

Battle of the Frontiers

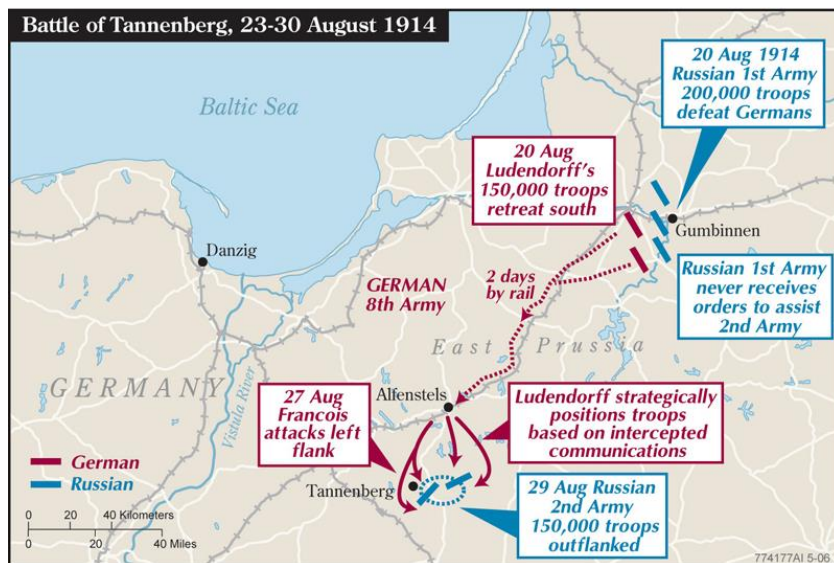
The Battle of Liege from August 5th through the 16th in 1914 was the first official battle of World War I. In that battle, the Germans took a surprisingly high casualty rate against the Belgians. But after their successful attack against the neutral country, the German forces continued to the French border. It was there that the Battle of the Frontiers took place. This was a series of battles in which the Germans began their invasion of France, and French troops attempted a counter invasion further south of Germany. The fighting took place between August 7 and September 13, 1914 along the eastern frontier of France and in southern Belgium. The battles utilized the military strategies of the French General Joseph Joffre with Plan XVII and the German offensive attack according to the Schlieffen plan. The German forces on the northern flank (side) were to circle around through Belgium and surround the French. This was delayed by the presence of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) joining the French troops. The Franco-British were driven back by the Germans, who were able to invade northern France. French and British rearguard actions delayed the Germans from advancing quickly, allowing the French time to transfer their forces to the west to defend Paris, and resulting in the First Battle of the Marne. In total, the French suffered 329,000 casualties, nearly 30,000 for the British, and the Germans approximately 305,000.



Battle of Tannenberg

The Battle of Tannenberg was fought between Russia and Germany from August 26th to August 30th in 1914 during the first month of World War I. The battle resulted in the almost complete destruction of one faction of the Russian army. For example, on the 29th, a large number of Russian soldiers had been killed running through an open field in an attempt to attack and break through the German lines. The Russian commanding general, Alexander Samsonov disappeared into the woods that evening and committed suicide rather than report the loss to Czar Nicholas II.

After the battle, it was reported that three Russian army corps had been completely destroyed, yet a portion of the Russian army was still in east Prussia. A series of follow-up battles destroyed most of another company of the Russian army as well and kept the Russians off balance until the spring of 1915. The battle is particularly notable due to the fact that the Russia would not gain German territory for the remainder of the War. Also, for the failure of the Russians to encode their radio messages, and what was arguably the worst defeat by any of the combatants in the War. However it was this battle that brought high prestige to the German Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and his rising staff-officer Erich Ludendorff. Although the battle actually took place near Allenstein, Hindenburg wanted to pay honor to former German soldiers that had lost in battle at Tannenberg (30 km to the west) in 1410. In total, over 78,000 Russians were killed or wounded, along with 92,000 taken as prisoners of war (POWs). However, the German loss is estimated to be approximately 15,000.



First Battle of the Marne

After invading Belgium and north-eastern France during the Battle of Frontiers, the German army had reached within 30 miles of Paris. Their progress had been rapid, giving the French little time to regroup. The First Battle of the Marne was fought between September 6th through the 12th in 1914, with the German advance being brought to a halt, and a stalemate and trench warfare being established as the norm.

As the German armies neared Paris, the French capital prepared itself for a siege. The defending French and British forces were at the point of exhaustion, having retreated continuously for 10-12 days under repeated German attack until they had reached the south of the River Marne. Nevertheless, the German forces were close to achieving a breakthrough against the French forces, and were only saved on the 7th of September by the aid of 6,000 French reserve infantry troops brought in from Paris by a convoy of taxi cabs, 600 cabs in all. On September 9th, the German armies began a retreat ordered by the German Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke. Moltke feared an Allied breakthrough, plagued by poor communication from his lines at the Marne. The retreating armies were pursued by the French and British, although the pace of the Allied advance was slow - a mere 12 miles in one day. The German armies ceased their withdrawal after 40 miles at a point north of the River Aisne, where the First and Second Armies dug in, preparing trenches that were to last for several years.

In a strategic triumph at the First Battle of the Marne, the French forces - assisted by the British - had succeeded in throwing back the German offensive, recapturing lost ground in the process. More importantly, the battle ended any hopes the Germans had of effectively bringing the war on the Western Front to an early close. Casualties at the battle were heavy. The French faced 263,000 casualties, including nearly 82,000 deaths. It is believed that the Germans suffered similar casualties, with just over 256,000 casualties.



Battle of Ypres

There were three main battles that took place in Ypres, Belgium, as it was considered a strategic location due to its position leading to the English Channel. The First Battle of Ypres took place between October 19th and November 22nd, 1914. As part of the early “race to the sea,” the French and British attempted to outflank (position itself strategically along the side of the enemy forces) the Germans, while the German troops were attempting to do the same. The Germans, having early successes at breaking through the Allied Powers defenses lines, were indecisive about how to capitalize on their gain and continue moving forward. This allowed the British to assemble a group of soldiers made up of secretaries, clerks, medical orderlies, cooks, and engineers that were eventually able to push the Germans back to their own lines. In November, the cold winter forced a break in the battle. Although two more battles would take place here, the First Battle of Ypres was significant for its foreshadowing of how fighting would continue on the Western Front. Trench warfare in which soldiers dug in and gained little ground, only to be lost by a counter attack. Allied losses are estimated to be between 130,000 to 160,000. Germany’s casualties were nearly 50,000.



Second Battle of Ypres

The Second Battle of Ypres comprised the only major attack launched by the German forces on the Western Front in 1915, the German generals preferred to concentrate their efforts against the Russians on the Eastern Front. This battle lasted only a month, from April 22nd to May 25th in 1915, but forced the Germans to view it as a failure and give up their attempt to take control of the territory. This resulted in the constant German bombardment of the town in an effort to destroy it and diminish its usefulness. However, the battle is most significant for the first use of gas warfare (Germany did attempt to use gas against the Russians on the Eastern Front, but the cold temperature froze the gas, and it had little to no effect). The Germans tested an early form of chlorine gas during the Second Battle of Ypres, which was at first condemned by the Allied Powers, then copied by the Allied Powers.

Beginning with an early attack at sunrise by 17-inch howitzers, the Germans bombarded French troops on April 22nd. This was followed by the release of 5,700 canisters containing 168 tons of chlorine gas that appeared as a greenish-yellow mist rolling across the field. Covering four miles of trench lines, the gas affected approximately 10,000 troops, half of whom died within ten minutes of the gas reaching the front line. Death was caused by asphyxiation. The soldiers that lived were temporarily blinded and stumbled in confusion, coughing heavily. Many were captured as prisoners of war. However, the Germans were weary of the remnants of the gas, and how effective it truly was. They moved slowly on the Allied trenches, causing them to lose their advantage, and forcing them to regroup under a British counter-attack. As the fighting continued through May, there were further gas attacks, but the Allied Powers held their ground at their newly established line of trenches. German casualties are estimated at nearly 35,000 while the Allies are approximated at 70,000 to 85,000 due in large part to the use of gas warfare.



Battle of Verdun

The Battle of Verdun was fought from February 21st to December 18th, 1916. It was one of the largest battles of the First World War on the Western Front between the German and French armies. The initial German strategy aimed to provoke the French to attack the Germans, in doing so, the French were drawn into position for a German attack through their preset defenses. This would force the French to suffer dramatic losses from German artillery-fire, while the German infantry held positions easy to defend and suffered fewer losses. The German plan was based on an earlier experience when, after early success, the French offensive was defeated with far more French than German casualties.

Poor weather delayed the beginning of the German Verdun offensive, allowing the French construction of defensive lines and the arrival of reinforcements before the opening attack. The French General Pétain ordered that no withdrawals were to be made and that counter-attacks were to be conducted, despite exposing French infantry to fire from the German artillery. The German troops were able to make substantial advances but French reinforcements contained the attacks short of their objectives. The Germans continued the offensive toward the last geographical objectives of the original plan, and came within 4 kilometres (2.5 mi) of the Verdun citadel. In August and December, French counter-offensives recaptured much of the ground lost on the east bank and recovered Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux. An estimate in 2000 found a total of 714,231 casualties, 377,231 French and 337,000 German, an average of 70,000 casualties for each month of the battle; other recent estimates increase the number of casualties to 976,000, with 1,250,000 suffered at Verdun. The Battle of Verdun lasted for 303 days and became the longest and one of the most costly battles in human history. This marked the beginning of World War I as a “war of attrition” in which the goal was not necessarily to gain a decisive victory, but to wear down the enemy until they eventually are willing to cede land or surrender.



Battle of the Somme

The Battle of the Somme was fought between July 1st through November 18th, 1916 and took place on a 30 kilometer battle front just north of the Somme River. The French planned the battle as a way to divert German forces and supplies from the Battle of Verdun, hoping it would provide a quicker end to that battle. Gaining ground against the Germans became a secondary goal.

The attack was preceded by an eight-day preliminary bombardment of the German lines, with the hopes that the continued bombing would entirely destroy all forward German defenses, making it easier for the attacking British troops to practically walk across No Man's Land and take possession of the German front lines. Yet on the first day of fighting, the British suffered a loss of 58,000 troops (one third of them killed). This was mainly the result of the failure of the advance artillery bombardment to destroy the German front line barbed wire and the heavily-built concrete bunkers the Germans had constructed. Much of the munitions used by the British proved to be 'duds' - badly constructed and ineffective. Many charges did not go off; even today farmers of the Western Front unearth many tons of unexploded 'iron harvest' each year. Despite heavy losses during the first day, the British Commander-in-chief Douglas Haig persisted with the attack in the following days. Advances were made, but these were limited and often ultimately repulsed. Haig was convinced - as were the Germans - that the enemy was on the point of exhaustion and that a breakthrough was imminent. Thus the offensive was maintained throughout the summer and into November. The British saw few victories however, and those that were secured were not followed up.

In September, the British rolled out their newest weapon, the tank. Two companies with 50 tanks rolled across the French terrain, and was useful in knocking down the barbed wire. However, mechanical and other failures reduced the original number of participating tanks from 50 to 24. While they achieved a large measure of shocked surprise when sprung upon the German opposition, these early tanks proved unwieldy and highly unreliable. The end of the battle in November was not decided by surrender, but rather snow, and the inability to continue to such extreme conditions. Ultimately, the Allied Powers suffered nearly 800,000 casualties, and the Germans over 500,000.



Third Battle of Ypres / Passchendaele

Whereas the first and second battles of Ypres were launched by the Germans in 1914 and 1915 respectively, Third Ypres was planned by British Commander in Chief Douglas Haig as a chance for Allied forces to breakthrough in Flanders in 1917. The ultimate goal was the destruction of German submarine bases on the Belgian coast. The British were taking heavy losses of their shipping and naval forces due to Germany's use of submarines, and it was feared that they wouldn't last through 1918. Meticulously planned, Third Ypres was launched on July 31, 1917 and continued until the fall of Passchendaele village on November 6th, 1917. The offensive resulted in gains for the Allies but was by no means the breakthrough Haig intended, and such gains as were made came at great cost in human terms.

As with the Battle of the Somme, the element of surprise was lost because the British bombarded the German lines for ten days prior to the attack. The Germans were ready, and the main British advances, limiting the Allied Powers to small gains. Within the next few days, the heaviest rains experienced in the region in the last 30 years caused more problems. The fields were essentially muddy swamps, and tanks became bogged down and immobile. The Allied Powers were forced to wait to renew their offensive in August. It is during this battle in October that Adolf Hitler is temporarily blinded by a British gas attack, and sent to a hospital to recover. After the Russian surrender on the Eastern Front, troops came as reinforcements for the Germans. Additionally, the Germans uses of mustard gas, greatly increasing Allied casualty rate. Estimates put the Allied casualties between 250,000 to 425,000, and German casualties between 200,000 and 400,000.

Today, the battle is commonly referred to simply as 'Passchendaele', and the tactics employed at the Third Battle of Ypres are as controversial as those executed at the Battle of the Somme a little over a year earlier. In both battles, Haig was under the false assumption that the Germans were near surrender, and convinced to continue in battle with the belief that they would.



Battle of Chateau-Thierry

Comprised of two related battles, first at Chateau-Thierry on June 3rd and 4th, and then at Belleau Wood from June 6th through the 26th in 1918, the Battle of Belleau Wood saw the re-capture by U.S. forces of the woods taken at the end of May by the German army. The Americans had launched a counter-attack in early June with the assistance of the French Tenth Division, and succeeded in pushing the Germans back across the Marne to Jaulgonne. This was followed up Chateau-Thierry two days later with the difficult exercise of capturing Belleau Wood.

Second Division's Marine Corps, under James Harbord, were tasked with the taking of the wood. This perilous venture involved a murderous trek across an open wheat field, swept from end to end by German machine gun fire. As a consequence of the open nature of the advance on the wood, casualties on the first day were the highest in Marine Corps history (a record which remained until the capture of Japanese-held Tarawa in November 1943).

Fiercely defended by the Germans, the woods were first taken by the Marines, then lost back to the Germans - and again taken by the U.S. forces a total of six times before the Germans were finally expelled.

The battle ran through most of June, and by its end saw U.S. forces suffer 9,777 casualties, of which 1,811 were fatal. The number of German casualties is not known, although some 1,600 troops were taken prisoner. Incredibly grateful to the Americans, the French renamed the woods Bois de la Brigade de Marine, in honor of the Marine Corps's tenacity in its re-taking.



Second Battle of the Marne

In what began as the last major German offensive of the First World War, the Second Battle of the Marne developed into a significant Allied victory. After it became clear that the Germans had not only failed in their aim to win the war in this offensive, but had in fact lost ground, a number of German commanders, including [Crown Prince Wilhelm](#), believed the war was lost

The battle took place over the course of 15 July-5 August 1918, in the final year of the war. [Erich Ludendorff](#), the German Chief-of-Staff, was convinced that the war could best be won by an attack in Flanders. To that end he determined to lure Allied forces from Belgium to the Marne in a huge diversionary attack, preparatory to a renewed offensive further north.

On the day of the offensive's launch, on 15 July, 23 German divisions, attacked the French Fourth Army to the east of Reims, while a further 17 divisions of the Seventh Army attacked the French Sixth Army in the west.

In attacking Reims in this way, Ludendorff aimed to split the French forces. Joining the French were 85,000 U.S. forces plus troops from [Sir Douglas Haig's](#) British Expeditionary Force (BEF), although the majority of the latter's forces were located further north in Flanders. The attack to the east quickly proved a failure and was halted at 11 am on the first day without being resumed.

With the Germans having ultimately failed in their efforts to break through, [Ferdinand Foch](#), the Allied Supreme Commander, authorized a counter-offensive on 18 July, launching 24 divisions of the French army alone, in addition to U.S., British and Italian troops and some 350 [tanks](#). His aim was to eliminate the large German presence among the French lines. In this he was entirely successful. [Mangin's](#) French Tenth Army, and Degoutte's Sixth Army led the attack, advancing five miles on the first day alone. [Berthelot's](#) French Fifth Army and Eben's Ninth Army meanwhile launched subsidiary attacks in the west.

On 20 July the Germans ordered a retreat; by 3 August they were back where they had started at the launch of the great spring 1918 offensive: at the Aisne-Vesle rivers. The Allied counter-offensive was finally halted on 6 August by the now solidly entrenched Germans. Casualties were high, more so among the German forces than the Allies. France suffered 95,000 casualties, Germany 168,000, with Britain incurring 13,000 losses and the U.S. 12,000. As a consequence of the disastrous result in the Marne, Ludendorff's planned Flanders offensive was initially postponed, then entirely cancelled. No further large-scale attempt to win the war was undertaken.

