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World War I: A Global Struggle

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 Australian troops attack at the Battle of Gallipoli. Photograph Courtesy of the National Archives & Records Administration

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As [World War I](#) descended across Europe in August 1914, it also saw fighting erupt across the colonial empires of the belligerents. These conflicts typically involved smaller forces and with one exception resulted in the defeat and capture of Germany's colonies. Also, as the fighting on the Western Front stagnated in to trench warfare, the Allies sought secondary theaters for striking at the Central Powers. Many of these targeted the weakened Ottoman Empire and saw the spread of fighting to Egypt and the Middle East. In the Balkans, Serbia, who had played a key role in starting of the conflict, was ultimately overwhelmed leading to a new front in Greece.

War Comes to the Colonies

Formed in early 1871, Germany was a later comer to the competition for empire. As a result, the new nation was forced to direct its colonial efforts towards the less preferred parts of Africa and the islands

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of the Pacific. While German merchants began operations in Togo, Kamerun (Cameroon), South-West Africa (Namibia), and East Africa (Tanzania), others were planting colonies in Papua, Samoa, as well as the Caroline, Marshall, Solomon, Mariana, and Bismarck Islands. In addition, the port of Tsingtao was taken from the Chinese in 1897.

With the outbreak of war in Europe, Japan elected to declare war on Germany citing its obligations under the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1911. Moving quickly, Japanese troops seized the Marianas, Marshalls, and Carolines. Transferred to Japan after the war, these islands became a key part of its defensive ring during [World War II](#). While the islands were being captured, a 50,000-man force was dispatched to Tsingtao. Here they conducted a classic siege with the aid of British forces and took the port on November 7, 1914. Far to the south, Australian and New Zealand forces captured Papua and Samoa.

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Battling for Africa

While the German position in the Pacific was quickly swept away, their forces in Africa mounted a more vigorous defense. Though Togo was swiftly taken on August 27, British and French forces encountered difficulties in Kamerun. Though possessing greater numbers, the Allies were hampered by distance, topography, and climate. While initial efforts to capture the colony failed, a second campaign took the capital at Douala on September 27.

Delayed by weather and enemy resistance, the final German outpost at Mora was not taken until February 1916. In South-West Africa, British efforts were slowed by the need to put down a Boer revolt before crossing the border from South Africa. Attacking in January 1915, South African forces advanced in four columns on the German capital at Windhoek. Taking the town on May 12, 1915, they compelled the colony's unconditional surrender two months later.

The Last Holdout

Only in German East Africa was the war to last the duration. Though the governors of East Africa and British Kenya wished to observe a pre-war understanding exempting Africa from hostilities, those within their borders clamored for war. Leading the German *Schutztruppe* (colonial defense force) was Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck. A veteran imperial campaigner, Lettow-Vorbeck embarked on a remarkable campaign which saw him repeatedly defeat larger Allied forces.

Utilizing African soldiers known as *askiris*, his command lived off the land and conducted an ongoing guerilla campaign. Tying down increasingly large numbers of British troops, Lettow-Vorbeck suffered several reverses in 1917 and 1918, but was never captured. The remnants of his command finally surrendered after the armistice on November 23, 1918, and Lettow-Vorbeck returned to Germany a hero.

The "Sick Man" at War

On August 2, 1914, the Ottoman Empire, long known as the "Sick Man of Europe" for its declining power, concluded an alliance with Germany against Russia. Long courted by Germany, the Ottomans had worked to re-equip their army with German weapons and used the Kaiser's military advisors. Utilizing the German battlecruiser *Goeben* and light cruiser *Breslau*, both of which had been transferred to Ottoman control after escaping British pursuers in the Mediterranean, Minister of War Enver Pasha ordered naval attacks against Russian ports on October 29. As a result, Russia declared war on November 1, followed by Britain and France four days later.

With the beginning of hostilities, General Otto Liman von Sanders, Ever Pasha's chief German advisor, expected the Ottomans to attack north into the Ukrainian plains. Instead, Ever Pasha elected to assault Russia through the mountains of the Caucasus. In this area the Russians advanced first gaining ground as the Ottoman commanders did not wish to attack in the severe winter weather. Angered, Ever Pasha took direct control and was badly defeated in the Battle of Sarikamis in

December 1914/January 1915. To the south, the British, concerned about ensuring the Royal Navy's access to Persian oil, landed the 6th Indian Division at Basra on November 7. Taking the city, it advanced to secure Qurna.

The Gallipoli Campaign

Contemplating the Ottoman entry into the war, First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill developed a plan for attacking the Dardanelles. Using the ships of the Royal Navy, Churchill believed, partially due to faulty intelligence, that the straits could be forced, opening the way for a direct assault on Constantinople. Approved, the Royal Navy had three attacks on the straits turned back in February and early March 1915. A massive assault on March 18 also failed with the loss of three older battleships. Unable to penetrate the Dardanelles due to Turkish mines and artillery, the decision was made to [land troops on the Gallipoli Peninsula](#) to remove the threat ([Map](#)).

Entrusted to General Sir Ian Hamilton, the operation called for landings at Helles and farther north at Gaba Tepe. While the troops at Helles were to push north, the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps was to push east and prevent the retreat of the Turkish defenders. Going ashore on April 25, Allied forces took heavy losses and failed to achieve their objectives.

Battling on Gallipoli's mountainous terrain, Turkish forces under Mustafa Kemal held the line and fighting stalemated into trench warfare. On August 6, a third landing at Sulva Bay was also contained by the Turks. After a failed offensive in August, fighting quieted as the British debated strategy ([Map](#)). Seeing no other recourse, the decision was made to evacuate Gallipoli and the last Allied troops departed on January 9, 1916.

Mesopotamia Campaign

In Mesopotamia, British forces successfully repelled an Ottoman attack at Shaiba on April 12, 1915. Having been reinforced, the British commander, General Sir John Nixon, ordered Major General Charles Townshend to advance up the Tigris River to Kut and, if possible, Baghdad. Reaching Ctesiphon, Townshend encountered an Ottoman force under Nureddin Pasha on November 22. After five days of inconclusive fighting, both sides withdrew. Retreating to Kut-al-Amara, Townshend was followed by Nureddin Pasha who laid siege to the British force on December 7. Several attempts were made to lift the siege in early 1916 with no success and Townshend surrendered on April 29 ([Map](#)).

Unwilling to accept defeat, the British dispatched Lieutenant General Sir Fredrick Maude to retrieve the situation. Reorganizing and reinforcing his command, Maude began a methodical offensive up the Tigris on December 13, 1916. Repeatedly outmaneuvering the Ottomans, he retook Kut and pressed towards Baghdad. Defeating Ottoman forces along the Diyala River, Maude captured Baghdad on March 11, 1917.

Maude then halted in the city to reorganize his supply lines and avoid the summer heat. Dying of cholera in November, he was replaced by General Sir William Marshall. With troops being diverted from his command to expand operations elsewhere, Marshall slowly pushed towards to the Ottoman base at Mosul. Advancing towards the city, it was finally occupied on November 14, 1918, two weeks after the Armistice of Mudros ended hostilities.

Defense of the Suez Canal

As Ottoman forces campaigned in the Caucasus and Mesopotamia, they also began moving to strike at the Suez Canal. Closed by the British to enemy traffic at the start of the war, the canal was a key line of strategic communication for the Allies. Though Egypt was still technically part of the Ottoman Empire, it had been under British administration since 1882 and was rapidly filling with British and Commonwealth troops.

Moving through the desert wastes of the Sinai Peninsula, Turkish troops under General Ahmed Cemal and his German chief of staff Franz Kress von Kressenstein attacked the canal area on February 2,

1915. Alerted to their approach, British forces drove off the attackers after two days of fighting. Though a victory, the threat to the canal forced the British to leave a stronger garrison in Egypt than intended.

Into the Sinai

For over a year the Suez front remained quiet as fighting raged at Gallipoli and in Mesopotamia. In the summer of 1916, von Kressenstein made another attempt on the canal. Advancing across the Sinai, he met a well-prepared British defense led by General Sir Archibald Murray. In the resulting Battle of Romani on August 3-5, the British forced the Turks to retreat. Going over the offensive, the British pushed across Sinai, building a railroad and water pipeline as they went. Winning battles at [Magdhaba](#) and Rafa, they were ultimately stopped by the Turks at the First Battle of Gaza in March 1917 ([Map](#)). When a second attempt to take the city failed in April, Murray was sacked in favor of General Sir Edmund Allenby.

Palestine

Reorganizing his command, Allenby commenced the Third Battle of Gaza on October 31. Flanking the Turkish line at Beersheba, he won decisive victory. On Allenby's flank were the Arab forces guided by [Major T.E. Lawrence](#) (Lawrence of Arabia) who had previously captured the port of Aqaba. Dispatched to Arabia in 1916, Lawrence successfully worked to foment unrest among the Arabs who then revolted against Ottoman rule. With the Ottomans in retreat, Allenby rapidly pushed north, taking Jerusalem on December 9 ([Map](#)).

Though the British wished to deliver a death blow to the Ottomans in early 1918, their plans were undone by the beginning of the German [Spring Offensives](#) on the Western Front. The bulk of Allenby's veteran troops were transferred west to aid in blunting the German assault. As a result, much of the spring and summer was consumed rebuilding his forces from newly recruited troops. Ordering the Arabs to harass the Ottoman rear, Allenby opened the [Battle of Megiddo](#) on September 19. Shattering an Ottoman army under von Sanders, Allenby's men rapidly advanced and captured Damascus on October 1. Though their southern forces had been destroyed, the government in Constantinople refused to surrender and continued the fight elsewhere.

Fire in the Mountains

In the wake of the victory at Sarikamis, command of Russian forces in the Caucasus was given to General Nikolai Yudenich. Pausing to reorganize his forces, he embarked on an offensive in May 1915. This was aided by an Armenian revolt at Van which had erupted the previous month. While one wing of the attack succeeded in relieving Van, the other was halted after advancing through the Tortum Valley towards Erzurum.

Exploiting the success at Van and with Armenian guerillas striking the enemy rear, Russian troops secured Manzikert on May 11. Due to the Armenian activity, the Ottoman government passed the Tehcir Law calling for the forced relocation of Armenians from the area. Subsequent Russian efforts during the summer were fruitless and Yudenich took the fall to rest and reinforce. In January, Yudenich returned to the attack winning the Battle of Koprukoy and driving on Erzurum.

Taking the city in March, Russian forces captured Trabzon the following month and began pushing south towards Bitlis. Pressing on, both Bitlis and Mush were taken. These gains were short-lived as Ottoman forces under Mustafa Kemal recaptured both later that summer. The lines stabilized through the fall as both sides recuperated from the campaigning. Though the Russian command wished to renew the assault in 1917, social and political unrest at home prevented this. With the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, Russian forces began withdrawing on the Caucasus front and eventually evaporated away. Peace was achieved through the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) in which Russia ceded territory to the Ottomans.

The Fall of Serbia

While fighting raged on the major fronts of the war in 1915, most of the year was relatively quiet in Serbia. Having successfully fended off an Austro-Hungarian invasion in late-1914, Serbia desperately worked to rebuild its battered army though it lacked the manpower to do so effectively. Serbia's situation changed dramatically late in the year when following Allied defeats at Gallipoli and Gorlice-Tarnow, Bulgaria joined the Central Powers and mobilized for war on September 21.

On October 7, German and Austro-Hungarian forces renewed the assault on Serbia with Bulgaria attacking four days later. Badly outnumbered and under pressure from two directions, the Serbian army was forced to retreat. Falling back to the southwest, the Serbian army conducted a long march to Albania but remained intact ([Map](#)). Having anticipated the invasion, the Serbs had begged for the Allies to send aid.

Developments in Greece

Due to variety of factors, this could only be routed through the neutral Greek port of Salonika. While proposals for opening a secondary front at Salonika had been discussed by the Allied high command earlier in the war, they had been dismissed as a waste of resources. This view changed on September 21 when Greek Prime Minister Eleutherios Venizelos advised the British and French that if they sent 150,000 men to Salonika, he could bring Greece into the war on the Allied side. Though quickly dismissed by the pro-German King Constantine, Venizelos' plan led to the arrival of Allied troops at Salonika on October 5. Led by French General Maurice Sarrail, this force was able to provide little aid to the retreating Serbians.

The Macedonian Front

As the Serbian army was evacuated to Corfu, Austrian forces occupied much of Italian-controlled Albania. Believing the war in the region lost, the British expressed a desire to withdraw their troops from Salonika. This met with protests from the French and the British unwillingly remained. Building a massive fortified camp around the port, the Allies were soon joined by the remnants of the Serbian army. In Albania, an Italian force was landed in the south and made gains in the country south of Lake Ostrovo.

Expanding the front out from Salonika, the Allies held a small German-Bulgarian offensive in August and counterattacked on September 12. Achieving some gains, Kaymakchalan and Monastir were both taken ([Map](#)). As Bulgarian troops crossed the Greek border into Eastern Macedonia, Venizelos and officers from the Greek Army launched a coup against the king. This resulted in a royalist government in Athens and a Venizelist government at Salonika which controlled much of northern Greece.

Offensives in Macedonia

Idle through much of 1917, Sarrail's *Armée d'Orient* took control of all of Thessaly and occupied the Isthmus of Corinth. These actions led to the exile of the king on June 14 and united the country under Venizelos who mobilized the army to support the Allies. In May 18, General Adolphe Guillaumat, who had replaced Sarrail, attacked and captured Skra-di-Legen. Recalled to aid in stopping the German Spring Offensives, he was replaced with General Franchet d'Esperey. Wishing to attack, d'Esperey opened the Battle of Dobro Pole on September 14 ([Map](#)). Largely facing Bulgarian troops whose morale was low, the Allies made swift gains though the British took heavy losses at Doiran. By September 19, the Bulgarians were in full retreat.

On September 30, the day after the fall of Skopje and under internal pressure, the Bulgarians were granted the Armistice of Solun which took them out of the war. While d'Esperey pushed north and over the Danube, British forces turned east to attack an undefended Constantinople. With British troops approaching the city, the Ottomans signed the Armistice of Mudros on October 26. Poised to strike into the Hungarian heartland, d'Esperey was approached by Count Károlyi, the head of the

Hungarian government, about the terms for an armistice. Traveling to Belgrade, Károlyi signed an armistice on November 10.

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