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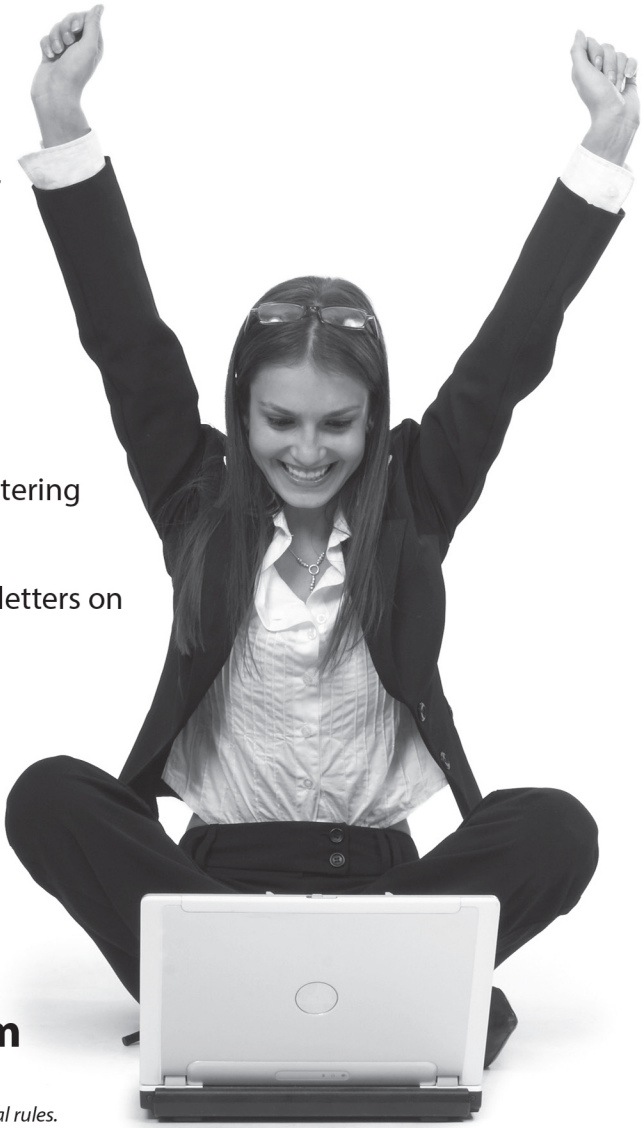

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by Dr Seán Lang

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First World War For Dummies®

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Contents at a Glance

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Introduction

Some years ago I had a job at Exeter University training student teachers to teach history in secondary schools. One day we were talking about the First World War and how to teach children about it, and one of them said, 'Why don't we just go there?' So we hired a minibus, took the ferry and spent a few days visiting the battlefields around the area of the Battle of the Somme in northern France. We visited cemeteries and museums; we looked at maps and traced where the lines of trenches had run, and worked out where this advance had taken place and where that machine gun had been positioned: all very useful experience. The most useful lesson of the trip, however, was entirely unexpected.

During our trip, we visited the memorial park that commemorates the men from Newfoundland who fought on the Somme. It has an impressive memorial, a cemetery and a large area where the trenches and shell holes have been preserved. By the entrance we found a group from an English boys' school. The boys were sitting on the ground and their history teacher was telling them about the war. I caught words like 'Sarajevo' and 'invaded Belgium', so I guessed he was taking them through the events of 1914. They didn't look very gripped. We went on and visited the monument, explored the trenches and worked out what had happened where. One student even found her grandfather's grave in the cemetery, which was a poignant moment. And then we headed back to the minibus.

When we got to the entrance, the school party was still there. They'd advanced four or five yards, but the boys were still sitting on the ground and the teacher was still talking. This time I heard the words 'Loos' and 'Ypres' and I realised that in all the time we'd been exploring, these poor boys had been sitting down while their teacher talked his way through the history of the war – *and he'd only reached 1915!* When we reached the minibus I told my group, 'That's a perfect example of how you should never, *ever* teach children – or anyone – about the First World War'.

And I promise not to do it to you.

About This Book

Like all the *For Dummies* books, you can read this one how you like. You can read it cover to cover, you can dip into it, you can go straight to the bit you want or you can hop about. Wherever you start reading, I try to make sure you know where you are and what's been happening while you've been away.

This book is called *First World War For Dummies.* That doesn't mean you're a dummy, but you might feel like one when you run into someone who appears to know all there is to know about the war. And such people undoubtedly exist. They spend their lives studying the war in minute detail, and they can tell you exactly which battalion was based where and who commanded whom and what the soldiers on each side wore and when they wore it. Don't get me wrong: I'm full of admiration for these people. I just try not to get stuck with them at parties.

Most people tend to have a rather less precise idea of the First World War. You may well have studied some aspects of the war at school, either in history or possibly in your English lessons. The war produced some very powerful poetry that pupils often study at school, and modern writers such as Pat Barker and Sebastian Faulks have written successful novels set in the war. But even if you've looked at the war before, you may not have a full picture of what was going on. You may well know that life in the trenches could be appalling, but why were the men sitting in trenches in the first place? And how did they plan to get out of them? Even more importantly: what did they think the war was actually *for*?

I've designed this book to give you an overview of the way the war developed and how it changed the world. I take you through the causes of the war and who the men and women were who got caught up in it. I do take you through various battles – you can't really avoid that – but I try to explain why people felt the need to fight them in the first place. (No, they weren't doing so just for fun or to give future generations lots of historical details to learn.) My aim isn't to fill you with more pieces of information than you can take in – that's what our fact-collecting friends are for – but to *explain* what happened, why it happened and what the people at the time hoped (often wrongly) would follow from their actions.

Having an understanding of the First World War is crucial for being able to understand the modern world. The war marks the point when the old certainties of the Victorian age ended and the 20th century really got going. It was the first war of mass production – and mass destruction. It was the first war in history to be fought on land, on sea, under the sea, in the air and even in the home. And it was truly a *world* war. In the west, awareness of the war tends to be dominated by the trenches of the Western Front, but the war was fought across eastern and southern Europe, in the Middle East, the Pacific, in the Atlantic and across Africa. It brought in countries from every continent. The war led to a huge range of major developments in world history, including the Russian Revolution, the rise of fascism and of the Nazis, the Second World War, the Cold War, the Arab–Israeli conflict and even the British love affair with irony.

Like any historical topic, historians have sharply differing views on the First World War. For many years they saw it essentially as a tragedy, in which a whole generation of young men paid a terrible price for the self-indulgent follies of their leaders. Writers and filmmakers were haunted by the image of troops going 'over the top' (that's a phrase from the First World War), only to be mown down in 'no-man's-land' (and that's another one) by machine guns, while their generals sat sipping brandy in comfortable chateaux located miles behind the lines. 'Lions led by donkeys' was how one German general is said to have described his British opponents – brave Tommies let down by their own uncaring and inept generals. It's a powerful narrative and you can find it in many books and films about the war.

More recently, historians have challenged that stereotype. They've shown that these generals were far from inept, and that they actually showed considerable ingenuity and imagination in coping with a type of warfare that was completely new to them – and to everyone else. Perhaps even more importantly, more historians have made a powerful case that the First World War, like the Second, was a war worth fighting, that it was about important issues and that it did achieve something important. You're not convinced? Well, I look at the question from both sides in the book so keep an open mind for now.

Foolish Assumptions

Like any author I have to make certain assumptions about you, the reader, and these assumptions may be right or they may be wrong.

Firstly, I'm assuming that you've heard a bit about the war but don't know much about it in any detail. Secondly, I'm assuming that you've probably gathered, from TV, from films or from what you did at school, that the war was a pretty grim affair from which no one, and certainly no one in charge, emerges with much credit. You may very well know of one of your family who fought, and possibly died, in the war and you may wonder what, if anything, that person fought and died for. And, of course, I'm assuming you've picked up this book to try to find out more, to get a better grasp on the war and what it all meant. If even some of those assumptions are right then you've come to the right place.

I'm also making another assumption, and this one may not be quite so secure. I'm assuming that you're ready to have your eyes opened, your own assumptions challenged and, if need be, your ideas changed. History isn't about confirming people's stories, however important these stories might be to them. History is about looking at the past as objectively as possible and working out what happened, how it happened, why it happened and what

it led to. Along the way those who consider history tend to overturn many cherished versions of the past, many legends and many comforting stories. I'm assuming you're ready for that. If not, brace yourself now.

Icons Used in This Book

History isn't the same as the past. *The past* is what you're trying to find out about; *history* is what you make of the past and how you communicate your thoughts about it. This means that at various points I want to highlight for you my own – and it is only my own – view of some of the details. Most of the time you'll be able to pick that up from the way I write about them, but at some points I highlight what I think is important for you to realise with one of these symbols:

Or, alternatively, 'Who you gonna call? Mythbusters!' History is full of famous stories that people hand down and repeat without anyone really checking whether they happened. Some did, but a lot didn't. The First World War has its fair share of such stories. But did they actually happen? When you see this sign, you can find out.

The First World War involved millions of people in all areas of life, but certain people were at the very centre of events. When you spot this icon, you're introduced to some of the people who, for better or worse, made a difference.

I don't know why people complain about history being rewritten. History is *always* being rewritten: that's what history *is.* You can view almost any event or development in more than one way, and different historians view some events in very different ways. This sign indicates some of the biggest areas of disagreement and debate.

Sometimes keeping a detail in mind is important because it explains something that you'll come across later. When you see this sign, make a mental note of it.

War often helps speed up technological change and the First World War is a good example. From aircraft design to medicine, big technological changes happened during the war. Stop at this sign to find them.

Not to be confused with Technological Innovation. Technical Stuff is where you need to get your head round some of the detail. Okay, maybe some of the boring detail, but important boring detail. Don't worry: I guide you through it, it'll be over soon and you'll feel better for it afterwards.

Beyond the Book

You never know when you may need to check your knowledge of the First World War. You're watching TV and a documentary on the war comes up, or you're on holiday and you come across a striking war memorial. At times like these, you find yourself thinking, 'Wait a minute. Where did that battle fit into the picture? Why were they fighting there? I didn't realise those countries were in the war: which side were they on?' and so on. That's where you can whip out your trusty smart phone and check the online features that accompany this book.

The online content has two main parts. First, you can find the cheat sheet (at `www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/firstworldwar`), which gives you a timeline of the key events and battles, so you can fit your discovery into the overall picture of the war and see how it relates to everything else. The second part is a set of four short articles that look at four big questions about the war: who was to blame for it, how bad were those generals, did the First World War really mark the end of a golden age and, very importantly, did the First World War cause the Second World War? These articles and a bonus Part of Tens chapter (which you can find at `www.dummies.com/extras/firstworldwar`) give you my own thoughts on these questions. You're under no obligation to agree with me, but I hope you find them a good place to start developing your own ideas about the significance of the First World War.

Where to Go from Here

Where to go from here? Over the page, of course! You want to get started, don't you? But where *exactly* to go depends on what you already know and what you want to find out.

If you want to get an idea of the whole war then start with Chapter 1, because that gives you an overview of the war, who fought in it and where, and what some of the big issues were that they had to face up to. After you've got that, you can then head off to whichever part of the story you want to find out more about. You may find that way of reading the book particularly useful if you already know a bit about some part of the war but you're not sure how it fits into the whole.

Alternatively, if you want to go through the story from the start, you'll find I begin by giving you a picture of the world before 1914, and I then take you through the thorny question of how the war began. Of course, you may prefer to browse through the book, dipping in and out to get a flavour of the war and to see which aspects particularly engage your attention.

But one thing to bear in mind: this is history, yes, but it's also about what real people went through only a few generations ago. The last surviving people who fought in the war only died in the 2000s. It might seem as if the war took place an age ago, and in a way it did, but in historical terms these events took place only yesterday, almost within living memory. Treat the war with respect. And the greatest respect you can show is to find out more about it. Start right here.

Part I
Origins of War

web extras

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In this part...

- Find out why the assassination of one European statesman caused the nations of Europe to throw themselves at each other's throats.
- Understand the background to the outbreak of war in 1914, the Great Powers of Europe and their people, and how Europeans dominated the world.
- Discover how Europe, the continent that prided itself on its sophisticated culture and civilisation, plunged the world into the most destructive and ghastly war in world history.

Chapter 1

The First World War: An Overview

In This Chapter

- Giving the war a name
- Looking at what caused the war and who fought in it
- Scanning the fronts and theatres of war
- Breaking through in technology and medicine
- Reviewing the course of the war
- Working out why the war still matters today

You can find plenty of battles and generals and details in this book, and they're all important to know about, but plunging straight into the events of the war can be a bit disorientating, especially if you're not quite sure of what else was happening in the period. So, in this chapter I try to give you a roadmap of the war, to explain who was fighting whom, where the fighting took place and to give you an overall shape of the way the war developed.

Thinking of the war having a 'shape' might seem a bit strange if your picture of the war is essentially one in which soldiers spent their whole time sitting in the trenches, launching occasional suicidal attacks on the enemy lines. However, although it might not have seemed like it to the ordinary soldiers at the time, or to many people since, the war did have a shape and a direction: each side did try various ways to break through the enemy lines and to win. The generals and political leaders learned many hard lessons along the way and, believe it or not, they did try to avoid repeating their most disastrous mistakes. Of course, they didn't always succeed, but this chapter gives you an overview of what they were *trying* to do.

I Name This War . . . Er, What Should We Call the War?

How about starting with the basics, like what exactly the war should be called? This might sound like a silly question, but it's not. Wars don't come ready-packaged with a name on top: they usually get named after they've

happened and people often disagree – sometimes quite sharply – on what to call them. For example, what the Russians call 'the Great Patriotic War' is, to the rest of the world, a little thing called 'the Second World War'. The Russian name suggests that the war on the Eastern Front was the most important area of conflict and that the rest was just a sideshow. Seeing why some other countries may disagree isn't hard!

Even the dates of wars can be problematic. Most of the countries involved in the First World War went to war in 1914, but not all of them: Italy only entered in 1915, Romania in 1916 and the United States not until 1917. Most people think the war ended in 1918, but it didn't: the *fighting* ended then, but the war itself wasn't over (and it could have been renewed at any time) until the peace treaty was signed, which was in 1919. Some war memorials do carry the dates 1914–1919 and people often think it's a mistake, but in fact those memorials are the ones that get it right!

While it was going on, people usually referred to the war as the European War or the Great War – a name that people often still use today. (Of course, no one called it the First World War at the time for the very good reason that there hadn't been a second one then!) Towards the end, people sometimes referred to it as the War to End All Wars: the war had been so costly and so terrible that it had to have been fought for *something*. (Not surprisingly, after the Second World War, this phrase became something of a bad joke.) With similar optimism, US President Wilson sometimes called it a War to Make the World Safe for Democracy, though that certainly wasn't what anyone had in mind when they started it. Years later, after the Second World War, some people did refer for a while to the First and Second German Wars, which suggested that the Germans had been entirely responsible for them both, but the names haven't lasted and were never entirely accurate anyway.

More recently, and especially in the non-western world, some historians have questioned the use of the term 'world war'. The far-away quarrels between Austria-Hungary and Serbia or between Britain and Germany were of no interest to people in Africa or Asia, and they only got dragged into them by their European colonial masters. What was really happening, these scholars say, was a 'European Civil War' – the first of two. It's not difficult to see where this idea comes from, but it rather ignores the role played by non-European countries such as Japan, China, the United States and some of the South American states, which weren't European colonies and which came into the war very much following their own agenda.

Strictly speaking, the First World War wasn't even the *first* world war! The religious wars between Protestants and Catholics that ravaged Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries also saw fighting in Central America, India and the Pacific. The first wars to be *planned* on a global scale were the European wars of the 18th century, which were fought in North America, in India and on the all the world's oceans as well as in Europe. The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars involved serious fighting in India, the West Indies, North Africa, the Middle East, Canada and the United States. So what people call the

'First' World War was actually the fourth or fifth! On the other hand, all these 'world' wars were really European wars that spread around the world, so maybe they're better off with the names they have.

All things considered, I'm going to stick to 'First World War' in this book, because at least everyone knows what you're referring to by that name, even if they don't like it.

Analysing the Causes

The war was so destructive and its consequences were so far-reaching that it's hardly surprising that many people – and not just historians – have asked how on earth it started in the first place. This question hasn't been without its controversy.

Historians at war

When the war ended the political leaders on the winning side thought it was quite easy to work out how the war began: it was all Germany's fault. They even wrote that claim into the peace treaty and made the Germans sign it (see Chapter 17). Then, after the war, historians started ploughing their way through thousands and thousands of diplomatic memos and telegrams and papers and letters in the archives to *prove* who caused the war. And the answer was: Germany! Or maybe Austria. Or maybe the British Foreign Secretary. Or else the Russians. It all depended on which documents you read.

These disagreements may come as a surprise to you, but this is how history works. Very seldom do you find a piece of evidence that definitely *proves* something; usually, a document's significance depends on the different ways historians interpret it. All too often historians – like anyone else – can read into the evidence what they want to see, rather than what's actually there!

An accident waiting to happen . . .

In the years after the war, some historians liked to argue that no one *caused* the war. They argued that the outbreak of war was inevitable and that the countries all just somehow slid into it. Or, if you prefer, they were all equally self-interested and therefore equally to blame.

The trouble with this argument is that nothing in history is inevitable until it happens (otherwise, you might as well blame fate or the stars and have done with it). What makes history so interesting is precisely that people often *don't* act in their own best interests. Every country stood to lose heavily from the war, and they all did. So maybe the 'accident waiting to happen' idea raises more questions than it answers. Let's try Plan B.

. . . or was villainy afoot?

When the *Second* World War started in 1939 some people began asking: what is it with the Germans and their invading-the-neighbours addiction? Other people said that starting the Second World War didn't prove that Germany had started the First World War as well. And then in the 1960s a German (yes, German) historian called Fritz Fischer started producing what appeared to be documentary proof that the Germans had definitely been planning the First World War. Ever since then the debate has raged, though generally scholars accept the broad outline of Fischer's argument nowadays – except, understandably, in Germany. (I say more about how and why the war started in Chapter 3.)

Reviewing the Combatants

The war involved a huge range of countries from all parts of the world, from the *Great Powers* – the strongest and most powerful countries of all – to the most humble of colonial territories. Allow me to introduce you to some of them. (I look at them in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3.)

The Central Powers

Germany and its allies dominated the centre of the continent and, after the war had started, they came to be known as the *Central Powers*.

Germany – nation most likely to succeed

Germany was the one to watch. The German army was highly organised and it was run by a sort of military ministry called the General Staff, in which hundreds of highly professional officers studied all the possible permutations for war and worked out how to win them all. It was also building up a powerful fleet. Germany's erratic Kaiser (emperor), Wilhelm II, declared that Germany wanted its 'place in the sun', but the other Great Powers wanted to know just what that meant in practice.

Austria-Hungary – one state, two kingdoms

Once Austria had been one of the great titans of Europe, but it had been crushed by Napoleon and then badly shaken by a series of revolutions, from which it had never recovered. The proud Hungarians, who had been merely a province of the old Austrian Empire, demanded and got equal status with the Austrians, and so in 1867 the curious *dual monarchy* of 'Austria-Hungary' was born. This dual monarchy idea is complex, but woe betide anyone who got it wrong! Within the dual monarchy, Austria was an *empire,* with an emperor, but Hungary was a *kingdom,* with a king. Since the emperor and the king were the same person, it meant he held two different titles, had two different

crowns and two different coronations. When anything was done purely within Austria it was *imperial;* when it was done within Hungary it was *royal;* and when it was done by Austria-Hungary together, it was *imperial and royal.*

As well as Austrians and Hungarians, Austria-Hungary included a huge range of other national groups – Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Poles, Croats and, most importantly, Serbs – which were, in effect, subject peoples of an empire, although to complicate things further some were ruled just by Austria and some just by Hungary.

The two halves of the empire shared the same monarch, the Habsburg Emperor Franz Josef, and they were to follow the same foreign and military policy, but for all other things they would operate as separate states. This was to prove crucial in 1914.

Turkey – the Ottoman Empire

The Turkish Empire was officially called the Ottoman Empire. The *Ottomans* were originally a tribe of the Turkish people who took their name from their founder, Sultan Osman. The Ottomans took over the leadership of the Turks back in the middle ages and the Turkish empire had been known as the Ottoman Empire ever since.

By 1909 the Ottoman Empire was in a very sorry state. Its government was weak and corrupt, it had lost control of Egypt, Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and no one expected it to keep hold of the rest of the empire for long. But although the Empire may have been weak, the Turks had shown themselves to be utterly ruthless when it came to crushing revolts and had twice defended themselves against Russian invasion with impressive determination. Turkey had been a British ally, but the Germans were wooing the new, nationalist Turkish government with friendship, investment and top-notch German military advisers. And the Turks were very interested in what the Germans were offering.

The Allied and Associated Powers

Opposing Germany and its allies was a sort of alliance (but not actually an alliance – don't worry: I explain in this section) of France, Britain, Russia and Italy, and their respective empires, later joined by the United States. Not forgetting Belgium and Serbia.

France – hungry for revenge

France had been the military giant of Europe back in Napoleon's day, but since then the country had been torn apart by revolutions and in 1870–1 it had lost a catastrophic war with the German states. First, the Germans had paraded through Paris and staged a great ceremony in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles to celebrate the creation of a united Germany. (Don't forget this.) The

Germans had also annexed two of France's most important industrial provinces, Alsace and Lorraine. The French could only dream of getting revenge, because they were too deeply divided between left and right to start launching wars on their own. But give them an ally and that situation might change . . . .

Britain – feeling slightly nervous

Britain had been the most powerful state in the world but by 1900 other countries were catching up, including the United States and, more worryingly, Germany. Maybe it was time for Britain to look around for a friend or two. Doing so wasn't easy: the other Europeans didn't much like Britain and the only alliance the British could sign was an admittedly very useful deal with Japan. But in 1904 Britain signed an agreement with the French to patch up their differences, and in 1907 a second one with Russia. These agreements were known as *ententes* (that's French for *agreements,* folks) and they weren't alliances: they didn't tie Britain down to intervening in any war that might break out. Or did they?

Russia – the friendless giant

No one much liked Russia. It was a huge, oppressive state with an all-powerful ruler, and it was expanding everywhere – in the Baltic, in eastern Europe, in the Balkans, in Central Asia, in the Far East: nowhere seemed to be beyond Russia's grasp.

But Russia had serious problems. It was way behind the rest of Europe in industrial development, it had a serious internal security problem (one group of revolutionaries blew up Tsar Alexander II, and no Russian minister was safe from assassination) and in 1904 it went to war with Japan – and lost. Russia had been a German ally and some people in both countries thought it still should be, but the Russians didn't trust Germany's other ally, Austria-Hungary. With three people in the marriage, something had to give. Russia and Germany split up and, on the rebound, as it were, Russia signed an alliance with France in 1894. Which meant that if Germany ever went to war with France, it would be at war with Russia too.

Italy – open to offers

Italy was allied to Germany and Austria-Hungary, but it wasn't very happy about it. The Austrians were the Italians' old enemies; the Germans had helped the Italians unify their country and wouldn't let them forget it. The pope was sulking in the Vatican because Italy had taken nearly all his lands without asking, and when the Italians tried to cheer themselves up by doing what other Great Powers did – grabbing hold of some part of Africa – they invaded Ethiopia. And lost. So Italy was in a strange position in 1914: it was allied to Germany but open to a better offer.

The United States of America – keeping out of things

The United States was home to thousands of European immigrants who'd gone there to escape all those kings, generals and wars (see Chapter 11). The USA had just a small army, though that didn't stop the country from