



The Western Front

(from the viewpoint of the Triple Alliance/Central Powers)

Adopted from the PowerPoint, Textbook, and Internet Sources

The Western Front was the front of World War 1 that stretched for 400-plus miles through France and Belgium, all the way from the North Sea to the border of Switzerland. This front would prove to be decisive in who would win the First World War. The Western Front has a long history of dispute between France and Germany as the territories of Alsace and Lorraine frequently switched hands between France and Germany between 1870 and 1918. This caused both Germany and France to claim them as ancestral lands. This would become complicated because each time the territory changed hands the school system and language would be changed from French to German and it would stay that way until it exchanged hands again. This effectively “trained” the citizens as both French and Germans, affecting their ideas of their own nationality and nationalism, one of the causes of WWI.

The history of the Western Front is tied to the mobilisation of the French troops, whom were waiting for Germany to make its first move after it had declared war on Russia. Two days after declaring war on Russia they declared war on France and began the Schlieffen Plan by going through Belgium to attack France. Their goal was to get France out of the war quickly so that they did not have to fight a two-front war.

By 1918, at the conclusion of the war, the Western Front consisted of several lines of trenches. There was the main line, and up to four lines of trenches behind it. The trenches were about four feet wide and eight feet deep, but often were much shallower. They were built (dug) in a zig-zag pattern with the trench that was parallel to the enemy trench referred to as the fire trench. The fighting at the Western front employed the use of many of the new technologies of World War 1 that promoted a slow and defensive style of warfare to be used. Some of the new pieces of technology that were used were the machine gun, poisonous gas, tanks, airplanes, and even primitive submarines (not used on the front, but will be a huge part of World War II).

Since trenches were immobile that meant that armies had to find new ways to introduce movement into the war and a way to break the stalemate that the armies found themselves in. Among the new technologies listed above, this was the first time that barbed wire was used extensively in warfare to keep away and slow the advance of enemy soldiers. Previously it had been used on American cattle ranches to keep the cattle on the farmer’s lands. Poison gases, like mustard gas, was used to kill enemy soldiers but the problem with gases is that they were dependant upon the weather. A shifting wind could send the gas away from its intended target and back towards those who had originally launched the gas. Mustard gas caused blisters, damaged the eyes, and bronchial tubes by stripping them of their mucous membrane. Death from mustard gas could take 5 weeks. About 1.2 million soldiers were killed on both sides due to poison gas attacks.

Machine guns were used to rapidly fire and kill advancing armies in “no man’s land” and further added to the stalemate. It became even more difficult to advance in “no man’s land.” The British first developed tanks to break the defensive trench warfare to encourage a more offensive war by protecting advancing troops as they broke through enemy lines/defenses. It did not have overwhelming results as it was deployed later in the war as well as they were slow and clumsy; but tanks were effectively proven as a concept to be further developed and played a central role in World War II and the German *blitzkrieg* (lightning war). Much like tanks, primitive submarines were used (even sinking the *Lusitania*- which, along with the Zimmerman Telegram, convinced the United States to join the war against the Central Powers). The *Lusitania* was sunk because the Germans were practicing unrestricted submarine warfare which meant that they were sinking ships without warning, even if they were from neutral countries. The Zimmerman Telegram was a secret diplomatic telegram from Germany to Mexico proposing an alliance between the two, that was intercepted by the British, decoded and shared with the Americans. In the telegram it said that if the US entered the war with the Allies Mexico would “recover” Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico if they started to fight the US and the Central Powers won the war.

Airplanes were also used (as biplanes) for observation at first and then later engaging in “dogfights” that had little effect on the actual war itself, but like the submarine would play a greater role in WWII as a proven concept from WWI. Flamethrowers were used, as were grenade launchers, to be able to strike the enemy from a further distance too.

The German and the French armies fought many battles across the Western Front. The longest and most deadly was at the Battle of Verdun, with about 714,000 casualties. The battle lasted from February until December 1916 with an average of 70,000 casualties a month. The Battle of the Somme was fought by the British and French armies against the Germans in July 1916. During this battle there were 60,000 British soldiers killed in one day and over 1,000,000 in 5 months. The Battle of the Somme lasted from July until November 1916 taking place on the upper portions of the river. The Battle of the Somme was the largest on the Western Front in terms of the number of troops involved (3,000,000).