Chapter 1

The First World War: An Overview

*Y*ou can find plenty of battles and generals and details in this book, and they're all important to know about, but plunging straight into the events of the war can be a bit disorientating, especially if you're not quite sure of what else was happening in the period. So, in this chapter I try to give you a roadmap of the war, to explain who was fighting whom, where the fighting took place and to give you an overall shape of the way the war developed.

Thinking of the war having a 'shape' might seem a bit strange if your picture of the war is essentially one in which soldiers spent their whole time sitting in the trenches, launching occasional suicidal attacks on the enemy lines. However, although it might not have seemed like it to the ordinary soldiers at the time, or to many people since, the war did have a shape and a direction: each side did try various ways to break through the enemy lines and to win. The generals and political leaders learned many hard lessons along the way and, believe it or not, they did try to avoid repeating their most disastrous mistakes. Of course, they didn't always succeed, but this chapter gives you an overview of what they were *trying* to do.

I Name This War . . . Er, What Should We Call the War?

How about starting with the basics, like what exactly the war should be called? This might sound like a silly question, but it's not. Wars don't come ready-packaged with a name on top: they usually get named after they've

happened and people often disagree – sometimes quite sharply – on what to call them. For example, what the Russians call 'the Great Patriotic War' is, to the rest of the world, a little thing called 'the Second World War'. The Russian name suggests that the war on the Eastern Front was the most important area of conflict and that the rest was just a sideshow. Seeing why some other countries may disagree isn't hard!

Even the dates of wars can be problematic. Most of the countries involved in the First World War went to war in 1914, but not all of them: Italy only entered in 1915, Romania in 1916 and the United States not until 1917. Most people think the war ended in 1918, but it didn't: the *fighting* ended then, but the war itself wasn't over (and it could have been renewed at any time) until the peace treaty was signed, which was in 1919. Some war memorials do carry the dates 1914–1919 and people often think it's a mistake, but in fact those memorials are the ones that get it right!

While it was going on, people usually referred to the war as the European War or the Great War – a name that people often still use today. (Of course, no one called it the First World War at the time for the very good reason that there hadn't been a second one then!) Towards the end, people sometimes referred to it as the War to End All Wars: the war had been so costly and so terrible that it had to have been fought for *something*. (Not surprisingly, after the Second World War, this phrase became something of a bad joke.) With similar optimism, US President Wilson sometimes called it a War to Make the World Safe for Democracy, though that certainly wasn't what anyone had in mind when they started it. Years later, after the Second World War, some people did refer for a while to the First and Second German Wars, which suggested that the Germans had been entirely responsible for them both, but the names haven't lasted and were never entirely accurate anyway.

More recently, and especially in the non-western world, some historians have questioned the use of the term 'world war'. The far-away quarrels between Austria-Hungary and Serbia or between Britain and Germany were of no inter-est to people in Africa or Asia, and they only got dragged into them by their European colonial masters. What was really happening, these scholars say, was a 'European Civil War' – the first of two. It's not difficult to see where this idea comes from, but it rather ignores the role played by non-European coun-tries such as Japan, China, the United States and some of the South American states, which weren't European colonies and which came into the war very much following their own agenda.

Strictly speaking, the First World War wasn't even the *first* world war! The religious wars between Protestants and Catholics that ravaged Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries also saw fighting in Central America, India and the Pacific. The first wars to be *planned* on a global scale were the European wars of the 18th century, which were fought in North America, in India and on the all the world's oceans as well as in Europe. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars involved serious fighting in India, the West Indies, North Africa, the Middle East, Canada and the United States. So what people call the

'First' World War was actually the fourth or fifth! On the other hand, all these 'world' wars were really European wars that spread around the world, so maybe they're better off with the names they have.

All things considered, I'm going to stick to 'First World War' in this book, because at least everyone knows what you're referring to by that name, even if they don't like it.

Analysing the Causes

The war was so destructive and its consequences were so far-reaching that it's hardly surprising that many people – and not just historians – have asked how on earth it started in the first place. This question hasn't been without its controversy.

Historians at war

When the war ended the political leaders on the winning side thought it was quite easy to work out how the war began: it was all Germany's fault. They even wrote that claim into the peace treaty and made the Germans sign it (see Chapter 17). Then, after the war, historians started ploughing their way through thousands and thousands of diplomatic memos and telegrams and papers and letters in the archives to *prove* who caused the war. And the answer was: Germany! Or maybe Austria. Or maybe the British Foreign Secretary. Or else the Russians. It all depended on which documents you read.

These disagreements may come as a surprise to you, but this is how history works. Very seldom do you find a piece of evidence that definitely *proves* something; usually, a document's significance depends on the different ways historians interpret it. All too often historians – like anyone else – can read into the evidence what they want to see, rather than what's actually there!

An accident waiting to happen . . .

In the years after the war, some historians liked to argue that no one *caused* the war. They argued that the outbreak of war was inevitable and that the countries all just somehow slid into it. Or, if you prefer, they were all equally self-interested and therefore equally to blame.

The trouble with this argument is that nothing in history is inevitable until it happens (otherwise, you might as well blame fate or the stars and have done with it). What makes history so interesting is precisely that people often *don't* act in their own best interests. Every country stood to lose heavily from the war, and they all did. So maybe the 'accident waiting to happen' idea raises more questions than it answers. Let's try Plan B.

. . . or was villainy afoot?

When the *Second* World War started in 1939 some people began asking: what is it with the Germans and their invading-the-neighbours addiction? Other people said that starting the Second World War didn't prove that Germany had started the First World War as well. And then in the 1960s a German (yes, German) historian called Fritz Fischer started producing what appeared to be documentary proof that the Germans had definitely been planning the First World War. Ever since then the debate has raged, though generally scholars accept the broad outline of Fischer's argument nowadays – except, understandably, in Germany. (I say more about how and why the war started in Chapter 3.)

Reviewing the Combatants

The war involved a huge range of countries from all parts of the world, from the *Great Powers* – the strongest and most powerful countries of all – to the most humble of colonial territories. Allow me to introduce you to some of them. (I look at them in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3.)

The Central Powers

Germany and its allies dominated the centre of the continent and, after the war had started, they came to be known as the *Central Powers*.

Germany – nation most likely to succeed

Germany was the one to watch. The German army was highly organised and it was run by a sort of military ministry called the General Staff, in which hundreds of highly professional officers studied all the possible permutations for war and worked out how to win them all. It was also building up a powerful fleet. Germany's erratic Kaiser (emperor), Wilhelm II, declared that Germany wanted its 'place in the sun', but the other Great Powers wanted to know just what that meant in practice.

Austria-Hungary – one state, two kingdoms

Once Austria had been one of the great titans of Europe, but it had been crushed by Napoleon and then badly shaken by a series of revolutions, from which it had never recovered. The proud Hungarians, who had been merely a province of the old Austrian Empire, demanded and got equal status with the Austrians, and so in 1867 the curious *dual monarchy* of 'Austria-Hungary' was born. This dual monarchy idea is complex, but woe betide anyone who got it wrong! Within the dual monarchy, Austria was an *empire,* with an emperor, but Hungary was a *kingdom,* with a king. Since the emperor and the king were the same person, it meant he held two different titles, had two different

crowns and two different coronations. When anything was done purely within Austria it was *imperial;* when it was done within Hungary it was *royal;* and when it was done by Austria-Hungary together, it was *imperial and royal.*

As well as Austrians and Hungarians, Austria-Hungary included a huge range of other national groups – Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Poles, Croats and, most importantly, Serbs – which were, in effect, subject peoples of an empire, although to complicate things further some were ruled just by Austria and some just by Hungary.

REMEMBER

The two halves of the empire shared the same monarch, the Habsburg Emperor Franz Josef, and they were to follow the same foreign and military policy, but for all other things they would operate as separate states. This was to prove crucial in 1914.

Turkey – the Ottoman Empire

The Turkish Empire was officially called the Ottoman Empire. The *Ottomans* were originally a tribe of the Turkish people who took their name from their founder, Sultan Osman. The Ottomans took over the leadership of the Turks back in the middle ages and the Turkish empire had been known as the Ottoman Empire ever since.

By 1909 the Ottoman Empire was in a very sorry state. Its government was weak and corrupt, it had lost control of Egypt, Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and no one expected it to keep hold of the rest of the empire for long. But although the Empire may have been weak, the Turks had shown themselves to be utterly ruthless when it came to crushing revolts and had twice defended themselves against Russian invasion with impressive determination. Turkey had been a British ally, but the Germans were wooing the new, nationalist Turkish government with friendship, investment and top-notch German military advisers. And the Turks were very interested in what the Germans were offering.

The Allied and Associated Powers

Opposing Germany and its allies was a sort of alliance (but not actually an alliance – don't worry: I explain in this section) of France, Britain, Russia and Italy, and their respective empires, later joined by the United States. Not forgetting Belgium and Serbia.

France – hungry for revenge

France had been the military giant of Europe back in Napoleon's day, but since then the country had been torn apart by revolutions and in 1870–1 it had lost a catastrophic war with the German states. First, the Germans had paraded through Paris and staged a great ceremony in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles to celebrate the creation of a united Germany. (Don't forget this.) The

Germans had also annexed two of France's most important industrial provinces, Alsace and Lorraine. The French could only dream of getting revenge, because they were too deeply divided between left and right to start launching wars on their own. But give them an ally and that situation might change . . . .

Britain – feeling slightly nervous

Britain had been the most powerful state in the world but by 1900 other countries were catching up, including the United States and, more worryingly, Germany. Maybe it was time for Britain to look around for a friend or two. Doing so wasn't easy: the other Europeans didn't much like Britain and the only alliance the British could sign was an admittedly very useful deal with Japan. But in 1904 Britain signed an agreement with the French to patch up their differences, and in 1907 a second one with Russia. These agreements were known as *ententes* (that's French for *agreements,* folks) and they weren't alliances: they didn't tie Britain down to intervening in any war that might break out. Or did they?

Russia – the friendless giant

No one much liked Russia. It was a huge, oppressive state with an all-powerful ruler, and it was expanding everywhere – in the Baltic, in eastern Europe, in the Balkans, in Central Asia, in the Far East: nowhere seemed to be beyond Russia's grasp.

But Russia had serious problems. It was way behind the rest of Europe in industrial development, it had a serious internal security problem (one group of revolutionaries blew up Tsar Alexander II, and no Russian minister was safe from assassination) and in 1904 it went to war with Japan – and lost. Russia had been a German ally and some people in both countries thought it still should be, but the Russians didn't trust Germany's other ally, Austria-Hungary. With three people in the marriage, something had to give. Russia and Germany split up and, on the rebound, as it were, Russia signed an alliance with France in 1894. Which meant that if Germany ever went to war with France, it would be at war with Russia too.

Italy – open to offers

Italy was allied to Germany and Austria-Hungary, but it wasn't very happy about it. The Austrians were the Italians' old enemies; the Germans had helped the Italians unify their country and wouldn't let them forget it. The pope was sulking in the Vatican because Italy had taken nearly all his lands without asking, and when the Italians tried to cheer themselves up by doing what other Great Powers did – grabbing hold of some part of Africa – they invaded Ethiopia. And lost. So Italy was in a strange position in 1914: it was allied to Germany but open to a better offer.

The United States of America – keeping out of things

The United States was home to thousands of European immigrants who'd gone there to escape all those kings, generals and wars (see Chapter 11). The USA had just a small army, though that didn't stop the country from

expanding: it fought a war with Spain and took over territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean. The Americans were content to establish themselves as the world's greatest economy and let the Europeans fight their own wars.

Japan – east is west

The Japanese had spent 40 years successfully turning themselves into a modern western-style country, with western-style industry and administration and western-style armed forces. They had an alliance with Britain and in 1904 they took on the Russians and won. They had their eyes on expanding in China and the Pacific, and a European war might give the Japanese just the opportunity they were looking for.

Serbia – a little country with big ideas

Serbia was a small Balkan state with ambitions to be a big Balkan state. In particular, it wanted to take over the ethnically mixed region of Bosnia-Herzegovina (see Chapter 3). What made Serbia a worrying country was its tendency for political violence. In 1903 Serbian army officers had launched a coup and hacked the King and Queen to death. Some of those conspirators were still powerful in 1914 and they hadn't lost their taste for royal blood.

Belgium – sitting in the way

If people thought of the Belgians before 1914, it was as the pretty ruthless rulers of a huge African colony in Congo. Belgium itself seemed a quiet, peaceful country, but appearances are deceptive. The Belgian coastline faces the southern coast of England, and for anyone wanting to invade France, Belgium provided an easy way round the back of the French frontier defences. If war came, Belgium would be in the front line.

The rulers

The early 20th century was a good time for designers of crowns and coronation robes because most of Europe was ruled by monarchs. Only one of these monarchs was an *autocrat* (that's a monarch who can rule pretty much as he likes) – Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. That, at any rate was the theory: in reality Nicholas depended heavily on his ministers, his general, his wife and even on the mystic monk Rasputin.

Other rulers were more open about the limits on their powers. The British monarchy, with Queen Victoria still on the throne when the 20th century opened, was a *constitutional monarchy* in which the monarch had to respect the wishes of parliament and accept the prime minister's advice. The Italian monarchy was broadly based on the British model. Emperor Franz Josef was both Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, so he, poor man, had two governments to listen to. France was a *republic,* so in theory power lay with the elected president, though in practice French politics were based on ever-changing coalitions, so the president had to keep a very wary eye on everyone in the French national assembly.

REMEMBER

The big question mark was over Germany: who really ruled that powerful military state? The Kaiser liked to think he did, but the German constitution said otherwise: the Kaiser had to work with the *Reichstag* (parliament) and above all with the *Chancellor* (Prime Minister). But the Chancellor, in turn, had to carry the military with him. This meant that in Germany the military had far more political power than in any other European country. This was going to matter.

Mapping the Conflict

Countries fought over particular parts of the world in the First World War. Most people think of wars in terms of arrows and symbols stuck on maps of the world, so here I have a look at the theatres of war.

Viewing the different theatres of war

Here I list the main areas of the world where fighting took place, but first, I need to explain a few terms:

REMEMBER

- ✔ **Theatres of war:** Historians use this term to denote a whole geographical area where fighting took place. So the Western and Eastern Fronts were both parts of the *European theatre;* the fighting in Kenya, German South West Africa, Portuguese East Africa, Togo and the Cameroons all made up the *African theatre,* and so on.

- ✔ **Fronts:** *Front* refers to the area where the fighting was happening: The term is linked to 'front line'. Fronts can move, sometimes very rapidly, or they can be stuck in more or less the same place, as happened with the Western Front.

- ✔ **Campaigns:** A *campaign* is a big military plan, with a set of objectives which, you hope, either win the war or at least badly hurt the enemy. Campaigns often involve many battles.

- ✔ **Battles:** *Battle* took a change of meaning in the First World War. The word used to mean a single fight at a specific place, such as the Battle of Waterloo or the Battle of Hastings. However, First World War battles were much bigger than battles had been in the past: the British attack on the Somme in 1916, for example, was so huge that generals in previous wars would've called it a whole campaign.

The Western Front

The Western Front is, for many people, the *only* part of the First World War they know about. The war in the west began with a German invasion of Belgium and France, and when this was pushed back, both sides dug in and took shelter in trenches (see Chapter 7). This line of trenches ran in an unbroken line from the Swiss border, where Swiss border guards could watch both sides and

kept a careful eye to make sure they stayed on their own sides of the frontier, to the Belgian coast, where it petered out before hitting the sand dunes (see Figure 1-1). Although each side did make some advances, this line of trenches remained fairly static, despite some huge battles, until 1918.
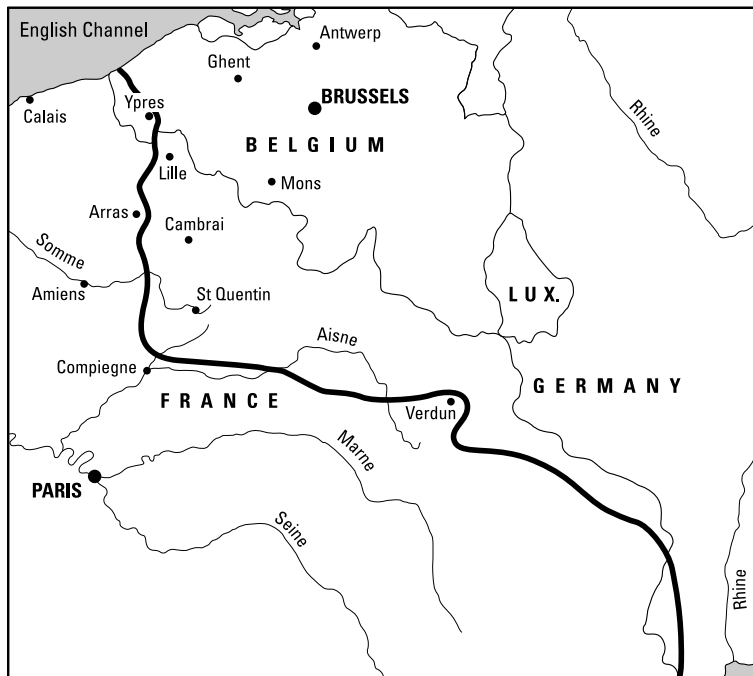

Figure 1-1:
The stabilised line of the Western Front.

The Eastern Front

Although trenches were dug on the Eastern Front, they never dominated the scene in quite the way they did in the west. The Eastern Front was more of a war of *movement* (see Figure 1-2). Like the Western Front, though, it was huge. In the north it ran through Poland and western Russia, where the Germans and Russians faced up to each other. Then the Front ran south through southern Poland and into Czech and Slovak territory, into the area where the Russians faced the Austro-Hungarians. Romania entered the war in 1916, thus extending the Eastern Front even farther south.

Figure 1-2:
The area of
the Eastern
Front.

The southern theatre

The war was fought in various parts of southern Europe (see Figure 1-3). In 1915 Italy joined in the war on the Allied side and a front opened up along its Alpine border with Austria. This Alpine war was extremely dangerous and costly but it often gets overshadowed by the Western Front. Bulgaria joined in the war on Germany's side, so fighting took place along its borders too. Austria's border with Serbia was where the fighting actually began, but after Serbia was overrun in 1915, the British and French opened another front against the Austria, at Salonika in northern Greece.

The Turkish theatre

Turkey's entry into the war sparked off fighting over a very wide area (see Figure 1-4, and check Chapter 9 for the details). First, Turkey fought against the Russians in the Caucasus region of central Asia. British forces from India then invaded Turkish-held Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) and in 1915 Allied troops landed at Gallipoli on the Turkish coast. A major anti-Turkish rebellion started up in Arabia and the British launched an offensive from Egypt that moved northwards through Palestine and Syria.
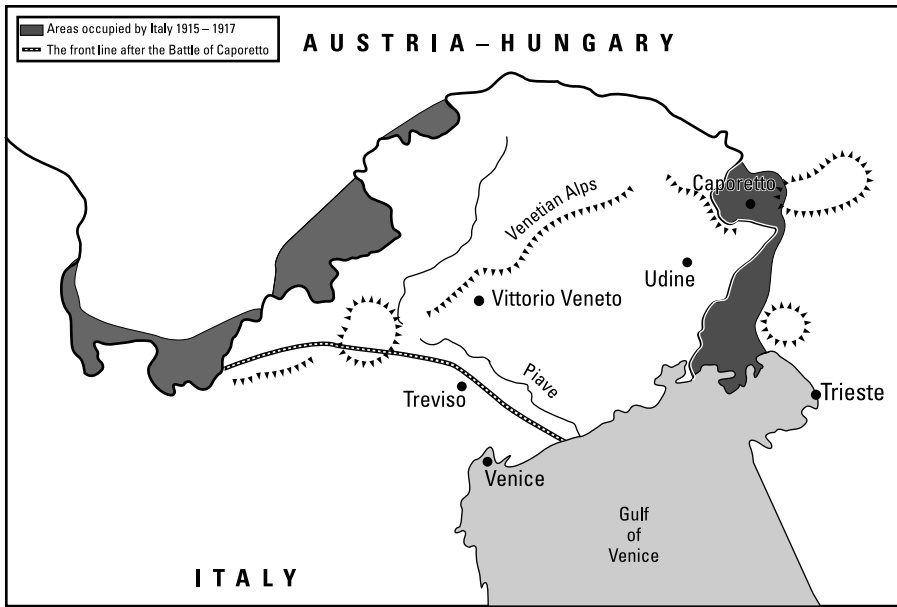
Top map

Areas occupied by Italy 1915 – 1917
The front line after the Battle of Caporetto

AUSTRIA–HUNGARY

Venetian Alps

Caporetto

Udine

Vittorio Veneto

Piave

Treviso

Trieste

Venice

Gulf
of
Venice

ITALY

Bottom map

AUSTRIA–HUNGARY

Austro-Hungarian army   German army

BELGRADE

ROMANIA

BUCHAREST

Bulgarian army

SERBIA

MONTENEGRO

CETINJE

SOFIA

BULGARIA

Bulgarian army

Sarajevo

Bulgarian army

Adriatic Sea

ALBANIA

DURRËS

German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian forces

Serbian, French and British forces

Thessaloniki

OTTOMAN

Black Sea

ITALY

GREECE

EMPIRE

Aegean Sea

Figure 1-3: The Italian (left) and Salonika (right) fronts of the southern theatre.

Figure 1-4: The wide area of the Turkish theatre.

The African theatre

Britain, France, Belgium and Germany all had colonies in Africa and the outbreak of war in Europe set the Allied colonies up against the German ones. The Germans were outnumbered but their commander in east Africa conducted a guerrilla campaign that led the British a merry dance. Fighting in Africa stretched from German South-West Africa, through the centre of the continent to Kenya and East Africa (see Figure 1-5). (Chapter 10 contains all you need to know about how the war dragged in the African colonies.)

The Pacific theatre

The Australians and New Zealanders attacked Germany's Pacific colonies. The Japanese were keen to contribute their bit to the Allied war effort by attacking German possessions in China and the Pacific (see Figure 1-6 and Chapter 10). They also took the opportunity to start taking Chinese territory until China came into the war on the same side and the Allied leaders asked the Japanese to refrain from attacking their ally.
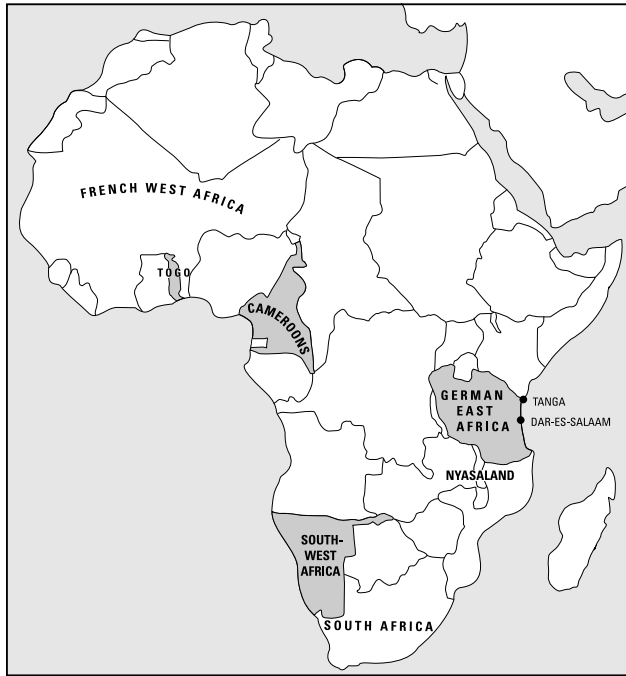
Figure 1-5: German colonies (in grey) of the African theatre where war was waged (shaded areas).
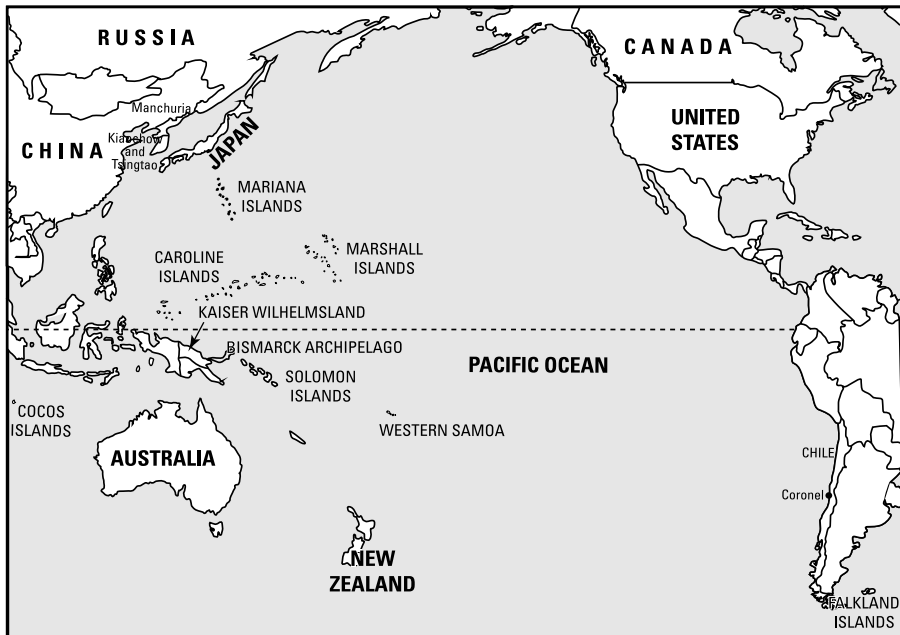
FRENCH WEST AFRICA

TOGO

CAMEROONS

GERMAN EAST AFRICA

TANGA
DAR-ES-SALAAM

NYASALAND

SOUTH-WEST AFRICA

SOUTH AFRICA

Figure 1-6: Key locations of conflict at land and sea in the Pacific theatre.

RUSSIA

CANADA

Manchuria

Kiaoshow and Tsingtao

CHINA

JAPAN

UNITED STATES

MARIANA ISLANDS

CAROLINE ISLANDS

MARSHALL ISLANDS

KAISER WILHELMSLAND

BISMARCK ARCHIPELAGO

PACIFIC OCEAN

SOLOMON ISLANDS

COCOS ISLANDS

WESTERN SAMOA

CHILE

AUSTRALIA

Coronel

NEW ZEALAND

FALKLAND ISLANDS

The naval war

Navies can fight anywhere in the world and the First World War is a good example. The British and German fleets squared up to each other in the North Sea and the English Channel (the biggest naval battle, Jutland in 1916, was fought off the coast of Denmark) and clashed at Coronel, off the coast of Chile, and then again off the coast of the Falkland Islands in the south Atlantic (see Figure 1-6). German U-boats (submarines) operated all round the British Isles and far out across the Atlantic. German surface raiders operated even farther afield: one of the most famous and successful, the *Emden,* attacked shipping in both the Pacific and the Indian Oceans (see Chapter 8).

Making the struggle global: Other areas of war

As well as the areas where the actual fighting took place, the war also had a great impact on other places.

A home front

The First World War has a good claim to be the first war with a concept of a *home front*. Of course, all wars affect those people who stay at home, but the First World War was the first to turn everyone's ordinary lives into a front of the war. The most obvious example was in the factories, where both sides employed large numbers of women to replace the men who'd been conscripted into the army. Both sides had to introduce strict controls on food consumption too, and both used poster campaigns to put psychological pressure on everyone to get involved in the war effort.

In fact, the home front angle means that, whether or not you accept that this was the first *world* war (you can see in the first section of this chapter why some people quibble over that), a very good case exists for saying it was the first *total* war. (You can read more about the home front in Chapters 12 to 14.)

Neutral countries

Some countries managed to stay neutral in the war, such as Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Sweden. Neutral countries were important areas for espionage and for attempts to find a peace settlement to end the war, but neutrality didn't save countries from the effects of the fighting. Some countries came under pressure to join in the war, and all found their trade seriously disrupted by the blockades and U-boat campaigns that the belligerents were throwing at each other.

Forging Ahead with the Technology and Science of War

Many soldiers went into battle in 1914 still wearing the colourful uniforms of a century earlier, and commanders still placed enormous hopes in cavalry charges to scatter the massed ranks of enemy infantry. However, the early 20th century was a time of enormous technological change, which meant that these antiquated styles of warfare were on their way out. This was going to be a scientist's war.

Open fire! Inspecting the new weaponry

Soldiers still used their familiar rifles and pistols in the First World War; in hand-to-hand fighting in the trenches they even used weapons like spikes and maces that would've been familiar to medieval knights. But they also had to get used to some very new types of weaponry:

- **Aircraft:** The world's first powered, controlled flight, made by the Wright brothers, took place in December 1903, and a decade later aircraft were being used to fight wars. The First World War was the first conflict to be fought in the air. Planes conducted reconnaissance and attacked each other, first with pistols and rifles, and later with machine guns. Airships carried out bombing raids, and by the end of the war special bombing aircraft were doing the same.

- **Barbed wire:** One of the most deadly weapons of the war wasn't designed as a weapon at all. Barbed wire was first developed as cattle fencing on the American prairie but it proved a very effective defensive measure in the First World War. Troops who got caught on the wire – and it was very easy to do so – were sitting targets for enemy marksmen.

- **Gas:** Huge advances in the chemical industry meant that militaries now had the use of poison gas. Not all gas was intended to kill, but plenty of gases did.

- **Machine guns:** Machine guns had been developed 40 years earlier, but they'd been large affairs, mounted on big wheels like cannon, and they were prone to jam. Machine guns in the First World War became much lighter and more portable – and more accurate.

- **Submarines:** Submarine plans were first drawn up in the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century and the first use of submarines in combat was in the American Civil War of the 1860s. But the First World War saw submarines used for the first time in large numbers and with the capacity to operate far from base. And to fire torpedoes: a deadly new development.

> ✔ **Tanks:** Tanks were originally to be called 'landships'. 'Tank' was a code-name, used to make it seem to any enemy agents who may hear of them as if they were large watertanks. The earliest tanks often broke down, but designs quickly improved. Tanks would revolutionise warfare and they certainly meant the end of cavalry.

Making advances in medicine

Many of the war's scientific advances were channelled into weaponry, but important advances were made in medicine too.

Trialling triage

Medical officers first applied *triage,* the system of prioritising casualties into those who'll definitely live, those who'll definitely die and those who'll live with immediate medical intervention, on a wide scale and systematic basis in the First World War. Ambulances took casualties to *clearing stations* just behind the front line where the exhausted doctors made their decisions. You just had to hope they got it right.

Sharpening surgery

The war produced a constant stream of casualties needing surgery. Some disagreement exists over whether this led to advances in military surgery or not. On the one hand, army surgeons gained a lot of experience and they certainly made advances in restorative surgery. On the other hand, many surgeons were so overwhelmed by the numbers of casualties they had to cope with that they went back to amputating limbs as the easiest way of dealing with the problem – just as surgeons had done in centuries past.

Minding mental health

Mental health was the area of medicine that saw the most obvious advances during the First World War. The effects of constant shelling on men's nerves was so shattering that many went through complete mental collapse. This was the first war where doctors began to treat shattered nerves and the effects of *shellshock* – what nowadays is called *post-traumatic stress disorder* – with sympathy and a much greater understanding of the symptoms and their underlying causes.

The First World War in a Nutshell

The First World War went through three distinct phases. I outline them for you here, to give you an overall feel for the shape of the war. If you want to know more – well, the rest of book is just over the page.

1914–15: The best-laid plans go wrong

Both sides went into the war in 1914 with plans of how they'd run rings around the enemy and be back home in time for Christmas. To general consternation, these well-laid plans all went wrong. The Germans *didn't* swing round and take Paris, the French *didn't* march straight into the heart of Germany, the Russians *didn't* steamroller their way into Berlin and the Austrians *didn't* march all over Serbia.

These failures (which I tell you about in Chapter 4) meant that military commanders on both sides had to spend the winter of 1914–15 going back to their drawing boards and rethinking their war-winning strategies from scratch. Nineteen fifteen was a sort of 'Plan B' year, with attacks in Belgium, in Turkey and in Poland, none of which broke through. It was also the year when the Germans tried to force Britain out of the war through submarine warfare, which was a different sort of Plan B. It didn't work either. (You can read about 1915 in Chapter 5.)

1916–17: The big battles

If Phase 1 was about trying to find the cleverest strategy, Phase 2 was about much less subtle and ever more desperate attempts to break through the stalemate on all sides by launching massive offensives. The Allies co-ordinated their plans for big attacks in both the west and the east, but the Germans struck first with a massive offensive against the French at Verdun. The British then launched their own massive offensive on the Somme. When those attacks failed, the French planned yet another massive offensive under General Nivelle. That failed. Then the British launched yet another one, at Ypres. That failed too. The only successful attack made in 1916 was by the Russian General Brusilov, who broke through the Austrian lines but wasn't able to keep his attack going, and in 1917 by the Austrians, who broke through the Italian lines at Caporetto.

By the end of 1917 the Allies were exhausted: revolution broke out in Russia, and although the United States entered the war in April, American troops wouldn't be arriving in large numbers for another year. (Chapters 6 and 15 take you through the ups and downs of 1916 and 1917.) Nineteen eighteen started with all the advantages very much on the German side.

1918–19: Endgames

In the spring of 1918 the German launched their massive offensive, the *Kaiser battle,* which broke through the Western Front and sent the British and French spinning back to their separate bases. The Germans headed towards Paris and it looked as if they might snatch victory. But the Allied troops

rallied and started to fight back. American troops started arriving in large numbers and went straight into battle, the Allies pushed the Germans right back to their frontier and the German army collapsed.

Meanwhile the Italians had got their breath back and defeated the Austrians. And as the war collapsed, so did the governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary: socialists staged a revolution in Berlin that toppled the Kaiser, and the different nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire finally made their bids for independence, with the result that Austria-Hungary imploded.

US President Wilson offered Germany and its allies what sounded like very reasonable peace terms and they agreed to a ceasefire. However, the peace treaties that the Allies drew up in 1919 were anything but reasonable, and are generally regarded as an important root cause for the outbreak of a Second World War barely 20 years later. (Chapters 16 and 17 guide you through the final dark days of war and the peace negotiations and settlements that followed.)

The Legacy: Why the First World War Still Matters

The years from 1914 to 1919 may seem like ancient history, and you may wonder whether the First World War still matters.

One important result of the First World War was the creation of thousands of war memorials and war cemeteries in all the countries touched by the conflict. These tributes to the dead of the war started off a whole culture of remembrance that people still keep going to this day. Even though many years have passed since the First World War and many other wars have happened, people still commemorate the dead of all wars in November, in memory of the First World War (see Chapter 18).

The war also had a knock-on effect on world events that has carried through to today. It helped bring about the Russian Revolution and the Second World War, both of which led to the Cold War, which continues to affect relations between Russia and China and the west to this day. But the impact of the First World War on recent history has been even more direct than that:

✔ The modern problems in the Middle East have their roots directly in the Allied campaigns in Arabia and Palestine and the policy the British followed about who should be allowed to settle where.

✔ The Northern Ireland conflict grew directly out of the Irish settlement brought about by the First World War.

- ✔ The bloody civil war that tore former Yugoslavia apart in the 1990s was a *direct* response to the settlement that the Allied leaders imposed on the region at the end of the First World War.

- ✔ The First World War provided the first major cracks in the bonds that held Britain's overseas empire together, and started the process that led to Britain's withdrawal from India, its most important colonial possession.

- ✔ The First World War marked the first time when the United States played a central role on the world stage. After the war – and despite their own preferences to keep out of world affairs – the Americans would go on to play a dominant world role for the rest of the century.

The First World War set the tone for the whole of the 20th century that followed, which in turn shaped the 21st. Think the First World War is ancient history and has nothing to do with you? Dream on, my friend. Or better still – read on.