bogged down in Mesopotamia as it approached Baghdad; it was besieged by Turks at Kut-el-Amara from December 1915 until March 1916, when it was forced to surrender.

(c) Italy declares war on Austria–Hungary (May 1915)

The Italians were hoping to seize Austria–Hungary's Italian-speaking provinces as well as territory along the eastern shore of the Adriatic Sea. *A secret treaty was signed in London* in which the Allies promised Italy Trentino, the south Tyrol, Istria, Trieste, part of Dalmatia, Adalia, some islands in the Aegean Sea and a protectorate over Albania. The Allies hoped that by keeping thousands of Austrian troops occupied, the Italians would relieve pressure on the Russians. But the Italians made little headway and their efforts were to no avail: the Russians were unable to stave off defeat.

2.3 1916

(a) The western front

On the western front, 1916 is remembered for two terrible battles, *Verdun* and *the Somme*.

1 *Verdun* was an important French fortress town against which the Germans under Falkenhayn launched a massive attack (February). They hoped to draw all the best

French troops to its defence, destroy them and then carry out a final offensive to win the war. But the French under Petain defended stubbornly, and in June the Germans had to abandon the attack. The French lost heavily (about 315 000 men), as the Germans intended, but so did the Germans themselves, with over 280 000 men killed and no territorial gains to show for it.

2 *The Battle of the Somme* was a series of attacks, mainly by the British, beginning on 1 July and lasting through to November. The aim was to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun, take over more of the trench line as the French army weakened, and keep the Germans fully committed, so that they would be unable to risk sending reinforcements to the eastern front against Russia. The attack began disastrously: British troops found themselves walking into deadly machine-gun fire; on the very first day 20 000 were killed and 60 000 injured. Yet Haig, the British Commander-in-Chief, did not call off the attack – it continued at intervals for over four months. At the end of it all, the Allies had made only limited advances varying between a few hundred yards and seven miles, along a 30-mile front. *The real importance of the battle was the blow to German morale*, as they realized that Britain (where conscription was introduced for the first time in May) was a military power to be reckoned with.

Losses on both sides, killed or wounded, were appalling (Germans 650 000; British 418 000; French 194 000). The Allied generals, especially Haig, came under severe criticism for persisting with suicidal frontal attacks. In spite of the failures and the appalling casualties, both British and French generals remained convinced that mass infantry charges – the 'big push' – were the only way to make a breakthrough. None of them showed any sign of producing alternative tactics, and tens of thousands of lives were sacrificed for no apparent gain. It was after one of the disastrous attacks in 1915 that a German officer remarked that the British army were 'lions led by donkeys'. Haig came in for the most serious criticism – for the majority of historians, he became the epitome of Allied incompetence and lack of imagination. One historian, W. J. Laffin, went so far as to call his book about the war *British Butchers and Bunglers of World War I* (1988), and for him the chief 'donkey' was Haig. J. P. Harris, in *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (2008), is rather more balanced. He argues that Haig certainly found it difficult to cope with the unprecedented situation that he found himself in on the western front and he misjudged the strength of the German forces. He was slow to see beyond the tactic of the 'big push' and must therefore bear much of the responsibility for the massive casualties. However, he did eventually show himself to be receptive to new techniques and strategies and played a vital role in the 1918 campaign which brought the final collapse of German forces.

The horrors of the Somme also contributed to the fall of the British prime minister, Asquith, who resigned in 1916 after criticism of British tactics mounted. And yet the events of 1916 *did* contribute towards the eventual Allied victory; Hindenburg himself admitted in his memoirs that the Germans could not have survived many more campaigns with heavy losses like those at Verdun and the Somme.

(b) David Lloyd George becomes British prime minister (December 1916)

Taking over from Asquith as prime minister, *Lloyd George's contribution to the Allied war effort and the defeat of the Central Powers was invaluable*. His methods were dynamic and decisive; already as Minister of Munitions since May 1915, he had improved the supply of shells and machine-guns, encouraged the development of new weapons (the Stokes light mortar and the tank), which Kitchener (Minister of War) had turned down,

and taken control of mines, factories and railways so that the war effort could be properly centralized. As prime minister during 1917, he set up a small *war cabinet*, so that quick decisions could be taken. He brought shipping and agriculture under government control and introduced the Ministry of National Service to organize the mobilization of men into the army. He also played an important part in the adoption of the convoy system (see Section 2.4(e)).

(c) In the east

In June 1916 the Russians under Brusilov attacked the Austrians, in response to a plea from Britain and France for some action to divert German attention away from Verdun. They managed to break the front and advanced 100 miles, taking 400 000 prisoners and large amounts of equipment. The Austrians were demoralized, but the strain was exhausting the Russians as well. The Romanians invaded Austria (August), but the Germans swiftly came to the Austrians' rescue, occupied the whole of Romania and seized her wheat and oil supplies – not a happy end to 1916 for the Allies.

2.4 THE WAR AT SEA

The general public in Germany and Britain expected a series of naval battles between the rival Dreadnought fleets, something like the Battle of Trafalgar (1805), in which Nelson's British fleet had defeated the combined French and Spanish fleets. But both sides were cautious and dared not risk any action which might result in the loss of their main fleets. The British Admiral Jellicoe was particularly cautious; Churchill said he 'was the only man on either side who could have lost the war in an afternoon'. Nor were the Germans anxious for a confrontation, because they had only 16 of the latest Dreadnoughts against 27 British.

(a) The Allies aimed to use their navies in three ways

- to blockade the Central Powers, preventing goods from entering or leaving, slowly starving them out;
- to keep trade routes open between Britain, her empire and the rest of the world, so that the Allies themselves would not starve;
- to transport British troops to the continent and keep them supplied via the Channel ports.

The British were successful in carrying out these aims; they went into action against German units stationed abroad, and at the *Battle of the Falkland Islands*, destroyed one of the main German squadrons. By the end of 1914 nearly all German armed surface ships had been destroyed, apart from their main fleet (which did not venture out of the Heligoland Bight) and the squadron blockading the Baltic to cut off supplies to Russia. In 1915 the British navy was involved in the *Gallipoli Campaign* (see Section 2.2(b)).

(b) The Allied blockade caused problems

Britain was trying to prevent the Germans from using the neutral Scandinavian and Dutch ports to break the blockade; this involved *stopping and searching all neutral ships* and

confiscating any goods suspected of being intended for enemy hands. The USA objected strongly to this, since they were anxious to continue trading with both sides.

(c) The Germans retaliated with mines and submarine attacks

These tactics seemed to be the only alternative left to the Germans, since their surface vessels had either been destroyed or were blockaded in port. At first they respected neutral shipping and passenger liners, but it was soon clear that the German submarine (U-boat) blockade was not effective. This was partly because they had insufficient U-boats and partly because there were problems of identification: the British tried to fool the Germans by flying neutral flags and by using passenger liners to transport arms and ammunition. In April 1915 the British liner *Lusitania* was sunk by a torpedo attack. In fact the *Lusitania* was armed and carrying vast quantities of weapons and ammunition, as the Germans knew; hence their claim that the sinking was not just an act of barbarism against defenceless civilians.

This had important consequences: out of almost two thousand dead, 128 were Americans. President Wilson therefore found that the USA would have to take sides to protect her trade. Whereas the British blockade did not interfere with the safety of passengers and crews, German tactics certainly did. For the time being, however, American protests caused Bethmann to tone down the submarine campaign, making it even less effective.

(d) The Battle of Jutland (31 May 1916)

This was the main event at sea during 1916; it was the only time in the entire war that the main battle-fleets emerged and engaged each other; the result was indecisive. The German Admiral von Scheer tried to lure part of the British fleet out from its base so that that section could be destroyed by the numerically superior Germans. However, more British ships came out than he had anticipated, and after the two fleets had shelled each other on and off for several hours, the Germans decided to retire to base, firing torpedoes as they went. On balance, the Germans could claim that they had won the battle since they lost only 11 ships to Britain's 14. The real importance of the battle lay in the fact that *the Germans had failed to destroy British sea power:* the German High Seas Fleet stayed in Kiel for the rest of the war, leaving Britain's control of the surface complete. In desperation at the food shortages caused by the British blockade, the Germans embarked on 'unrestricted' submarine warfare, and this was to have fatal results for them.

(e) 'Unrestricted' submarine warfare (began January 1917)

As the Germans had been concentrating on the production of U-boats since the Battle of Jutland, this campaign was extremely effective. They attempted to sink all enemy and neutral merchant ships in the Atlantic; although they knew that this was likely to bring the USA into the war, they hoped that *Britain and France would be starved into surrender* before the Americans could make any vital contribution. They almost did it: the peak of German success came in April 1917, when 430 ships were lost; Britain was down to about six weeks' corn supply, and although the USA came into the war in April, it was bound to be several months before their help became effective. However, the situation was saved by Lloyd George, who insisted that the Admiralty adopt a convoy system. A convoy was a large number of merchant ships sailing together, so that they could be protected by

escorting warships. This drastically reduced losses and meant that the German gamble had failed. *The submarine campaign was important because it brought the USA into the war.* The British navy therefore, helped by the Americans, played a vitally important role in the defeat of the Central Powers; by the middle of 1918 it had achieved its three aims.

2.5 1917

(a) In the west

On the western front, 1917 was a year of Allied failure. A massive French attack in Champagne, under Nivelle, achieved nothing except mutiny in the French army, which was successfully sorted out by Petain. From June to November the British fought *the Third Battle of Ypres*, usually remembered as *Passchendaele*, in appallingly muddy conditions; British casualties were again enormous – 324 000 compared with 200 000 Germans – for an advance of only four miles. More significant was *the Battle of Cambrai, which demonstrated that tanks, used properly, might break the deadlock of trench warfare*. Here, 381 massed British tanks made a great breach in the German line, but lack of reserves prevented the success from being followed up. However, the lesson had been observed, and *Cambrai became the model for the successful Allied attacks of 1918*. Meanwhile the Italians were heavily defeated by Germans and Austrians at Caporetto (October) and retreated in disorder. This rather unexpectedly proved to be an important turning point. Italian morale revived, perhaps because they were faced with having to defend their homeland against the hated Austrians. The defeat also led to the setting-up of an *Allied Supreme War Council*. The new French premier, Clemenceau, a great war leader in the same mould as Lloyd George, rallied the wilting French.

(b) On the eastern front

Disaster struck the Allies when *Russia withdrew from the war (December 1917)*. Continuous heavy losses at the hands of the Germans, lack of arms and supplies, problems of transport and communications and utterly incompetent leadership caused two revolutions (see Section 16.2), and the Bolsheviks (later known as communists), who took, over power in November, were willing to make peace. Thus in 1918 the entire weight of German forces could be thrown against the west; without the USA, the Allies would have been hard pressed. Encouragement was provided by the British capture of Baghdad and Jerusalem from the Turks, giving them control of vast oil supplies.

(c) The entry of the USA (April 1917)

This was caused partly by the German U-boat campaign, and also by the discovery that Germany was trying to persuade Mexico to declare war on the USA, promising her Texas, New Mexico and Arizona in return. The Americans had hesitated about siding with the autocratic Russian government, but the overthrow of the tsar in the March revolution removed this obstacle. *The USA made an important contribution to the Allied victory*, they supplied Britain and France with food, merchant ships and credit, though actual military help came slowly. By the end of 1917 only one American division had been in action, but by mid-1918 over half a million men were involved. Most important were the psychological boost which the American potential in resources of men and materials gave the Allies, and the corresponding blow it gave to German morale.

2.6 THE CENTRAL POWERS DEFEATED

(a) The German spring offensive, 1918

This major German attack was launched by Ludendorff in a last, desperate attempt to win the war before too many US troops arrived, and before discontent in Germany led to revolution. It almost came off: throwing in all the extra troops released from the east, the Germans broke through on the Somme (March), and by the end of May were only 40 miles from Paris; the Allies seemed to be falling apart. However, under the overall command of the French Marshal Foch, they managed to hold on as the German advance lost momentum and created an awkward bulge.

(b) The Allied counter-offensive begins (8 August)

Launched near Amiens, the counter-attack involved hundreds of tanks attacking in short, sharp jabs at several different points along a wide front instead of massing on one narrow front. This forced the Germans to withdraw their entire line and avoided forming a salient. Slowly but surely the Germans were forced back until by the end of September the Allies had broken through the Hindenburg Line. Though Germany itself had not yet been invaded, Ludendorff was now convinced that they would be defeated in the spring of 1919. He insisted that the German government ask President Wilson of the USA for an armistice (ceasefire) (3 October). He hoped to get less severe terms based on Wilson's 14 Points (see Section 2.7(a)). By asking for peace in 1918 he would save Germany from invasion and preserve the army's discipline and reputation. Fighting continued for another five weeks while negotiations went on, but eventually *an armistice was signed on 11 November.*

(c) Why did the war last so long?

When the war started the majority of people on both sides believed that it would be over by Christmas. However, Britain's Secretary for War, Lord Kitchener, himself a successful general, told the cabinet, much to its collective dismay, that it would last nearer three years than three months. Though he did not live to see the end of the war (he was drowned in 1916 on his way to Russia, when his ship struck a mine and sank), he was one of the few who had judged the situation correctly. There are several reasons why the conflict lasted so long. The two sides were fairly evenly balanced, and although the main theatre of war was in Europe, it quickly became a global conflict. Other countries that had not been in the original alliance systems, decided to join in, some because they saw it as a chance to gain new territory, and others waited to see which side looked the more likely to win, and then joined that side. For example, Italy (May 1915), Romania (August 1916), the USA (April 1917) and Japan joined the Allied side, while Turkey (November 1914) and Bulgaria (October 1915) joined the Central Powers. To complicate matters further, troops from the British Empire – from India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa – all played their part in the fighting, which eventually spread into the eastern Mediterranean, Asia and Africa.

The main countries involved in the war had very strongly held war aims which they were absolutely determined to achieve. The Germans, anxious to protect themselves from becoming 'encircled', aimed to take territory from Poland in the east and Belgium in the west to act as buffer zones against Russia and France. The French were obsessed with taking back Alsace-Lorraine, which the Germans had taken in 1871. The British would

never allow Belgium, a country so near to their coast, to be controlled by a hostile power like Germany. Austria–Hungary was desperate to preserve its empire against the ambitions of Serbia. Right from the beginning these competing war aims meant that it would be almost impossible to reach an acceptable negotiated solution.

Once stalemate had been reached on the western front with troops bogged down in lines of trenches, the Allies were faced with difficult problems: the weapons available to the Central Powers as they defended their trenches were more deadly than those available to the attackers. German troops, using fixed machine-guns in trenches protected by barbed wire, had a huge advantage over the attackers, who relied too much on preceding artillery bombardments (see Section 2.2 for more about the problems of trench warfare). Another remarkable factor prolonging the war was the way in which propaganda helped to motivate and encourage the general public as well as the military on both sides. Morale was boosted and support for the war sustained by newspapers, posters, films and advertisements directed at all classes in society to make them proud of their own country and way of life, while spreading stories of horror and atrocity about the enemy. In Germany, in spite of food shortages, labour unrest and a general war-weariness, public support for the war continued. The defeat of Russia encouraged the German generals to continue the struggle and launch what turned out to be a last desperate attempt to break through on the western front in spring 1918, before too many American troops arrived on the scene. A combination of all these factors meant that there would have to be a fight to the finish until one side or the other was either overrun and occupied by the enemy, or was so completely exhausted that it could not carry on fighting.

(d) Why did the Central Powers lose the war?

The reasons can be briefly summarized:

1. Once the Schlieffen Plan had failed, removing all hope of a quick German victory, it was bound to be a strain for them, *facing war on two fronts*.
2. *Allied sea power was decisive*, enforcing the deadly blockade, which caused desperate food shortages among the civilian population and crippled exports, while at the same time making sure that the Allied armies were fully supplied.
3. The German submarine campaign failed in the face of *convoys* protected by British, American and Japanese destroyers; the campaign itself was a mistake because it brought the USA into the war.
4. The entry of the USA brought *vast new resources* to the Allies and made up for the departure of Russia from the war. It meant that the Allied powers were able to produce more war materials than the enemy, and in the end this proved decisive.
5. Allied political leaders at the critical time – Lloyd George and Clemenceau – were probably more competent than those of the Central Powers. The unity of command under Foch probably helped, while Haig learned lessons, from the 1917 experiences, which proved to be crucial to the allied victory in the final stages of the war. In fact some historians believe that the criticisms levelled at Haig are unfair. John Terraine was one of the first to present a defence of Haig, in his book *Douglas Haig: The Educated Soldier* (1963). Recently Gary Sheffield has gone further: in *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (2011) he argues that, given the fact that the British had no experience of trench warfare, and that they were the junior partners to the French, Haig learned remarkably quickly and proved to be an imaginative commander. Haig made four outstanding contributions to the Allied victory. First, he took a leading part in reforming the army and preparing it for a major war before 1914. Then, between 1916 and 1918 he was responsible for transforming the

British Expeditionary Force from an inexperienced small force into a mass war-winning army. Thirdly, his battles in 1916 and 1917 (the Somme, Arras and Third Ypres), though his troops suffered heavy losses, played a vital role in wearing down the Germans, whose losses were also heavy. Finally Haig's generalship was a crucial component of the Allied victory in 1918. He had learned lessons about the effective use of tanks, and the avoidance of salients by using small groups of infantry attacking at different points along the trench line; his idea of transporting infantry in buses to accompany the cavalry was very effective. Eventually, too, there was a great improvement in the coordination between infantry, artillery and aerial observation. In the words of Gary Sheffield: 'Douglas Haig might not have been the greatest military figure Britain has ever produced, but he was one of the most significant – and one of the most successful.'

6 The continuous strain of heavy losses told on the Germans – they lost their best troops in the 1918 offensive and the new troops were young and inexperienced. At the same time the forces available to the Allies were increasing as more Americans arrived, bringing the total of American troops to around two million. From July 1918 onwards the Germans were forced into their final retreat. An epidemic of deadly Spanish flu added to their difficulties and morale was low as they retreated. Many suffered a psychological collapse: during the last three months of the war some 350 000 German troops actually surrendered.

7 Germany was badly let down by her allies and was constantly having to help out the Austrians and Bulgarians. The defeat of Bulgaria by the British (from Salonika) and Serbs (29 September 1918) was the final straw for many German soldiers, who could see no chance of victory now. When Austria was defeated by Italy at Vittorio-Veneto and Turkey surrendered (both in October), the end was near.

The combination of military defeat and dire food shortages produced a great war-weariness, leading to mutiny in the navy, destruction of morale in the army and revolution at home.

(e) Effects of the war

The impact of the war was extraordinarily wide-ranging, which was not surprising given that it was the first 'total war' in history. This means that it involved not just armies and navies but entire populations, and it was the first big conflict between modern, industrial-ized nations. New methods of warfare and new weapons were introduced – tanks, submarines, bombers, machine-guns, heavy artillery and mustard gas. With so many men away in the armed forces, women had to take their places in factories and in other jobs which had previously been carried out by men. In the Central Powers and in Russia, the civilian populations suffered severe hardships caused by the blockades. In all the European states involved in the war, governments organized ordinary people as never before, so that the entire country was geared up to the war effort. The conflict caused a decline in Europe's prestige in the eyes of the rest of the world. The fact that the region which had been thought of as the centre of civilization could have allowed itself to experience such appalling carnage and destruction was a sign of the beginning of the end of European domination of the rest of the world. The effects on individual countries were sometimes little short of traumatic: the empires which had dominated central and eastern Europe for over two hundred years disappeared almost overnight.

1 The most striking effect of the war was the appalling death toll among the armed forces. Almost 2 million Germans died, 1.7 million Russians, 1.5 million French, over a million Austro-Hungarians and about one million from Britain and her

empire. Italy lost around 530 000 troops, Turkey 325 000, Serbia 322 000, Romania 158 000, the USA 116 000, Bulgaria 49 000 and Belgium 41 000. And this did not include those crippled by the war, and civilian casualties. A sizeable proportion of an entire generation of young men had perished – the Tost generation'; France, for example, lost around 20 per cent of men of military age. However, military historian Dan Todman, in *The First World War: Myth and Memory* (2005), argues that as time has passed, the public perception of the war has changed. He produces evidence suggesting that the Tost generation' interpretation is something of a myth. Certainly casualties were severe but were not the wholesale destruction of a generation that was claimed. According to Todman, overall, just 12 per cent of fighting men died. Although some 20 000 British soldiers were killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, this was not typical of the war as a whole. In the circumstances, Todman insists, Haig had no alternative – his was the only rational strategy, and in the end, whatever the criticisms, the war *was* won. Still, many find it difficult to put aside the long-held perception of the war as a 'futile mud- and blood-bath', and no doubt historians will continue to find it a controversial topic.

2 In Germany, hardship and defeat caused a revolution: the Kaiser Wilhelm II was compelled to abdicate and a republic was declared. Over the next few years the Weimar Republic (as it became known) experienced severe economic, political and social problems. In 1933 it was brought to an end when Hitler became German Chancellor (see Section 14.1).

3 The Habsburg Empire collapsed completely. The last emperor, Karl I, was forced to abdicate (November 1918) and the various nationalities declared themselves independent; Austria and Hungary split into two separate states.

4 In Russia the pressures of war caused two revolutions in 1917. The first (February–March) overthrew the tsar, Nicholas II, and the second (October–November) brought Lenin and the Bolsheviks (Communists) to power (see Sections 16.2–3).

5 Although Italy was on the winning side, the war had been a drain on her resources and she was heavily in debt. Mussolini took advantage of the government's unpopularity, to take over control – Italy was the first European state after the war to allow itself to fall under a fascist dictatorship (see Section 13.1).

6 On the other hand, some countries outside Europe, particularly Japan, China and the USA, took advantage of Europe's preoccupation with the war to expand their trade at Europe's expense. For example, the USA's share of world trade grew from 10 per cent in 1914 to over 20 per cent by 1919. Since they were unable to obtain European imports during the war, Japan and China began their own programmes of industrialization. During the 1920s the Americans enjoyed a great economic boom and their future prosperity seemed assured. Within a few years, however, it became clear that they had made the mistakes of over-confidence and over-expansion: in October 1929 the Wall Street Crash heralded the beginning of a severe economic crisis which spread throughout the world and became known as 'the Great Depression' (see Section 22.6).

7 Many politicians and leaders were determined that the horrors of the First World War should never be repeated. President Woodrow Wilson of the USA came up with a plan for a League of Nations, which would settle future disputes by arbitration and keep the world at peace through a system of 'collective security' (see Chapter 3). Unfortunately the job of the League of Nations was made more difficult by some of the terms of the peace settlement reached after the war, and the peace itself was unstable.

8 In his recent book *The Great War and the Making of the Modern World* (2011), Jeremy Black makes the point that the war led to the final stage of the partition of

Africa, when the peace settlement placed Germany's colonies in Africa under the control of the League of Nations. The League allowed them to be 'looked after' by various member states. This meant that in practice, for example, Britain acquired Tanganyika, while Britain and France divided Togoland and the Cameroons between them, and South Africa gained German South West Africa (Namibia).

2.7 THE PROBLEMS OF MAKING A PEACE SETTLEMENT

(a) War aims

When the war started, none of the participants had any specific ideas *about what they hoped to achieve*, except that Germany and Austria wanted to preserve the Habsburg Empire, and thought this required them to destroy Serbia. As the war progressed, some of the governments involved, perhaps to encourage their troops by giving them some clear objectives to fight for, began to list their *war aims*.

British prime minister Lloyd George mentioned (January 1918) the defence of democracy and the righting of the injustice done to France in 1871 when she lost Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. Other points were the restoration of Belgium and Serbia, an independent Poland, democratic self-government for the nationalities of Austria–Hungary, self-determination for the German colonies and an international organization to prevent war. He was also determined that Germany should pay reparations for all the damage they had done.

American President Woodrow Wilson stated US war aims in his *famous 14 Points* (January 1918):

1 abolition of secret diplomacy;
2 free navigation at sea for all nations in war and peace;
3 removal of economic barriers between states;
4 all-round reduction of armaments;
5 impartial adjustment of colonial claims in the interests of the populations concerned;
6 evacuation of Russian territory;
7 restoration of Belgium;
8 liberation of France and restoration of Alsace and Lorraine;
9 readjustment of Italian frontiers along the lines of nationality;
10 self-government for the peoples of Austria–Hungary;
11 Romania, Serbia and Montenegro to be evacuated and Serbia given access to the sea;
12 self-government for the non-Turkish peoples of the Turkish Empire and permanent opening of the Dardanelles;
13 an independent Poland with secure access to the sea;
14 a general association of nations to preserve peace.

These points achieved publicity when the Germans later claimed that they had expected the peace terms to be based on them, and that since this was not the case, they had been cheated.

(b) Differing Allied views about how to treat the defeated powers

When the peace conference met (January 1919) it was soon obvious that a settlement would be difficult because of basic disagreements among the victorious powers:

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2.8 THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES WITH GERMANY

(a) The terms

1 *Germany had to lose territory in Europe*:

- Alsace–Lorraine to France;
- Eupen, Moresnet and Malmedy to Belgium;
- North Schleswig to Denmark (after a plebiscite, i.e. a vote by the people);
- West Prussia and Posen to Poland, though Danzig (the main port of West Prussia) was to be a free city under League of Nations administration, because its population was wholly German.
- Memel was given to Lithuania.
- The area known as the Saar was to be administered by the League of Nations for 15 years, when the population would be allowed to vote on whether it should belong to France or Germany. In the meantime, France was to have the use of its coal mines.
- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which had been handed over to Germany by Russia by the Treaty of Brest–Litovsk, were taken away from Germany and set up as independent states. This was an example of *self-determination* being carried into practice.
- Union (*Anschluss*) between Germany and Austria was forbidden.

2 *Germany's African colonies were taken away* and became 'mandates' under League of Nations supervision: this meant that various member states of the League 'looked after' them.

3 *German armaments were strictly limited* to a maximum of 100 000 troops and no conscription (compulsory military service), no tanks, armoured cars, military aircraft or submarines, and only six battleships. The Rhineland was to be permanently demilitarized. This meant that all German territory on the left bank of the Rhine, together with a 50-kilometre strip on the right bank, was to be closed to German troops and was to be occupied by Allied troops for at least ten years.

4 *The War Guilt clause* fixed the blame for the outbreak of the war solely on Germany and her allies and proposed that the ex-Kaiser should be put on trial for war crimes.

5 *Germany was to pay reparations* for damage done to the Allies; the actual amount was not decided at Versailles, but it was announced later (1921), after much argument and haggling, as £6600 million.

6 *A League of Nations* was formed; its aims and organization were set out in the *League Covenant* (see Chapter 3).

The Germans had little choice but to sign the treaty, though they objected strongly. The signing ceremony took place in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, where the German Empire had been proclaimed less than 50 years earlier.

(b) Why did the Germans object, and how far were their objections justified?

1 It was a dictated peace

The Germans were not allowed into the discussions at Versailles; they were simply presented with the terms and told to sign. Although they were allowed to criticize the

treaty in writing, all their criticisms were ignored except one (see Point 3 below). Some historians feel that the Germans were justified in objecting, and that it would have been reasonable to allow them to take part in the discussions. This might have led to a toning-down of some of the harsher terms. It would certainly have deprived the Germans of the argument much used by Hitler, that because the peace was a 'Diktat', it should not be morally binding. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the Germans could scarcely have expected any better treatment after the harsh way they had dealt with the Russians at Brest–Litovsk – also a 'Diktat' (see Section 16.3(b)).

2 *Many provisions were not based on the 14 Points*

The Germans claimed that they had been promised terms based on Wilson's 14 Points, and that *many of the provisions were not based on the 14 Points*, and were therefore a swindle. This is probably not a valid objection: the 14 Points had never been accepted as official by any of the states involved, and the Germans themselves had ignored them in January 1918, when there still seemed a chance of outright German victory. By November, German tactics (Brest–Litovsk, the destruction of mines, factories and public buildings during their retreat through France and Belgium) had hardened the Allied attitude and led Wilson to add *two further points*: Germany should pay for the damage to civilian population and property, and should be reduced to 'virtual impotence'; in other words, Germany should be disarmed. The Germans were aware of this when they accepted the armistice, and, in fact, most of the terms did comply with the 14 Points and the additions.

There were also objections on specific points:

3 Loss of territory in Europe

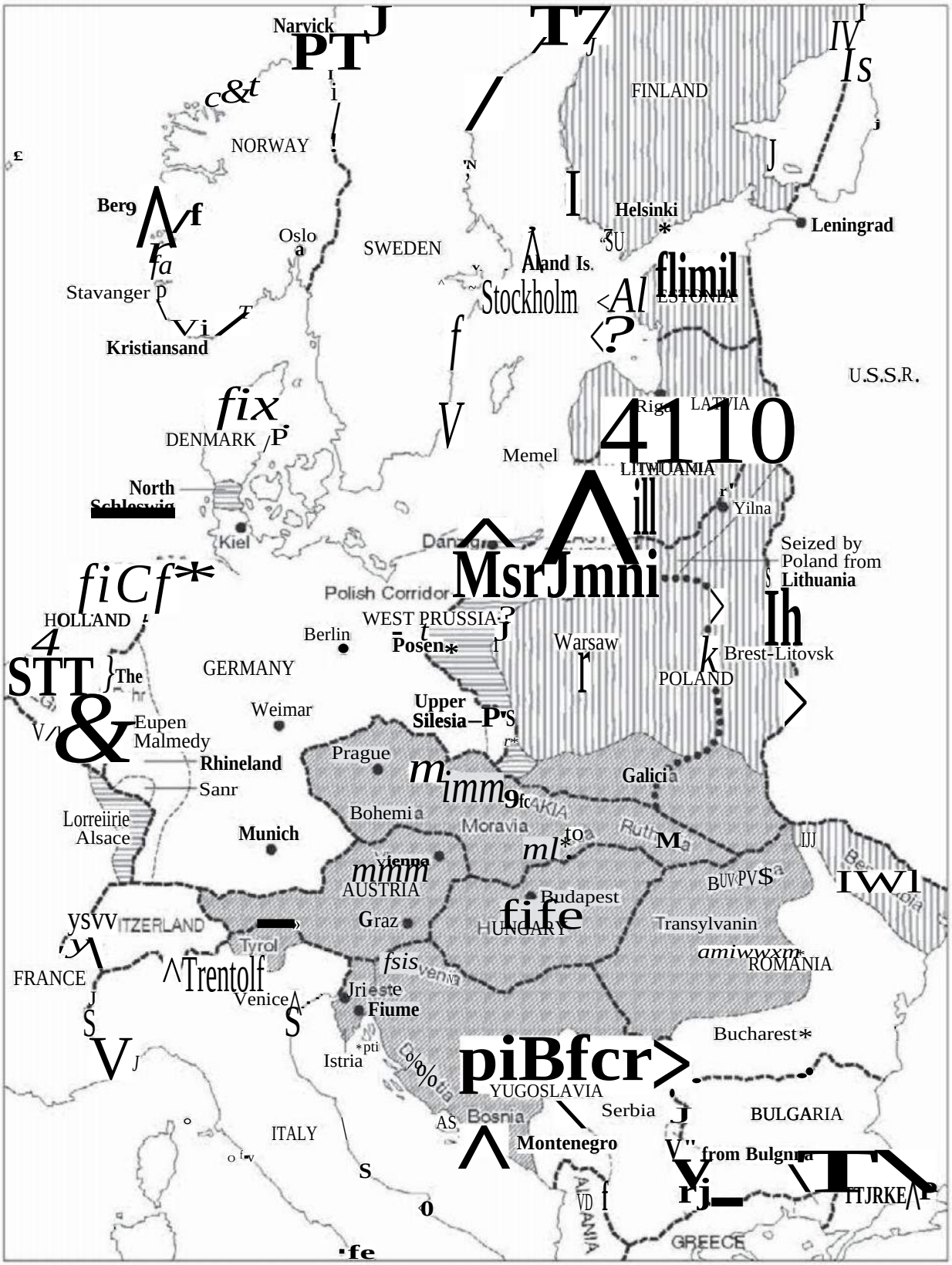
This included Alsace–Lorraine and especially West Prussia, which gave Poland access to the sea. However, both were mentioned in the 14 Points. Originally Upper Silesia, an industrial region with a mixed population of Poles and Germans, was to be given to Poland, but this was the one concession made to the German written objections: after a vote among the population, Germany was allowed to keep about two-thirds of the area. In fact most of the German losses could be justified on grounds of nationality (Map 2.5). Where the Germans did have genuine cause for protest was on the question of national self-determination. Right from the start of the peace conference the Allies had emphasized that all nationalities should have the right to choose which country they wanted to belong to. This principle had been applied in the case of non-Germans; but the settlement left around a million Germans under Polish rule, and almost three million in the Sudetenland controlled by the new state of Czechoslovakia. In addition, Austria was a completely German state with a population of some seven million. All these Germans wanted to become part of Germany, but the unification of Germany and Austria was specifically forbidden in the agreement, probably because that would have made Germany larger and more powerful even than in 1914.

4 Loss of Germany's African colonies

The Germans probably had good grounds for objection to the loss of their African colonies, which was hardly an 'impartial adjustment'. The mandate system allowed Britain to take over German East Africa (Tanganyika) and parts of Togoland and the Cameroons, France to take most of Togoland and the Cameroons, and South Africa to acquire German South West Africa (now known as Namibia); but this was really a device by which the Allies seized the colonies without actually admitting that they were being annexed (Map 2.6).

5 *The disarmament clauses were deeply resented*

The Germans claimed that 100 000 troops were not enough to keep law and order at a time of political unrest. Perhaps the German objection was justified to some extent, though the



Map 2.5 **European frontiers after the First World War and the Peace Treaties**

Map 2.6 **Africa and the Peace Treaties**

French desire for a weak Germany was understandable. The Germans became more aggrieved later, as it became clear that none of the other powers intended to disarm, even though Wilson's Point 4 mentioned 'all-round reduction of armaments'. However, disarmament of Germany was impossible to enforce fully, because the Germans were determined to exploit every loophole.

6 'The War Guilt' clause (Article 231)

The Germans objected to being saddled with the entire blame for the outbreak of war. There are some grounds for objection here, because although later research seems to indicate Germany's guilt, it was hardly possible to arrive at that conclusion in the space of six weeks during 1919, which is what the Special Commission on War Responsibility did. However, the Allies wanted the Germans to admit responsibility so that they would be liable to pay reparations.

7 Reparations

Reparations were the final humiliation for the Germans. Though there could be little valid objection to the general principle of reparations, many historians now agree that the actual amount decided on was far too high at £6600 million. Some people thought so at the time, including J. M. Keynes, who was an economic adviser to the British delegation at the conference. He urged the Allies to take £2000 million, which he said was a more reasonable amount, which Germany would be able to afford. The figure of £6600 million enabled the Germans to protest that it was impossible to pay, and they soon began to default (fail to pay) on their annual instalments. This caused resentment among the Allies, who were relying on German cash to help them pay their own war debts to the USA. There was international tension when France tried to force the Germans to pay (see Section 4.2(c)). Eventually the Allies admitted their mistake and reduced the amount to £2000 million *(Young Plan, 1929),* but not before reparations had proved disastrous, both economically and politically.

The Germans clearly did have some grounds for complaint, but it is worth pointing out that the treaty could have been even more harsh. If Clemenceau had had his way, the Rhineland would have become an independent state, and France would have annexed the Saar.

2.9 THE PEACE TREATIES WITH AUSTRIA–HUNGARY

When Austria was on the verge of defeat in the war, *the Habsburg Empire disintegrated* as the various nationalities declared themselves independent. Austria and Hungary separated and declared themselves republics. Many important decisions therefore had already been taken before the peace conference met. However, the situation was chaotic, and the task of the conference was *to formalize and recognize what had taken place.*

(a) The Treaty of St Germain (1919), dealing with Austria

By this treaty Austria lost:

- Bohemia and Moravia (wealthy industrial provinces with a population of 10 million) to the new state of Czechoslovakia;
- Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, which, with Montenegro, now became known as Yugoslavia;
- Bukovina to Romania;
- Galicia to the reconstituted state of Poland;
- the South Tyrol (as far as the Brenner Pass), Trentino, Istria and Trieste to Italy.

(b) The Treaty of Trianon (1920), dealing with Hungary

This treaty was not signed until 1920 because of political uncertainties in Budapest (the capital); the Communists, led by Bela Kun, seized power but were later overthrown.

- Slovakia and Ruthenia were given to Czechoslovakia;
- Croatia and Slovenia to Yugoslavia;
- Transylvania and the Banat of Temesvar to Romania.

Both treaties contained the League of Nations Covenant.

These settlements may seem harsh, but it has to be remembered that much of what was agreed had already happened; on the whole they did keep to the spirit of self-determination. More people were placed under governments of their own nationality than ever before in Europe, though they were not always as democratic as Wilson would have liked (especially in Hungary and Poland). However, there were some deviations from the pattern; for example the three million Germans (in the Sudetenland) who now found themselves in Czechoslovakia, and the million Germans who were placed under Polish rule. The Allies justified this on the grounds that the new states needed them in order to be economically viable. It was unfortunate that both these cases gave Hitler an excuse to begin territorial demands on these countries.

The treaties left both Austria and Hungary with serious economic problems

Austria was a small republic, its population reduced from 22 million to 6.5 million; most of its industrial wealth had been lost to Czechoslovakia and Poland. Vienna, once the capital of the huge Habsburg Empire, was left high and dry, surrounded by farming land which could hardly support it. Not surprisingly, Austria was soon facing a severe economic crisis and was constantly having to be helped out by loans from the League of Nations. Hungary was just as badly affected, her population reduced from 21 million to 7.5 million, and some of her richest corn land lost to Romania. Matters were further complicated when all the new states quickly introduced tariffs (import and export duties). These hampered the flow of trade through the whole Danube area and made the industrial recovery of Austria particularly difficult. In fact there was an excellent economic case to support a union between Austria and Germany.

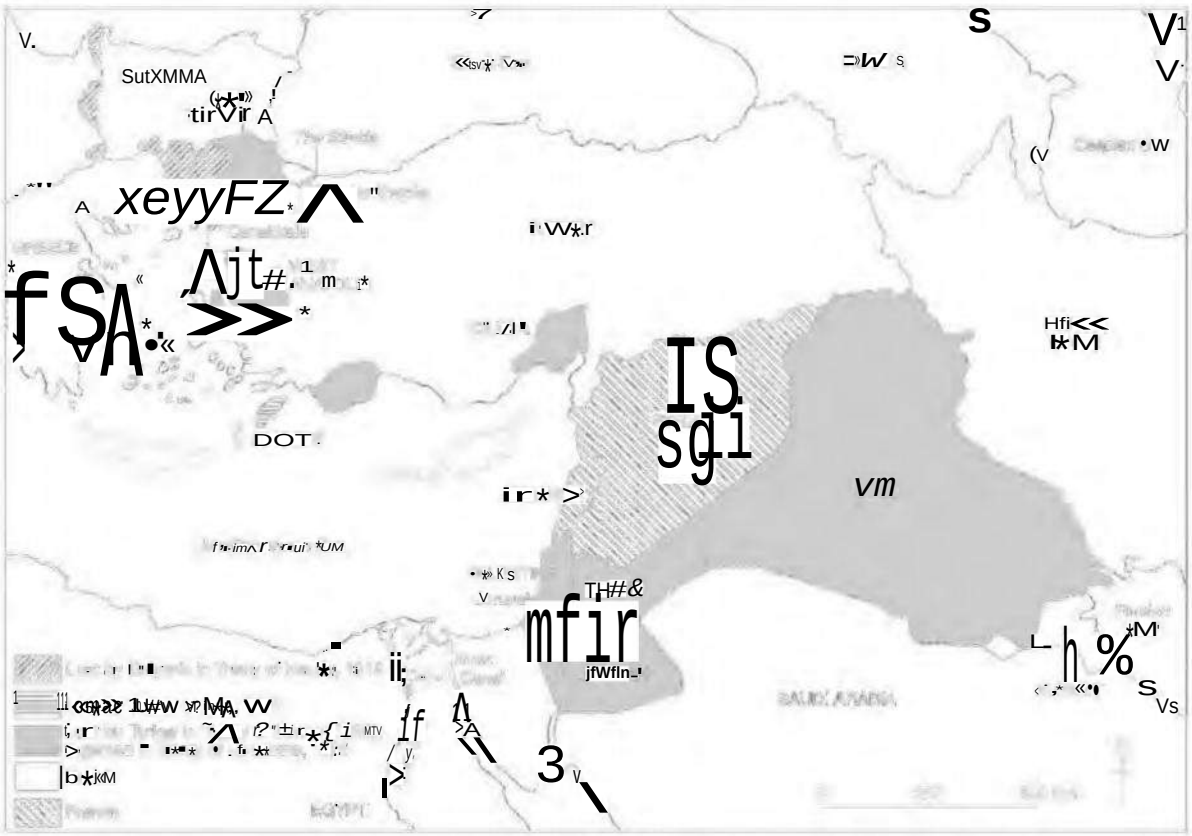
2.10 THE SETTLEMENT WITH TURKEY AND BULGARIA

(a) The Treaty of Sevres (1920), dealing with Turkey

Turkey was to lose Eastern Thrace, many Aegean islands and Smyrna to Greece; Adalia and Rhodes to Italy; the Straits (the exit from the Black Sea) were to be permanently open; Syria became a French mandate, and Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan British mandates. However, the loss of so much territory to Greece, especially Smyrna on the Turkish mainland, outraged Turkish national feeling (self-determination was being ignored in this case). Led by Mustafa Kemal, the Turks rejected the treaty and chased the Greeks out of Smyrna. The Italians and French withdrew their occupying forces from the Straits area, leaving only British troops at Chanak. Eventually a compromise was reached and the settlement was revised by the *Treaty of Lausanne* (1923), by which Turkey regained Eastern Thrace including Constantinople, and Smyrna (Map 2.7). Turkey was therefore the first state to challenge the Paris settlement successfully. One legacy of the Treaty of Sevres which was to cause problems later was the situation in the mandates. These were peopled largely by Arabs, who had been hoping for independence as a reward after their brave struggle, led by an English officer, T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), against the Turks. Nor were the Arabs happy about the talk of establishing a Jewish 'national home' in Palestine (see Section 11.2(a)).

(b) The Treaty of Neuilly (1919), dealing with Bulgaria

Bulgaria lost territory to Greece, depriving her of her Aegean coastline, and also to Yugoslavia and Romania. She could claim, with some justification, that at least a million Bulgars were under foreign governments as a result of the Treaty of Neuilly.



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2.11 VERDICT ON THE PEACE SETTLEMENT

In conclusion, it has to be said that this collection of peace treaties *was not a conspicuous success*. It had the unfortunate effect of dividing Europe into the states which wanted to revise the settlement (Germany being the main one), and those which wanted to preserve it. On the whole the latter turned out to be only lukewarm in their support. The USA failed to ratify the settlement (see Section 4.5) and never joined the League of Nations. This in turn left France completely disenchanted with the whole thing because the Anglo-American guarantee of her frontiers given in the agreement could not now apply. Italy felt cheated because she had not received all the territory promised her in 1915, and Russia was ignored, because the powers did not want to negotiate with its Bolshevik government.

Germany, on the other hand, was only temporarily weakened and was soon strong enough to challenge certain of the terms. In fact it is possible to argue that Germany was weakened less than her enemies. Much of France, Poland and the Balkans had been ravaged by occupying troops, whereas German territory was virtually untouched. After all, no enemy troops had set foot on German soil and not surprisingly it was soon widely accepted in Germany that their armies had not been defeated. Returning German soldiers were welcomed back as heroes, fresh and undefeated from the battlefield. German industry was able to switch back to peacetime production remarkably quickly, and by 1921 was producing three times as much steel as France.

All this tended to sabotage the settlement from the beginning, and it became increasingly difficult to apply the terms fully. Clearly, since Germany was still the strongest power in Europe economically, the great failing of the peace settlement was that it left the Germans with a sense of resentment and grievance, but did not leave them too weak to retaliate and seek revenge. These weaknesses were widely recognized at the time, even among allied delegates at the conference. Harold Nicolson, a British diplomat at the conference, wrote: 'If I were the Germans, I shouldn't sign for a moment.' John Maynard Keynes, a senior British delegate and economic adviser, was so disillusioned with the way things were going that he resigned in protest and came home. But it is easy to criticize after the event; Gilbert White, one of the American delegates, put it well when he remarked that, given the intricacy of the problems involved, 'it is not surprising that they made a bad peace: what is surprising is that they managed to make peace at all'. With the availability of new sources, many historians find themselves in sympathy with this assessment, and argue that the settlement can now be seen 'as a workable compromise', and perhaps the best that could have been achieved under difficult circumstances. True, there were some mistakes, but the peacemakers cannot be blamed for Hitler's rise to power, and certainly not for the Second World War. For example P. M. H. Bell, in his book *Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (2007), argues that in the early 1920s, Europe, including Germany, was beginning to recover well from the after-effects of the war. The tragedy was that 'the outline of a successful European recovery was cut off in its prime by the great depression and its dreadful consequence, the advent of Hitler'.

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QUESTIONS

1 Assess the reasons why the First World War was not 'over by Christmas' 1914.
2 Explain why the 1919 Peace Settlement provoked so much opposition among the Germans.
3 To what extent was the Paris Peace Settlement shaped by the principle of self-determination?

There is a document question about the First World War on the website.