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T4 First World War

Author: Aleš Binar, Ph.D.

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FIRST WORLD WAR 1914 TO 1918

First World War was one of the most decisive military conflicts in 20th century that lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. During that time 29 states entered the war, while six of them suffered defeat. Despite the fact that it is more than hundred years since the war begin, two important results still affect present-day world; those are creation of new states in Europe, among them Czech Republic, and spread of Communism.

Roots of First World War

There are many reasons for outbreak of First World War, both internal and international. The most important are **diplomatic antagonisms** of world powers:

- Antagonism of two most powerful blocs in World:
 - The **Triple Entente** was diplomatic bloc that was established in 1891 to 1907 and allied **United Kingdom, France, and Russia**.
 - The **Triple Alliance** was diplomatic bloc that was established in 1882 and allied **Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy**. But due to fact that Italy entered the war on the side of Entente, the rest of allied countries, Germany and Austria-Hungary are called as Central Powers.
- Antagonism of great powers:
 - **Germany** and **France** had each mutual territorial claim to their territory; while France demanded return of Alsace-Lorraine (joined to Germany in 1871) Germany demanded gaining other territory in Eastern France.
 - Between **Germany** and **United Kingdom** there were prestigious dispute over supremacy on the seas. Both countries undertook so called armament race (to build as much battle ships and cruiser as possible).
 - Harsh antagonism appeared also between **Italy** and **Austria-Hungary** that both belonged to one diplomatic bloc. Italian claimed Austrian-Hungarian territory in Adriatic sea; this fact became cause of disintegration of Society of the Three in 1914.
 - Also between **United Kingdom** and **Russia** that belong to the same bloc too were different were serious disputes about in East Asia, but majority of them were settled after defeat of Russia by Japan.

- Relations between **Italy** and **France** suffered because of Italian claims for French territory (among others for Corse)

Declaration of War

On 28 June 1914 throne successor in Austria-Hungary **Franz Ferdinand** was **assassinated** by member of nationalist movement in Sarajevo. That assassinator was **Gavrilo Princip**, Serbian nationalist from Bosnia and Herzegovina who belonged to the organization **Young Bosnia** that demanded unification of Serbs in one state. For his deed he chose the symbolic day. The 28 June 1389 is important day of Serbian statehood because commemorates battle of Kosovo.

- Talks of powers after assassination and crisis in international relations is called as **July Crisis**.

Soon after that Austria-Hungary passed ultimatum to Serbia in which demanded among others investigation of circumstances of assassination in such way that was in fact a violation of principles of state sovereignty. Moreover Serbia was not interest to allow investigation due to connections between government and circles of radical nationalists.

That is why Serbian government refused Austrian-Hungarian ultimatum and Austria-Hungary declared war on 28 July 1918:

- Moment of declaring of war to Serbia is supposed to be the **beginning of First World War**.

But Serbia was allied with **Russia** that on 29 July 1914 mobilize its army. Germany, ally of Austria-Hungary, passed ultimatum to Russia to cease the mobilization. Russia refused to this demand and on 1 August 1914 **Germany declares war to Russia**. After this moment international crisis became war between world powers.

Russia's ally was France. That is why German government was afraid of fight on two fronts, western and eastern. According to so called Schlieffen Plan there was need at first to defeat France, than Russia. Due to this prepositions Germany declared war to **France** and occupies **Belgium** on 3 August 1914.

Violation of neutrality of Belgium became casus belli for **United Kingdom** that was guarantee of this neutrality and declared war to Germany on 3 August 1914. Until the end of 1914 in conflict were engaged also **Montenegro**, **Japan**, and **Ottoman Empire**.

During 1914 to 1918 two groups of states fight over dominance. On the one side there were:

Central Powers, i.e. **Germany** and **Austria-Hungary**, and their allies, i.e. **Ottoman Empire** (Turkey) and **Bulgaria**. On the other side there were:

(Triple) **Entente**, i.e. **United Kingdom**, **France**, and **Russia**, and later on **U.S.A.**, **Italy**, and **Japan**, and their allies, i.e. 23 states, among others **Serbia**, **Belgium**, **Montenegro**, **Romania**, **Greece**, and later on also **Czechoslovakia** and **Poland**.

Periodization and Characteristics of First World War

According to military approach there could be two main types of periodization of First World War:

- According to the **way of conducting the war** there could be realized three main stages. Those stages are 1) **period of manoeuvring war** that lasted from the beginning of the war until September/October 1914 in Western Front, or until the end of 1914 in the Eastern Front, 2) **period of trench warfare** that lasted until the beginning of 1918 in Western Front (and until autumn 1917 in the Eastern Front), and 3) final stage renewal of **manoeuvring war** that comprises last year of the war; there were two main tactics to restore manoeuvring war, i.e. using tactic of assault groups and tank warfare.
- According to the **superiority of belligerents** there are also three stages but with different periodization. Those stages are 1) period of **mutual stalemate** that lasted from the beginning of war until the revolution in Russia broke up in 1917, 2) period of **superiority of Central Powers** that were able to defeat Russia and Romania and to occupy their territory, and 3) stage of **superiority of Entente** and its allies that lasted shortly in second half of 1918, but that led to the conclusion of the conflict.

During First World War fights took in different fronts all over the world, especially in Europe and in Middle East. The decisive theatre became **Western Front** in Northern France where the most powerful armies were deployed. In Europe were then established **Eastern Front** in East Europe in territory of Russia and Austria-Hungary and partly of Romania, **Italian**, or South **Front** that spread around borders between Italy and Austria-Hungary, and **Balkan Front** that comprises

territory of Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria. In Middle East there four fronts were opened, in **Caucasus**, in **Mesopotamia**, in **Palestine**, and in **Straits**.

First World War is said to be **total war** because of huge mobilization of human resources. In fact all men were obliged to serve in army and the rest of population was involved into military economy (women replacing men, restriction in markets etc.).

Manoeuvring War 1914

All engaged countries had their offensive plans but only Germany was able to carry out its plan at least partly. At the end of 19th century Chief of Imperial German General Staff General **Alfred von Schlieffen** developed offensive plan that took into account threat of fights in both western and eastern front. That is why he decided to attack first at France and defeat French army before its ally, Russia, would be able to mobilize its powers and commence its own military actions. The core was to lead campaign over territory of (neutral) Belgium while main attack of right wing of German armies should aim at the **side** and the **rear** of French army in the **Western Front**. The idea was that within six weeks French army would be surrounded and Germany could pay attention only to Russia.

- Schlieffen Plan was realized only partly. Chief of Imperial German Staff General Helmut von Moltke decided to **weaken the right wing** in favour of left wing and to aim into region eastern of Paris instead of western of Paris as it was intended. This decision meant strategic weakening of whole offensive.
- German offensive was stopped during **First Battle of the Marne** on 5 to 12 September 1914 that took place near Paris. Attack of French 6th Army under command of General Michel-Joseph Manoury deflected advancement of German 1st Army of General Alexander von Kluck and 2nd Army of Marshal Karl von Bülow; Frenchmen made use of the fact that during German advancement gap between both armies enabled to conduct successful counter-offensive.

After deflection of German offensive both sides were forced to dig themselves in order to protect against gun and machinegun fire and led to four years of trench warfare in the Western Front.

Different situation was in the **Eastern Front**. Despite German expectations Russia immediately after its entry into war commenced offensive. On 17 August 1914

Russian troops invaded East Prussia (Germany) and on 18 August 1914 invaded Galicia (Austria-Hungary) and sieged important Austrian stronghold Przemyśl. But German 10th Army under command of General Paul Hindenburg made use of fact that Russian could not co-ordinate their effort and almost destroyed Russian 2nd Army in Battle of **Tannenberg** on 23 to 31 August 1914 and then prevailed over 1st Russian Army in Battle of **Masurian Lakes** on 5 to 15 September 1914. After this battles also in Eastern Front war end up in trench warfare.

In **Balkan Front** Austria-Hungarian offensive that was commenced on 12 August 1914 aimed at Belgrade. During December 1914 Belgrade was captured by Austria-Hungarian army, but soon after that they were pushed back again. At the end of 1914 fights was limited into trench skirmishes.

Trench Warfare 1914

In **Western Front** both sides tried to circumvent each other positions and begin so called **Run to the Shores** in mid-September 1914. During few weeks continuous front line from the sea shores in the north of France to borders of Switzerland was created due to:

- **Dominance of defensive weaponry** (machine guns, artillery, barbed wire) over **offensive weaponry** (infantry, partly also artillery).

Both sides undertook number of attempts to breach trench lines. The one of the largest was so called **First Battle of Ypres** that lasted from 30 October to 11 November 1914 and ended by German failure to breach front line.

In **Eastern Front** Russian army failed to continue in its offensive (**Battle of Łódź, of Cracow, and of Limanowa**).

Trench Warfare 1915

General Erich von Falkenhayn who succeeded after General Moltke changed priority in German strategy. He decided that in **Western Front** Germany stayed in defensive and all military effort focused on Eastern Front. On the other hand British and French commenced series of offensive, two offensives in Champagne and in Artois etc. but failed to breach the German trench lines. During **Second Battle of Ypres** in May 1915 Germans for the first time deployed poison gas that brought about large losses among French army; some 5000 men of 10 000 intoxicated had died.

According to Falkenhayn decision Germany focused its effort in the Eastern Front and together with Austria-Hungary commenced series of offensive:

- **Gorlice-Tarnów Offensive** took place from 1 to 3 May 1915 and brought about large advancement of Austria-Hungarian army to Lviv. This offensive became turning point in the course of war in the Eastern Front; after that Russian were forced to lead defensive fights.
- At the same time German forces advanced in Poland and in Baltic Region (capturing of Warsaw and Vilnius), but after short period of manoeuvring fights trench warfare was restored in September 1915.

On 23 May 1915 Italy entered the war on the side of Entente, i.e. against agreement with Germany and Austria-Hungary, and opened another front. During 1915 Italian forces commenced four unsuccessful attempts to breach through Austria-Hungarian defensive line, so called **First to Fourth Battle of Isonzo River**. The fights in front bogged down into trench warfare since its very beginnings.

Key turnaround occurred in **Balkan Front** in 1915. In October 1915 Bulgaria entered the war on the side of Central Powers. German High Commanded together with Austria-Hungarian and Bulgarian forces prepared decisive campaign with the aim to finally defeat Serbia. The campaign was commenced on 7 October 1915 and since its beginning Serbian army was forced to retreat. Serbians withdraw through Albanian mountains and the rest of them were evacuated by British vessels into Greece. But Serbian government did not capitulate. During October 1915 Entente opened another front in Balkan, **Thessaloniki Front**, but with limited extend of fights.

Representatives of Entente, especially First Lord of Admiralty sir Winston Churchill, attempted to defeat Turkey and to gain a direct contact with Russian territory via disembarking in Dardanelles and Bosphorus and occupying the Straits. So called **Gallipoli Campaign** was commenced on 18 March 1915 when British battleships attacked Turkish position in Gallipoli Peninsula. On 25 April 1915 British troops were disembarked on the shores but were not able to breach defence lines. Months of fights brought nothing but bloodshed among British and Australian forces. That is why in turn of 1915 and 1916 the British were forced to retreat.

Trench Warfare 1916

During 1916 both belligerents were hopelessly stuck in trench warfare. That year both sides reach a decision that war could not be win by breaching the trench lines

but by exhaustion of the enemy. New strategy became so called **exhaustive warfare**, i.e. effort to make use of battles as means that lead to military and economic collapse of rival. In this strategy was not important the height of own losses if those were higher than enemy's.

On 21 January 1916 German High Command commenced attack on French position near fortification Verdun and started the **Battle of Verdun** that lasted nearly the whole and was ended on 21 December 1916. Germans hoped that Frenchmen will defend this strategically and historically important fortification by any means necessary and undertook huge losses. But battle of Verdun became prestigious clash and Germans were caught into their own trap even when French forces under General Philippe Petaine switched into counter-attack in October 1916. Terms like Cote 304 called Hommes Mort (Dead Man) or Fort Douamont became synonyms for nothing but bloodshed. During Battle of Verdun both sides lost more than one million man including ca. 330 000 German casualties and ca. 380 000 French casualties.

The representatives of Entente reached in conference in Chantilly in February 1916 similar idea. They decided for **joint offensive on all three main fronts**, i.e. in Western (British and French), Eastern (Russians), and Southern (Italians).

In **Western front** the **Battle of Somma** lasted from 24 June to 19 November 1916. The only reason the territory in Somma River was chosen to be place of decisive offensive was the fact that there were borders between British and French positions. Nothing more. But Somma River was also part of front with strong German fortification with minimal strategic importance. That is why that during first day of attack British counted more than 50 000 losses! Together Entente lost in Battle of Somma 625 000 men, Germany approximately 450 000.

Few days later Russian army commenced so called **Brusilov Offensive** in the **Eastern Front** on 4 July 1916. Russian South Western Army Group attacked on two main directions and advanced more than 100 km into Austria-Hungarian positions. Their success was paid off by very high price.

In Southern Front Italian forces commenced Sixth Battle of Isonzo. The Battle lasted from 6 to 17 August 1917 and ended the same way as the five previous clashes, i.e. without any results.

Strategy of exhaustive warfare did not bring any result and neither side could exhaust its enemy. But two world powers, France and Russia, got in stage of **economic and military crisis**. Revolts and revolutions among both military men and

civilians took place. Despite the fact that Entente had higher losses than Central Powers, Entente disposed with much larger human and economic sources, especially in colonies.

At that time **Central Powers** made **peace offer** in December 1916, but this offer was refused. The war should continue also in 1917.

Trench Warfare 1917

In 1917 Entente attempted to repeat co-ordinated offensive and commenced three offensives, but this effort lacked of success since its beginning. In Western Front it was **Nivell Offensive** that lasted from 9 April to 5 May 1917, in Eastern Front it was **Kerenski's Offensive** that lasted from 1 to 16 July 1917 and in Southern Front **Tenth Battle of Isonzo** that took place from 12 May to 8 June 1917. While in Western Front offensive had to be ceased due to wave of revolt in French divisions, in Eastern Front the Russia got in catastrophe. Russian offensive was deflected and Germans and Austria-Hungarians switched into counter-offensive and advanced hundreds of kilometres into Russian territory. Whole Russian army dissolved and soldiers left their positions in millions.

The Central Powers made use of this development. In November 1917 Bolsheviks gained the power in Russia and in December 1917 signed armistice with Central Powers and war in Eastern Front in fact ended. But representatives of Germany and Austria-Hungary and Russia did not agreed on term of peace treaty. That is why Central Powers commenced large offensive in the whole Eastern Front. Russia lost the rest its advantages and was forced to sign **Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** on 3 March 1918 according which lost vast territory of Finland, Baltic Region, Belarus, Ukraine, and Caucasus. Soon after that Romania signed **Bucharest Peace Treaty** and left the Entente.

In Southern Front German forces enforced positions of Austria-Hungary in Southern front and commenced large offensive that led to so called **Breach of Caporetto** (Kobarid) on 24 October 1917. Italians with the help of French and British troops could not stop advancing troops until Piava River on 18 November 1917.

Final Stage of War 1918

In the beginning of 1918 military situation become favourable for Central Powers, because of four key reasons:

- Due to defeat of Russia and Romania Eastern Front ceased to exist and released number of divisions of Germany and Austria-Hungary.
- Due to course of war in Eastern and Southern Front Central Powers gained vast territory with number of resources.
- According to Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty German and Austria-Hungarian prisoners of war were released and once again enlisted into active service.
- German High Command develop new tactics to breach over trench lines

Germany made use of this favourable situation and on 21 March 1918 commenced **Ludendorff Offensive**, also called Kaiserschlacht (Emperor's Battle) or Spring Offensive. Germany had to hurry up because on 6 April 1917 United States entered the war on the side of Entente and formed its forces to assault in Western Front. The aim of the Ludendorff Offensive was to defeat France before the Americans arrives.

German High Command under Generals Paul Hindenburg and Erich von Ludendorff implement new tactic of **strike groups** (Sturmtruppen). The core of the tactic was to outflank the enemy's strongholds and to strike into its rear or flank. Strike groups also attacked not in lines as usual but consists of small number of men equipped with the finest guns, especially newly developed machine-guns. Germans also deployed so called moving gunfire, i.e. gunfire that was pointed and adjusted according to advance of striking units. At the end of March German forces once again reached Marna River (Operation Blücher). But the last attempt to breach the front lines was deflected. The Ludendorff Offensive was defeated. This last attempt is called:

- **Second Battle of Marna.** On 15 March 1918 German commenced deceptive attack near Reims while 7th Army crossed Marna River and attempted to divide French armies. But assault was deflected and on 18 July 1918 French and American forces (French 10th Army of General Charles Mangin) commenced counter-offensive. After week of fight General Ludendorff ordered to retreat on 6 September 1918.

The Entente could make use of its superiority in resources, especially after entry of United States into war, but British and French army developed new device to breach the trench lines – the **tank**.

Tank weapon was for the first time used during Battle of Somma on 15 September 1916. That day more than 50 tanks were deployed, but did not gain victory; in fact their use became only premature revelation of new weapon.

First successful attack of tanks took place in **battle of Cambrai** on 20 November 1917. That day over 400 tanks were placed in front of wide of only 10 km. Tanks breached some 15 km into German territory, but British could not make use of their achievement.

After June 1918 Entente commenced **General Offensive** in the whole front and step by step forced German forces to retreat. During advancement of Entente forces more than 500 tanks in front of 20 km width breached the line into depth of 10 km during the **Battle of Amiens** on 18 August 1918. That day was called “Black Day of German Army”. Since this moment Germany switched into defensive and after loss of all its allies (Bulgaria, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary) pledged for armistice.

Armistice and Peace 1918 to 1920

First World War ended in **double defeat**. It meant that at first two Entente countries, Russia and Romania were defeated by Central Powers, than Entente defeated Central Powers and their allies. This fact became key moment for development in territory of Eastern and Central Europe. The vast territory western of Rhine belonged to the country that was defeated.

During autumn allies of Germany pledged for peace:

- On 30 September 1918 **Bulgaria** asked for armistice,
- on 30 October 1918 **Turkey**, and
- on 27 October 1918 **Austria-Hungary** and armistice was declared on 3 November 1918.

On 11 November 1918 representatives of **Germany** signed armistice treaty in **Compiègne**. Cease of fire got in force exactly at 11.00 a.m. This moment is supposed to be the **end of First World War**. Final peace treaties were then signed in 1919 and 1920.

Overall Results of First World War

Until the break of the Second World War in 1939 the First World War was the **largest conflict in history of mankind**. Over 70 million men were mobilize of whom some nine million fallen and other approximately seven million civilians had died; majority of

them by indirect causes of death, e.g. by malnutrition and illness. Other sources estimate the total number of casualties even to 30 million of military men and civilians.

According to overall results the Central Power and their allies led more effective war than Entente but suffered lack of resources that was the ground of their defeat. Victory of Entente in First World War was not due to superiority in strategy but due to superiority in numbers and in resources!

• State	Mobilized	Fallen
• Germany	13 000 000	1 800 000
• Austria-Hungary	9 000 000	1 200 000
• Central Powers	21 000 000	3 000 000
• Russia	12 000 000	1 700 000
• France	8 600 000	1 600 000
• United Kingdom	8 500 000	1 300 000
• Entente	29 100 000	4 600 000

Summary

First World War was in many ways the most decisive moment in history of 20th century. First of all World War was **modern war**. During course of war new weapons were invented and deployed, i.e. gas, air and tank warfare etc. Also new strategy to overcome trench warfare that was later on used during Second World War (tank warfare and flank tactics) was developed during the war.

First World War is also supposed to be so called **total war** due to high mobilization of all human resources. There was a tight link between front and rear. All available population was involved in work for military purpose, especially in industry.

Despite the fact, or vice versa because of the fact that war became economic, social, and political catastrophe the clash of 1914 to 1918 was the **end of historic epoch**. First World War is milestones for the end of economic hegemony of European countries, for the spread of Communism and Fascism, but on the other side also of the political emancipations (of nations, women, social groups etc.). The result of the war was among others establishing of new states, e.g. of Czechoslovakia.

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