Opening extract from
The Story of the First World War

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Chapter 1

The build-up to war

The turn of the 20th century was a time of optimism and prosperity, of industrial and mechanical marvels – great factories, steamships and locomotives, and extraordinary new flying machines. Below the surface, however, there was seething political discontent: trade unions striking for better working conditions, women suffragettes demanding voting rights, terrorist assassinations and national rivalries. But the period may now be remembered more fondly, viewed across the abyss of 'the Great War' to come.

Shifting alliances

One major cause of the Great War was the system of alliances that had developed between the major European nations. Each one believed it was stronger and safer inside a partnership of allies. They hoped that the sheer size and strength of the two sides would prevent either one from attacking the other.

But this belief had a serious flaw. Some began to fear that if Germany became stronger it might tip this precarious balance of power. Then, when war came, opposing nations would be dragged into a conflict they had no interest in pursuing.

A French cartoon of the 'giant German ogre', the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck

A new nation

19th century Germany was made up of 39 small independent states. Prussia, the most powerful, persuaded the others to invade France in 1870, taking over Alsace and Lorraine, and to unite around Prussia to create a powerful new nation.

This painting shows Wilhelm I of Prussia being proclaimed Kaiser (meaning 'king') of the Germans, in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles in 1871 – a key moment in the rise of German power.

Ententes and alliances

Fearing French retaliation after the Franco-Prussian War, the Germans made an alliance with Austria-Hungary, promising each other miltary aid if Russia or France attacked either of them. Italy joined in 1882, forming a triple alliance known as the Central Powers.

In the decades that followed, France, Russia and Britain also negotiated alliances amongst themselves, offering mutual aid if one or other was attacked. Finally, in 1907, all three came together in an agreement known as the *Triple Entente* (meaning 'agreement' or 'understanding').

Causes for war

One of the things that alarmed France, Britain and Russia most was the rise of German military officials to leading government positions. They were right to worry. War with France had united the new nation and won territory for it on France's eastern border. Now some members of the government began to push for further military adventures.

The Schlieffen Plan

Fearing a war on both the French and Russian fronts, Count Alfred von Schlieffen devised what he thought was a foolproof plan.

Believing the vast but sluggish Russian army would be slow to arrive at Germany's eastern border, he proposed to defeat France quickly by a surprise thrust through neutral Belgium. This would enable the German army to seize Paris, and defeat the French in six weeks.

Then the Germans could turn their full military strength on Russia. Schlieffen retired in 1905, but his plan gave German leaders false hope that they might win an easy victory. Without it, they might have been more cautious.

This German cartoon map of Europe, made in 1914, shows Germany (blue) and Austria-Hungary (yellow) as determined soldiers with weapons at the ready, surrounded by hostile powers.

The Western Front

The War began as expected — with great marches and great ambitions. The French attacked their German border, hoping to reclaim territory in Alsace and Lorraine, that had been seized in 1871.

   Their troops went into battle dressed traditionally and conspicuously in bright red and blue uniforms, with the cavalry in gleaming silver breastplates. Not surprisingly, they were cut down by German machine gunners. Casualties were horrific: by the end of the year 300,000 French soldiers had been killed and almost 700,000 injured. The bright uniform had to be changed to a duller blue.

Attack and counter-attack

General Helmuth von Moltke, the German commander, was determined to carry out Schlieffen's plan and attack France through Belgium. But there were problems from the start. The Belgians put up an unexpectedly strong resistance, and the Russians arrived faster than expected on Germany's eastern border.

Signal failure

In the West, the German High Command was plagued by communication problems. Their radio signals were jammed by electronic equipment installed at the top of the Eiffel Tower.

Worse, their signals were uncoded, so the French, who were listening, knew exactly where the next attack was coming from.

This massive swathe of soldiers advancing across open fields shows the German army in training just before the outbreak of war.

Days from Paris

By late August, the Germans were only days from Paris. A million Parisians fled, and the French government left for Bordeaux. Scenting victory, the German Chancellor composed a peace memorandum demanding vast amounts of money and territory from the French.

But at this crucial moment, a vigorous French counterattack on the Marne river hit exhausted German troops. By September 10, von Moltke abandoned his plan. He was reported to have told the Kaiser: "Your Majesty, we have lost the War."

Both sides hoped to outflank the other, but without success. By the end of the year, they faced each other along 765 km (475 miles) of fortified trenches – from the Channel to the Alps. The true nature of the War had revealed itself.

The 1st Battle of Ypres

The Battle of Ypres, fought in autumn rain and freezing mud at a small town near the Belgian coast, was a warning of things to come.

During October and November 1914, 50,000 German, and 25,000 Allied soldiers were killed. The British army lost many of its most experienced soldiers. The Germans lost many of their idealistic young volunteers.

They called it *Kindermord*, 'The Massacre of the Innocents'. It ended, like most battles on the Western Front, in a costly stalemate.