

The First World War

An estimated ten million people died in World War I – a global military conflict which took place mainly in Europe between 1914 and 1918.

Militarily the war in the west began on 4 August 1914, when German troops swept into Luxembourg and Belgium.

The United Kingdom, France, Russia, and later Italy (from 1915) and the United States (from 1917), headed the Entente Powers, which defeated the Central Powers, led by the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman Empires. After its revolution in 1917, Russia withdrew from the war.

The Western Front, stretching 440 miles, from the Swiss border to the North Sea, was a line of trenches, dug-outs and barbed-wire fences, with an area known as ‘no man’s land’ between them. The line moved very little between 1914 and 1918.

On the Eastern Front, the vast eastern plains and limited rail network prevented a trench warfare stalemate, though the scale of the conflict was just as large as on the Western Front. The Middle Eastern Front and the Italian Front also saw heavy fighting, while hostilities also occurred at sea and, for the first time, in the air.

World War I caused the disintegration of four empires: the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman and Russian. Germany lost its colonial empire and states such as Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Yugoslavia gained independence.

The immense cost of waging the war also set the stage for the breakup of the British Empire and left France devastated for over 25 years.



Wounded men of the 1st Battalion Lancashire Fusiliers are tended to in a trench, 1916.
PHOTO (BY ERNEST BROOKS) © IWM Q739

France in World War I

by Nick Stafford

As part of my work on the stage play of *War Horse* I investigated the invasion and occupation of (part of) France in 1914, because a significant proportion of the story takes place in and around an occupied farm. However, I did this as a fiction writer, not a historian. My interest in history whilst writing a play like *War Horse* is as the backdrop. It is also undergrowth to snuffle around in, where I hope to glimpse how life was lived.

So I read about the occupation, imagined it, then, in anticipation of the questions the rest of the team would ask when we came to stand, say, the French characters of Paulette and Emilie on their feet, rather than give pages of documents or a talk, I wrote these monologues, and supplied figures that tell their own story.

PAULETTE: There were lots of rumours about what Germany was up to. Travellers came through and said that they'd entered Belgium. They'd done this because our own border with them was defended. To come through Belgium was to outflank our defences. No-one knew what to do. The trains that ran the line ten kilometres away were becoming less frequent, someone said. Jean and I tried to go into the village more often but hard news was impossible to get. One or two villagers said they weren't taking any chances – they took their portable possessions and went further into France. You can't move a farm like that though, can you? We talked about sending Emilie somewhere but with whom, to whom? She can't go alone. And then what if the Germans did come, would we ever see Emilie again? We cleared out the cellar and equipped it with food and water and candles and bedding. We disguised its entrance.

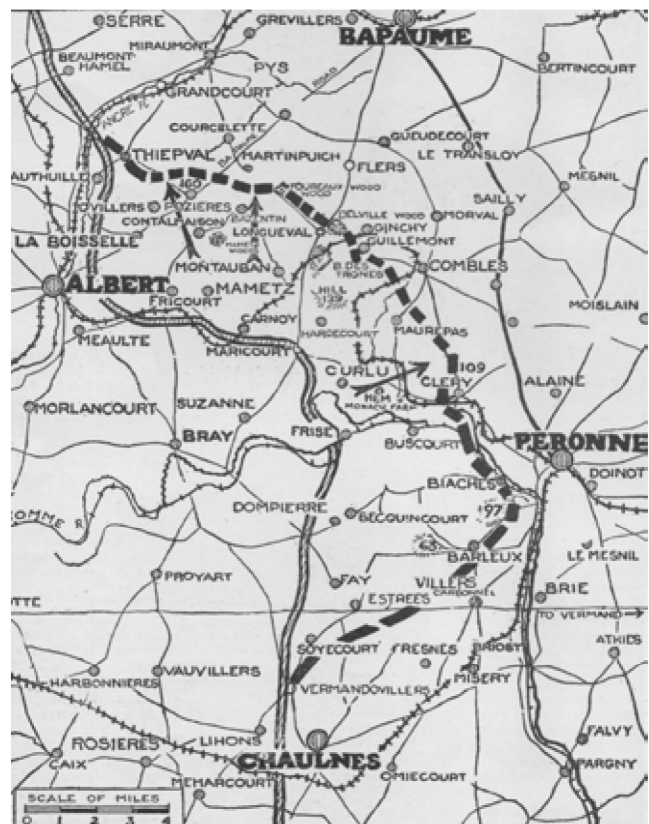
Then one day we saw three German soldiers on horses. They were up on the hill with spy glasses, then they went away. Jean took our best horse and went to find out what was happening. In our last hurried conversation he said he didn't know what he should do – like all men he'd done his National Service so he knew how to be a soldier. Perhaps that's where he went.

The Germans came and occupied us. They took over the administration and we all have new papers that we must carry at all times. They took an exhaustive inventory of everything – animals, crops, curtains, bowls, cutlery, books, furniture – everything. Sometimes they come around and ask where such and such a thing has gone and we have to be able to account for it or face gaol. We are not allowed out after dark, and we can't gather in groups of more than three. To travel to the next village we

must obtain a passport. Soldiers requisition whatever they need – horses, of course, also cows, pigs, potatoes, cotton sheets, ornaments, men. Any French men must work in their labour camps here, in Belgium, and in Germany. Everything is directed towards Germany's benefit. The churches hold Protestant services for them. Someone was caught with a telegraph terminal. They were tried and shot. There are rumours of French and British soldiers who were caught behind the German advance living in woods and in people's cupboards. What was once our land is now a gaol. We can hear the guns. They say we are part of Germany, now.

EMILIE: Papa and mama frowned and did a lot of whispering. We made a den in the cellar. Papa rode off and strange men came. I didn't understand them. They have many, many guns, swords, horses. There are lots of these men. Mama tells me to be very, very careful around them. She cries in the night. I still go to school, but monsieur Didot isn't our teacher any more, it's a woman called Madame Thiery. We're all hungry, all the time. We still grow food, but the men take it. Mama's hidden some potatoes and apples, but I'm not supposed to tell. She says the men will go away again. I ask when?

This article appeared in the original programme for *War Horse*.



Area of France invaded and devastated – 10%.

Livestock numbers in that area

	Pre-war 1918	
Cattle and draft oxen	892,000	58,000
Horses and mules	407,000	32,000
Sheep and goats	949,000	25,000
Pigs	356,000	25,000

Agricultural production lost in that area

Wheat	50%
Oats	30%
Sugar Beet	60%
Potatoes	18%

Damage in that area

Houses destroyed	293,039
Houses seriously damaged	435,961
Trenches and shell holes to be filled	436m cubic yards
Barbed wire to be removed	448m yards
Munitions to be destroyed	21m tons
Wells to be restored	121,108
Railway track destroyed	1,500 miles
Roads to be remade	33,000 miles

One million horses were taken to France from Britain.
62,000 were brought back.

