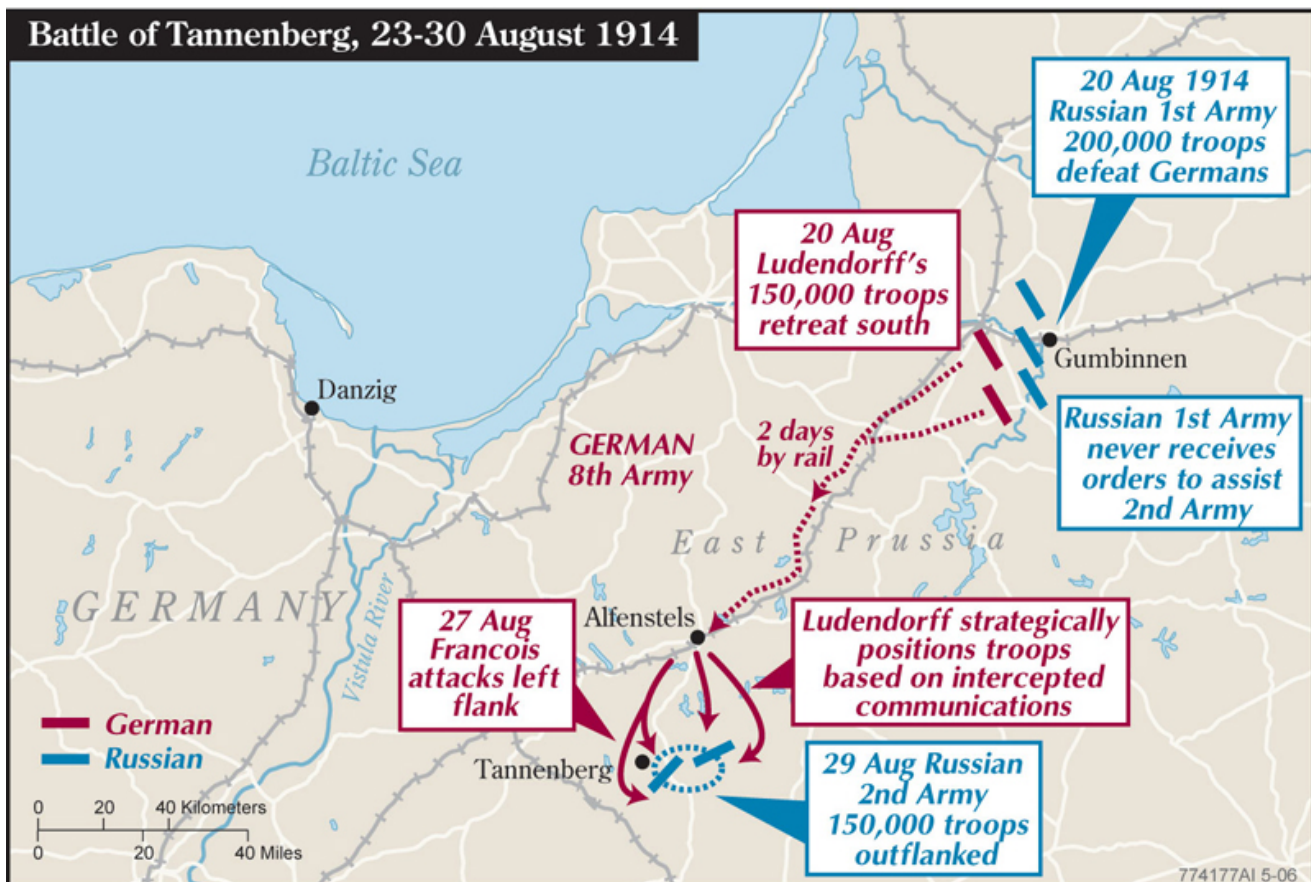


Battle at Tannenberg, August 1914

On the outbreak of the First World War General Alexander Samsonov was given command of the Russian Second Army for the invasion of East Prussia (Eastern Germany). He advanced slowly into the south western corner of the province with the intention of linking up with General Paul von Rennenkampf advancing from the north east.

The commander of the German Eighth Army, General Maximilian Prittwitz, was dismissed for ordering the retreat when faced with the Russian Second Army. General Paul von Hindenburg (who would later become president of Germany after WWI) and General Erich Ludendorff were sent forward to meet Samsonov's (Russians) advancing troops. They made contact on 22nd August, 1914, and for six days the Russians, with their superior numbers, had a few successes. However, by 29th August, the Russian Second Army was surrounded.

General Alexander Samsonov attempted to retreat but now in a German cordon (surrounded by opposing army troops), most of his troops were slaughtered or captured. Only 10,000 of the 150,000 Russian soldiers managed to escape. Shocked by the disastrous outcome of the battle, Samsonov committed suicide. The Germans, who lost 20,000 men in the battle, were able to take over 92,000 Russian prisoners. In Britain, all news of the Russian defeat at Tannenberg was kept from the public.



Check for Understanding - Battle at Tannenberg, August 1914

1. *Why did the Russian army have the advantage at the beginning of the battle?*
2. *What happened at the beginning that made the Russians think that they were going to be victorious?*
3. *How many soldiers did the Russian 2nd Army have? How many escaped? How many were taken prisoner? How many died (Hint: do some math)?*
4. *How might this battle be an example of the fighting on the Eastern Front?*

Battle At Gallipoli, 1915



By the spring of 1915, combat on the Western Front had sunk into stalemate. Enemy troops stared at each other from a line of opposing trenches that stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss border. Neither opponent could outflank its enemy resulting in costly and unproductive direct attacks on well-fortified defenses. The war of movement that both sides had predicted at the beginning of the conflict had devolved into deadly stagnation.

Allied leaders, including Winston Churchill and Lord Kitchener, scoured their maps to find a way around the deadlock. The Dardanelles Strait leading from the Mediterranean to Istanbul caught their eye. A successful attack in this area could open a sea lane to the Russians through the Black Sea, provide a base for attacking the Central Powers through what Churchill described as the "soft underbelly of Europe", and divert enemy attention from the Western Front.

The Campaign was a disaster, poorly planned and badly executed. It began in February 1915 with an unsuccessful naval attempt to force a passage up the Dardanelles. The fleet retreated after sustaining heavy damage from Turkish guns lining both shores and from mines strewn across the channel.

In April, a landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula attempted to secure the shores and silence the Turkish guns. Trouble brewed from the beginning. Amphibious operations were a new and unperfected form of warfare leading to poor communications, troop deployment and supply. The Turks entrenched themselves on the high ground pouring artillery and machine gun fire down upon the unfortunate Australian, New Zealand, Irish, Indian, French and English troops below. The battleground soon resembled that of the Western Front - both sides peering at each other from fortified trenches, forced to spill their precious blood in useless frontal attacks on well defended positions. The stalemate continued through the fall of 1915 until British forces withdrew at the end of the year.

Casualties were high - approximately 147,000 for the British & French, more than 28,000 for the Australians, 7,000+ for New Zealand (25% of those participating), and almost 5,000 British Indians, while the Ottoman Turks suffered about 165,000 casualties or a rate of 60%. The failed campaign gained little and badly tarnished both Churchill's and Kitchener's reputations. For Australia and New Zealand, April 25 is known today as ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) Day, in honor of the of those lost in the battle.

Checking for Understanding - Battle At Gallipoli, 1915

1. *Why was it important for the Allies to “open a sea lane to the Russians through the Black Sea”? (hint: What happened in Aug.-Sept. 1914?)*
2. *How did geography play a part in this battle? Who had the superior position? Why?*
3. *Identify Allied troops who fought in this battle. Where were they from? Why were they fighting for the Allies? How well did this battle turn out for them?*

The Battle of Verdun, 1916

The Battle of Verdun in 1916 was the longest single battle of World War One. The casualties from Verdun and the impact the battle had on the French Army was a primary reason for the British starting the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 in an effort to take German pressure off of the French at Verdun. The Battle of Verdun started on February 21st 1916 and ended on December 16th in 1916. It was to make General Philippe Pétain a hero in France.

The attack on Verdun (the Germans code-named it 'Judgment') came about because of a plan by the German Chief of General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn. He wanted to "bleed France white" by launching a massive German attack on a narrow stretch of land that had historic sentiment for the French - Verdun. The area around Verdun contained twenty major forts and forty smaller ones that had historically protected the eastern border of France and had been modernized in the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Falkenhayn believed that the French simply could not allow these forts to fall as the national humiliation would have been too much. But Falkenhayn didn't want to take the forts, he wanted a "war of attrition" - to simply kill as many of the French as possible. By fighting to the last man, Falkenhayn believed that the French would lose so many soldiers that the battle would change the course of the war.

140,000 German troops started the attack. They were supported by 1,200 artillery guns that targeted 2,500,000 shells at the Verdun region. 1,300 ammunition trains were needed to supply these guns. The Germans also had complete air supremacy with 168 planes located in the area - the largest concentration of planes in history up to that point. To start with, the French only had 30,000 troops to oppose the Germans. On the day the battle started February 21st, 1000 German artillery guns fired on a six mile line along the French front. One French soldier wrote about the artillery bombardment:

"Men were squashed. Cut in two or divided from top to bottom. Blown into showers; bellies turned inside out; skulls forced into the chest as if by a blow from a club."

The German attack and the subsequent battle was to last over 300 days. Flame-throwers were used in large numbers for the first time to help the Germans advance the eight miles they needed to if they were to capture Verdun. By February 25th, the Germans had captured 10,000 French prisoners.

The French put General Philippe Pétain in charge of the defense of Verdun. He was faced with an extremely difficult situation. There was only one road into Verdun from the outside. In fact, it was barely a road by definition. It was only twenty feet wide and vehicles could barely pass one another. Yet along this road, 25,000 tons of supplies were moved into Verdun and 90,000 soldiers. 6,000 vehicles were used in this task and it is said that 66% of the French army was to pass up this road at some time during the battle to save Verdun. Two French soldiers wrote:

"You eat beside the dead; you drink beside the dead, you relieve yourself beside the dead and you sleep beside the dead."

"People will read that the front line was Hell. How can people begin to know what that one word - Hell - means."

By the end of October 1916, the French had re-captured the two forts at Vaux and Douaumont but the surrounding land where the battle had been fought since February was a wasteland. The Battle at Verdun continued to December - ironically after the Somme conflict was considered to have ended.

The loss of life and those wounded was huge at Verdun. Reference books frequently give differing figures such as the magnitude of loss. It is probable that an accurate figure will never be known. It is said that the French lost over 360,000 and the Germans nearly 340,000.

Checking for Understanding - The Battle of Verdun, 1916

1. *How long did the Battle of Verdun last?*
2. *What was the goal of the Germans at the Battle of Verdun? Explain in your own words.*
3. *What was the size of the force that the German's brought to Verdun? How many soldiers did the French start with? How many ended up as prisoners of war?*
4. *How was Verdun an example of how the goals of WWI had changed? How do you think it would impact the French perspective of the Germans by the end of the war?*

The Battle of the Somme, 1916

The Battle of the Somme started in July 1st 1916. It lasted until November 1916. For many people, the Battle of the Somme was the battle that symbolized the horrors of warfare in World War One; this one battle had a marked effect on overall casualty figures and seemed to epitomize the futility of trench warfare. By the end of the battle, the British Army had suffered 420,000 casualties including *nearly 60,000 on the first day alone*. The French lost 200,000 men and the Germans nearly 500,000.

Sir William Robertson, Chief of the British Imperial General Staff, explained what this strategy was:

Remembering the dissatisfaction by ministers at the end of 1915, because the operations had not come up to their expectations, the General Staff took the precaution to make quite clear beforehand the nature of success which the Somme campaign might yield. The necessity of relieving pressure on the French Army at Verdun remains, and is more urgent than ever. This is, therefore, the first objective to be obtained by the combined British and French offensive. The second objective is to inflict as heavy losses as possible upon the German armies.

The battle at the Somme started with a week long artillery bombardment of the German lines. 1,738,000 shells were fired at the Germans. The logic behind this was so that the artillery guns would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire placed in front of the trenches. The use of artillery was heavily supported by the commander of the British forces, Field Marshall Haig.

Lord Kitchener was a supporter of the theory of attrition - that eventually you would grind down your enemy and they would have to yield. He saw the military success of the battle as all-important. However, it did have dire political and social consequences in Britain. Many spoke of the "lost generation". Many people found it difficult to justify the near 88,000 Allied men lost for every one mile gained in the advance.

The next morning (July 2nd) we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of us.....it became clear that the Germans always had a commanding view of No Man's Land. (The British) attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high water-mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as if they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. Machine gun fire had done its terrible work.

-George Coppard, machine gunner at the Battle of the Somme.

Checking for Understanding - The Battle of the Somme, 1916

1. *When did the battle start and end? How did this compare with the battle of Verdun?*
2. *Why was the Battle of the Somme started? (Hint: Read Sir William Robertson's statement)*
3. *What is a war of attrition? Do you feel it work at the Battle of the Somme?*
4. *What was the total casualty count for the battle?*