

Boulogne, the BEF's main supply port. Once again the kaiser came to the front lines, this time expecting to lead his men into Ypres. Once again, he would be disappointed.

To defend the Ypres/Yser area, Joffre sent Foch north to take command of what became known as Army Group North. It consisted of the disorganized remains of the Belgian Army, the BEF, and the French Tenth Army. Foch was in fact junior to both Sir John, a field marshal, and the commander of the Belgian Army, King Albert I. Nevertheless, France had the most men in the sector, and Foch knew the terrain well. He quickly divined that the Allied position required the retention of the French cities of Lille and Dunkirk and the Belgian town of Dixmude, north of Ypres. He rushed reinforcement to all three and ordered them defended at all costs.

Getting three armies to work together posed a significant challenge. The British and Belgian positions differed substantially. Sir John was naturally concerned with securing the Channel ports and wanted to evacuate the Ypres sector in order to concentrate along the coast. King Albert, however, determined to hold on to the last strip of his nation's territory not under German control, whatever the cost. On October 17, as Foch was reorganizing the Allied forces in and around Ypres, Falkenhayn's forces struck. The chance to destroy the tired British, whom Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria called "our most detested enemy," added fuel to the German drive.²⁰

The resulting campaign involved two overlapping battles, the First Battle of Ypres and the Battle of the Yser (October 17 to November 12). The relatively flat, featureless terrain of the Ypres sector favored the German attackers because the presence of water tables just under the surface made digging in futile. Foch understood that his forces lacked the power to counterattack. They would have to stand, fight, and somehow survive. The most desperate fighting occurred from October 21 to 29. The situation looked so bad that at one point Sir John turned to Foch and said,

“There is nothing left for me to do but go up and be killed with the I Corps.”²¹ Foch himself, usually a paragon of optimism, grew pessimistic as well because of the imminent arrival of German forces from the Antwerp sector, the low morale of many Belgian units, and what the French saw as a slow concentration of British forces in the region.

The Allied position held in large part due to the courage of a group of Belgian sappers. On October 29, they moved toward the hydraulic works at Nieuport, on the North Sea coastline. They advanced close enough to the German lines to be able to hear their enemy’s movements. At 7:30 that evening, they opened the sluice gates that kept the North Sea out of Flanders. In a matter of just a few hours, more than 700,000 cubic meters of water flooded into Flanders, covering an area twenty-two miles long. The sappers stayed long enough to close the gates before the ebb tides sent the water out again. Their daring act created a temporary line of defense that the Allies needed in order to regroup and hold their line.²²

Mid-November brought winter weather and mutual exhaustion. The two sides took the opportunity to assess where they stood. Their war plans, which had been so carefully prepared by the best military minds over many years, had failed to yield the quick victories their authors had promised. The enormous casualties of the first year of the war effectively destroyed the cores of the prewar European armies. New armies of volunteers and conscripts would need to be formed, trained, and sent into battle. This realization was most painful for Great Britain, which had for so long resisted the general trend of mass-conscript armies in place of a small, professional force. That force no longer existed. In its place came new armies of volunteers that closely linked the nation’s army and its society.

For France, the year ended with a German occupation of most of the country’s industrial northeast. The region included one-tenth of France’s population, 70 percent of its coal fields, and 90

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

*French soldiers dig in near Reims in Champagne. Note the
damaged building in the background, a victim of
artillery fire. (Library of Congress)*

percent of its iron ore mines. To end the occupation, France would have to assume the offensive in 1915, a prospect that the past several months had demonstrated would not be easy. The damage to France, both moral and material, was already high. The city of Reims, in the heart of Champagne, had already had 300 buildings destroyed and 700 civilians killed by German shelling. By the end of 1914 the city, which had 110,000 residents before the war, was a virtual ghost town. Its magnificent cathedral, coronation site of twenty-six French kings, had been badly damaged by shelling, much of it intentional. Between 1914 and 1918 the Germans fired more than 100,000 shells at Reims.

For all of their operational success, Germany sat in an equally inopportune position. Its entire strategy had depended on winning quickly in the west. As Moltke himself realized, the Ger-

mans' failure to do so required them to fight the industrial powers of Britain and France on one side while having to fend off the massive Russians in the east. A long war, moreover, would enable the British to institute a blockade and thereby attack the German economy. As a result, all three nations were committed to fighting on in 1915, even if few people could remember exactly how the assassination of an unpopular Austrian archduke had put them in such a predicament.

LOOSED LIKE WILD BEASTS

The War in Eastern Europe

There is no village which does not bear the mark of wanton destruction of life and property—houses burned, others pillaged, and the contents dragged into the street and there smashed. Churches have been invariably gutted and defiled.

—London *Daily Chronicle* correspondent Percival Gibbon
reporting from Poland, October 1914

THE movement of the great powers in eastern Europe in 1914 depended in large measure on the speed with which the Russian army completed mobilization. Simply put, mobilization is the time between a nation's decision to prepare its armed forces for war and its completion of those preparations. Russia had an immense army of more than 6 million men, but it was stretched out across the landmass of the largest state in the world. Prewar investments (much of it by French firms) to improve the Russian railway network had helped to increase its speed and efficiency, but the Russian transportation infrastructure remained woefully inadequate for the task of mobilization.

Once organized, the Russian army still faced myriad problems. Its leadership was riven by ideological, social, and personal fissures; several of its senior military officers were barely on speaking terms. In addition, the same transportation difficulties that delayed mobilization ensured that even when the Russians had the materiel they needed, the right weapons rarely reached the right units at the right times. Most of Russia's fortresses were obsolete, and the nation retained such a faith in cavalry (a faith soon shown to be anachronistic) that in the early days of the war, wrote one

historian, “railways that might have sent infantrymen speedily to the front were loaded, instead, with horses and fodder for them.”¹

Russia had many impressive soldiers, but it had many more who owed their positions to court intrigue or personal connections. Alexei Brusilov, one of Russia’s most competent officers, noted that in the years leading up to the war the promotion system did not value “independence, initiative, strong views and [strong] personalities.” The average Russian infantryman’s worldview had not prepared him to understand the war or his place in it. Brusilov noted that the Russian draftees from the interior of the country had no idea why they were fighting. “Practically no one knew who these Serbians [on whose behalf Russia had ostensibly entered the war] were; they were equally doubtful as to what a Slav was.”² Despite some anti-German sentiment in the Cabinet, few Russian soldiers thought much about Germans, and fewer still hated them. Members of the upper strata of society had little anti-German sentiment, as the tsar’s friendly exchange of telegrams with his cousin the kaiser reflected. Several members of the Russian court, including the tsarina, were demonstrably pro-German.

The Germans, for their part, feared nothing about the Russian army except its size. Dennis Showalter’s characterization of the Russian army as a clumsy heavyweight boxer with neither fancy footwork nor timing is apt. The Germans saw themselves as a skilled middleweight capable of taking advantage of their larger, but slower, opponent.³ Even their allies questioned the ability of the Russians to provide any meaningful military assistance in the event of war. Most prewar French and British observers of the Russians thought their ally’s operations primitive and their support structure insufficient for the demands of modern warfare.

The Russian army also suffered from immense problems on the home front. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 had resulted in the creation of an elected parliament, but had done little to compensate for the fragility of the Russian state. While few people

in 1914 predicted the magnitude of the revolution that assailed the country in 1917, many believed that the structure of the Russian state was far too weak to survive a prolonged war. Ironically, this weakness led many members of the Russian aristocracy to support the war in the hopes that a national emergency might rally the Russian people around the tsar and the status quo.

All of these problems notwithstanding, Russia surprised even itself with a vigorous effort in the days and weeks following the tsar's mobilization order of July 30. Hundreds of thousands of Russians, disproportionately from the cities, volunteered for military service, and the number of reservists who failed to report to their units as ordered was substantially lower than the Russians had estimated. One week after issuing the mobilization order, the tsar received leaders of the parliament's major political parties, many of whom had been openly hostile to him. They agreed to set aside political differences and join together to support the war. Even Russia's most vicious anti-Semites praised the nation's Jews as fellow subjects with a common interest in winning the war.

Geographically, Russia sat in a position that offered both challenges and opportunities. Russia's western border included the Polish salient, a 100-mile-long bulge that stuck out into the German border with Austria-Hungary. It therefore sat exposed to a joint enemy attack, but it also gave Russian planners the option of attacking north into the German province of East Prussia, the traditional home of the German aristocracy, or south over the Carpathian Mountains into the agricultural heartland of Hungary. Russian planners were divided over which option offered the better chance of success. Almost all Russians thought the Austro-Hungarians would be easier to defeat, but the mountainous terrain of the Carpathians was a drawback. An attack into Germany, however, would provide the most help to France; and if Germany were defeated, Austria-Hungary would likely have no choice but to surrender.

Unable to decide between the two options, the Russians chose

a flexible war plan, called Plan 19. It contained two variants: an “A” variant against Austria; and a “G” variant, which involved an attack into East Prussia. The key to Plan 19 lay in a staged mobilization. Unlike the Germans, the Russians chose not to wait until all their units had mobilized before beginning offensive operations. Twenty-seven Russian divisions were ready for combat within fifteen days; another twenty-five divisions prepared to join them eight days later. Less than two months after the decision to mobilize, the Russian army had ninety divisions in the Polish salient and twenty more in Trans-Caucasia to guard against the contingency of the Ottoman Empire’s entering the war.

The success of the mobilization notwithstanding, Russian efforts in East Prussia faced problems before they even began. The tsar had convinced his uncle, Grand Duke Nikolai, to assume command of the Russian armies. Nikolai had an impressive military career that dated to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. He had been responsible for many of the important military reforms that the Russian military had implemented in the wake of the disaster in 1904–1905. In 1909, however, as the result of another of the innumerable Russian inner-circle rivalries, the new War Minister, V. A. Sukhomlinov, had relegated Nikolai to a secondary role. His marginalization had been so complete that when Nikolai accepted the job of commander-in-chief on August 2, he had to be briefed about Plan 19, because he was not familiar with its details. Although he felt unable to decline his nephew’s request, he felt completely overwhelmed by his new responsibilities.

Nikolai ordered Russian armies into the field before mobilization had been completed, placing immediate pressure on both Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Russian First and Second Armies were charged with invading East Prussia. The First Army’s commander, Pavel Rennenkampf, was a Baltic German by ethnicity; his ancestry later led to misguided charges that he had pro-German sympathies and that his failures had resulted from treason rather than bad leadership. Rennenkampf had been promoted

through the Russian General Staff system and had ties to both the tsar and Nikolai. Second Army commander Alexander Samsonov, by contrast, had been a protégé of Nikolai's adversary, Sukhomlinov. The rivalry between Nikolai and Sukhomlinov had filtered down to their protégés and had grown so deep that it became standard Russian practice to assign a second in command from the General Staff to an army commander from the War Ministry and vice versa, to minimize the negative consequences of the rivalry between the factions. A widely circulated story that Rennenkampf and Samsonov had exchanged blows on a railway platform during the Russo-Japanese War was not true, but the mutual dislike between the men was intense enough that people who knew the two men easily believed it.

The man most directly responsible for overcoming these problems, Northwest Front Commander Yakov Zhilinski, could hardly have been less well suited to the task. An aggressive advocate of Plan 19's G option, he had more ambition than aptitude. He owed his position in large measure to his understanding of French plans and needs. He was, however, a difficult man to work with and held the remarkable distinction of being unpopular with both the Sukhomlinov and the Nikolai cliques. Throughout the campaign in East Prussia, he failed to coordinate the movements of the First and Second Armies, with disastrous results.

These disasters likely would have come even earlier than they did if the Germans had not sent seven of their eight armies west instead of east. Facing a numerical inferiority of four to one, German Eighth Army commander Max von Prittwitz decided to lure Rennenkampf into East Prussia and attempt to destroy his First Army. Fighting in East Prussia put the Germans on familiar terrain and allowed them to be supplied by German trains; Russian rail lines used a different gauge. The existence of a sixty-mile chain of lakes known as the Masurian Lakes limited the avenues of Russian approach, forcing Rennenkampf to go around the lakes to the north while Samsonov went to the south, thus neutralizing

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

German soldiers set up a firing line in East Prussia in 1914. Crushing German victories in the east partially compensated for the failures in the west, but were not enough to force Russia out of the war.
(© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)

the Russians' numerical superiority. The Germans had planned and rehearsed an active defense in East Prussia for years; Prittwitz's staff knew exactly what it was supposed to do.

The plan was sensible enough, but the improbably named German I Corps commander Hermann von François did not care for it. His hatred of Slavs overrode his sense of obedience and on August 17, 1914, he disobeyed his superior and advanced toward the Russian border. Rennenkampf had by then crossed into East Prussia but, short of supplies and with his men weary from a week of marching, had ordered a halt for August 20. François's staff intercepted a radio transmission carrying the order to halt, which the Russians had not bothered to encode, and convinced Prittwitz to allow him to attack the resting Russians at the town of

Gumbinnen, about twenty-five miles west of the Russo-German border.

The fourteen-hour battle that resulted provided Russia with an early, if short-lived, boost of confidence. Although Russian artillery support was crude and infantry tactics even cruder, Rennenkampf's superior numbers forced François to admit that he lacked the strength to force the Russians back across the border. Samsonov's Second Army, meanwhile, continued its advance south of the Masurian Lakes, threatening the German Eighth Army with envelopment. Prittwitz thought the situation serious enough to contact Moltke, who was then engaged with the German advance through Belgium. He told Moltke that to prevent envelopment he was ordering a general retreat of the Eighth Army almost seventy miles to secure positions behind the Vistula River.

While many of Moltke's decisions in August 1914 appear mistaken in retrospect, his reaction to Prittwitz's call does not. He immediately relieved Prittwitz of his duties and called upon sixty-seven-year-old Paul von Hindenburg, then in retirement after completing an impressive fifty-one-year army career. Hindenburg had spent much of his retirement on his estate in East Prussia, occupying himself with the details of various Russian invasion scenarios of his homeland. Enthusiastic, intelligent, and physically imposing, he had been impatiently waiting for an assignment since the outbreak of the war. He was the perfect choice to assume command of the Eighth Army. In another inspired move, Moltke ordered Erich Ludendorff, the hero of Liège, to join Hindenburg as his chief of staff. The two met for the first time on an east-bound train from Hanover on August 23.

VICTORY AT TANNENBERG

Hindenburg and Ludendorff were of one mind concerning the situation facing the Eighth Army. Even before meeting Hindenburg, Ludendorff had taken the responsibility of ordering

the Eighth Army to begin a concentration against Samsonov's Second Army. Only a solitary German cavalry division sat opposite Rennenkampf's First Army, which Ludendorff believed had been bloodied badly enough by the Battle of Gumbinnen to keep it from moving quickly in the near future. Hindenburg quickly approved the new dispositions, and upon arriving at Eighth Army headquarters the two generals discovered that the army's operations chief, Lt. Col. Max Hoffmann, had independently divined the same general strategy and had begun preparations for a concentration against Samsonov.

Moltke made one other decision, and this one has remained controversial ever since. Believing that he had more than enough strength to take Paris, he removed two corps from the right wing of the German approach in France and sent them east. These two corps would serve as protection for East Prussia in the event that the Eighth Army's bold offensive operations against the Russians failed. The two corps, however, spent late August in transit from west to east. As a result, they were unavailable for either the Battle of the Marne or the developing battle against Samsonov.

Samsonov, for his part, was almost entirely in the dark about developments in front of him. Russian communications were so primitive that Zhilinski had to send many of his messages via telegraph to Warsaw, where they were decoded and driven by automobile north over uneven roads to Samsonov's headquarters. On August 24, as the British were holding at Mons in Belgium, Zhilinski told Samsonov that only "insignificant forces" were in his sector.⁴ Samsonov therefore pushed the center of his line forward, dangerously exposing his flanks to a peril he did not know existed.

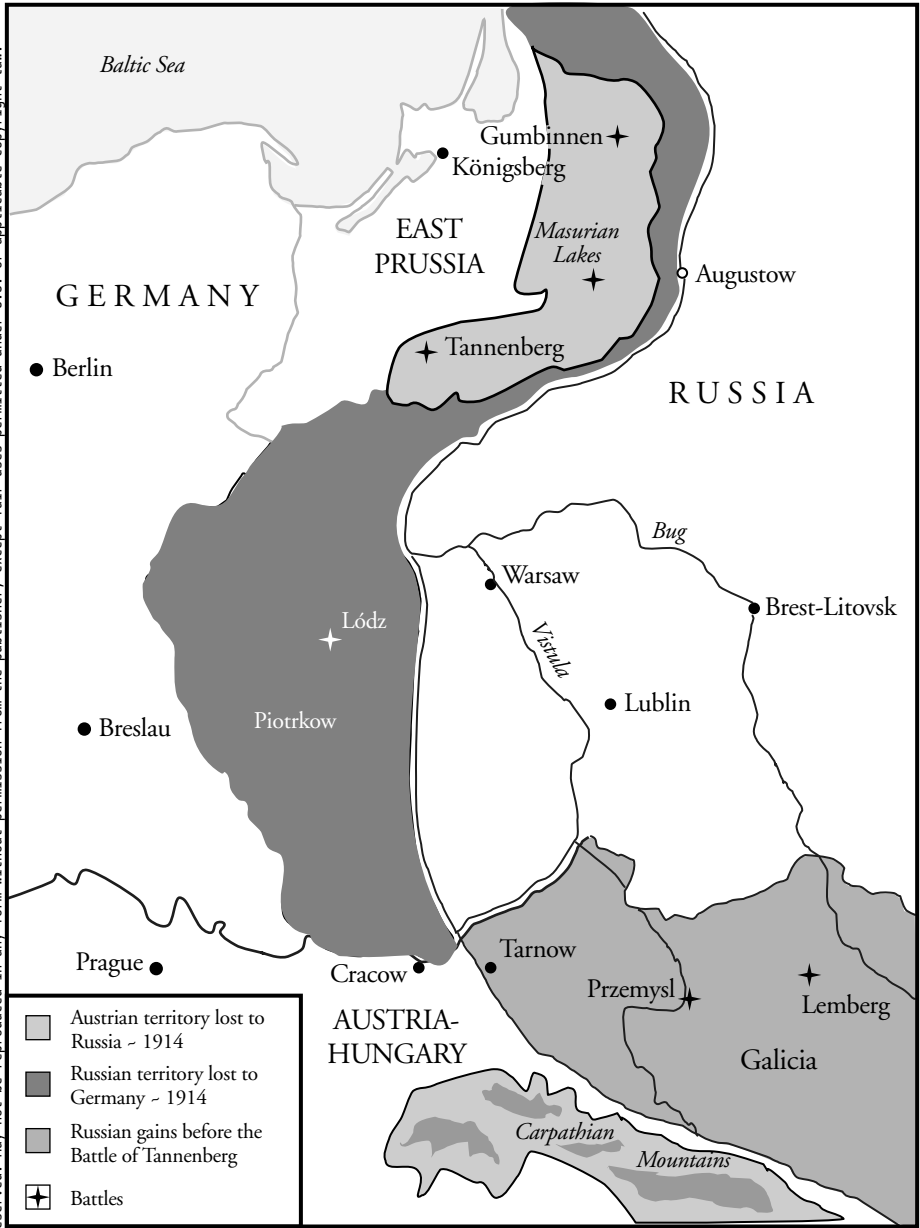
The German high command sensed that the geographic and personal fissures between the Russian armies presented a golden opportunity. After some initial hesitation, the aggressive François led the attack on August 27, cutting off the lines of retreat for the Second Army's left and center. He continued his attack on the

Russian rear the next day, again disobeying an order, this one from Ludendorff to help a threatened German reserve unit. With little solid information on his situation, Samsonov moved slowly and failed to check the alarm growing in Russian ranks. By August 29, the Second Army was entirely encircled. Realizing the calamity he now faced, Samsonov broke down. After telling his staff, "The emperor trusted me. How can I face him after such a disaster?" he disappeared into the woods and committed suicide.

Leaderless, surrounded, and without hope of reinforcement, the Russians panicked. In many places, the German ring was too thin to resist a determined Russian attack, but none materialized. Of the 135,000 Russians trapped in the pocket, only 10,000 escaped. More than 100,000 Russians surrendered, along with 500 of their precious artillery pieces. Despite its numerical superiority, the Russian Second Army had performed miserably and suffered a crushing defeat. The size of the immense Russian Army meant that the rout only affected four of the nation's thirty-seven corps, but the psychological ramifications of the loss far outweighed the material ramifications. The Russians grew pessimistic, believing that they could not beat the more skillful Germans, a conclusion that many in France and Britain shared.

The German Eighth Army high command suggested calling the battle Tannenberg, after the nearby site of a battle half a millennium earlier in which Polish and Lithuanian knights had defeated the Teutonic knights. Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Hoffmann believed that the Germans had reversed the humiliation that their ancestors had suffered against the Slavs. None of the three men lacked for self-confidence. They boasted that they had planned and executed one of the greatest victories in military history. They soon grew secure in the dominance of German methods and organization over those of a foe for whom they had neither professional respect nor humanitarian sentiment. Perhaps most important, Russia's size no longer intimidated them.

Copyright © 2005, Harvard University Press. All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.



The eastern front, 1914

“We have a feeling of absolute superiority over the Russians,” Hoffmann said that fall. “We must win, and we will.”⁵

Flush with their great success, the Germans decided to turn north and perform the same trick again, this time against Rennenkampf’s First Army. Uncertain about what was happening to his south and with his supply lines threatened by the German garrison at the fortress of Königsberg to his north, Rennenkampf moved slowly and cautiously. Zhilinski informed him on August 30 of the magnitude of Samsonov’s defeat, but Russian headquarters incorrectly guessed that the Germans would next move south toward Warsaw. To spoil that effort, Zhilinski directed Rennenkampf to move forward into East Prussia.

An offensive disposition temporarily exposed Rennenkampf’s flanks. For the third time in less than a month, François’s aggressive, almost reckless, behavior placed him in the center of events. Marching his men seventy-five miles in four days, he surprised the Russian left and drove it back. Rennenkampf, however, did not panic as Samsonov had. A veteran of the Boxer Rebellion who gained favor with the tsar in 1905 by brutally seizing parts of the Trans-Siberian Railroad from revolutionaries, Rennenkampf had survived several personal bankruptcies and four failed marriages. He was not a stranger to crisis, and he kept his head despite the increasing deterioration of his strategic position.

Anxious to avoid Samsonov’s fate, he directed two divisions to fight a rear-guard action in order to allow the remainder of his army to get away safely. From September 10 to 12, his army retreated more than fifty miles back into Russia. In what became known as the Battle of the Masurian Lakes, the First Army lost almost 150,000 men and 150 guns. The Germans pursued the retreating First Army into Russia, losing the advantage of railways on the German gauge. Heavy rains soon gave Russia some breathing room, allowing Rennenkampf to regroup and counterattack at the Augustowo forest on October 1, driving the German forces out of Russia. The kaiser’s bad luck continued. He had joined the

Eighth Army too late to witness the victories of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, but arrived at Augustowo just in time to escape a Russian cavalry charge.

The opening moves in the east had bloodied the Russians, but their massive human reserves remained. The Germans had inflicted two great defeats on them, but by the time winter set in, the Russians had managed to redeem themselves by clearing their homeland of German troops. This achievement was small comfort to their British and French allies, who increasingly saw the Russians as incurably incompetent. If the Allies wanted to keep the Russian front active, they would have to provide the Russian army with direct material assistance and as much advice as the Russians would accept. According to an old Russian proverb, Russia is never as strong as she looks, but Russia is never as weak as she looks. That maxim accurately reflected both Russia's dire situation in the north at the end of the 1914 and its ability to withstand more punishment.

THE CAMPAIGN IN SERBIA

The Russians expected more success against the Austro-Hungarian army than against Germany. The Austro-Hungarian Empire suffered from so many problems that even its emperor, the eighty-four-year-old Franz Joseph, harbored doubts about its survival. The brother of the ill-fated Emperor Maximilian of Mexico, Franz Joseph had been on his throne since 1848, making him the longest-reigning monarch in Europe. He presided over a multiethnic empire, with three bureaucracies using three languages: German, Hungarian, and Croatian. The army had to use eleven languages to accommodate all of the empire's major ethnic minorities, many of whose members actively hoped for the empire's dissolution. The antihero of Czech veteran Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik* (written in the 1920s) reacted to the news of Ferdinand's assassination by telling his charwoman that he knew two

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Count Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of the Austro-Hungarian General Staff, had urged his government to fight a preemptive war against Serbia for years. The failure of his war plan to achieve any Austrian state aims led to his demotion at the end of 1916. (© Corbis)

Ferdinands, one who had accidentally drunk a bottle of hair oil and another who collected manure. "They wouldn't be any great loss," he said, "either of 'em." Hašek's satire captured the ambivalence of so many Austro-Hungarians toward the war and to the empire itself.⁶

The largely agricultural economy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire forced it to keep military expenditures to a minimum. Its per capita spending on defense was the lowest of any of the great powers. This lack of funding combined with the need for farm laborers meant that it also had the smallest percentage of men under arms of any of the continental powers. The empire trained just 22 percent of its eligible males for military service annually, compared with Germany's 40 percent and France's 86 percent.⁷ Napoleon's famous jibe at the Austrians as being always one army, one year, and one idea too late still applied to their empire in 1914.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the members of Austria-Hungary's ruling elite had ambitions to increase their power, especially in the Balkans. In 1908 the empire had annexed the province of Bosnia-Herzegovina from the waning Ottoman Empire. The addition of three hundred miles of coastline on the Adriatic Sea gave the Austro-Hungarian Empire additional naval bases and a finger of territory that threatened Serbia. Not coincidentally, it also left Serbia landlocked. Austria-Hungary's Army Chief of Staff General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf believed that the empire should have gone on to conquer Serbia in its entirety. Thereafter he presented the emperor with annual plans for a preemptive war against Serbia "with the regularity of an almanac."⁸

The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 resulted in the Serbian conquest of two former Ottoman provinces, Novibazar and Macedonia. Serbia thereby doubled in size and grew in confidence. Its calls for the unification of all Slavs into one Serbian-dominated state grew increasingly shrill. Such rhetoric threatened the internal viability of Austria-Hungary, where Slavs represented one of the largest ethnic minorities. The army depended heavily on Slavs in

its enlisted ranks, although Germans and Magyars dominated the officer corps. Thus the Austrians believed that the assassination of the archduke by a group of Slavs presumed to have links to Serbian officials could not go unanswered.

Conrad and other Austro-Hungarian hard-liners saw the assassination as a chance to settle scores with Serbia. Conrad was an intelligent and capable staff officer, but he had never learned the famous Clausewitzian dictum that war is an extension of policy by other means. For him, war was, or should have been, the guiding force of state policy. Only the army, he had repeatedly argued, could weld the empire's many mutually antagonistic nationalities into a loyal whole. By making war on some combination of Serbia, Russia, and Italy, he hoped to repeat the great success of Otto von Bismarck during the Wars of German Unification and create a powerful empire that would return Austria to the rank of first-rate powers.

In July 1914 Conrad calculated that his chances were fading, as Austria's relative power in Europe would only decline further in the coming years. Many Germans agreed with him. The more time they gave the Russians to modernize their army and build rail lines, the harder Austria's task would become. Better, many believed, to fight in 1914 than in 1917, when the Russian modernization program was scheduled to reach fruition. The latest Balkan crisis caused by the assassination gave Austro-Hungarian leaders an opportunity to set the conditions for war. Serbia's rejection of their harsh ultimatum gave them the veneer of justification they needed to take the final steps. Conrad therefore had a chance to enact his latest plan for the war that he wanted more than almost anyone else in Europe.

On paper at least, the plan was rather elegant and solved a contradiction in Austro-Hungarian thinking. Conrad's heart and soul burned to send his army south to conquer and subdue the detested Serbians. He knew, however, that he had to guard against the possibility of a massive Russian movement across the

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Antipathy between Austria-Hungary and Serbia provided the proximate cause for the war and fueled a bitter campaign in the Balkans. Austro-Hungarian soldiers, like those shown here, rarely took Serbian prisoners.
(National Archives)

Carpathian Mountains. He had hoped that Germany might accept primary responsibility for guarding against this possibility while he moved against Serbia. But talks between the military staffs of the two allies were limited in the years before the war; the two did not meet at all between 1897 and 1907. Discussions thereafter remained limited because the Germans suspected that Russian spies had infiltrated the Austrian general staff. As a result, Germany and Austria-Hungary each assumed that the other would engage the Russian giant while their own army hunted their primary prey. The very existence of such an enormous misunderstanding underscores the problematic nature of the German-Austrian alliance.

Given his inability to predict either Russian movements or German assistance, Conrad developed a plan that allowed him to attack Serbia whether Russia threatened Austria-Hungary or not. The plan divided the army into three groups. *Minimalgruppe Balkan*, nine divisions strong, was to advance on the Serbian capital of Belgrade and capture it, thereby neutralizing the Serbs. *A-Staffel*, with twenty-seven divisions, would advance into southern Poland, presumably with significant German help, to forestall Russian operations there. The final group, *B-Staffel*, contained ten divisions. If the Russians deployed quickly, it would join *A-Staffel* to defend the Carpathians; otherwise it could either join in the war against Serbia or redeploy against Italy in the expected event of that country's renegeing on its Triple Alliance commitments to Germany and Austria.

With this plan, the shaky Austro-Hungarian Empire went to war. *Minimalgruppe Balkan* ominously marched toward Serbia under the command of General Oskar von Potiorek, the man who had been responsible for Archduke Franz Ferdinand's security detail in Sarajevo. As it happened, the vanguard of the Austro-Hungarian forces was the mostly Czech VIII Corps, whose soldiers the Austrian high command suspected of "treasonous tendencies."⁹ The Czechs had long sought greater autonomy within the empire, and their loyalty remained questionable throughout the war. Nevertheless, they had the lead in Potiorek's 200,000-man force as it entered Serbia simultaneously from the west and northwest. Its ultimate goal, Belgrade, sat close to the Austro-Hungarian border and had not been properly fortified, leading Potiorek to predict an easy victory.

Opposing the Austro-Hungarian army were 250,000 hardy soldiers of the Serbian army and 50,000 more men from their tiny Balkan ally, Montenegro. Unlike the Austro-Hungarians, the Serbian soldiers had experienced recent battlefield successes in the Balkan Wars and therefore better understood the nature of mod-

ern warfare. Its commander, Radomir Putnik, had been largely responsible for the great victories of the Balkan Wars through his role as Serbia's Minister of War. After the Second Balkan War, however, his health had begun to deteriorate rapidly. When the July crisis began he was receiving treatment in an Austrian spa. Austro-Hungarian authorities temporarily arrested him, but both Franz Joseph and Conrad authorized his release, apparently on the assumption that at his age (sixty-seven) and in his debilitated condition he posed no threat.

They guessed wrong. Putnik still had plenty of fight left in him. He organized his forces into an impressive series of field defenses. He allowed the Austrians to advance, extending their supply lines and exposing their flanks. Although Belgrade itself suffered the destruction of 700 buildings due to Austrian artillery and air raids, Putnik succeeded in driving the invaders back in an engagement known as the Battle of the Jadar, fought from August 16 to 23. Putnik had managed to defend Serbian territory despite a numerical inferiority and virtually no modern heavy artillery pieces. He then made the rash decision to cross into Austrian-controlled Bosnia, expecting to fulfill Serbian rhetoric about fighting a war to free Slavs and hoping to inspire a local revolt.

Potiorek took advantage of the forward deployment of Serbian forces to attack again. For ten bitter days (September 7 to 17) the two armies fought for control of the Austrian bridgeheads across the Save and Drina Rivers. Had the Serbians not run low of ammunition they likely would have repeated the success of their operations the previous month. Instead Putnik had to admit that he lacked the strength to push the Austrians back. He wisely retired to defensive positions in the mountains, hoping to force the enemy to wear itself out in difficult terrain. When the opportunity presented itself Putnik planned to counterattack and once again chase Austro-Hungarian forces out of Serbia.

Meanwhile, Conrad's plan collapsed in the reality of modern

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

*Radomir Putnik, chief of the Serbian General Staff, modernized the Serbian Army in the years before the war and led it to victory in the Balkan Wars. He also led well in the war's early months, but was relieved of command when Serbian forces fled to Corfu.
(Library of Congress)*

warfare. In order to provide for maximum flexibility and the shortest movement times, his staff decided to organize the men assigned to *B-Staffel* in Galicia. The region had sufficiently well developed railway networks to allow for the deployment of large formations to almost any place in the empire. That decision

forced *B-Staffel's* subordinate formations to move to the extreme north of the empire, only to organize and be transported south when Potiorek's failures necessitated their presence in Serbia. By the end of August, they were still trying to organize in Galicia. The fog and friction of war impeded the complicated timetables upon which Conrad had depended. As a result, *B-Staffel*, designed to fight in either the north or the south, spent its time in transit and did not fight at all at a time when it was needed in both places.

Despite his best efforts, Putnik could not hold Belgrade, which the Austrians finally entered on December 2. The Austrians had achieved an objective that might have ended the war had Germany and Russia stayed neutral. Now the capture of Belgrade meant little in the war's rapidly expanding larger picture. Nevertheless, to Austro-Hungarian commanders the capture of the Serbian capital represented a chance at catharsis. Belgrade was the home of Austria-Hungary's most implacable enemies. As a result, Austro-Hungarian officers singled Belgrade out for special punishment. An American war correspondent, who went on to write a famous account of the Bolshevik Revolution, was in Serbia that December. He wrote:

The [Austrian] soldiers were loosed like wild beasts in the city, burning, pillaging, raping. We saw the gutted Hotel d'Europe and the blackened and mutilated church where three thousand men, women and children were penned together without food or water for four days, and then divided into two groups—one sent back to Austria as prisoners of war, the others driven ahead of the army as it marched south against the Serbians.¹⁰

It was the beginning of a terrible ordeal for Serbia. The nation had just 350 fully trained doctors in 1914, and more than 100 of them had served and died with the army. Medicines and properly equipped hospitals were both in short supply. Sanitation and

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Serbian suffering engendered tremendous sympathy in the Allied and neutral nations. As this poster demonstrates, sympathy for the Serbian plight extended from France to the United States despite American neutrality. (Library of Congress)

public health, already precarious, broke down entirely. Typhus, cholera, and other diseases soon grew out of control. By one contemporary's estimate, 65 percent of Serbia suffered from typhus alone.¹¹

But if the Austrians thought they had eliminated the Serbians, they soon learned otherwise. France and Britain rushed ammunition and hundreds of nurses and doctors to Serbia to stem the military defeats and ease the civilian suffering. Putnik waited until the Kolubra River behind the Austrians began to flood; then, on December 3, he struck savagely into their lines. With the swollen river behind them preventing an orderly retreat and winter weather complicating resupply, the Austrians fought desperately for six days, suffering terrible casualties. On December 15, Serbian forces reentered Belgrade as the Austrians finally found their way across the rivers to relative safety. Conrad's plan to annihilate his most hated enemy had failed.

The campaign in Serbia serves as a vivid example of the demodernization of warfare. Away from the western front, combat in World War I resembled that of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries much more than it did the mechanized war of the western front. Disease, long marches, and savage hand-to-hand combat dominated this campaign, as they would much of the eastern front. Fluid front lines meant increased hardships for civilians, who could neither run nor hide from the war. Villages changed hands frequently and ill-supplied soldiers took what they needed, even from the people they were supposed to be defending.

Austrian losses in what was supposed to be the easier of their two war options were appalling. Recent estimates list Austrian casualties in the 1914 Serbian campaign at 227,000 men, or five times Austria's losses in the entire 1866 war with Prussia. Conrad replaced Potiorek with Archduke Eugen, who settled into winter quarters and attempted to reorganize his new army. Conrad reluctantly decided that his forces would have to remain on the defensive against Serbia and seek a decision against Russia,

where his *A-Staffel* had fared little better than *Minimalgruppe Balkan*.

THE CARPATHIAN AND POLISH CAMPAIGNS

By mid-August the Russians had assembled more than 400,000 men in the south in four separate armies under the overall command of southwest front commander Nikolai Ivanov. He owed his position to his successful repression of a naval mutiny at the Baltic Sea base of Kronstadt in 1906. Despite his lackluster service in the Russo-Japanese War and his evident lack of ideas or enthusiasm, he retained his command. Of the four army commanders underneath him, three were, to be generous, of inconsistent ability. Fortunately for Ivanov and for Russia's early fortunes, the southwest front also included Russia's best wartime general, Alexei Brusilov, in command of the southernmost army, the Eighth.

Russia's plan involved an advance on the Austrian line of fortifications north of the Carpathian Mountains in Galicia. The Galician defenses were based around four major outposts. From east to west they were Lemberg, Przemysl, Tarnow, and Cracow. If the Russians could reach Cracow in force, they would have two enticing options. They could move southwest along the western foothills of the Carpathian Mountains into the Oder River valley between Austria and Hungary. Doing so would threaten the harvests of Austria-Hungary's breadbasket and impose tremendous hardship on their enemy. Alternatively, they could move northwest into the low ground of mineral-rich Silesia toward Breslau. Such a movement would imperil the smooth operation of German industry and place immediate pressure on Germany to defend Berlin from a direction where there were few forts and few natural defenses.

To achieve this goal, the Russians first had to capture Lemberg. The capital of Galicia and one of the largest cities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Lemberg was protected by an impressive se-

ries of fortifications amply supplied with artillery and linked to Austria by four separate rail lines, the most important of which for the supply of the garrison ran west to Przemysl. Lemberg had also been one of the assembly points for the Austro-Hungarian Fourth Army. The presence of Russian troops in the area forced yet another change in Austro-Hungarian war planning.

To forestall a Russian advance on the Carpathians, Conrad ordered an offensive into Russian Poland. Between August 23 and September 1, the Austrian First and Fourth Armies succeeded in driving the Russians back almost 100 miles in places. Farther to the south, however, the advance fared less well, forcing the Austrians to retire back toward the presumed safety of Lemberg. Leaving a garrison behind to hold the fortress, the Austrian Second and Third Armies conducted a retreat of almost 100 miles of their own, leaving them with their backs literally resting upon the Carpathians.

Surrounded and badly outnumbered, the Austrian garrison at Lemberg shocked Austro-Hungarian commanders by surrendering without firing a shot in its own defense. Estimates of the size of Austrian losses vary widely; contemporary sources indicated that 60,000 Austro-Hungarian soldiers became prisoners of war and that the Russians captured the garrison's 637 heavy artillery pieces. For the Russians, Lemberg was an ideal base from which to conduct operations to the west because its rail lines connected it to the Russian supply centers of Kiev and Warsaw. Przemysl, the next fortress on the Russian axis of advance, lay just 70 miles to the west.

The Russian victory at Lemberg was one of the first major Allied successes in the war, providing Russia with a modicum of confidence in the aftermath of Tannenberg. The Russians reinstated the city's Slavic name of Lvov, symbolically removing traces of its German connections. In a similar move, the Russians renamed St. Petersburg, giving it the Russian name of Petrograd. Most of the residents of Lvov welcomed the Russians as liberators