**The beginning**

In the four decades prior to August 1914, the western world and the countries in its sphere of influence were undergoing unprecedented changes in every area of society. Industrial expansion and wealth, both personal and national, had a profound impact on economic life. These changes lead to conflicts, jealousies and differences that were not easily reconcilable. Monarchies and democracies alike sought to cope with the changes and to protect their authority. Meanwhile, as the major European nations sought to expand their wealth and territories, they also looked for partners they could turn to in case of war.

**Stalemate**

But with the expanding European economies, a majority of Europeans leaders were optimistic about the future in early June 1914. A small number of people, however, sensed a coming apocalypse.

Both sides originally believed that the Great War would be over quickly. In Germany, this belief was based on a long established war strategy called the Schlieffen Plan. The German generals were so confident of success that Kaiser Wilhelm II proclaimed that he would have "Paris for lunch, St. Petersburg for dinner." The plan required precise timing, with no interruptions in the timetable -- its first objective was to capture Paris in precisely 42 days, and force the French to surrender. The German armies would then shift their focus to the eastern front and defeat the Russians before they were fully prepared to fight.  
   
The Schlieffen plan got off to a quick start with a German army invading Belgium to reach Paris, and then soon began to unravel.

**Total war**

In the spring of 1915 the trenches along the western front were filled with millions of soldiers, at the average rate of one soldier per four inches of trench. The job behind the front lines was to keep the men fed, equipped and ready to continue the fighting until the end came.  
   
The civilians behind the lines were as important to victory as the men on the lines. Because of their value to the war-making power of each nation, civilians became the target of the enemy. Since both sides targeted both civilians and military personnel, and mobilized men and resources at an unprecedented rate, the Great War was a "total war."

**Slaughter**

In early 1916, the British had over 1 million men in Belgium and France, while the French and German armies had re-supplied their front line troops. The stage was set for both sides to try to make the breakthrough on the battlefield that would assure each victory.  
   
Instead, by year's end, both sides would lose nearly one million men with very little change in position of the front line trenches. The battlefields became "killing fields" and only one word, "slaughter", accurately describes the extent of the killing, violence and destruction.

**Trenches**

In September, 1914, the German commander, General Erich von Falkenhayn ordered his men to dig trenches that would provide them with protection from the advancing French and British troops. As the Allies soon realized that they could not break through this line, they also began to dig trenches.

As the Germans were the first to decide where to stand fast and dig, they had been able to choose the best places to build their trenches. The possession of the higher ground not only gave the Germans a tactical advantage, but it also forced the British to live in the worst conditions. Most of this area was rarely a few feet above sea level. As soon as soldiers began to dig down they would invariably find water two or three feet below the surface. Along the whole line, trench life involved a never-ending struggle against water and mud. Duck-boards were placed at the bottom of the trenches to protect soldiers from problems such as trench foot.

Conditions got so bad that some men preferred to sleep outside their trenches. Arnold Ridley commented: "If you've ever tried to keep awake when you haven't had any sleep for days, it's not a question of allowing yourself to go to sleep. I can remember lying in a sunken road behind Gueudecourt. The trenches were full of water and I can remember getting out of the trench and lying on the parapet with the bullets flying around because sleep was such a necessity and death only meant sleep."

C. S. Lewis also had trouble from waterlogged trenches on the Western Front at Arras in 1917. "Through the winter, weariness and water were our chief enemies... One walked in the trenches in thigh gumboots with water above the knee, and one remembers the icy stream welling up inside the boot when you punctured it on concealed barbed wire."

**Pals brigades**

Lord Kitchener was appointed Secretary for War in August 1914. His main task was to persuade men to join the British Army. At a meeting on the 19th August it was suggested by Sir Henry Rawlinson that men would be more willing to enlist if they knew they would serve with people they knew. By the end of September over fifty towns in Britain had formed pals battalions. The larger towns and cities were able to form more than one battalion. Manchester and Hull had four, Liverpool, Birmingham and Glasgow had three and many more were able to raise at least two battalions.

The effect of these pals brigades was that a soldier might see his friends from childhood killed in front of him and entire town or city neighborhood might lose many of their young men.

Later, all the countries involved were force to draft soldiers, also know as conscription.

**Body lice**

Men in the trenches suffered from lice. One soldier writing after the war described them as "pale fawn in color, and they left blotchy red bite marks all over the body." They also created a sour; stale smell. Various methods were used to remove the lice. A lighted candle was fairly effective but the skill of burning the lice without burning your clothes was only learnt with practice.

Where possible the army arranged for the men to have baths in huge vats of hot water while their clothes were being put through delousing machines. Unfortunately, this rarely worked. A fair proportion of the eggs remained in the clothes and within two or three hours of the clothes being put on again a man's body heat had hatched them out.

At the Passchendaele, Lieutenant Robert Sherriff described his men going into battle: "At dawn on the morning of the attack, the battalion assembled in the mud outside the huts. I lined up my platoon and went through the necessary inspection. Some of the men looked terribly ill: grey, worn faces in the dawn, unshaved and dirty because there was no clean water. I saw the characteristic shrugging of their shoulders that I knew so well. They hadn't had their clothes off for weeks, and their shirts were full of lice."

As well as causing frenzied scratching, lice also carried disease. This was known as pyrrexhia or trench fever. The first symptoms were shooting pains in the shins and was followed by a very high fever. Although the disease did not kill, it did stop soldiers from fighting and accounted for about 15% of all cases of sickness in the British Army.

**Rats**

Many men killed in the trenches were buried almost where they fell. If a trench subsided, or new trenches or dugouts were needed, large numbers of decomposing bodies would be found just below the surface. These corpses, as well as the food scraps that littered the trenches, attracted rats. One pair of rats can produce 880 offspring in a year and so the trenches were soon swarming with them.

Robert Graves remarked in his book, Goodbye to All That: "Rats came up from the canal, fed on the plentiful corpses, and multiplied exceedingly. While I stayed here, a new officer joined the company and, in token of welcome, was given a dug-out containing a spring-bed. When he turned in that night he heard a scuffling, shone his torch [flashlight] on the bed, and found two rats on his blanket tussling for the possession of a severed hand."

**Gas attacks**

Poisonous gases were known about for a long time before the First World War but military officers were reluctant to use them as they considered it to be an uncivilized weapon. The French Army was the first to employ it as a weapon when in the first month of the war they fired tear-gas grenades at the Germans.   
  
In October 1914 the German Army began firing shrapnel shells in which the steel balls had been treated with a chemical irritant. The Germans first used chlorine gas cylinders in April 1915 when it was employed against the French Army at Ypres. Chlorine gas destroyed the respiratory organs of its victims and this led to a slow death by asphyxiation.   
  
It was important to have the right weather conditions before a gas attack could be made. When the British Army launched a gas attack on 25th September in 1915, the wind blew it back into the faces of the advancing troops. This problem was solved in 1916 when gas shells were produced for use with heavy artillery. This increased the army's range of attack and helped to protect their own troops when weather conditions were not completely ideal.   
  
After the first German chlorine gas attacks, Allied troops were supplied with masks of cotton pads that had been soaked in urine. It was found that the ammonia in the pad neutralized the poison. Other soldiers preferred to use handkerchiefs, a sock, or a flannel body-belt, dampened with a solution of bicarbonate of soda, and tied across the mouth and nose until the gas passed over. It was not until July 1915 that soldiers were given efficient gas masks and anti-asphyxiation respirators.

Mustard Gas (Yperite) was first used by the German Army in September 1917. The most lethal of all the poisonous chemicals used during the war, it was almost odorless and took twelve hours to take effect. Yperite was so powerful that only small amounts had to be added to high explosive shells to be effective. Once in the soil, mustard gas remained active for several weeks.

An estimated 91,198 soldiers died as a result of poison gas attacks and another 1.2 million were hospitalized. The Russian Army, with 56,000 deaths, suffered more than any other armed force.

**Mutiny**

In 1917, after the loss of millions of live, the stalemate on the front lines, and the disruption of nearly every aspect of daily life in all the combatant nations, many people - civilians and soldiers alike - still wanted to continue fighting to victory. The combatant nations rejected all the peace initiatives that were proposed in 1917. As the months passed, however, people on both sides of the conflict began to question the violence and massive slaughter. People everywhere sought ways to cope with, if not escape, the environment of war. Russian front line soldiers grew increasingly disillusioned and apathetic. Many refused to obey orders, retreating when commanded to advance; they deserted the military and engage in open rebellion and mass mutiny. In France, a failed offensive in the spring of 1917 resulted in a mutiny not against the war but against the way it was waged by the general staff.  

**Collapse**

The year 1918 started with a major German offensive on the western front, which the Allies stopped. With the help of the Americans -- who declared war on Germany in 1917 -- the Allies then engaged in a highly successful set of offensives of their own. Germany's civilian support for the war eventually collapsed, and a mutiny by the German navy that sparked civil riots sweep through the cities. In early November, the Kaiser abdicated and fled to neutral Holland. On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, a cease-fire went into effect for all combatants. The war was over.

The Great War had been the worst disaster in history. Nine million soldiers were killed. Four empires had collapsed and large parts of France, Belgium and Russia lay devastated. The old order had been decimated and a new one was taking shape -- and this struggle would prove even bloodier than the war itself.   
   
Millions of people - military and civilian - in every combatant nation had to cope with the war experience and its aftermath. Some people tried not to remember the war, while others built monuments to those who had died. Many went to the grave burdened by the unanswered question: "What did it all mean?"

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Country** | **Total mobilized** | **Killed & died** | **Wounded** | **Prisoners & missing** | **Total Casualties** | **Casualties as % of soldiers mobilized** |
| ***Allied Powers*** | | | | | | |
| **Russia** | 12 million | 1.7 million | 4.95 million | 2.5 million | 9.15 million | 76.3% |
| **France** | 8.4 million | 1.35 million | 4.26 million | 537,000 | 6.16 million | 76.3% |
| **British Empire**  (incl. Canada, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, India, etc) | 8.9 million | 908,371 | 2.09 million | 191,652 | 3.19 million | 35.8 % |
| ***Central Powers*** | | | | | | |
| **Germany** | 11 million | 1.77 million | 4.2 million | 1.15 million | 7.14 million | 64.9% |
| **Austria-Hungary** | 7.8 million | 1.2 million | 3.62 million | 2.2 million | 7.02 million | 90% |
| **GRAND TOTAL** | 65 million | 8.5 million | 21 million | 7.75 million | 37.5 million | 57.6% |

**Countries** **Total  
Mobilized** **Killed  
& Di**