

## World War One (1914 to 1918)

One of the bloodiest wars in recent history, the casualty list is horrendous. It saw the first use of tanks and aeroplanes in warfare as well as the first significant use of submarines, equipment that previous battles had not seen. Although there were street parties in many European capital cities when the Great War broke out, it soon became clear that it would not be “over by Christmas”.

There were many significant events through the following years and there are many resources that provide detailed information about them. What follows here is a brief timeline of some of the events that will help to provide a stepping stone into further research.

### 1914

**June 28<sup>th</sup>** - Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austro-Hungarian Empire, was assassinated by a Serbian in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Through **July**, Austro-Hungary ensured that they had the support of Germany, whilst Serbia garnered support from Russia, France, Belgium and Britain.

As a result, on 28<sup>th</sup> July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, soon followed by Germany declaring war on Russia on **August 1<sup>st</sup>**, France on August 3<sup>rd</sup> and Belgium on August 4<sup>th</sup>. This led Britain to declare war on Germany that same day.

During the next month, Russia invaded East Prussia and Japan declared war on Germany.

**September 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>** – The first Battle of the Marne. The German advance was halted and trench warfare began. The Allied Forces then started a follow-up offensive of the retreating Germans at the first Battle of the Aisne on 14<sup>th</sup> September. On 15<sup>th</sup> September, the “Race for the Sea” began with trenches being dug north into Flanders and out to the coast. Once completed, trenches were also started along the 400 miles to the Swiss border.

**October 14<sup>th</sup>** – The first Battle of Ypres started, which was to last until 22<sup>nd</sup> November. The German troops were vastly inexperienced and during this battle alone lost 1,500 men with 600 others taken prisoner.

**December 21<sup>st</sup>** saw the first German air raid on Britain. A small aeroplane flew over Dover and dropped 2 bombs in the sea near the Admiralty Pier. Peace broke out temporarily on Christmas Day as soldiers along the Western Front declared a truce.

### 1915

Although the air raids on Britain from the small aeroplanes continued throughout the war, those from the zeppelins were far more effective. The first of these occurred on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> **January**. Two Zeppelins targeted Humberside but were diverted by strong winds, and dropped their bombs on Great Yarmouth, Sheringham, King's Lynn and the surrounding Norfolk villages. Four people were killed and 16 injured.

**February** saw German U-boat attacks on Allied and neutral shipping with the blockade of Britain being declared. From 19<sup>th</sup> February through to August, there were amphibious attacks by the Allied Forces on the Dardanelles and Gallipoli, which ended with the Turkish siege of the Allied forces.

On 1<sup>st</sup> **March**, the German submarine, U-28 fired a single torpedo into the *Falaba*, a British passenger-cargo ship, resulting in 100 deaths. Ten days later, Britain announced a blockade of German ports.

From **April** 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 25<sup>th</sup> the Second Battle of Ypres was fought, with Germany using poison gas for the first time. It was used on 3 occasions during this time: on 24th April against the 1st Canadian Division, 2nd May near Mouse Trap Farm and on 5th May against the British at Hill 60. The Allied Forces landed at Gallipoli on 25<sup>th</sup> of the month, with the Treaty of London being agreed the following day. This treaty meant that Italy, who had been neutral up to that point, came into the war on the side of the Allies.

A German-United States diplomatic crisis occurred on **May** 7<sup>th</sup> when a U-boat sank the British liner *Lusitania*. Of the 1,959 people on board, 1,198 died, including 128 Americans. This enraged the American citizens, putting pressure on their government to join the war.

Between **June** 29<sup>th</sup> and December 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Italians launched unsuccessful attacks on the Hungarians at the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Battles of Isonzo.

Continuing their assault on Poland, the Germans captured Warsaw on **August** 4<sup>th</sup>.

On **October** 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Anglo-French forces land at Salonika, Greece and during this month and into **November**, the Austro-German-Bulgarian forces invaded Serbia, banishing the Serbian army from the country.

By the end of **December**, the allied forces had begun to withdraw from Gallipoli.

## 1916

The Battle of Verdun, fought between the Germans and the French, started on 21<sup>st</sup> **February** and continued for the next ten months. This was the longest and bloodiest battle of the Great War, resulting in a total of over 714,000 men killed. Some modern day estimates put this figure at over 976,000.

Following on from the previous June, between **March** 11<sup>th</sup> and November 14<sup>th</sup>, the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> Battles of Isonzo took place between Italy and Austria-Hungary

The ship *Sussex* was torpedoed by the Germans, whilst en route from Folkestone to Dieppe on March 24<sup>th</sup>. Although there were Americans on board, none were amongst the dead, but outrage in America forced the government to undertake talks with the German powers. The result was that on **May** 4<sup>th</sup>, the Germans signed the 'Sussex Pledge', in which they agreed not to target passenger ships and not to open fire upon merchant ships until arms had been confirmed.

Fought off the coast of Denmark on 31<sup>st</sup> May and 1<sup>st</sup> **June**, the Battle of Jutland was the largest sea battle of the First World War. The British dead numbered 6,094 and the Germans 2,551.

Launched on 4<sup>th</sup> June, the Russian Brusilov Offensive in Carpathia (present day Ukraine) against the combined forces of Austria-Hungary and the German and Ottoman Empires was one of the deadliest battles in the hostilities with 1,825,000 men killed between the two sides by September.

On **July** 1<sup>st</sup>, the Battle of the Somme began.

**August 28<sup>th</sup>** saw Italy declare war on Germany.

Tanks were introduced on the Somme battlefield for the first time on **September 15<sup>th</sup>**. By the time that the battle ended on **November 18<sup>th</sup>**, the greatest number in British military history had been killed: 600,000 men died in order to gain 5 miles of ground. The Germans lost 650,000 defending them.

However, November 28<sup>th</sup> saw a lone German Gotha aircraft drop six bombs on London. As a result of this success, the Germans created a special bomber squadron dedicated to bombing England.

## **1917**

After limited use of submarine warfare, Germany once again resumed full use on **February 1<sup>st</sup>**. Following pressure from its citizens, after Americans being killed or injured in various incidents, the US severed diplomatic ties with Germany 2 days later.

Between February 23<sup>rd</sup> and April 5<sup>th</sup>, the German forces undertook a strategic withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, destroying villages, blowing up roads and booby-trapping ruins in their wake.

**April 6<sup>th</sup>** saw the US entering the war by declaring war on Germany. In the early morning of 9<sup>th</sup> April, Canadian troops stormed Vimy Ridge, rousting the Germans. But it was at the cost of 3,598 Canadian lives, with a further 7,000 being wounded.

Between **May 12<sup>th</sup>** and October 24<sup>th</sup>, the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Battles of Isonzo were fought, finally ending in Italian failure.

Following the 8,000 metres of tunnel that were constructed by the British under the German lines, 19 large mines were exploded in them under the Messines Ridge on **June 7<sup>th</sup>**. Three weeks later, the first US troops arrived in France. The following day, Greece entered the war on the side of the Allies.

The 'Battle of Mud' that was Passchendaele began on **July 16<sup>th</sup>** in a British attempt to break through Flanders, with a major British offensive being launched at Ypres on July 31<sup>st</sup>.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution that resulted in a Communist government under Lenin, Russia opened separate peace negotiations with Germany on **December 22<sup>nd</sup>**. These were concluded in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3<sup>rd</sup> of the following year.

## **1918**

Spurred on by the peace with Russia, Germany launched its first Spring Offensive on **March 21<sup>st</sup>**, eventually mounting five major offensives against Allied forces, starting with the Battle of Picardy against the British.

Their second Spring Offensive took place on **April 9<sup>th</sup>** with the Battle of the Lys, in the British sector of Armentieres.

Whilst German U-boats appeared in US waters for first time on **May 25<sup>th</sup>**, two days later they launched their third Spring Offensive, the Third Battle of the Aisne, beginning in the French sector along Chemin des Dames.

The first American offensive at the Battle of Cantigny on May 28<sup>th</sup> resulted in Victory for the Americans. Nine days later, on 6<sup>th</sup> **June**, the US 3rd Division captured Bouresches and the southern part of Belleau Wood.

The fourth German Spring Offensive was lunched on June 9<sup>th</sup> at the Battle of the Matz, in the French sector between Noyan and Montdidier. The final part of the Offensive was launched at the second Battle of the Marne on **July 15<sup>th</sup>**.

The Allies counterattacked on July 18<sup>th</sup> and by **August 8<sup>th</sup>** the successful Amiens offensive started, forcing all German troops back to the Hindenburg Line.

The greatest air assault of the war was launched by the US on **September 12<sup>th</sup>** during the Battle of St. Mihiel. Two weeks later the Meuse-Argonne offensive opened, which was the final Franco-American offensive of the war. Between September 27<sup>th</sup> and **October 17<sup>th</sup>**, the Allies stormed the Hindenburg Line, managing to break through at several points.

The Allies had made tremendous grounds against the Germans and as a result, in the early hours October 4, the German Chancellor Max von Baden, sent a telegraph message to the US government, requesting an armistice between Germany and the Allied powers.

In the following month, the British advanced, taking many Germans prisoner. Germany ended their unrestricted submarine warfare and, on **November 10<sup>th</sup>** the German Republic was founded.

Fighting finally ceased at 11am on November 11<sup>th</sup>.

As you can see from the above, this was a long and complicated war and many more battles than are noted took place. The cost of human lives was the worst in history with over 16 million deaths and 20 million wounded.

## Where are the Records Kept?

The National Archives at Kew hold British Army unit war diaries from 1914 as well as Cabinet Papers from 1915. Commercial websites also hold service records, which are downloadable for a fee. However, more than 50% were destroyed in 1940 when a German bombing raid hit the War Office and fire broke out.

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If you would like advice about where to find further information about the First World War and are not sure where to look, someone else might be able to assist you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post your query. The members will be delighted to try to help you.

There is so much more to discover about the First World War and listed below are some products that will certainly help you to understand what happened, where and why. All of them are available from [www.parishchest.com](http://www.parishchest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details:

- 1914 From Peace to War & Our Army and Navy Ref: YBM-SKU11211
- Ireland's Memorial Records World War 1 (1914-1918) Ref: ENE-C011
- Jutland - New Perspectives Ref: FHI-CDJNP
- Over Here and Over There: Ilford Aerodromes and Airmen in the Great War Ref: IHP-4852
- The Green Howards in the Great War 1919 Ref: ARB-0903
- World War I Ref: MJB-CB25

Parish Chest has a complete section that is dedicated to Armed Forces where you will find Army Lists for the time period covered plus Regimental packs and WW1 Volunteers. Don't forget to use the website search box as well and pop in words such as **National Roll**.