

# Chapter 1

## THE WESTERN FRONT 1914 –1916



Belgian troops during the withdrawal to Antwerp, 20 August 1914. Note the dog-drawn machine guns. (IWM Q81728)

### **BACKGROUND TO WAR: THE ROAD TO WAR**

The route which led the major powers of Europe to war in 1914 was long and tortuous, with many complex and interwoven factors eventually combining to drive them into a protracted and cataclysmic struggle. Among these factors were new naval and military technology, colonial rivalries, economic competition and irreconcilable national ambitions. However, perhaps the most important and

obvious turning point towards a general European conflict was the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. That limited confrontation had seen the humiliating defeat of France and the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership. The sudden emergence of the German Empire, which as part of the spoils of victory took the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from France, brought about a fundamental shift in the European balance of power. Germany's subsequent and accelerating progress towards economic ascendancy only intensified the anxieties of her neighbours and competitors.

For the best part of two decades, between 1871 and 1890, the new European status quo was not seriously challenged, thanks to the diplomatic dexterity and deviousness of Otto von Bismarck, the German Chancellor, in keeping France isolated. When Bismarck left office in 1890 it was not long before a fresh series of unpredictable currents began to erode the foundations of his carefully constructed Continental system. A rapid deterioration in Russo-German relations and a rapprochement between Tsarist Russia and Republican France compelled Germany to strengthen its existing links with the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, so ensuring that it possessed an ally to the east. While Germany was undeniably the dominant partner in this particular alliance, it would pay a heavy price for a policy that tied it more closely to a dilapidated empire that was itself finding it increasingly difficult to curb the nationalist aspirations of its diverse subject peoples in south-eastern Europe. The potentially explosive situation in the Balkans was made more dangerous by the decline of Turkish influence there, offering both Austria and Russia (the self-proclaimed protector of the southern Slavs) tempting territorial and political prizes in the region. In seeking to exploit such opportunities, Austria and Russia each embarked upon a course which could only end in confrontation. The rise of Serbia added yet another hazardous element to an unstable regional mixture. Serbia had been infuriated by Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 but had itself gained influence and territory as a result of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, giving Austria, in turn, mounting cause for disquiet and irritation.



British recruits at Aldershot in 1914. Many of those who volunteered at the outbreak of war would not see action until 1915 or 1916.

With the departure of Bismarck, the belligerent and erratic Wilhelm II – who had become *Kaiser* (Emperor) in 1888 – soon spurred Germany to follow a more aggressive path in international relations. France, already determined to avenge the disaster of 1870–1871 and win back its lost provinces, was further alarmed by Germany’s developing industrial and military muscle; Russia too had grounds for concern about an Austro-German alliance that not only threw an ominous shadow along its western frontier but was likely to counteract Russian interests in the Balkans.



Kaiser Wilhelm II, Emperor of Germany 1888–1918. (Topfoto)

The first, and probably the most significant, crack in the edifice erected by Bismarckian diplomacy came in 1892 with the removal of its cornerstone – the isolation of France. That year, Russia and France concluded a military agreement – reinforced by additional talks in 1893 and 1894 – under which each promised to come to the other's aid if either were attacked by Germany.

Moreover, the change from Bismarck's *Realpolitik* (politics of realism) to the *Weltpolitik* (world policy or politics) of Kaiser Wilhelm II ultimately forced Britain to review its relations with other leading players on the European and world stage. Admittedly, Germany was not the only power that made Britain uneasy. Recurrent tension in its relations with France and Russia, previously its chief naval competitors, had caused Britain to pass the Naval Defence Act in 1889 in order to safeguard the supremacy on which its national security and prosperity rested. The Act embraced the doctrine that the Royal Navy's establishment should, at any given time, match the combined naval strength of any two other countries. The maintenance of this 'Two Power Standard' became more difficult as the United States and Japan also began to overtake Britain industrially and to build ocean-going fleets. Britain was, however, content to

stick largely to its policy of ‘splendid isolation’ so long as the balance of power in Europe was not imperilled and no single nation became too dominant or threatened Britain’s security by making a hostile move into the Low Countries towards the Channel ports.

Britain was, in fact, relatively friendly with Germany for much of the last quarter of the 19th century, not least because Queen Victoria’s eldest daughter was married to the German Crown Prince, Frederick, who succeeded to the imperial throne in March 1888. Frederick died from cancer after reigning for barely three months, and the accession of his estranged and impulsive son, Wilhelm II, heralded fresh competition with Britain for colonies and overseas markets as the new Kaiser sought world power status for Germany. Even so, it was the German Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900 that did most to alienate Britain. Shaped by the German Naval Secretary, Rear Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, with the Kaiser’s enthusiastic support, these measures disclosed Germany’s intention to construct a fleet, including 38 battleships, within 20 years. Regarding Britain as Germany’s ‘most dangerous naval enemy’, Tirpitz envisaged the German fleet as a political pawn which would strengthen his country’s hand in world affairs. To this end he wished to provide Germany with sufficient capital ships to mount a genuine challenge in the North Sea and give it the capability of inflicting such damage on the Royal Navy that the latter would fall below the ‘Two Power Standard’. The launching of 14 battleships in Germany between 1900 and 1905 inaugurated a naval arms race that would enter an even more menacing phase when Britain launched the revolutionary turbine-driven ‘all-big-gun’ battleship *HMS Dreadnought* in 1906.

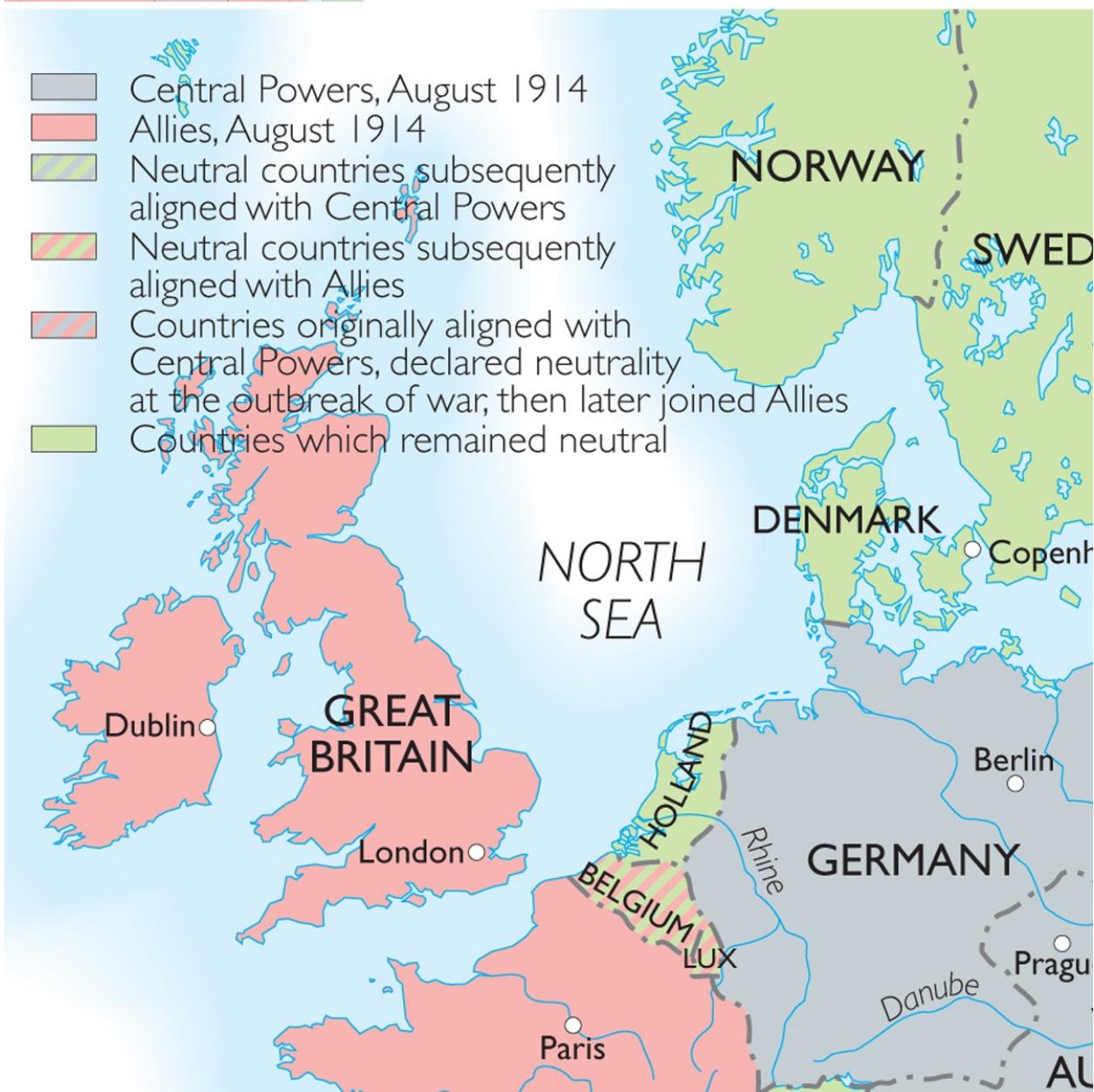
German backing for the Boers during the South African War of 1899–1902 hastened the demise of Britain’s earlier isolationist policy. Since the United States Navy was not obviously aimed *directly* at its interests, Britain, in 1901, deliberately abandoned any attempts to compete with growing American naval power. The following year an Anglo-Japanese treaty was signed, considerably reducing British anxieties in the Far East and enabling Britain to concentrate more warships in home waters. In 1904 the *Entente Cordiale* greatly strengthened British diplomatic and, later, military ties with its traditional rival, France. A similar understanding was reached with Russia in 1907, once Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 had all but removed the long-standing Russian threat to India. Thus before the end of the first decade of the 20th century Britain had swung noticeably towards the Franco-Russian alliance.

The understandings with France and Russia did not constitute formal agreements and neither did they commit Britain irrevocably to go to war in support of either power, but it was now at least morally bound to France and

Russia in opposition to the Central Powers, Germany and Austria. Any unforeseen incident involving one or more of these countries might well ignite a general conflagration which, because of the rival alliance systems, could engulf them all. In these circumstances it would certainly not have served Britain's interests to stand aside and allow Germany to conquer France and occupy the Channel ports. Therefore, despite all the contradictions in Britain's new international stance, the possibility of its participation in a European war on the side of France and Russia was – as Germany should have been well aware – far from remote.

Diplomatic manoeuvres, opposing alliances and naval rivalries were not the only ingredients which rendered the European powder keg more explosive and conditioned nations and peoples for armed conflict. The spread of education and adult literacy in the decades before 1914 also saw the rise of a popular press ready to glamorise deeds of military valour or take an unashamedly jingoistic line when reporting foreign affairs. Chauvinism and aggressive imperialism were similarly encouraged by capitalism. Fashionable ideas about 'national efficiency' and concepts such as 'Social Darwinism' emphasised the survival of the fittest and fostered the belief that war was a purifying ordeal necessary to counter any signs of national decadence and moral degeneration. As most political and military leaders erroneously thought that should war come, it would be short, statesmen were generally more willing to solve international disputes by military rather than diplomatic means.

All the individual national motives for conflict and collective failures to halt the slide into the abyss cannot, however, conceal the primacy of Germany's responsibility for war in 1914. In the often savage debate that has raged since the work of Professor Fritz Fischer in the 1960s, historians have disagreed about the extent to which Germany positively sought and planned the conflict in advance; but few have denied that Germany was its mainspring. For Prussian aristocrats, the officer class and industrialists, war held great attraction as a means of negating or diverting attention from the increasing internal influence of the Social Democratic Party. It would also enable Germany to forestall the modernisation and improvement of the Russian Army, expected to be complete by 1916–1917. Since Germany's impressive economic expansion had not yet been rewarded by world power status, a successful war would simultaneously end its diplomatic and military encirclement and bring it the geopolitical influence it felt it deserved.









European alliances before and during the First World War.

On 8 December 1912, the Kaiser summoned his senior military advisers to a war council. The fact that some of the conclusions reached on this occasion coincided with the actual events of 1914 has led Fischer and other historians to view the meeting as evidence that Germany's leaders took a conscious decision there and then to go to war within 18 months. The importance of the meeting in this respect may have been exaggerated, but there is no doubt that the Kaiser and the military-political-industrial élite wanted hegemony in Europe and were fully prepared to contemplate war, with all its attendant risks, as the quickest way of realising their ambitions. This in itself represented a serious enough threat to European peace but the situation was made infinitely more hazardous by the iron grip which the Kaiser and his circle maintained on the reins of power in Germany. Whereas considerable checks and balances were imposed upon the political and military leaders of Britain and France by their respective parliamentary systems, the German Army was essentially beyond civilian control. Its senior officers were directly responsible to the Kaiser, and neither the Chancellor nor the state secretaries (or 'ministers') were ultimately answerable to the Reichstag, the German parliament. In other words, those in Germany who were most willing to plunge Europe into war in order to deal with their own internal and external difficulties, and to assure Germany's standing in the world, were subject to the fewest effective restraints.

## **WARRING SIDES: THE OPPOSING ARMIES**

Germany's strategic ambitions and the unique status its armed forces enjoyed within society helped to ensure that, until 1916 at least, the Imperial German Army would be the dynamo of the First World War. It was Germany's war plan that did most to determine the course, if not the nature, of the conflict. The plan itself had been shaped originally, between 1897 and 1905, by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, then Chief of the German General Staff. Schlieffen's overriding aim had been to enable Germany to deal successfully with the strategic nightmare of a two-front war against Russia and France, should such a situation arise. However, by appearing to offer a feasible solution to this problem, the plan reduced the army's fears of a two-front war and, correspondingly, strengthened its willingness to accept the risks of such a conflict. In these respects, one could argue that the Schlieffen Plan, instead of being a mere precautionary measure, actually increased the likelihood of a general European struggle.

Schlieffen estimated that, should Germany have to face both France and Russia, the latter would be slower to mobilise and deploy, giving Germany a vital margin of some six weeks in which to overcome France by means of a

massive and rapid campaign in the west. As soon as France was defeated, Germany could then transfer the bulk of its forces to the east to tackle Russia. There was a danger, nonetheless, that the fortresses along France's north-eastern frontier might fatally delay the German Army's lightning western offensive. Accordingly Schlieffen resolved that German forces must cross a narrow strip of Dutch territory known as the 'Maastricht Appendix', then sweep through neutral Belgium before driving into north-western France. The pivotal role in the campaign was given to five armies deployed between Metz and Holland, totalling 35 corps in all. The most powerful forces were allocated to the extreme right wing of the offensive. One army here was expected to swing round to the west of Paris, on the outer flank of a colossal wheeling movement which was intended to take the opposing French armies in the rear before trapping them up against their own frontier. It was anticipated that, on the outbreak of war, the French would advance immediately into Lorraine, so two weaker German armies were assigned to the left, or eastern, wing. Their task was to contain the French movement and even fall back slowly, if required, in the hope of luring the enemy forces beyond any point from which they could seriously interfere with the planned German encirclement.



Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff 1891–1905. His war plan, with modifications, largely shaped German strategy in 1914. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

Helmut von Moltke, Schlieffen's successor, made several key alterations to the original plan between 1906 and 1914. Though a diligent and painstaking officer, Moltke was also introspective and suffered from bouts of low self-confidence. He was especially anxious about the potential threat to German communications which the expected French thrust into Lorraine would pose. Consequently, most new divisions created after 1906 were assigned to the German left wing rather than the crucial right. Once seven times stronger than the left, the right wing became only three times stronger as a result of Moltke's changes. Of equal significance was his decision to abandon the projected movement through Holland while sticking with the planned advance through Belgium. This decision was doubly unfortunate for it not only complicated the problems of deployment – squeezing the right-wing armies into a tighter initial bottleneck – but also failed to eliminate the considerable diplomatic and strategic disadvantages almost certain to ensue from any German violation of Belgium's neutrality. Historians have rightly observed that, even as originally conceived, the Schlieffen Plan was unworkable, as it paid insufficient heed to the problems of over-extended supply lines, inadequate communications systems, the fatigue of troops and the unpredictability of battle. It also miscalculated the speed of Russian mobilisation and the level of resistance that Belgian forces and civilians would offer. However, it is equally true to say that the changes wrought by Moltke did little or nothing to improve it and further undermined its already tenuous prospects of success.

Conscription, the bedrock of the German military system, permitted Germany to increase the size of its army swiftly, from a peacetime strength of around 840,000 to more than 4,000,000 trained soldiers when war was declared. Able-bodied young German males first joined the Landsturm at the age of 17; at the age of 20 they were called to the colours for full-time military training, which lasted two or three years, depending upon their arm of service. Thereafter they would pass into the reserve for four or five years and then carry out additional spells of service with the Landwehr and Landsturm until they reached 45. The Landwehr and Landsturm, upon mobilisation, would undertake defensive duties on lines of communication, and the reservists were alternatively recalled to regular units or formed new reserve corps and divisions that could confidently be used as front-line formations. The system, especially the employment of reservists, was to give the Germans a significant advantage over the French Army in some critical sectors along the front in the opening weeks of

the war.



German infantry photographed on manoeuvres before the First World War.  
(Getty Images)

In the summer of 1914 German infantry training was in the midst of a transition from close-order to open-order tactics – a factor that would cost their infantry dear. However, the army as a whole was excellently trained, had a solid nucleus of highly capable non-commissioned officers and could claim a clear superiority in its light, medium and heavy howitzers – weapons which would quickly prove their worth in the operations to come.

The French military system was likewise based upon conscription. In 1913 compulsory service had been extended to three years with the colours, then 14 in the reserve. Because its population was smaller, France had to call up a bigger proportion of the nation's men, including colonial recruits, to attain even a semblance of parity with Germany. At the outbreak of war, France was able to muster approximately 3,680,000 trained soldiers but had fewer reserve formations than the Germans mobilised.

In the wake of the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War French military doctrine had been recast. The most important figure in this process was

Lieutenant-Colonel (later Marshal) Ferdinand Foch. His teachings as Chief Instructor (1896–1901) and Commandant (1908–1911) of the *Ecole Supérieure de Guerre* placed the ‘will to conquer’ firmly at the core of the French Army’s creed and inspired an almost mystical faith in the primacy of the *offensive à l’outrance* (attack to the limit). The same gospel was preached by one of Foch’s disciples, Colonel Louis de Grandmaison, who between 1908 and 1911 headed the War Ministry’s important Operations Branch. It was reflected too in the army’s superb, quick-firing 75mm field gun, which more than matched its German 77mm equivalent, although medium and heavy artillery were given a lower priority.

The plan with which the French went to war – known as Plan XVII – was prepared under the guidance of General Joseph Joffre, the Chief of the French General Staff from 1911 and the Commander-in-Chief designate in the event of hostilities. The imperturbable Joffre, a follower of the Foch–Grandmaison philosophy, rejected a previous scheme for a defensive concentration along the Belgian border and instead announced his intention to ‘advance with all forces united to attack the German armies’. Five French field armies would be deployed under Plan XVII. Of these, the First and Second Armies on the right wing were to advance into Lorraine, exactly as Schlieffen had hoped. In the centre, the Third Army would attack towards Thionville and Metz. The Fifth Army, situated on the left between Mézières and Montmédy, had a more flexible role and, depending upon the route the Germans took, would either follow the Third Army’s general direction or thrust north-east through the Belgian Ardennes and Luxembourg. The Fourth Army would be kept in semi-reserve, ready to reinforce the left or centre as required.









Plan XVII, as amended on 2 August 1914 following the German invasion of Luxembourg

The rival war plans.

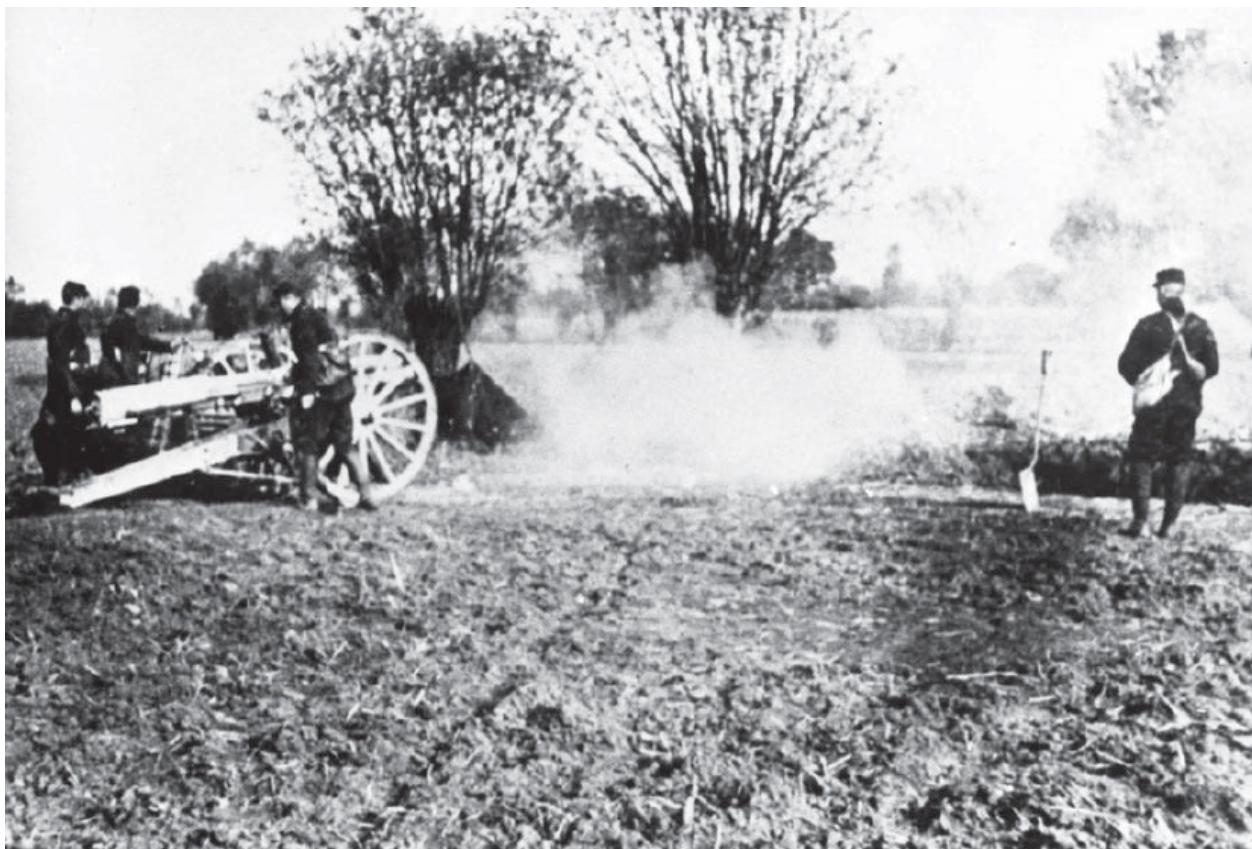
While more adaptable than the Schlieffen Plan, the French Plan XVII had a fundamental weakness. In grossly underestimating the extent to which German reserve troops would be employed alongside regular formations, the French, from the outset, were badly wrong-footed by the breadth and strength of the German sweep through Belgium. The Belgian Field Army was not expected to be a major player in the unfolding drama. Belgium had introduced conscription in 1913 but, when the crisis came, mobilised only 117,000 officers and men. The outbreak of war also found the Field Army divided by strategic disputes and in the middle of reorganisation.



Recruits from Bermondsey line up for an inspection. (Corbis)

Joffre also accorded relatively little weight to a possible British contribution when drawing up Plan XVII. Traditionally shielded from invasion by the Royal Navy, Britain still had a small, long-service professional army, raised by voluntary enlistment and regarded as sufficient to police and garrison its worldwide empire and protect British interests overseas. Five separate compulsory-service Bills had been placed before Parliament between 1908 and 1914 but all had been defeated. The underlying problem was that, in peacetime, no political party was prepared to risk the wrath of the taxpayer or commit electoral suicide

by shedding the voluntary system and supporting a financially costly expansion of the army. The reforms of R. B. Haldane, as Secretary of State for War from 1905 to 1912, had thus to be achieved within an agreed military budget which, during most of his term of office, was limited to around £28,000,000. Even after Haldane's reforms – and including its Regular Reserve, Special Reserve and part-time Territorial Force – the British Army, on mobilisation, only totalled some 733,000. There was the possibility of receiving reinforcements from India and the Dominions, although India's security could not be jeopardised and Dominion manpower was as yet of uncertain quantity and quality.



A battery of French 75mm quick-firing field guns in action in 1914. The barrel of the gun nearest the camera is at full recoil. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

The principal offensive component of the army was the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of six infantry divisions and one cavalry division, numbering approximately 120,000. Behind this were the 'Saturday Afternoon Soldiers' of the Territorial Force, formed from the old Volunteer Force in 1908. Some 269,000 strong in July 1914, the Territorial Force had been created chiefly for home defence but could provide a framework for future army expansion if necessary. Both the Regular Army and the Territorial Force lacked heavy

artillery in 1914 and were below strength. However, individually the men of the BEF were better trained than any of their European counterparts and had unrivalled standards of rifle-shooting, with many infantrymen capable of firing 15 aimed rounds per minute.

No agreement existed which irreversibly bound the BEF to fight on the European mainland if war came. However, Anglo-French staff talks since 1906 made this probable. As no one – least of all the Admiralty – had succeeded in putting forward a compelling and realistic alternative, the only cogent plan for the deployment of the BEF likely to be implemented, if only by default, was one that had been prepared after 1910 by the Director of Military Operations, Brigadier-General Henry Wilson, an ardent Francophile and friend of Foch. Under this scheme the BEF, on mobilisation, would assemble on the French left, in the Hirson–Maubeuge–Le Cateau area. Minimal consideration had been given to the long-term ramifications of this deployment. The logical corollaries to any meaningful continental commitment were the possible need to raise a mass army and the related necessity for industrial mobilisation to ensure that these much larger forces would be properly supplied. Britain's experiences in the first half of the coming war would be all the more painful because the country was permitted to enter a major conflict without any blueprint for military or industrial expansion or, indeed, any clear idea of the scale of effort that might be required.

## **OUTBREAK: COUNTDOWN TO WAR**

The incident that finally ignited the flames of war in Europe occurred on 28 June 1914, when, during an official visit to Sarajevo, capital of the newly annexed Austrian province of Bosnia, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne, was assassinated with his wife. The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, was one of a group of conspirators recruited and despatched to Sarajevo by the Black Hand, a Serbian terrorist group, with the connivance of the chief of Serbian military intelligence. The Serbian Government itself did not inspire the assassination but certainly knew of the plot and made well intentioned, if feeble, attempts to warn Austria about it. Austria eagerly exploited the opportunity to humble Serbia and thereby snuff out its challenge to Austro-Hungarian authority in the Balkans. First, however, Austria sought Germany's backing for its proposed course of action. Germany, in turn, saw in the Austro-Serbian confrontation a golden chance of securing hegemony in Europe, achieving world status while splitting the encircling Entente powers, forestalling Russian modernisation, eradicating the dangers to Austria-Hungary and suffocating domestic opposition. Even though it might drag the whole of Europe into armed conflict, Germany was

prepared to take this calculated risk to achieve its ends. Therefore, on 5 and 6 July Germany gave Austria a 'blank cheque' of unconditional support against Serbia.

Having obtained Germany's endorsement, on 23 July Austria issued a ten-point ultimatum to Serbia. The latter accepted nine of the points but rejected, in part, the demand that Austrian officials should be involved in the investigation of the assassination, regarding such interference as a challenge to its sovereignty. On 25 July Serbia mobilised its army; Russia also confirmed partial mobilisation before entering, on 26 July, a 'period preparatory to war'. Austria reciprocated by mobilising the same day and then, on 28 July, declared war on Serbia. Up to this point it might still have been possible to isolate the problem, but Germany continued to act in an uncompromising manner which only served to heighten tensions and gave the crisis international dimensions. On 29 July Germany demanded an immediate cessation of Russian preparations, failing which Germany would be forced to mobilise. Russia could not afford to acquiesce meekly in the destruction of Serbian sovereignty, or increased Austrian influence in eastern and south-eastern Europe. Consequently, on 30 July Russia ordered general mobilisation in support of Serbia.



German conscripts are given a rousing send-off as they leave Berlin by train for the front, August 1914. (Topfoto)

Russian mobilisation began the following day but was not the inevitable precursor to war: its forces could, if necessary, have stayed on their own territory for weeks while negotiations proceeded. Germany, however, proclaimed a *Kriegsgefahrzustand* (threatening danger of war) on 31 July and presented Russia with an ultimatum. Russia's failure to respond led Germany to order general mobilisation and declare war on Russia on 1 August. This action caused France to mobilise and set in motion the remaining cogs in the intricate machinery of European alliances and understandings, for the Schlieffen Plan required, from the outset, a violation of neutral Belgium and an attack on France, quite independent of any action the Russians might take. On 2 August Germany handed Belgium an ultimatum insisting on the right of passage through its territory. This was firmly rejected and the next day Germany declared war on France. Early on 4 August German forces crossed the frontier into Belgium. The strength of the German armies on this flank was awesome. Colonel-General Alexander von Kluck's First Army, on the extreme right, numbered 320,000 troops. The neighbouring Second Army, under Colonel-General Karl von Bülow, and the Third Army, commanded by General Max von Hausen, respectively totalled 260,000 and 180,000. The invasion of Belgian territory brought Britain into the conflict. Though it had no formal agreements with France and Russia, Britain was committed in principle, by a treaty concluded in 1839, to guarantee Belgian independence and neutrality. In 1906 the Foreign Office had observed that this pledge did not oblige Britain to aid Belgium 'in any circumstances and at whatever risk' but, realistically, the huge threat posed by Germany to the balance of power and the Channel ports had to be resisted. Moreover, it proved much easier for Britain's Liberal Cabinet to rally the nation behind a war for 'gallant little Belgium' than behind an abstract concept such as the preservation of the status quo or the balance of power. Britain's own ultimatum expired without reply at 11pm (London time) on 4 August and she declared war on Germany.

## THE FIGHTING: WAR ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1914–1916

### The invasion of Belgium

The changes to the Schlieffen Plan wrought by Moltke dictated that the German right-wing armies must pass through the Meuse Gap between Holland and the Ardennes, a narrow corridor dominated by Liège. Failure to capture Liège and