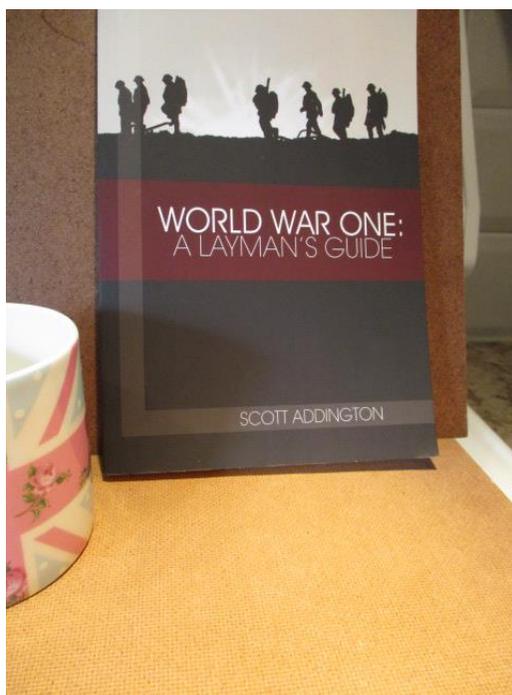


# World War One: A Layman's Guide

By Rod Fraser

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SCOTT ADDINGTON, A British marketing executive, has written a short book (approximately 160 pages) to tell casual readers what they need to know about the Great War.

The book is called: *World War One: A Layman's Guide*. It is written in an open, accessible style. Or

as Addington tells it, “[my book] is more like a chat down at the pub than a heavy historical text”. Quite so. I was drawn to it for exactly that reason.

I don’t intend to provide descriptions of all the battles, or other war details described so well by Addington, but I will mention major engagements (on the Western Front) and other events leading up to the war, so readers will be able to draw their own lessons about this important conflict.

### **What Started the Great War?**

ON JUNE 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary (‘Austria’), was assassinated in Bosnia, by a group who wished to free Bosnia from Austrian dominance. They favoured a union with Serbia.

Believing Serbia was behind the assassination, Austria consulted with its ally, Germany, to win their support. With this in place, Austria declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914.

Three days later, Russia mobilized her army in support of Serbia, rushing their troops up to the border they shared with Germany and Austria. In response to this provocation, Germany promptly declared war on Russia.

At this time, there was a military alliance in place between France and Russia, where each country

pledged to come to the assistance of the other, in the event of an attack by Germany or Austria. In anticipation of a two-front war, Germany formally declared war on France on August 3, 1914.

Germany's plan was to attack France first, defeat the French army and then turn its armies to the east to confront Russia. Germany expected it would take Russia a few weeks to mobilize, so the plan seemed sensible and prudent.

To avoid attacking the fortifications along the Franco-German border, the Germans attacked France through the wide, flat countryside of Belgium (whose neutrality was guaranteed by Great Britain). The Germans launched their attack on August 4, 1914, and Great Britain declared war on Germany the same day.

In short, Germany and Austria started a war with Great Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and Serbia. As you will see, other countries joined the conflict in the months and years that followed.

For ease of reference, I will refer to the German and Austrian alliance as either 'Germany' or 'Austria'. In turn, I will refer to Great Britain, France, Belgium, Russia and Serbia as the 'Allies'.

Addington summed up the first few weeks of the conflict thus, "After all this political showboating ... it would be left to ... [ordinary men] to fight it out in

the trenches over the next five years [*sic*] .... "

## **The Battle of the Marne**

WHEN THE GERMAN army attacked through Belgium, it scattered Belgium's army quite quickly (it being only a tenth of the size of the German forces). Nevertheless, the Belgium resistance gave the British and French time to mobilize and position their divisions against the German army.

The Allied troops (including the Belgium army) were outnumbered and outgunned. They offered spirited resistance, but slowly they were driven back by the Germans to some 40 miles south of the Marne River (close to Paris), all during the month of August.

On September 6<sup>th</sup>, the French army and British Expeditionary Force successfully counter-attacked along the Marne River and forced the German army to retreat northwest. Following the German retreat, the two antagonists fought a number of battles in a race to the sea.

Both wanted to have access and control of the Belgium North Sea ports. So each army in turn hoped to outflank the other as they moved north and west.

At the end of the race to the sea, two large armies (Germany and the Allies) were to face each

other for over four years, in "two continuous lines of trenches ... stretching from the Belgium coast to the Swiss border". This turn of events was the last of the mobile warfare of this conflict, until the final months of the war.

### **Other Participants in the War.**

PRIOR TO THE war, Italy was an ally of Germany and Austria. It was a defensive alliance, where Italy was required to provide military assistance in the event that either of its allies were attacked.

In this instance, war was declared by Germany and Austria, so Italy remained neutral for almost a year, then joined the Allies in their war against Germany and Austria on May 23, 1915.

The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, after a number of American ships were sunk by German submarines. Attacks on American shipping were a source of considerable tension during the war years. Great Britain was a major trading partner of America, and the U.S. had no intention of ceasing its trade with Britain, despite it being at war with Germany and Austria.

Japan joined the Allies at the start of the Great War by declaring war on Germany, although its influence was largely felt in securing the sea lanes of the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean against the

German Navy. Japan seized a number of German territories in the Far East during the war years.

The Ottoman Empire (today known as Turkey) also entered the war early in August 1914. Believing that Russia was its bitter enemy and Germany its true friend, the Turks threw in their lot with Germany and Austria. While factions in the Ottoman government wished to remain neutral, the army was in favour of the war and that view prevailed.

### **Overview of World War One**

AFTER THE RACE to the sea in the early months of the war, there were many battles fought between 1914 and 1918. On the whole, they changed little or nothing. It was only the battles in the last months of the war that were decisive.

Nine million men (or more) were killed in combat during the Great War; twenty-one million soldiers were wounded. Civilian deaths also counted in the millions. But the ground given up or taken was not significant.

Many of the battlefields experienced a number of assaults. The same ground was taken, retaken ... and sometimes taken again. It was an ugly war of stasis, frontal attacks, trenches, mud and death.

I don't think much is gained in describing the many battles on the Western Front in the years up

to 1918, but they include: The Marne, Loos, The Somme, Passchendaele, Ypres, Verdun and Vimy Ridge.

They also include the Battle of Courcette, where the fictive Walter Blythe, a character from L.M. Montgomery's *Rilla of Ingleside*, was killed in 1916 (after winning the Distinguished Conduct Medal).

### **The Final Year of the War**

THERE WERE TWO major changes in 1917 that affected Germany's ability to fight and win the war. One was positive and the other negative.

The positive change was the civil unrest and uncertainty in Russia, after the toppling and replacement of Tsar Nicholas II with a new Provisional Government in early 1917.

Although the new government continued the war against Germany, its military efforts were distracted and ineffective. Germany was able to transfer a number of divisions to its Western Front in early to mid-1917—and more after the Bolsheviks assumed control of the Russian government in late 1917.

The entry of the United States into the war in early 1917 was the negative change. Germany knew that as America mobilized and sent its soldiers to Europe, large numbers of American troops would eventually enter the fight.

The die was cast. If Germany was to win the war, it must move much of its army to the Western Front quickly and strike the Allies with a devastating blow—before the American army came to Europe in force.

IN THE EARLY spring of 1918, Germany, reinforced with divisions transferred from the Russian Front, ordered an attack on the Allied armies in France. Their primary objective was to destroy the British Fifth and Third Armies that held the line from the Somme to the English Channel.

The attack was initially successful. Within two days, the British armies were in full retreat. Unfortunately, the attack stalled. German units advanced well beyond their supply lines and bogged down. The attack faltered further with the arrival of British and French reinforcements.

The German army launched four or five other assaults in the spring of 1918 (collectively called the *Spring Offensive*) to support its attack on the British Fifth and Third Armies. Although they captured significant territory, many prisoners and extended their lines, the attacks were unsuccessful in defeating the Allies or in forcing them to the negotiating table.

It was a lost opportunity. In an essay in the *New Yorker* in the fall of 2018, Adam Hochschild said this,

“In the spring of 1918 ... German troops broke the long deadlock of trench warfare and advanced far into France. Some hundred thousand Allied soldiers were captured... Church bells rang in Berlin, German schoolchildren received a national holiday... Paris seemed within reach.”

Unfortunately, the optimism was unwarranted. The German advance ground to an inglorious halt and a significant reversal was in the cards.

BY THE FALL of 1917, the first units of the American army entered combat. Although initially small, the buildup of the U.S. Army continued throughout the winter and spring of 1918. By mid-June 1918, there were over a million American soldiers stationed in France, and 10,000 more were arriving each day.

These soldiers received a minimum of six-weeks training in France before facing combat—provided largely by experienced British, Canadian and Australian officers and senior non-commissioned ranks.

In June of 1918, American and French army units stopped a German offensive directed towards Paris. In July of 1918, three French Armies and five American divisions attacked German forces along the Marne River, forcing German army units to withdraw. This was the first of a number of Allied counter-offensives that would end the war.

In late September 1918, two British Armies, aided by the Australians and U.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps broke through a 20-mile portion of the Hindenburg Line. At the same time, Belgium and British troops pushed back the Germans in the fourth Battle of Ypres.

General John Pershing, now in command of the U.S. First Army and other French Army units (over a million men in total), also successfully attacked the German army at this time. While British and French armies attacked German positions in their sectors of the front, Pershing continued his assaults on the German lines throughout the fall.

This coordinated Allied push came to be known as the *Hundred Days Offensive*. It was focussed, unrelenting and successful. It brought an end to the war with Germany, when the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918. By this time, the American Expeditionary Force had evolved into a modern, combat-tested army of just short of 2 million soldiers.

### **Wind-up to the War**

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY LARGELY ceased to exist in the final months of the war. What are now Hungary, Yugoslavia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic split up, leaving Austria to sue for peace with the Allies. An Armistice was concluded on November 3, 1918.

The Ottoman Empire also made a separate peace with the Allies. Aboard HMS Agamemnon, the representatives of the Ottoman Empire signed an Armistice agreement with the British government on October 30, 1918. Facing invasion by Russia and Great Britain, an Arab revolt, mass starvation and a destroyed economy, they had little choice.

The end of the fighting between Germany and the Allies led to the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm in Germany, his seeking of asylum in neutral Holland, the collapse of his government and the proclamation of a German Republic.

The Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, concluded the war and imposed harsh conditions on Germany. This document resulted in grievances which were never properly resolved. Twenty years later, many argue this was a leading cause of World War Two.

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