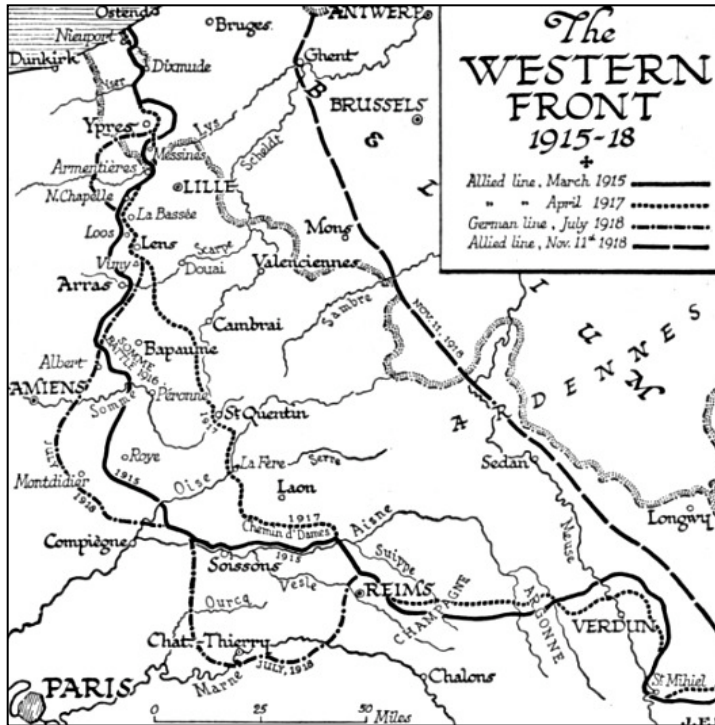


# essential context



## a. the western front

In August 1914, Germany activated the “**Schlieffen Plan**”: an invasion of France, via Belgium, in a gigantic sweep designed to bring the war in the west to a swift conclusion.

Unexpectedly strong resistance from Belgium and France, combined with surprisingly swift transfer of British troops to the continent, meant

that the Schlieffen Plan eventually ground to a halt.

At this point both sides desperately tried to outflank each other in what became known as the “**race to the sea**”. By the end of the year this had resulted in a front line which extended from the coast of Belgium to the border with Switzerland.

All along the “**Western Front**” both sides dug trenches to protect themselves from artillery bombardments and machine-gun fire.



## b. albert

Albert was successfully held by French troops during the ‘race to the sea’ in 1914. The Germans shelled it from the high ground they occupied around the town. By 1915, the famous ‘Golden Madonna’ on the basilica had been battered sideways and appeared to be on the verge of throwing the infant Christ into the rubble below. This gave rise to a German superstition that whichever side caused the statue to fall would lose the war. The Germans therefore studiously avoided shelling the tower and the ‘leaning virgin’ became a well-known feature of the Western Front. In 1918, the British, aware of its value as a vantage point, demolished the tower before retreating from Albert during the German Spring Offensive. They recaptured the town shortly afterwards but the statue was nowhere to be found. The town was completely rebuilt after World War One and the statue that can be seen today is a reproduction.

A political cartoon by David Low. It depicts a man's face, where the features are replaced by a map of Europe. A hand labeled "BRITISH ARMY" is pointing to the map. The man's expression is one of shock or realization. The cartoon is signed "LOW" in the bottom right corner.

This map illustrates the Ypres Salient during World War I. Key features include:

- Belgian Troops:** Indicated by a green line along the top edge of the salient.
- Chlorine Gas:** A yellow-shaded area labeled "Chlorine Gas" is shown near the Frenche sector.
- Ypres Salient:** The central area of the map, labeled "YPRES SALIENT".
- Locations:**
  - YPRES:** The main city, shown in two locations.
  - ST JULIEN:** A location to the northeast of Ypres.
  - FORTUIN:** A location to the east of St Julien.
  - GRAVENSTAFEL:** A location to the east of Fortuin.
  - WIJLTJE:** A location to the west of St Julien.
  - POTIJZE:** A location to the south of Ypres.
  - VLAMERTINGHE:** A location to the southwest of Ypres.
  - Dichebusch:** A location to the southwest of Ypres.
  - Gravenstafel:** A location to the northeast of Ypres.
  - Zonnebeke:** A location to the east of Ypres.
  - Ypres Road:** A red line running along the bottom edge of the salient.
- Sectors:** The map is divided into sectors labeled "FRENCH" and "GRAVENSTAFEL".
- Other Labels:** "Belgian Troops", "Chlorine Gas", "Ypres", "St Julien", "Fortuin", "Gravenstafel", "Wijltje", "Potijze", "Vlamertinghe", "Dichebusch", "Zonnebeke", "Ypres Road", "Gravenstafel", "Zonnebeke", "Ypres Road".

As a result, the town of Ypres became one of the most dangerous places in the world. Over the course of the war, 185,000 allied soldiers died here as the salient bulged and then contracted in a series of

devastating attacks and counter-attacks that can be summarised as follows:

First Battle of Ypres (1914): The culmination of the “race to the sea”; it was here that most of the *professional* soldiers on both sides were killed.

Second Battle of Ypres (1915): The Germans used poison gas for the first time to push the allies back from the salient and capture the high ground around Ypres.

Third Battle of Ypres (1917): The allies recaptured the ridges around Ypres in a series of muddy, bloody battles (e.g.

**Passchendaele** Ridge, **Messines** Ridge) claiming 1/4 million lives in total.

Soldiers quickly became exhausted at the front line and were given regular leave; they would head back into Ypres down the **Menin Road**, then to go to the safety of villages well behind the lines. The most popular of these was Poperinge, which became famous for its bars and brothels but also for **Talbot House**, an “everyman’s club” where soldiers could relax in civilised surroundings and try to forget about the war for a while. Nearby was the casualty clearing station of **Lijssenthoek**: the site of second largest Commonwealth war cemetery.

By the end of the war the villages in the salient had been obliterated and many – such as **Langemarck** and **Tyne Cot**, near **Passchendaele** - had changed hands several times as one army dislodged another, often destroying cemeteries from earlier battles as they did so (this helps to explain why so many graves are now for unidentified soldiers).

The city of **Ypres** itself never fell to the Germans, but was nevertheless reduced to a pile of rubble by incessant bombardments: the town we see today is, believe it or not, a complete reconstruction of the original medieval city. It was the gigantic cost of work like this that helps to explain why the allies were so keen that Germany pay **reparations** after World War One.

#### **d. the end of the war**

The to-and-fro motion of the opposing armies continued to the last. In 1917, the allies successfully took (albeit at a terrible human cost) not just **Passchendaele** Ridge in the Ypres Salient, but **Vimy Ridge** in the Somme sector.

In 1918, however, the Germans launched an immense “Spring Offensive” on the allied lines which recaptured all of the land lost the previous year.

Nevertheless the allies were ultimately able to hold on and then counter-attack in the “Spring Offensive”. The entry of the USA on the allied side convinced Germany that further fighting was pointless. Exhausted and traumatised, they surrendered on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918.



## after the war

After the war was over, the process of grieving, burying the dead and commemorating the fallen began.

### The memorials

In the Ypres salient, the British built the **Menin Gate** “memorial to the missing”, erected **St. George’s Chapel** and preserved **Talbot House**. On the Somme, the British built the **Thiepval** “memorial to the missing”, The Newfoundlanders built a **Beaumont Hamel** memorial park, the Canadians did the same at **Vimy Ridge**, the Northern Irish built the **Ulster Tower**, and the Australians, Welsh and Indians built memorials at **Pozieres**, **Mametz** and **Neuve Chapelle** respectively.

### The cemeteries

Perhaps more powerful than the memorials are the cemeteries. These include the British cemeteries of **Lijssenthoek** and **Tyne Cot** in the Ypres Salient; the largest French cemetery, **Notre Dame de Lorette**; and the oppressive German war cemeteries at **Langemarck**, **Neuville St. Vaast** and **Fricourt**.



ypres, 1917.