

# THE GREAT WAR—ERA SUMMARY

## BRITISH EMPIRE—1901 TO 1921

### DEATH OF VICTORIA TO AFTERMATH OF THE GREAT WAR

Thirteen years after the death of [Victoria I](#) in 1901, the British Empire faced the worst calamity in its history, the Great War. During the last half of the 19th century, the nation of Germany, dominated by Prussia, had made great gains over its continental neighbors. Its compulsory education and university system produced the best educated population in the world. In the [Franco Prussian War](#) of 1870, Germany had established itself as the pre-eminent military force on the continent. Germany was a well-educated, industrious, and ambitious country, with an enormous standing army. It was not, however, a strong naval power and by the time it came to power, most of the desirable areas of the globe had already been colonized by Britain, France, or Spain. Undaunted, Germany realized that if she could get control of the Balkan Peninsula, and ally herself with Turkey, she could control important trade routes to the east.

Great Britain, on the other hand, was very wealthy, powerful, and controlled almost all the strategically important sea routes, but her wealth and industry had given rise to a certain decadence and corruption, and the control of her government alternated between pro-imperialist Tories and liberal, or socialist reformers. Britain, being a self-content, but unwieldy power, did not want war, and was not prepared for it. Germany, being a young, vigorous, and ambitious rising power, did. The leaders in Germany undoubtedly believed they could conquer the corrupt western democracies in a short and decisive campaign, as they had done in the Franco-Prussian war. No one believed in advance that the war would sink to the depths of carnage, barbarism and whole-sale slaughter to which it quickly sank. The *Great War*, as it was called at the time, was not just a military debacle for all concerned, but a blow at the heart of the modernist idea of moral progress, and the conceits of civilization.

**The Western Front**—British involvement in the Great War occurred primarily on the Western Front, and in particular in the regions of Flanders and northern France. The German had planned a very quick foray toward Paris in hopes of a quick victory, but they were frustrated by Belgium's refusal to allow their army to pass through their country. This delayed the German



THE DESTRUCTION OF A ZEPPELIN AT CUFFLEY.

advance by three weeks, giving France and Britain time to marshal forces. Once inside French territory, the Germans advanced rapidly but were stopped and driven back at the *First Battle of the Marne*. The Germans retreated to a line defense that extended across eastern France from the North Sea to Switzerland, and both sides dug in for a protracted war. Numerous offensives were attempted from this line on both sides, but with modern weapon technology, every offensive resulted in horrendous casualties, and fighting quickly reverted to trench warfare. New weapons, such as poison gas, aircraft bombing, and tanks were invented to make progress on this front, but even these were unsuccessful in breaking the deadlock. The two most famous battles on the Western front, both lasting several months and inflicting hundreds of thousands of casualties, were *Verdun* and *Somme*. Yet even these ambitious campaigns failed in their objectives. The western front languished for three years, until Germany instigated a final offensive, in an attempt to break through the French line before American reinforcements arrived. The object failed and by 1818, when significant numbers of Americans arrived the Germans were driven out of their positions and far back into German territory.

**Gallipoli**—The *invasion of Gallipoli* was the worst British crisis of 1915. The British desired to gain control of the Black Sea in order to supply its ally Russian, and also to cut off German aid to Turkey. It was determined that the strait of Dardanelles could not be taken by British navy due to heavily fortified forts, so a large scale land invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula was planned. Although carefully planned, the casualties were extremely heavy, the conditions were terrible, and the British were too exhausted once they had secured each military objective to follow through on their offensive. After several offensives failed to make headway the project was abandoned. Winston Churchill was one of the Navel commanders at the time who lost their position after the debacle.



AUSTRALIANS AT WORK AT ANZAC TWO DAYS BEFORE THE EVACUATION TOOK PLACE

**Mesopotamia and Palestine**—After an initial disastrous campaign in Mesopotamia, in which most of a British army was besieged in Kut en route to Baghdad, the allied campaigns in Iraq and Palestine were generally successful. By attacking from British strongholds in the Persian Gulf and Egypt, several British armies were able to land successfully, secure their supply lines, and over run the southern portions of the Ottoman Empire. They were helped in these endeavors by an Arab rebellion, led by Lawrence of Arabia, a British archeologist who had spent several years traveling in Arabia and befriending important sheiks. The first allied victory in the area was the successful capture of Baghdad by General Maude in early 1917. This was followed up by a series of successful campaigns in Palestine and Syria by General Allenby. Jerusalem fell

to the British in late 1917, and most important cities in Syria were in British hands by early 1918.

**Dissolution of the British Empire**—The immediate effects of the Treaty of Versailles, which ended the Great War, was to add Egypt, Iraq and Palestine to Britain's dominions. These new acquisitions were the result of the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. Long term, however, the Great War portended the ultimate dissolution of the Empire. The war had crippled Britain economically, decreased its hold upon its colonies, and most importantly severely diminished its will to power. Britain's war debt was enormous and led to destabilizing inflation. The Anglo-Irish war of 1919 led to Ireland's independence from Great Britain in 1922. A few years later the Balfour Declaration of 1926 suggested that the imperial possessions of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Newfoundland, and South Africa be governed in cooperation with, but independently of Britain. This arrangement was set formally forth in 1931 in the Statute of Westminster. Gradually almost all other British possessions gained their independence: Iraq in 1932, India in 1947, Burma in 1948, Egypt in 1953, Nigeria and South Africa in 1960, and Kenya in 1963. Hong Kong was ceded back to the China in 1997. Today the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland enjoys commonwealth trade relations with most of its former colonies, but it directly governs only the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, and the British West Indies.