

When war was declared in August 1914, many people on both sides were convinced that the fighting would be over by Christmas. Indeed, many people rushed to join the army because they 'didn't want to miss the show'. They need not have worried – the war was to drag on for four years and three months. This was far longer than anybody had expected or feared. So why did the war last so long? Where did the fighting take place? And who finally won?

3: Over by Christmas?

MISSION OBJECTIVES

- To know where the fighting of the Great War took place.
- To be able to explain why the fighting wasn't over by Christmas.
- To be able to define the word 'stalemate'.

Germany's master plan!

The generals in charge of Germany's army had been expecting a major war for years. To get off the best possible start, they came up with a number of plans that they could put into action when war was declared. Their worst nightmare was a war against France and Russia at the same time – known as a war on two fronts. A **front** is the name given to the area where two armies meet each other. A war against France and Russia would mean that the Germans would have to split their army in two – one going east to fight Russia and the other going west to fight France. The plan they came up with to deal with this problem was called the Schlieffen Plan (pronounced 'scliefen' and named after the man who thought it up). The idea was to quickly defeat France with a huge knock-out blow through Belgium before moving the soldiers east to face the enormous, but slow-moving, Russian army.

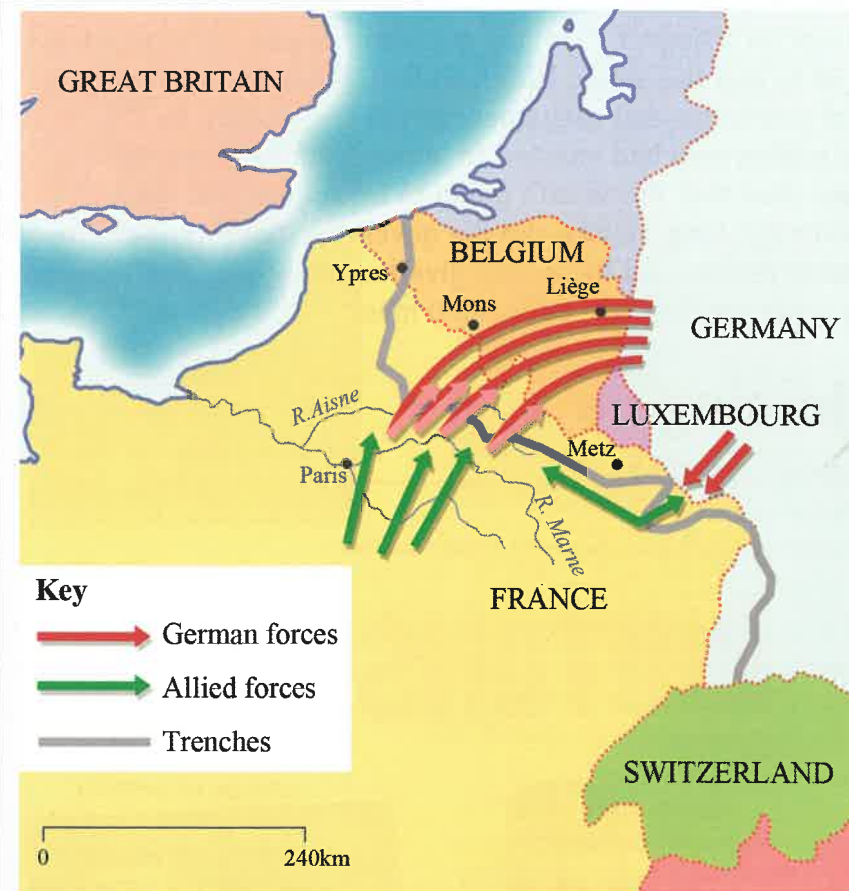
Germany's mistaken plan!

On 3 August 1914, the Germans put the Schlieffen Plan into action. Straightaway, things started to go wrong. For a start, the Belgian army – which the Germans expected to be a push-over – put up fierce resistance and slowed the charge to France right down. Then the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), a highly trained professional army of 125,000 men, held the Germans back at Mons. On 19 August, the Russians launched an attack on Germany. This was far quicker than the Germans had expected and before they had had a chance to capture Paris. They were forced to send troops east to face the Russians and, by September, the German army

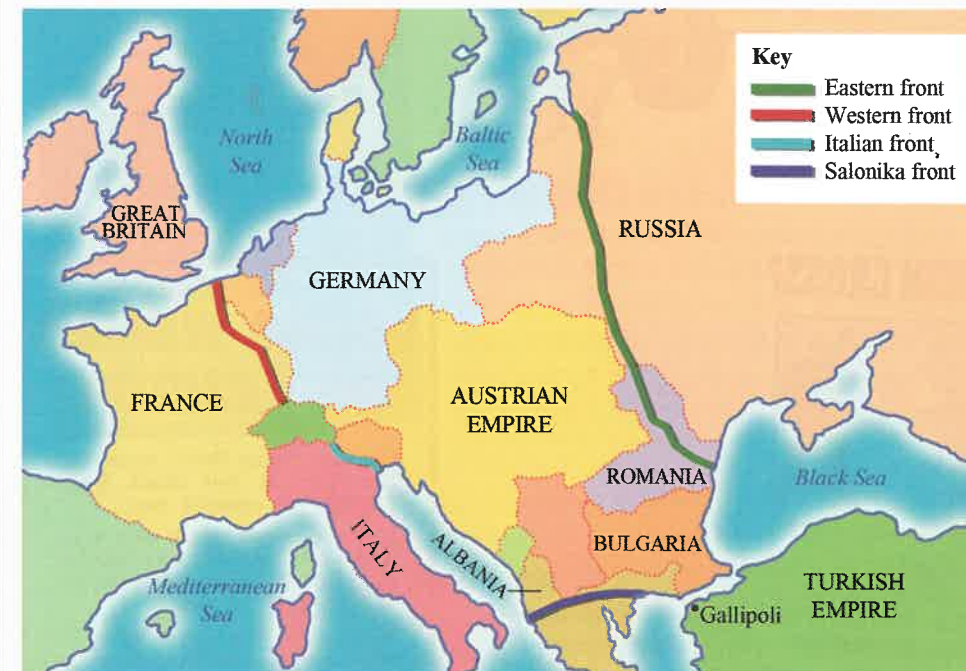
retreated 40 miles behind the River Aisne. There, they dug trenches and set up machine gun nests. The British and the French couldn't break through these defences and dug their own trenches directly opposite. By the end of 1914 the trenches stretched all the way from the English Channel to Switzerland. Neither side could find a way through. The war was stuck in a **stalemate**.



SOURCE A: The Schlieffen Plan in theory.



SOURCE B: The Schlieffen Plan – the reality.



SOURCE C: Far from being a war of rapid movement, the fighting was bogged down on fronts that hardly moved throughout the war. Most fighting took place on the WESTERN FRONT (in France and Belgium), but there was an EASTERN FRONT too where Russians fought against Germans and Austrians. There was also fighting along the Greek border (the SALONIKA FRONT) when Turkish soldiers joined in on Germany's side and Italy (who joined in on Britain's side), as well as at sea and in the air!

WISE-UP Words

front
stalemate

FACT Past its sell-by date
The Schlieffen Plan was dreamed up in the nineteenth century. By the time it was put into action not only was Schlieffen dead, but the world had changed. Railways and lorries moved defending troops far quicker than they did in Schlieffen's time and steamships sped the BEF across the Channel. The French even hired over 600 taxi cabs to ferry extra troops into battle!

Work

- 1 Write a sentence defining the following words:
front • stalemate
- 2 Imagine you are the general in charge of the German army on 2 August 1914. Write a letter to the Kaiser (the German king) explaining your plans for winning the war for Germany.
- 3 Now imagine you are the same general at the end of September 1914. Write another letter to the Kaiser explaining what has gone wrong and why.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

- Could you tell someone where the main fronts of the Great War were?
- Could you also tell them why the war wasn't over by Christmas?
- Do you know what the word 'stalemate' means?