

# THE MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS

## THE FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES (1914)

### IN CONTEXT

#### FOCUS

#### Anglo-French cooperation

#### BEFORE

**August 1914** The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) is dispatched to France to reinforce the French army.

**September 1914** The Allied forces halt the German advance at the First Battle of the Marne.

**October 4, 1914** Ferdinand Foch is appointed deputy commander-in-chief, to coordinate the northern wing of the Allied forces.

#### AFTER

**April–May 1915** In a bid to break the deadlock of trench fighting, German forces release poison gas for the first time at the Second Battle of Ypres.

**July 31–November 10, 1917** The Battle of Passchendaele around Ypres, ultimately an Allied victory, exacts more than 500,000 casualties.

**D**uring the summer and early fall of 1914, the conflict on the Western Front leapfrogged north in the Race to the Sea, as each side tried to outflank the other. After the fall of Antwerp on October 10, the Belgian army—covered by British and French forces—retreated west to the River Yser, 14 miles (23 km) north of the Flanders city of Ypres. Reinforcements for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), including Indian and territorial divisions, arrived and began to take up positions around Ypres

in an area that over the next few years would become the site of some of the war's fiercest battles.

#### Reciprocal assaults

Fought between October 19 and November 22, 1914, the First Battle of Ypres was a series of assaults and counter-assaults. General Erich Falkenhayn, chief of the German general staff, was set on launching an immediate, decisive assault to clear his way to the Channel and North Sea before the French, British, and Belgian lines solidified. Simultaneously, British and French

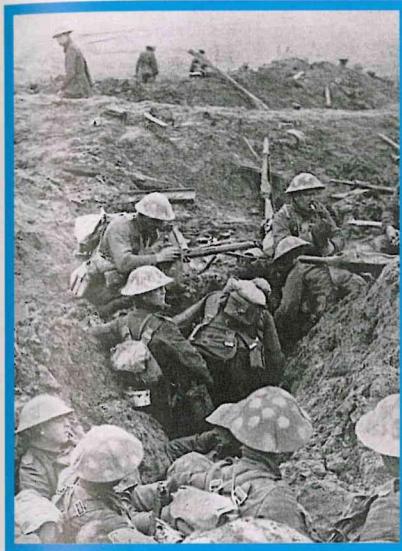
Trained French, British, and Belgian troops **fight together for the first time** against German forces.

With fighting largely in the open, **powerful artillery inflicts more than 100,000 casualties** on both sides.

The "Innocents" are the vanguard of **thousands more young volunteers sent to their deaths** in World War I.

The gunning down of German student volunteers is later immortalized as the **Massacre of the Innocents**.

**See also:** The British arrive 56–59 ■ The First Battle of the Marne 64–69 ■ The Race to the Sea 70–71 ■ Trenches take over 74–77 ■ The Second Battle of Ypres 110–115



forces, working in tandem under French general Ferdinand Foch, attempted an offensive designed to outflank the German troops. However, faced with superior numbers and a far greater weight of German artillery, the Allied offensive ground to a halt.

From October 20 onward, the Allies were fighting a desperate defensive battle against the German Fourth and Sixth armies; on October 30, the arrival of the French Ninth Corps to relieve the beleaguered British First Corps narrowly prevented a German breakthrough west of Ypres.

### Holding the line

The German attacks continued with unrelenting ferocity, but stubborn British resistance and the timely arrival of more French reinforcements were sufficient to weather the German storm. On November 11, the German units made their final breakthrough attempt. More than 12 of their most skillful divisions, including the

**A shallow, makeshift trench**  
shelters British soldiers dug in along the road to Ypres on the Belgian front in November 1914. Powerful artillery took its toll on both sides, making deeper trench warfare inevitable.

Prussian Guard, were held by the remnants of the Allied line. From then on, the fighting subsided as winter set in.

Losses were heavy on both sides. At an early stage, trying to overwhelm a perceived weak spot in the Allied line around Langemarck, a village north of Ypres, the German army had committed reserve divisions that included student volunteers with little training or experience, making them easy targets for the regular French and British troops. The Germans later called this the *Kindermord* ("child murder"), or more loosely the Massacre of the Innocents. By the end of the battle, German casualties numbered more than 130,000 men. The BEF suffered at least 50,000 casualties, severely weakening its strength, the French had a similar number, and the Belgians had up to 20,000.

### Stalemate—a new phase

The First Battle of Ypres ended the 1914 campaign on the Western Front. Germany's inability to break through the Allied line underscored a larger strategic defeat—the failure to secure a swift victory over France. The German high command now knew that their country faced a long war on both its Western and Eastern fronts. The battle also marked the end of mobile warfare. Each side was now building vast defensive trench networks stretching from Switzerland to the North Sea. ■

### The Christmas Truce

On Christmas Eve 1914, German soldiers on the Western Front began to sing carols and put up Christmas trees along their trenches. This continued into Christmas Day, when soldiers on both sides spontaneously started to walk into no-man's land. Groups of men mingled together, exchanging food, alcohol, and small gifts (such as buttons and cap badges). While most common in the West, similar truces occurred in parts of the Eastern Front.

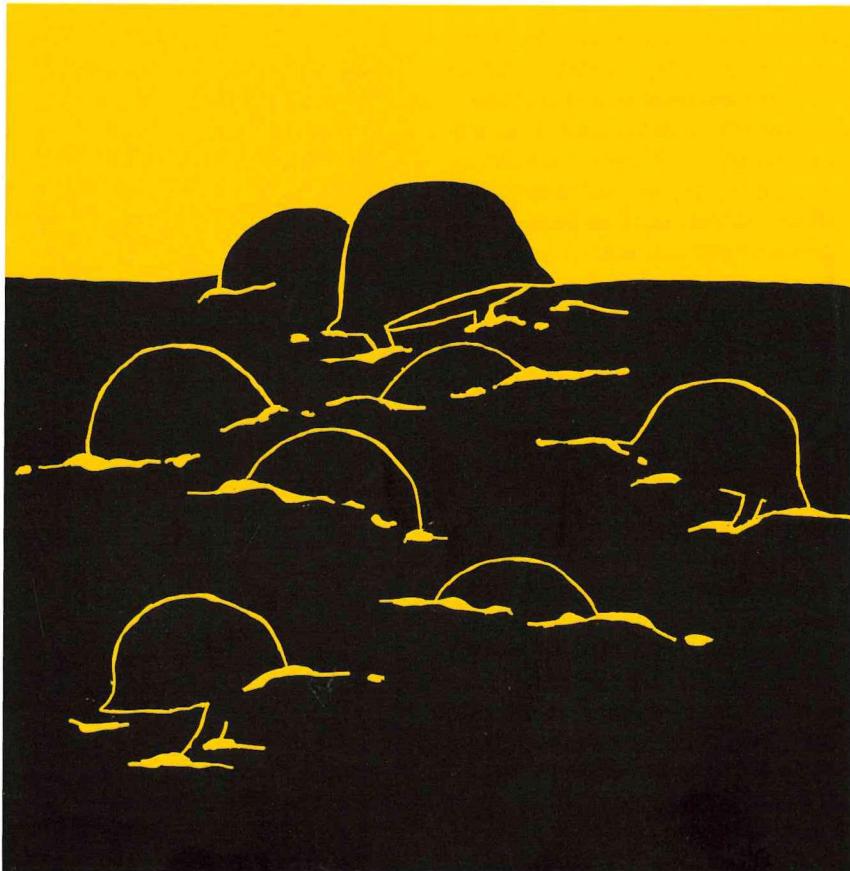
Troops on the Western Front held joint religious services and sung carols. In a number of places along the line, soccer matches were organized. The truce also gave soldiers an opportunity to carry their dead back from no-man's land for burial. Fraternization continued for several days on some parts of the front, but senior officers disapproved, afraid that it could affect fighting spirit, and orders were soon issued to resume hostilities.



**Soldiers on both sides** pose for a photograph during the unofficial truce of Christmas 1914. Up to 100,000 men took part along the Western Front.

# HELL IS MUD

TRENCHES TAKE OVER (1914–1915)



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

#### Trench warfare

### BEFORE

**1861–1865** Confederate and Union armies construct trench systems, most notably at the sieges of Vicksburg and Petersburg, during the Civil War.

• **1904–1905** At the Siege of Port Arthur, in the Russo-Japanese War, both sides dig lines of trenches and defend them with barbed wire, machine guns, and rapid-fire artillery.

### AFTER

**1929–1938** French forces build the Maginot Line—extensive underground concrete and steel defenses—along the border with Germany.

**2022–2023** In eastern Ukraine, both the Ukrainian and Russian armies dig networks of trenches to defend against enemy attack.

The war unleashed on Europe in August 1914 was unlike anything else the continent had seen—a conflict dominated by the deadly power of magazine rifles, machine guns, and quick-firing artillery. The same kind of weapons had been tested 10 years before in the Russo-Japanese War, as had the use of trenches as a defensive and protective system—but neither on the huge scale that came to define the Western Front. Such was the level of firepower that soldiers had to dig for their very survival, and once the early German offensives had ground to a halt at

**See also:** The Race to the Sea 70–71 ■ The First Battle of Ypres 72–73 ■ The Gallipoli Campaign 122–129 ■ Tank warfare 150–151 ■ The Battle of Messines 214–217 ■ Artillery 228–229 ■ Trench warfare transformed 254–257



A British sniper takes up position beside a river and a ruined village near Verdun, on the Western Front.

## Snipers

The static nature of trench warfare encouraged sniping—firing at an enemy with a rifle from a concealed position. Early snipers ranged from bored officers taking pot shots at enemy troops to skilled marksmen who knew about fieldcraft. The German army excelled at sniping, deploying former forest guards equipped with specially adapted service rifles fitted with telescopic sights. During 1914–1915, German snipers on the Western Front caused huge damage, especially to units that

failed to maintain good trench discipline, such as keeping heads below the parapets.

The Western Allies were slow to respond to the danger of sniping. It was only in 1916 that they made a concerted effort to overcome German sniper superiority. The British set up sniper schools to train recruits in shooting, fieldcraft, and tactical awareness, and sent experts into the trenches to teach front-line soldiers the practicalities of sniping.

the River Aisne in mid-September 1914, a new form of trench-bound warfare swiftly developed.

## Levels of preparedness

The German army was already far advanced in the materials and techniques for waging trench warfare. The Allied soldiers faced an enemy not only well-equipped with large-caliber howitzers—big guns that could fire shells in a high, curved trajectory—but with trench mortars, grenades, rifle grenades, illuminating flares, searchlights, and an array of entrenching tools.

The French were also relatively well-equipped for trench fighting, but the British had arrived in 1914 with little more than sandbags, some coils of barbed wire, and new supplies of picks and spades to add to the infantryman's simple trench-digging tool. Shallow trenches were

clearly insufficient. To keep men protected against artillery and other fire, trenches needed to be at least 8 ft (2.5 m) deep and 6½ ft (2 m) wide—and built to last for an unprecedented length of combat.

## Trench systems

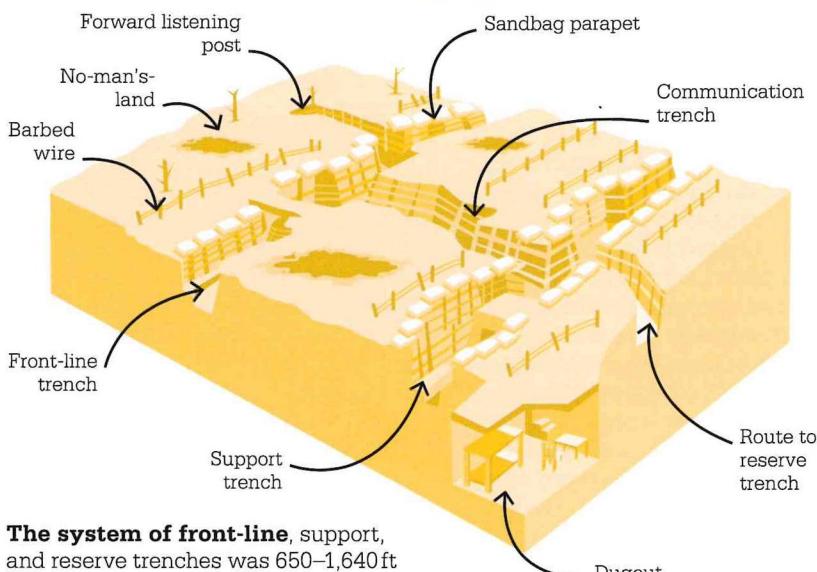
Front-line soldiers were instructed to dig trenches, not straight, but with traverses—zigzag or U-shaped

sections that prevented the blast and fragments from an artillery shell traveling far along a trench. Traverses also prevented an enemy soldier from firing down the length of a trench. Lines of barbed wire were staked out in front of the trench to slow down an enemy attack; soldiers entangled in barbed wire were easy targets for a well-sited machine gun. »



German soldiers stand on their trench firestep, looking over the sandbag parapet, as they prepare to carry out an attack in Flanders, near the Yser river, in fall 1914.

### Western Front trench system



**The system of front-line, support, and reserve trenches was 650–1,640 ft (200–500 m) deep.** Communication trenches carried soldiers, food supplies, equipment, and ammunition, while dugouts provided some space for rest and battle planning.

By the end of 1914, a basic trench system emerged of three roughly parallel lines interconnected by communication trenches. The front trench, directly facing the enemy, had a firestep, which lifted soldiers to parapet level, so they could fire while remaining concealed. Behind this was the support trench, which contained the bulk of the troops, ready to rush to the front-line trench in case of attack. The third line—the reserve trench—also held large numbers of men and acted as a further line of resistance. Soldiers strived to make the mud-filled, often waterlogged trenches more comfortable by installing rudimentary drainage and making dugouts in the trench sides to provide rest and shelter.

Geography played a key part in defining trench systems. The low-lying ground of the Flanders region in Belgium was prone to flooding

and turned into a virtual swamp in wet weather once artillery fire had destroyed ditches and drainage channels. Trenches immediately filled with water, forcing troops to build chest-high sandbag fortifications above ground level.

The Vosges region of the Western Front, near the Swiss border, posed different problems. Its mountainous terrain meant that trenches had to be carved out of rock or thick forested slopes rather than flat expanses of soil.

#### No-man's-land

The strip of ground between the front-line trenches of opposing armies became known as no-man's-land. Its width could vary greatly from less than 39 ft (12 m) to almost 1,500 ft (460 m), with an average of around 750 ft (230 m). In the early days of the war, no-man's-land often included haystacks, farm buildings,

and woods, where those operating between the lines could hide. It was the scene of sporadic infantry attacks and also more regular patrols and trench raids—usually at night. The aim of both was to gain information (especially from the capture of prisoners). Aggressive trench raids were also used to frighten the enemy and encourage a ruthless spirit among troops.

On the Aisne front and around the narrow Ypres salient in Flanders, Allied trench raids were conducted to dissuade German snipers from adopting forward positions, as their accurate fire chipped away at a battalion's strength and morale. Even more dangerous were the German artillery observers on lookout in no-man's-land for any Allied advance from cover; a signal from them would trigger a swift and accurate German bombardment.

#### Special weapons

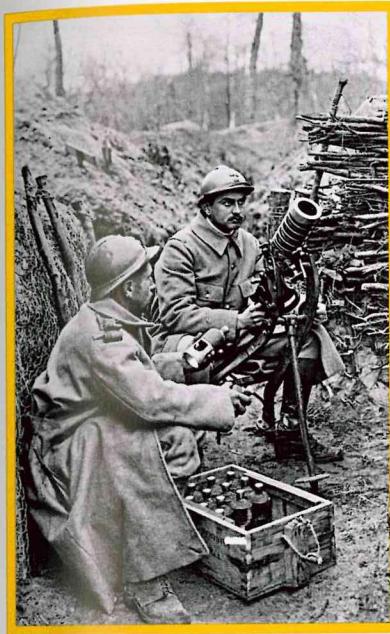
Fighting the enemy during chance encounters in no-man's-land or in organized trench raids demanded its own specialized weaponry. Rifles with fixed bayonets were too cumbersome for the close-quarter combat typical of trench fighting,

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No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.

**Lieutenant Wilfred Owen**  
British soldier and poet

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**French soldiers** prepare to fire a mortar from their trench on the front line. The mortars were given the nickname *crapouillot*, from *petit crapaud*, meaning "little toad."

they could deploy the fearsome *Minenwerfer* ("mine thrower") series, the largest of which was capable of firing a 214lb (97kg) shell up to 2,880ft (878m). The British and French had to start from scratch and preferred lighter, more mobile weapons. The British Stokes 3in (81mm) mortar, first used at the end of 1915, fired 10lb (4.5kg) shells up to 2,400ft (730m). Despite its relatively lightweight shell, the Stokes proved highly effective and was adopted by most Allied forces.

#### Trench rotation and relief

Commanders were soon aware of the strain that trench life placed on soldiers, and a rotation system was adopted by all sides. British soldiers, for example, would spend between four and eight days in a front-line trench, followed by around four days each in a support and a reserve trench. From 1915, 10 days' home leave was granted around every 12 months.

so soldiers began to create their own weapons, including iron maces, wooden clubs, daggers, hatchets, and spears. German troops adapted entrenching tools, giving them a sharp edge that could both cut and stab. They were used alongside more conventional weapons, such as grenades and pistols.

Trench warfare also prompted the development of devices that could throw grenades farther than by hand. Early catapults and spring-powered mechanisms proved highly inaccurate and were replaced from 1915 by rifle grenades. A variety of launch systems were used, with the much-copied French V-B cup launcher capable of propelling a grenade up to 590ft (180m).

Of all trench weapons, the mortar was perhaps the most important. It consisted of a metal pipe that could fire small shells at a steep angle—avoiding obstacles and dropping on the enemy from above, not unlike heavier artillery. The Germans had pioneered trench mortars before the war, so in 1914

Engagement in offensive operations was rare in trench warfare, and for most of the time a soldier's life was relatively peaceful. This encouraged a phenomenon called the "live and let live" system, where soldiers on both sides refrained from opening fire to avoid retaliation from the enemy. It was easy, however, for commanders to break this peaceful equilibrium, whether through the deployment of specialist snipers, the installation of trench mortars with large supplies of ammunition, or the resumption of night raids.

#### An unbreakable line

The defensive trench system—resilient even in the face of the huge explosive and destructive power of modern weapons—proved so effective from late 1914 that it totally paralyzed any hope of a war of movement on the Western Front. The Allies, however, were determined to break the trench deadlock and launched repeated offensives from 1915 onward, all of which failed to break through the German lines. In the end, it took slow, steady attrition to turn the war against the German army and in favor of the Allies. ■

#### Communications

A range of communication methods emerged to help commanders remain in contact with their troops. At the tactical level, commanders could use well-tested methods such as lamps and signal flags, or even animals, including dogs and pigeons, to carry written orders. Soldiers, called "runners," were also used as messengers.

By far the most important system of communication was the telephone, which enabled direct verbal interaction over

long distances from command headquarters to officers in front-line trenches. However, telephone cables could be easily cut, especially by artillery fire. During an offensive, even cables laid deep in the ground could be destroyed by heavy shelling. As troops advanced forward from their trenches, signalers went with them, carrying compact field telephones in shoulder bags and reeling out cables. These were even more vulnerable to artillery fire and had to be constantly repaired—a highly specialized and risky job.

# THE ENEMY HAS EARS EVERYWHERE

THE SECRET WAR (1914–1915)



## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

**Intelligence gathering**

### BEFORE

**1850** Austria's *Evidenzbureau* becomes the first military intelligence service.

**1901** The German Admiralty founds its *Nachrichten-Abteilung* ("Intelligence Division") to gather information on naval rivals.

### AFTER

**January 1917** British cryptographers decipher the Zimmermann Telegram, sent by Germany to Mexico. It promises American territory to Mexico in return for its military support in the war.

**May 1918** The Sedition Act is passed in the US, imposing fines and imprisonment on any American citizen who is found guilty of conspiring against their country.

The tense political situation in the years before 1914 encouraged an appetite for novels and tales of espionage. With the outbreak of war, such literature, along with conspiracy stories in the popular press, fostered a spy mania that touched all warring nations.

In Britain, the prolific Anglo-French writer William Le Queux had a pivotal impact on public opinion—and, ultimately, on official policy. His novels—several, such as *Spies of the Kaiser* (1909), concerning a supposed invasion of Britain—were presented as fact dressed up as fiction. Le Queux even hinted that he had official documents to support his claims. There were no

**See also:** War is declared 42–43 ■ Public opinion 44–45 ■ The Battle of Tannenberg 78–81 ■ The war at sea begins 88–93 ■ Society under strain 184–187 ■ The US enters the war 194–195 ■ War-crimes trials 318–319

## Mata Hari



Margaretha Geertruida MacLeod was a Dutch exotic dancer turned courtesan. Better known by her stage name, Mata Hari, she was born Margaretha Zelle in 1876 in Leeuwarden, Friesland. After her family lost their business, she left home to become a teacher.

In 1895, Zelle married Dutch army officer Rudolph MacLeod and went to live in Java and Sumatra. They were soon divorced, and she had to abandon her daughter. Moving to Paris, she worked as a dancer, used the name Mata Hari, and entered into liaisons—often paid—with military men.

In 1915, Zelle moved again, this time to the Hague, where she allegedly agreed to supply information about France to the Germans. Supposedly, however, she also became a French spy, in return for being allowed to visit a wounded lover.

Even though Zelle supplied little more than gossip to either side, in 1917, she was seized in Paris, accused of being a German spy, and sentenced to death by firing squad. The possibility remains that she was treated as a scapegoat for France's military failures.

such papers, though his books did inspire plenty of correspondence from readers suspicious of people with German connections.

Le Queux passed the letters on to the British government. The Committee of Imperial Defence took the claims seriously, and in 1909, the Secret Service Bureau—forerunner of MI5 and MI6—was born.

## Secret services

Other countries already had similar agencies, founded in earlier times of tension and conflict. In Belgium, the *Administration de la Sûreté Publique* investigated espionage. Russia had the *Okhrana* (secret police) while Austria-Hungary's *Evidenzbureau* worked with the state police. In Germany, the *Abteilung III b*, founded in 1889, focused its attention on Russia and France, and its navy's secret service, the *Nachrichten-Abteilung*,

spied primarily on Britain. In France, military intelligence was handled by the *Deuxième Bureau*, founded in 1871 after France's defeat to Prussia.

## Clampdowns and reprisals

On August 8, 1914, four days after declaring war on Germany, the British government passed its Defence of the Realm Act "for securing public safety." From then,

all communications were censored, pub opening times were restricted, and discussion of military and naval matters became illegal. Bonfires were banned as possible signals to the enemy; and whistling for a taxi was also forbidden for fear it might be confused with air raid warnings.

Similar legislation was rolled out across the British Empire. Australia's War Precautions Act, Canada's War Measures Act, and New Zealand's »



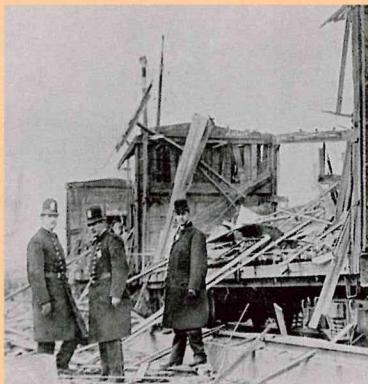
**German soldiers** escort a Russian spy caught cutting telephone wires behind German lines, during the opening year of the conflict.

### Sabotage

Espionage in World War I took many forms. These included sabotage—the targeting of ships, munitions, and goods factories to prevent supplies from reaching the front. In addition to the loss of life, property, and goods intended for the war effort, sabotage had a strongly negative effect on public morale.

Such acts could affect noncombatants, including the US before it entered the war. On July 30, 1916, an explosion at the Black Tom railway depot in New Jersey, close to Manhattan, destroyed 2,000,000lb (910,000kg) of munitions, packed into rail trucks and destined for Allied use. The blast caused over \$20 million worth of damage.

An investigation blamed German agents, including men guarding the depot. The neutral US immediately created the Espionage Act and established intelligence agencies to tackle espionage on home soil. Public opinion turned against Germany, fueling general support for the declaration of war in 1917.



**American policemen inspect** sabotaged rail trucks in July 1916 at the Black Tom depot on a landfill peninsula in New York Harbor.

### Military intelligence in most countries takes three forms.

#### Signals intelligence (SIGINT)

Intercepting signaling communications and code-breaking.

#### Imagery intelligence (IMINT)

Gathering visual information, including aerial reconnaissance.

#### Human intelligence (HUMINT)

Obtaining information from human sources, including spies, prisoners, and deserters.

War Regulations Act were also designed to secure public safety and defend the Commonwealth.

The first wartime spy executed in Britain was Carl Hans Lody on November 6, 1914. British intelligence agents had detected German-born Lody trying to pass on military data. He was arrested, convicted, and shot by a firing squad at the Tower of London—the first execution there for 167 years. The British Army hoped the historic location would impress the public; instead Lody's brave demeanor aroused a wave of sympathy. Ten more spies died at the Tower during the war.

Extreme wartime deprivation fueled the hunt for spies and traitors; often suspicions alone could be enough to secure a death penalty. Austria-Hungary executed some 80,000 civilians caught on the wrong side of the shifting front lines; most were Galician Ukrainians and Bosnian Serbs who had welcomed enemy troops as liberators.

### Spy networks

All the combatant nations deemed military intelligence essential. Networks of French, Belgian, and British intelligence agents

penetrated France and Belgium and were often aided by citizens who resented the privations of living in German-occupied territory.

The port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, which remained neutral, became the center of spying activity, with German and British agents both operating there. It was home to the British Secret Service Bureau's main European station, which worked with Dutch citizens who were free to travel to Germany. Despite little or no

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Tomorrow I shall be shot here in the Tower. I have had just judges, and I shall die as an officer, not a spy. Farewell. God bless you.

**Carl Hans Lody**

German spy,  
final letter to his family,  
November 1914

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training, these agents and Belgian resistance groups could report from behind the Western Front. Germany, which convicted a total of 235 Allied spies during the war, also recruited Dutch citizens to spy on British naval ports.

All sides in the war employed counter-espionage, too. The German *Abteilung III b* formed its counter-intelligence section, *Spionageabwehr*, in the autumn of 1914. It had offices in Denmark, whose geographical location, good cable communications, and neutrality made it a center of operations for the German, British, French, and Russian secret services.

### Evolving technology

France, Germany, and Italy all had air photo-reconnaissance units before the war. From 1914, Britain also began using observation planes and aerial photography to gather military intelligence. As the interpretation of such imagery improved, camouflage for troops and equipment became important.

New technologies were vital to intelligence gathering but could also be exploited by spies. The wireless, in particular, was believed to be a security risk, and most countries prohibited its private use. Encrypted telegrams, sent via the newly completed global network of telegraph cables, were widely used. Consequently, codebreaking evolved rapidly among both the Allies and Central Powers.

One major success in the secret war was Britain's naval intelligence-gathering unit, Room 40, named after the room in the Old Admiralty Building in London's Whitehall that

its team occupied in November 1914. With the British acquisition of three German naval codebooks in the first four months of the war, the unit was soon decoding numerous wireless and telegraph messages, passing on its intelligence to the British navy.

Meanwhile, the domestic section of Britain's Security Service Bureau (known as MI5 from September 1916) expanded nearly fiftyfold, to

a staff of 844 members during the four years of conflict. The section oversaw significant developments in techniques of observation and intelligence gathering, such as cable and postal censorship and creating (and breaking) complex codes. If fewer spies were apprehended after the early months of the war, it was because so many of them had been stopped at source. ■



**Shot by French troops**, an alleged spy is left dead in public view under a sign denouncing him as a traitor near Rheims, France, in October 1914.