

## 7.2 The part played by Britain on the Western Front, c.1914–18

The war began in August 1914 when Germany attacked France via Belgium, using the long-prepared Schlieffen Plan. On Tuesday 4 August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany. The armies of the Great Powers in Europe were already on the march. Britain was honouring its agreement in a treaty of 1839 to protect Belgium if the country was invaded.

### Key term

**Schlieffen Plan:** the plan devised by the German commander Schlieffen in 1904 to fight a war on two fronts.

### The British Expeditionary Force (BEF), 1914

The BEF of 100,000 men was well equipped and left Britain within a week – quicker than the Germans had expected. The German advance had already been held up in Belgium, and the BEF had no difficulty in landing at ports on the French–Belgian border. Even so, the Germans advanced into France, towards the River Marne, and the capital, Paris, was very close. The French responded quickly by moving many of their troops to stop the German attack. Paris taxis were used to move troops quickly to prevent German troops reaching the capital. The result was battles in the autumn of 1914, such as the Battle of the Marne, which lasted for a week in September. The BEF fought bravely alongside the French in these battles, but suffered heavy losses. By December 1914, over half of the original BEF were dead.



The Battle of the Marne, September 1914.

The Germans made a last desperate attempt at a quick victory in the west by advancing towards the Channel ports of Calais and Boulogne. However, the British forces, having moved from the Marne area, met them near the town of Ypres. After six weeks of furious fighting, the town remained in Allied hands and the ports were safe. Both sides suffered huge casualties, and both had to prepare themselves for a longer war than had been anticipated.

**Exam tip** Remember you need to know the part played by the BEF in defeating the Schlieffen Plan and the German advance in 1914.

### Britain and the Western Front, 1915–17

There was trench warfare on the Western Front between 1915 and 1917, with neither side able to break through.

#### Trench warfare

Both sides began to 'dig in' in order to defend themselves from the enemy. By Christmas 1914, it was clear that neither side was going to achieve a quick victory. The war had become one of stalemate. During the winter of 1914–15, two million soldiers faced each other across No Man's Land. Their rows of trenches became more organised and sophisticated as the months went by, as both armies sought some protection against both the weather and enemy machine-gun fire. No Man's Land was fortified with barbed wire and machine-gun posts. Before long, it was a wilderness of muddy shell craters, often containing rotting corpses.

The continuous line of trenches from the North Sea ports to the Swiss border made it impossible to outflank the enemy. A decisive victory could only be gained by a successful direct assault, and then breaking through into open country behind enemy lines. For three years, generals on both sides believed that this was possible if sufficient numbers of troops were assembled, and if there was enough bombardment of the area to be attacked. This was tried in 1915, but with heavy casualties. At the Battle of Loos in September 1915, the British suffered 80,000 fatalities in less than two weeks. The line of trenches hardly moved at all.



Trench warfare on the Western Front.

### New weapons Machine guns

On the battlefield, the machine gun had a devastating effect. The water-cooled machine guns used by both sides could fire up to 600 rounds a minute and frequently cut down hundreds of troops before they were able to advance more than a few metres.

### Gas

Poison gas was used for the first time by the Germans at the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915. It was later used by both sides in the war.

Gas attacks were widely feared, but they did not have a major impact on the outcome of the First World War. Gas was unpredictable in battle – a change in wind direction could blow the gas back to the sender – and by 1917 effective gas masks had been produced to protect soldiers on the battlefield.

Most people regarded gas as a particularly horrific weapon. In fact, the use of poison gas in war had been banned by international agreements at The Hague in 1899 and 1907.

### Tanks

The British used tanks for the first time at the Battle of the Somme in September 1916. The tanks achieved a little success at first but there were not enough of them to break the stalemate on the Western Front.

The first tanks were armour-plated with cannon and machine guns and moved at 5 km per hour. These models were unreliable and often broke down. Those that were successful often advanced too quickly for supporting troops and were captured or destroyed. At the Battle of Cambrai in 1917 the British used 381 tanks with great success in the initial stages of the battle. But the infantry soldiers could not keep up with them and in the later stages of the battle much of the land captured by the tank crews was recaptured by the Germans. Only in the final few months of the war in 1918 did tanks play an important part in bringing the stalemate on the Western Front to an end.

### Comment

*There were different kinds of gas: chlorine and phosgene gas destroyed the victim's lungs, mustard gas was particularly horrible and destroyed flesh.*

**Exam tip** Do not just revise details of these new weapons. You must be able to explain their effectiveness on the Western Front.

### Revision task

Make a copy of the table below. Use the information above to complete it.

Type of weapon	When was it first used?	How was it used?	Why was it important?

## The Battle of the Somme, 1916

General Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander, decided to launch a major attack against the Germans along the River Somme. He hoped that by using heavy artillery he would be able to weaken the German front line and so allow the British troops to advance. He also hoped to relieve the pressure on Verdun. This is what happened.

- The battle began with a five-day bombardment of German positions along a 30 km front.
- The German troops had prepared dugouts deep underground in order to survive the bombardment.
- On 1 July, 200,000 Allied soldiers attacked the German trenches along the Somme. British troops were ordered to walk not run since each man was carrying up to 30 kg of equipment.
- In the ten minutes between the end of the bombardment and the British attack, the Germans were able to return to their trenches and machine guns.
- On the first day of the battle, the British lost 20,000 men with another 40,000 wounded.

The Battle of the Somme ended in the middle of November 1916. Only 14 km of land had been gained by the Allies, at a cost of 600,000 casualties. At the end of 1916, there was still no breakthrough on the Western Front.

The wisdom of British tactics has been debated ever since. Sir Douglas Haig, the British general in charge of the offensive, has been ridiculed by many writers, but his reputation has been defended by others.

## The end of the war

### The Western Front, 1918: victory for the Allies

In April 1917, the USA joined the Allies in the war against Germany. The Germans knew it would take time for the USA to recruit and train an army, so they drew up plans to win a swift victory before the full impact of the American army was felt on the Western Front.

By March 1918, the Russian army had been defeated on the Eastern Front. The Germans could now move a million of their own men to the Western Front.

- Ludendorff, the German commander, decided that since he now had many more men than the Allies, he must make an all-out attack on the Western Front before large numbers of American troops arrived in Europe.
- On 21 March 1918, the Ludendorff offensive began and the Germans advanced rapidly; they had soon moved forward 65 km along a 130 km front.



Europe in the final stages of the war.

- They reached the River Marne in July and once again the French capital looked as if it might fall to the Germans.

The Allied commander at the time, General Foch, began his counter-attack on 18 July and with the help of newly arrived American troops was able to reverse the German advance.

- In August, the British defeated the Germans at Amiens with the help of tanks.
- More victories followed in Flanders (for example, at Ypres).

On 4 October, with the German army in full retreat, Ludendorff asked the Allies for a truce. On 11 November an armistice was signed and the First World War was over.

## Revision task

Make a copy of the table below. In column 2 use key words to summarise the part played by the British. In column 3 judge how important each event was for the outcome of the war on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the most important. Give a brief explanation for each decision.

Event	Part played by British	Importance (1-5)
The BEF and 1914		
The Somme, 1916		
The events of 1918		

## Exam practice

### SOURCE B

A photograph of a German trench, 1 July 1916, during the Battle of the Somme.



- 1 Study Source B. What was the purpose of this representation? Use details from the photograph and your own knowledge to explain your answer. (8 marks)

**Exam tip** The Exam practice question on the left is an example of a question 2 from Unit 3. You need to explain why this photograph was taken and printed. Note that it is a German trench and the scene of destruction was designed to show the success of the Allied attack on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Use your own knowledge of these events in your answer.