World War I was fought between two groups of countries — the Allies and the Central Powers. At first the Allies consisted of the British, French and Russian empires along with Serbia and Belgium. The Central Powers were Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bulgaria and the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Partly because Britain, France, Germany and Turkey had empires outside Europe, what began as a European war became a global war. It was fought on many fronts, on land, on and under the sea and in the air.

Widening support for the Allies

In return for promises of territory, Italy withdrew from the Triple Alliance and joined the Allies in May 1915. As the war progressed, other countries joined the Allies. Among them were Greece, Portugal, Romania, Japan, China, Brazil and the small countries of Central America, although many of them expressed their support without joining the fighting. The United States of America joined the Allies in 1917.

The Western Front

Germany’s strategy was based on the fact that it had an enemy to the west (France) and a bigger enemy to the east (Russia), and that it would be impossible to defeat both at the same time. Count Alfred von Schlieffen had developed Germany’s basic plan in 1905. Under the Schlieffen Plan, during the six weeks the Germans believed Russia would need to mobilise its army, Germany would launch a quick attack to defeat France. The victorious German forces could then be moved by rail to the east to fight Russia.

Attacking France through neutral Belgium in August 1914 avoided the much slower task of a direct invasion across the heavily fortified French-German border. The plan failed largely because of strong Belgian resistance, something Germany had not expected. Belgian resistance delayed Germany’s advance and helped French and British forces to halt the Germans in northern France in September 1914. Both sides dug trenches to reduce their losses from enemy artillery and machine-gun fire. Over the next four years, millions of lives were lost in huge offensives aimed at breaking the deadlock that resulted from trench warfare.

The Eastern Front

On the Eastern Front, Russian forces had some early successes but they were poorly led and equipped, and the Germans soon gained the advantage. Around 2 million Russian soldiers were killed, wounded or taken prisoner during the war. Despite some victories against Austro-Hungarian forces, Russia’s military was collapsing by early 1917 and the Revolution of November 1917 ended Russia’s involvement in the war (see spread 8.11).

The war at sea

Germany’s naval build-up had been a major reason for Britain’s decision to become an ally of France and Russia. Both Britain and Germany believed that navies could determine the outcome of war. However, in 1914 the German fleet was trapped in its ports, so the British navy’s main role was maintaining a blockade to prevent Germany from importing war materials. Germany retaliated by sending out U-boats to sink allied shipping. In January 1917 U-boats...
began to attack ships of neutral countries trading with the Allies. This led to the United States joining the Allies in April 1917.

**Other European fronts**

When Italy joined the Allies a new front was opened along its mountainous frontier with Austria. Fighting continued there throughout the war. In 1916 Austrian and German troops overran Rumania soon after it joined the Allies. After Russian forces captured Armenia from Turkey in 1915, Turkish soldiers rounded up hundreds of thousands of Armenians living within Turkish territory. They were sent on a death march and massacred. In the same year, the Allies failed in their attempt to invade Turkey via the Gallipoli Peninsula (see spread 8.5).

**War in the colonies**

With most of its navy bottled up in port, Germany was unable to defend its colonies. In 1914 South Africa took German South-west Africa, Australia took German New Guinea, and Japan seized Germany’s Pacific islands colonies and territory in China. Turkey’s Middle Eastern colonies became a theatre of war from 1915, when Britain encouraged Arab leaders to revolt against the Turks with promises of independent kingdoms. These promises were later dishonoured. Germany, in turn, created colonial problems for Britain by shipping arms to Irish rebels, who staged an unsuccessful revolt against British rule in Ireland in 1916.