

Eastern Frontline 1914-1917:



The **Allied plan** was for Britain and France to hold the German army up in the West, while the Russian army advanced from the East. This would trap the Germans between their enemies.

The Schlieffen Plan failed: The Russians were ready in just 10 days with 6 million men. The Germans had to send troops East before they had defeated France.

At the start of the war, British newspapers talked confidently about the Russian **steamroller** crushing opposition as it advanced into Germany. The Allies thought that the Russian steamroller would move unstopably forward. But shortly after the outbreak of war Russian steamroller broke down.

Russia attacks: While the Western Front had reached deadlock, the war continued in the Eastern Europe. Initial Russian plans called for simultaneous invasions of Austrian **Galicia**¹ and **German East Prussia**. Although Russia's initial advance into Galicia was largely successful, they were driven back from East Prussia at **Tannenberg** and the **Masurian Lakes** (north-eastern Poland) in **August** and **September 1914**.

200,000 Russians were slaughtered in 1914 at the battles of **Tannenberg** and the **Masurian Lakes** by German troops led by **Paul von Hindenburg** and **Erich von Ludendorff**.² After these battles the Russians were driven back, and the Germans and Austro-Hungarians advanced.

Central Powers counter-attacks:

1. By the spring of 1915, the Russians had retreated into Galicia, and in May the 1915 Central Powers achieved a remarkable breakthrough on Poland's southern frontiers. In August 1915 they captured Warsaw and forced the Russians to **withdraw from Poland**.

¹ **Galicia:** historical region in Eastern Europe, currently divided between Poland and Ukraine, named after the Ukrainian city of Halych, in Slovak **Halíč**.

² **Paul von Hindenburg:** as Germany's Chief of the General Staff from 1916, he and his deputy, Erich Ludendorff, rose in the German public's esteem until Hindenburg came to eclipse the Kaiser himself. Hindenburg retired again in 1919, but returned to public life one more time in 1925 to be elected as the second President of Germany.

Erich von Ludendorff: from August 1916 his appointment as *Generalquartiermeister* made him joint head (with von Hindenburg) of Germany's war effort. From this point on he ran Germany's war effort in World War I until his resignation in October 1918.

2. In 1915, the **Central Powers** attacked deep into Russia. There were great distances to be covered and the armies were spread more thinly than in Europe's front line.

(Remember: the Eastern front differed from the Western Front in this fact a lot. Compare the size of Western front with the size of Eastern Europe and Russia)

*The length of the front in the east was much longer than in the west. The theatre of war was roughly delimited by the **Baltic Sea** in the west and Minsk in the east, and Saint Petersburg in the north and the **Black Sea** in the south, a distance of more than 1,600 kilometres. This had a drastic effect on the nature of the warfare. While World War I on the Western Front developed into trench warfare, the battle lines on the Eastern Front were much more fluid and trenches never truly developed. This was because the greater length of the front ensured that the density of soldiers in the line was lower so the line was easier to break.*

Mark on the map below the approximate location of the Western and Eastern Front line:



Food was short and the weather was bad. **Many Russians surrendered** rather than fight in the terrible conditions, and some men pulled the triggers and killed themselves to escape the horrors of hunger and sub-zero temperatures. **Large numbers of prisoners** were taken. Letter of a Russian general says: *“Many of the men are without boots and have frostbitten feet. They are without sweaters. When officers are killed mass surrenders start. They say ‘Why should we perish of hunger and cold without boots, the artillery is silent, we are killed like partridges.’ The Cossacks recovered 500 men who had been captured. They were told ‘Who asked you, fools. We do not want to hunger and freeze again.’ “*

Prisoner of War (POW): is a person, whether civilian or combatant who is held in continuing custody by an enemy power during or immediately after an armed conflict.

During World War I about 8 million men surrendered and were held in POW camps (Prisoner of War Camps) until the war ended. All nations pledged to follow the **Hague rules on fair treatment of prisoners of war**³, and in general the POWs had a much higher survival rate than their peers who were not captured. Individual surrenders were uncommon; usually a large unit surrendered all its men.

³ The **Hague Conventions** were international treaties negotiated at the First and Second Peace Conferences at The Hague, Netherlands in **1899** and **1907**, respectively, and were, along with the **1949 Geneva Conventions**,

At Tannenberg 92,000 Russians surrendered during the battle.

Germany held 2.5 million prisoners; Russia held 2.9 million, and Britain and France held about 720,000, mostly gained in the period just before the Armistice in 1918. The US held 48,000.

The most dangerous moment was the act of surrender, when helpless soldiers were sometimes shot down. Once prisoners reached a POW camp conditions were better. It was particularly bad in Russia, where starvation was common for prisoners and civilians alike; roughly 25% of its 2 to 2.4 million POWs died in captivity. **Nearly 375,000 of the 500,000 Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war taken by Russians perished in Siberia from smallpox and typhus.** In Germany food was short but only 5% died.

The Brusilov Offensive (June – August 1916): was a major offensive against the armies of the Central Powers on the Eastern Front, launched in June 1916 and lasting until early August. It took place in what today is Ukraine. The offensive was named after the Russian commander in charge of the Southwestern Front, Aleksei Brusilov.⁴

Brusilov offensive advanced successfully into Austria-Hungary in June **1916. General Brusilov successfully counter-attacked the Austrians and captured many prisoners.** But he was let down in the end by poor railway links, which meant that he could not get reinforcements fast enough. Germany was able to plug the gap made in the defences, and Austria was able to recover. **By early 1917 German troops were deep in Russia.**

The Russian Army:

The Russian Army **did not have enough weapons.** Many soldiers had to wait for someone to be killed so that they could get hold of a rifle. In some Russian units sent to the front, only about a quarter of the men had rifles. The rest had to pick up the rifles of the dead. The Army was **poorly organized.** Many officers were **inexperienced** and **discipline was poor.** David Lloyd George, British Prime Minister in his memoirs of the First

among the first formal statements of the **laws of war and war crimes** in the nascent body of secular international law.

The Hague Convention states that:

- Prisoners are in the power of the hostile capturing government, not the actual captors; and must be treated humanely and that their belongings remain theirs (with the exception of arms, horses, and military papers)
- Prisoners may be interned in a town, fortress, or other similar facility but cannot be confined unless absolutely vital to public safety
- The capturing state may put prisoners to work, but not for the war effort and must pay wages to the prisoner upon their release
- The capturing government is responsible for the well-being of prisoners and barring some other agreement must house and board prisoners to the same standards as their own soldiers
- Relief societies for prisoners of war must have access to the prisoners
- Prisoners must be able to contact representatives from their states
- Prisoners are bound by the laws of their captor state

⁴ **Aleksei Alekseevich Brusilov:** was a Russian general most noted for the development of new offensive tactics used in the 1916 offensive. The innovative and relatively successful tactics used were later copied by the Germans. Recognising that no amount of artillery, shells or men could secure absolute control of an area that the Russians could then defend, Brusilov decided to distribute his attack over a considerable length of front. He hoped to disorganize the enemy over such a large area that some point would fatally give way. He decided not to waste resources by saturation bombardment of worthless areas, but rather, to target specific areas—command posts, crossroads, etc.—and degrade command and control over the whole front.

World War, wrote: “If the Russians had a plan against Germany it never came off. The invasion of East Prussia was little more than a chivalrous improvisation to save France from the blunder of her generals.”

The war put a great strain on Russia, as **civilians went hungry so the troops could be supplied**. When mutilated soldiers returned home with news of defeat because of lack of preparation, the mood was one of resentment against the government and the Allies.

Russia’s army strength **in 1914 was 7 480 000 men**. Only 4625 000 rifles were available, when 11 000 000 were needed for immediate use and to replace those damaged and lost in the fighting. An order for 3 500 000 was placed with suppliers in the USA in 1915, but two years later only one tenth of this number had been received.

Write an explanation of why the Russian Army did so badly in the campaigns of 1914-15?

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Could the West have done more to help Russia?

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Imagine you are a Russian soldier who has just surrendered to and Austrian patrol. Explain why you have given up without a fight?

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The Russian casualties in the First World War:

These are difficult to estimate, due to the poor quality of available statistics. Some official Russian sources list 775,400 battlefield fatalities. More recent Russian estimates give 900,000 battlefield deaths and 400,000 dead from combat wounds, or a total of 1,300,000 dead. This is about equal to the casualties suffered by France and Austria-Hungary and about one-third less than those suffered by Germany.

Events in 1917 and 1918 that led Russia to the end of the World War I:

Years 1917, 1918: There was widespread starvation in the winter of 1916, and Nicholas II was forced out of power in 1917. The new Provisional Government continued the war, but was no more successful. The Bolshevik revolution in 1917 brought new leaders to power who decided to end the fighting. Russia signed the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany in 1918, giving Germany control of a large amount of Eastern territory in return for peace**. Two important results of Russia leaving the war were: 1. The Allies left to fight on without Russian help on an Eastern Front, 2. Germany was now able to pull back 1 million men to the Western Front.

1. **February Revolution 1917:** In March 1917, demonstrations in Petrograd culminated in the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and the appointment of a weak **Provisional Government** which shared power with the **Petrograd Soviet socialists**. This arrangement led to confusion and chaos both at the front and at home. The army became increasingly ineffective

2. The **October Revolution** a.k.a. the **Great October Socialist Revolution, Red October** or the **Bolshevik Revolution**, was a political revolution and a part of the Russian Revolution of 1917. The October Revolution in Petrograd overthrew the Russian Provisional Government and gave **the power to the local soviets dominated by Bolsheviks**. As the revolution was not universally recognized outside of Petrograd there followed the struggles of the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) and the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922.

3. The **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** was a peace treaty signed on March 3, 1918, at Brest-Litovsk (now Brest, Belarus) between the Russia and the Central Powers, marking **Russia's exit from World War I**.

