

What was the Western Front

The Western Front was the name applied to the fighting zone in France and Flanders, where the British, French, Belgian and later American Armies faced that of Germany. There was an Eastern Front too, in Poland, Galicia and down to Serbia, where Russian Armies faced those of Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Western Front was not the only theatre that saw the British Army in action during the Great War but it was by far the most important. After the battles of 1914 both sides held an entrenched line that stretched from Nieuport on the Belgian coast, through the flat lands of industrial Artois, continuing through the wide expanses of the Somme and Champagne, into the high Vosges and on to the Swiss border. The British held a small portion of this 400-mile long line, varying from some 20 miles in 1914 to over 120 early in 1918.

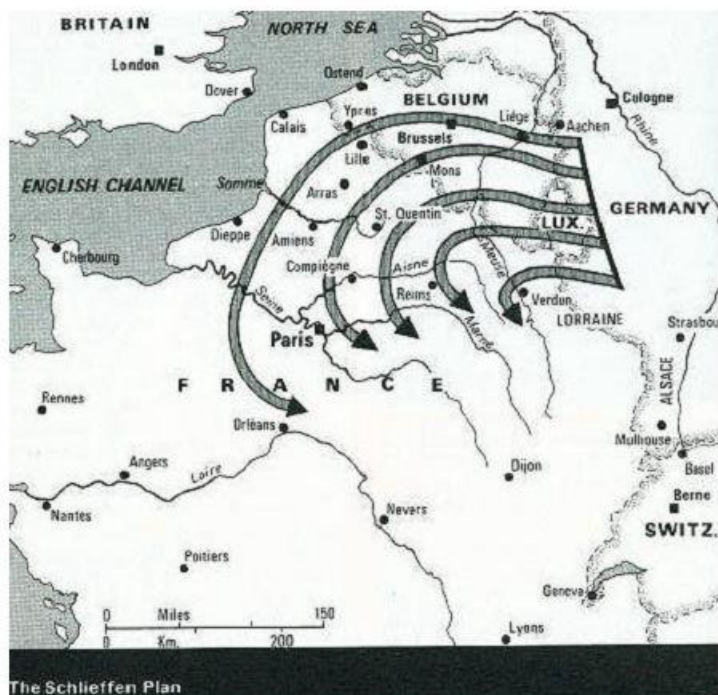
Summary

From the moment the German Army moved quietly into Luxemburg on 2 August 1914 to the Armistice on 11 November 1918, the fighting on the Western Front in France and Flanders never stopped. There were quiet periods, just as there were the most intense, savage, huge-scale battles. Until mid-1917 when the French Army was seriously affected by mutiny, the British Expeditionary Force was the junior partner. From then until ultimate victory, the British Army played the central role. Weakened by casualties and government action that held back hundreds of thousands of troops in the fear that the army command would squander them, with an ever-lengthening line to hold, the BEF fought a magnificent defence in spring 1918. Breakthrough came August 1918, and in the last 100 days of the war the BEF spearheaded the defeat of the main body of the main enemy.

Why here?

Decades before the Great War, Germans knew they would one day fight a major war in Europe. They faced the possibility of encirclement, a threat which became real when France allied with Russia. The staff of the Army under von Schlieffen proposed a breathtaking plan (compiled in the early years of the century) that would defeat both of these long-term enemies. It was considered that Russia would be slow to mobilise its armies, giving time for Germany to attack France. France would need to be quickly defeated, allowing Germany to turn its attentions to the Russian Bear.

The von Schlieffen plan therefore provided for a rapid advance, with German troops sweeping through neutral Belgium, swinging along the French coast and then to the West of Paris. (Schlieffen also planned to strike into the Netherlands to capture Antwerp from the North; his successor von Moltke cancelled this only because of a lack of artillery). French plans played into German hands, as they proposed to launch attacks into Alsace and Lorraine.



The German plan was quite well known by the French, who began entering secret planning with their new allies, the British.

In the years before the war, Germany quietly surveyed the coming battlefields of Northern France and Flanders, and built immense railway systems to be able to deploy millions of men to the borders. When war broke out, the plan began to be executed. Luxemburg and then Belgium was invaded, and the great move west began.

The French army was slaughtered in the first weeks of the war. The German army moved relentlessly forward. Lying at Mons, in the coalfield of southern Belgium, on the path of the northernmost of the advancing Germans were the units of the British Expeditionary Force.

Information from 1914.1918.net