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EDUCATIONAL PACKAGE

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

Content

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

This educational package is intended for teachers working with pupils in **secondary education**. It's main objective is to help with the preparation of school trips to the In Flanders Fields Museum and the Westhoek region (Flanders Fields) of Belgium.

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Notes
Approach

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

Why have a museum on the First World War?

Any country that has experienced a war waged on its shores will not easily forget it, even if it was fought as long as a hundred years ago. For every one of those that died in Belgium during the First World War (more than 600,000 people) remembered by the many graves (some 425,000 in total) and individual names on the multitude of war memorials in the region there is a story of sadness, pain and grief to be found somewhere in the world. The same goes for many of the traces and relics from the war that still lie across the old frontlines, as well as for every one of the millions of people who were made refugees from their homeland, or worse, were physically or psychically wounded.

Ypres, City of Peace, and the In Flanders Fields Museum maintain a connection with the First World War because it matters to those who want to discuss conflict and peace throughout the world. As a city, and as a region, Ypres has a long tradition of understanding as to what war is about. Perhaps 'understanding' is not the correct word to use, but Ypres knows the feeling of war and the city's experiences allow it to sense the presence of conflict, as well as its absence. The long-lasting effects of conflict have become part of those who live here, as well as part of those who happen to visit. To ensure that this connection is preserved, both for the city's inhabitants as well as its many visitors, it is essential that the story of Ypres' relationship with modern warfare be protected. Images from the conflict, and it was for this reason that the In Flanders Fields Museum opened its doors in 1998.

The In Flanders Fields Museum

The museum is located inside Ypres' reconstructed Town Hall – itself an important and powerful symbol of war, suffering and resurrection. Thanks to the design of the museum, the old building's interior shows off its history and grandeur, as well as its story of destruction and reconstruction. The building itself is our primary witness to the effects of the First World War.

The permanent exhibition narrates the story of the First World War in the West Flanders region of the Western Front. It details the German invasion of Belgium, when the conflict was still a 'war of manoeuvre', as well as the following four years of bitter trench warfare in the Westhoek region (Flanders Fields) of the country – from the beaches of Nieuwpoort to the banks of the River Lys at Armentières. However, the museum also pays special attention to the end of the war and the way that it has been remembered since 1918, ensuring that it is a conflict that remains fresh in the memory even more than a hundred years after its beginning.

The museum focuses on the human experience of the war and on the individual witnesses to its legacies, vividly bringing home the subject to the largest possible audience. The magnitude of the war demands such an audience in order that the historical facts, as well as the remembrance of the human cost of the conflict, are not forgotten. Now that those that experienced the conflict have passed away, the museum stands as the last main witness to what occurred in Flanders between 1914 and 1918. The magnificent Cloth Hall, in which the museum is situated, is also a witness to the war, part of the landscape of the conflict, its engagement with this venerable object of the war enables an even greater level of understanding as to the war's history. Therefore, the museum walks include a visit to the belfry, which allows the visitors to see the city and the surrounding battlefields from above. Downstairs in the museum, too, are many intriguing palimpsests embodying contemporary photographs and images both from the air (vertical and oblique) and from the ground (panoramic and close-up), evocatively reflecting the landscape and drama of the war. This engagement with the landscapes of the conflict means that the museum is also able to serve as an introduction to the wider history of the war, which can found right across the Westhoek region.

The importance of the war's landscapes cannot be underestimated, but it must also be remembered that there are many other witnesses to the conflict, too. In the museum, hundreds of authentic objects can be seen that recall the character of the war. These varied objects embody notions of death and protection, stupidity and intelligence, propaganda and self-preservation, and they are all still as powerful today as they were more than a century ago. But perhaps the most important objects of all are the words, stories and faces of those people who actually experienced the war. In the museum this 'human factor' is omnipresent, and these voices from the past guide visitors on their path through the museum, narrating the story both of the war and the landscapes it occupied. Innovative designs and technology are utilised and lifelike characters stand next to interactive settings, allowing visitors to engage with those that, more than a hundred years ago, experienced the horrors of the war.

The museum aims to narrate the history of the conflict in Flanders from as many points of view as possible, embracing the military history of the conflict as well the more personal stories of all the countries involved in the first global war to sweep the planet. In the Flanders region alone, people from five continents from more than 120 different contemporary countries were involved. Therefore, our audience is diverse and international. In the end, the story of the First World War in Flanders applies to all wars ever since, and anywhere in the world, and Ypres, City of Peace, is one of over 5,000 cities across the world that unite together against all war. Both now and forever more.

IFFM: exhibitions, information centre, educational operations, cultural and artistic programme

The In Flanders Fields Museum embodies much more than its permanent displays and a series of temporary exhibitions. We also run an up-to-date educational programme for both Belgian and foreign students, as well as a cultural and artistic programme that highlights the work of contemporary and modern artists, musicians and writers. A privileged partner is the province of West Flanders.

In the museum's Information Centre, which directly connects to the museum walks, visitors can further explore this dramatic period of world history. The bigger, universal story of the war can be researched, but so too can the histories of those individuals that experienced it. Local histories are also catered for, too, meaning that there is something for everyone to explore and enjoy. What is our connection with history and what is yours?

Because the essence of war has barely changed since the end of the First World War, the museum regards the narration the story of the conflict as a universal and contemporary message of peace, and therefore an important social task. The museum has close relationships with partners that share this mission and operates within the ideas and values of Ypres, City of Peace.

1914-1918
a war ...

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

... that involved at least 600,000 casualties in Belgium alone…

... of which at least 550,000 occurred in the Westhoek region (Flanders Fields)...

... where at least 300,000 of them are still buried today…

... and more than 200,000 still remain missing...

... in a place where more than 1.5 million people were wounded...

... and at least 1.5 million Belgian people fled from the war...

... from a place where millions of people, from more than 120 different contemporary countries...

... in the 'war to end all wars'…

…yet, since 1918, more than 130 wars have been fought…

So why would we keep silent about the First World war?

Notes
Museum Walks

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

Poppy Bracelet

First of all, this bracelet allows visitors to access the In Flanders Fields Museum and your chosen language is programmed into the bracelet, allowing you to interact with several displays.

In the armies of the First World War, everyone received a new, additional identity: an individual service number to be kept on one's body. These methods of identification were carried on various objects, some officially issued, and some made by the individuals themselves. Without this identity carrier a soldier could be punished, and if he was killed in action without it no one would ever know who he was. He would become one of the thousands of missing people from the war that today have no known grave.

During the museum visit the poppy bracelet gives you a comparable extra identity, bonding each visitor together with four witnesses to the war, allowing for an understanding of their experiences (see Iconic People Walk). This process confronts us with people from the war, people who lived and died almost a century ago.

Experience learns us that the use of the poppy bracelet applies especially to individual visitors. For school groups we focus on the icon people, the individual cabinets and the List of Names. (see further)





Log in *(N.1)*

Upon entering the museum visitors scan their poppy bracelet for the first time and enter their name, age and place of origin. This information allows us to fine-tune the four encounters each visitor experiences (see Iconic People Walk).

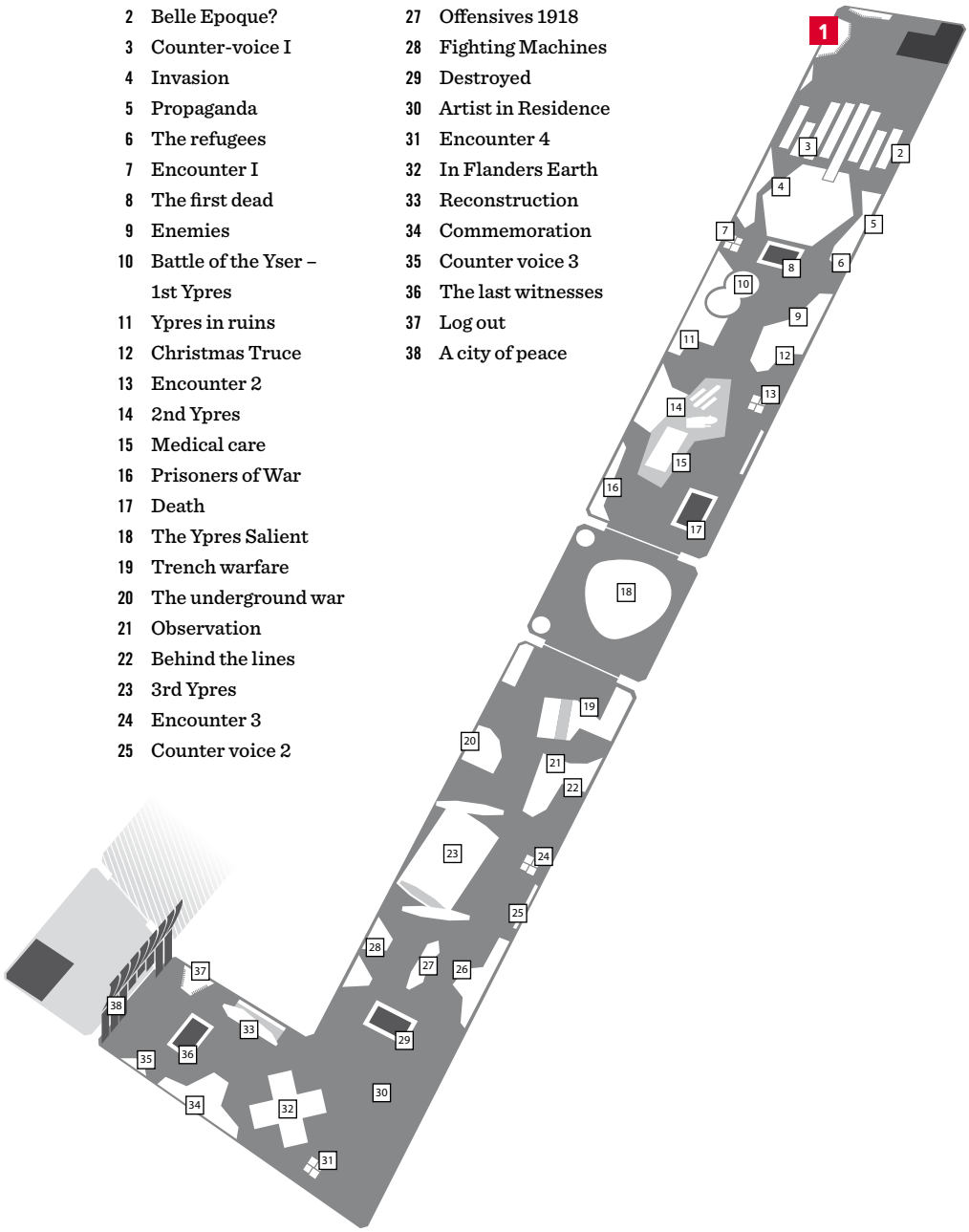
The log-in process can take some time. In order to avoid long queues we ask teachers, who want a specific story according to country or region, to report this at the time of booking. Then we will see if we can find a story that meets your wishes. So the poppy bracelets can be prepared in advance and the class can start visiting the museum immediately.

The In Flanders Fields Museum offers four different walks:

Chronological Walk
Thematic Walk
Iconic People Walk
Reflective Walk

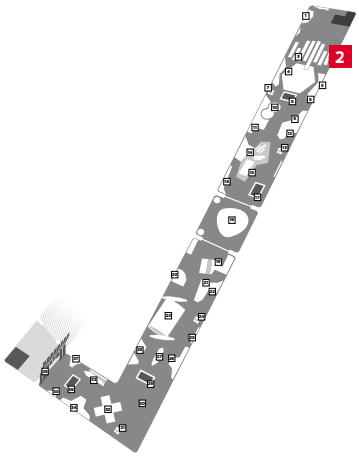
Below, these walks are discussed in detail.

1 Log in
2 Belle Epoque?
3 Counter-voice I
4 Invasion
5 Propaganda
6 The refugees
7 Encounter I
8 The first dead
9 Enemies
10 Battle of the Yser – 1st Ypres
11 Ypres in ruins
12 Christmas Truce
13 Encounter 2
14 2nd Ypres
15 Medical care
16 Prisoners of War
17 Death
18 The Ypres Salient
19 Trench warfare
20 The underground war
21 Observation
22 Behind the lines
23 3rd Ypres
24 Encounter 3
25 Counter voice 2
26 The world at war
27 Offensives 1918
28 Fighting Machines
29 Destroyed
30 Artist in Residence
31 Encounter 4
32 In Flanders Earth
33 Reconstruction
34 Commemoration
35 Counter voice 3
36 The last witnesses
37 Log out
38 A city of peace



1 Chronological Walk

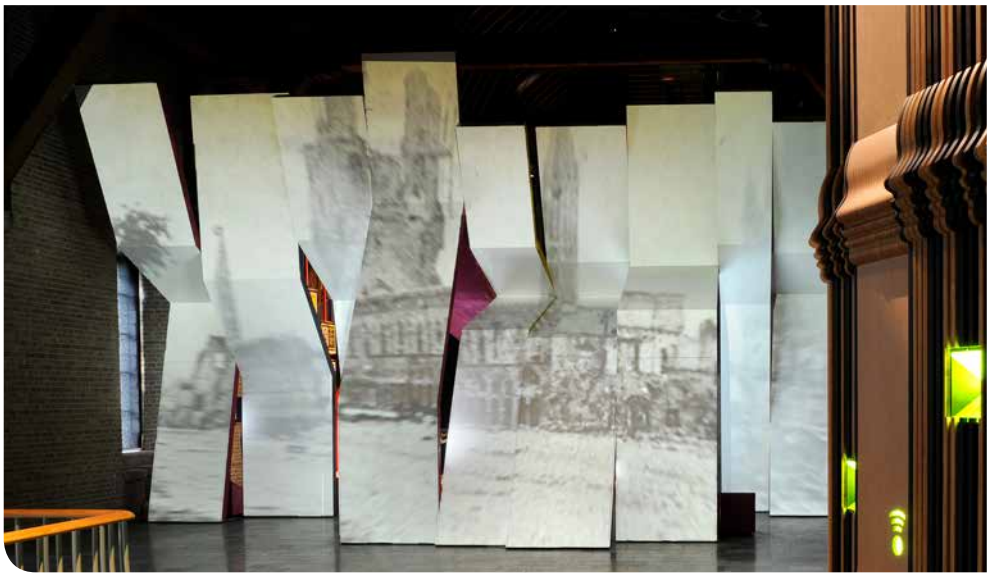
In various sections the military and historical story of the First World War is told, beginning with the eve of the conflict. Every section is introduced via a text panel that details the information in four languages. This information covers the time period and context of the subject displayed.

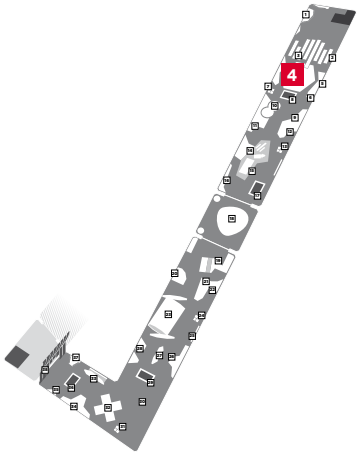


Belle Epoque – 1900-1914 *(N. 2)*

In the years before the First World War the industrialised world became steadily richer. During the Belle Epoque (the beautiful era) there was an almost euphoric feeling of progress and modernity. At the start of the permanent exhibition, as visitors enter the museum, an enormous video screen reflects this feeling. But the back of the projected display shows a different, shadier side of the story – a fallen Belle Epoque.

The dominant theme is of the native country, reflected even in the children's games and education. To fortify their position in the world, the major powers all entered into military alliances, and as a result many different types of vases, cards and other memorabilia were produced to emphasise those alliances. Those countries that wanted power needed to show power, and therefore the major countries all focused on their armies. At the time, all the colonial powers were involved in sending their troops to acquire and maintain territories overseas, and both in Asia and Africa, many bloody battles were fought as a consequence of these ambitions. By 1914, the growing wealth enjoyed by the lower classes of society had improved their standards of living. Yet, a large gap still remained between the factory workers (known as the proletariat) and the burgeoning middle class. Most average soldiers entered into military service for economical reasons and they were destined to become 'canon flesh' on the killing fields of the First World War. But during the war, many of these soldiers would become national heroes.





The Attack – 4/8/1914 *(N. 4)*

In August 1914, during the various declarations of war, Belgium managed to maintain its neutral position. Nevertheless, it was not long before three German armies attacked the country, flooding across the boarder in massed human waves. A large map on the museum floor depicts this grand attack, which took place from Liège to the Marne valley, and then finally arrived at the fields of Flanders. Just as the German troops did in August 1914, the visitor to the museum enters the Belgium of the period. The floor map marks places where the most severe battles were fought, or where acts of terror took place during the first weeks of war. Certain places (e.g. Dinant, Louvain and Antwerp) are depicted on screens that display images and newspaper articles of the events that unfolded.
The Belgian army was tiny compared to the vast German armies, but even so its defence was firm and occasionally successes were achieved (e.g. at Halen). The fort area around Liège, Namur and Antwerp was modern and advanced for the time, but the defences could not hope to stand up to the heaviest artillery barrages. As they crossed the boarder, the Germans left a path of destruction across Belgium, and every delay in their advance was cruelly meted out on the civilian population.
The museum symbolises this outburst of extreme violence against unarmed citizens with one of the lances of Uhlan, and next to the lance is displayed a list of Belgian places that experienced at least 10 civilian casualties and/or more than 100 houses set on fire during the first months of war.

The Enemies – 10/1914 – 10/1918 (The Great war in Flanders) *(N. 9)*

After the fall of Antwerp (7th – 10th October 1914), the war moved to the Westhoek region of Belgium, known as Flanders Fields. The Belgian army, along with the British and French forces that came to assist, managed to retreat from the invaders and withdrew to the westernmost corner of Belgium. Here is where the planned war of manoeuvre quickly became entrenched, as each side deployed their modern, industrially produced weapons against the other. The last gap in the continuous, but stagnant, front line that ran from the North Sea to the Swiss border was rapidly closed and these entrenched positions did not fundamentally change until the final liberation offensive began on 28th September 1918.



13th October 1914.
'At about 7:30 am, 12 German soldiers came here to rest and then left. Half an hour later, 3 tanks arrived. "Germans again," the people said. But it was Belgian and English soldiers. Everyone was surprised! (…) In the afternoon, 150 French soldiers passed Hallebast corner and as such 4 types of soldier were seen in Dikkebus that day.'

Achiel Van Walleghem, Dikkebus (B)

They were like ghosts in a window display - A colourful group of uniforms, completely unfit for a war that would last for the next four years.



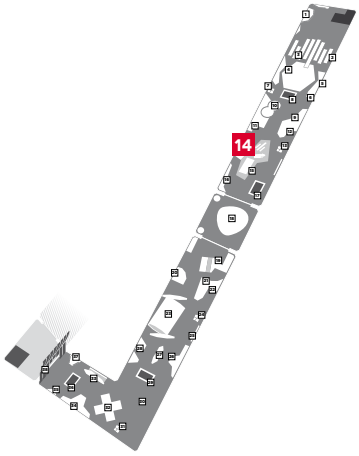
Flooding of the Yzer River – The First Battle of Ypres *(N. 10)*

On October 16th, the Belgian army dug in along the banks of the Yzer River in order to try and fend off the German Fourth Army. The task proved extremely difficult, even with the help of the French, and on 25th October the defenders were forced to withdraw behind the embankment of the Diksmuide – Nieuwpoort railway line. Between the 27th and 29th October, the polder on the left bank of the Yzer River at Nieuwpoort was successfully flooded and the last German attempt to break through near Ramskapelle was finally repelled.

Diksmuide was defended until the 10th November, by which time the flooded polder had split apart the armies. To the south, the French and British cavalry had been waiting impatiently since the beginning of October to get into action. Over the previous six weeks there had been several bloody battles in the region as both sides tried to outflank the other. One of these battles began on 22nd October at Langemark. Over the course of just a few days more than 3,000 young German soldiers were killed, allegedly marching to their deaths singing the German national anthem. Many of those that perished were very young and inexperienced, and in Germany the terrible slaughter became associated with a loss of youth and the myth of sacrifice, fuelling the war fever that was sweeping the country. On 22nd November 1914, the city of Ypres began to receive artillery fire and by the end of the month two salients had formed around Ypres and Armentières.

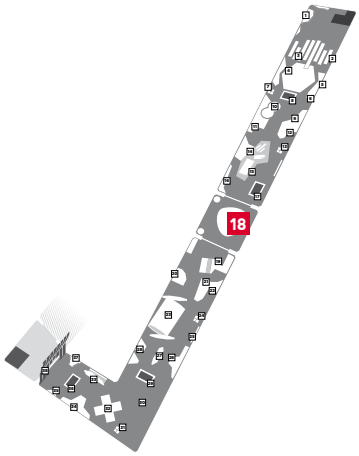
In the museum, an animated, strategic map of the area between the North Sea and the Lys explains how the static front lines were created between 4th October and 22nd November 1914, and next to the map oil paintings by Alfred Bastien bring to life the human suffering and loss that occurred along the Yzer River in those early days of the war. With the flooding of the Yzer River and the culmination of the First Battle of Ypres, the static and entrenched Western Front in Flanders was complete. Before long, trenches had been dug from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border; a distance of some 800 km. The shovel had gained the same value as the gun.

Despite the hopes of many, the war wasn't over by Christmas. Exposed to the freezing winter weather in the primitive and muddy trenches, many soldiers began to feel more sympathy for the enemy in the opposing lines than with those who were living a relatively good life at home. Even the Christmas gifts sent out to the armies at the front had little positive impact on morale. These factors, and many others, all contributed to the Christmas truces, which broke out up and down the lines over Christmas that year. In many places, soldiers and officers on both sides temporarily stopped fighting and met each other in No Man's Land. This story is told in the Iconic People Walk.



The Second Battle of Ypres – 22/4/1915 – 24/5/1915 *(N. 14)*

The First World War was the first truly industrial war and the effects were devastating for all involved. The terrible firepower of the heavy artillery and the machine gun killed men in their thousands. Pieces of shrapnel, still regularly found in the fields around Ypres, are a silent reminder to the terrible destruction caused by the modern weapons of war. Even so, these highly destructive weapons could not force the breakthrough in the lines so desired by both sides. As a result, all sides tried to find new methods of breaking the stalemate and these efforts culminated in the first use of poisonous gas. The German scientist and chemist Fritz Haber (see Iconic Characters) was the first to perfect this new terror weapon and it was unleashed on the British lines in 1915. Initially, the use of this dreadful weapon caused an outcry, but before long the allied troops were using it, too. Gas masks were soon provided to protect men and horses from the silent killer, but its use still remained widespread throughout the war. The fluorescent green colour of the window display in this section of the museum reflects the colour of the chlorine gas that was used which such terrible consequences in 1915.



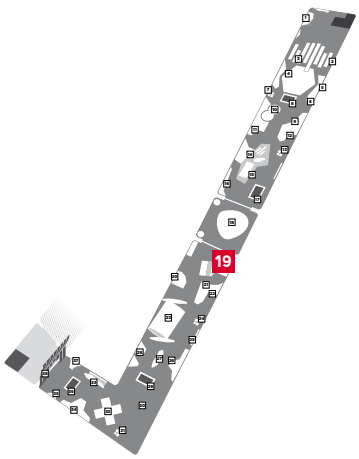
The Ypres Salient *(N. 18)*

Upon reservation, the belfry may be visited while touring the museum (€ 2 extra per person).
231 steps take you to the top of the tower, allowing the visitor to view the Ypres Salient as it is today. Whilst climbing the tower, the history of the belfry unfolds, explaining its role as a symbol of the medieval city (including the famous 'cat throwing'), as well as its history during and after the First World War. The information boards also discuss the history of the carillon, explaining why it is seen as an instrument of remembrance.

In the museum itself there's a zeppelin that incorporates a 12' long video presentation, illustrating how the Ypres salient evolved between the Second and Third Battles of Ypres.

Attention:
For safety reasons only one group of twenty people (max) and ten individual visitors are allowed upstairs per half an hour. Please book well in advance if you want to ensure you can visit the belfry.





Trench Warfare 1914 – 1918 *(N. 19)*

The life of a First World War infantry soldier involved endless days at and behind the front lines. While in the front line, self-preservation became paramount and to be seen above the trench parapet would mean almost certain death. Even in the absence of heavy attacks or sniper fire, when the weather was mild (so you didn't have to stand or sleep in water), the food supply was good and the rats could be kept away from your precious food, you could still be called on for a night patrol or a raid into No Man's Land.

Life was always filled with danger and death. Despite the constant threats, life at the front could also become quite boring. The museum employs authentic objects to bring to life the soldier's average day:

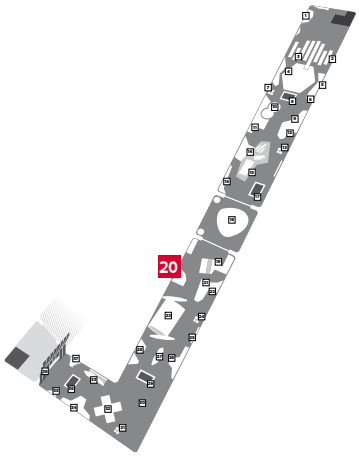
Trench weapons: *It was not only hand grenades and machine guns, but also trench mortars that wounded and killed many people on a daily basis. Trench mortars were particularly lethal and were used to shoot heavy projectiles from one side's trenches to the other. The flamethrower was used for the first time in Ypres (30th July 1915) and this too soon became a popular weapon.*

Raids: *Trench raids were frequently carried out in order to 'stimulate the fighting spirit'. A raid's objective was to cross over No Man's Land to the enemy's lines in order to destroy their trenches and take prisoners, from whom information could be extracted. These raids were deeply unpopular and often resulted in very high casualties. Typically, the weapons used by the raiders were not only lightweight and practical but also very primitive in design.*

Protection: *Shields and body armour were used to protect the head and chest, and many of the examples exhibited in the museum seem quite medieval!*

Trench construction: *To limit damage from attacks, trenches were constructed in a zigzag pattern. Between the lines, in No Man's Land, vast barriers of barbed wire were laid down to limit the effects of massed infantry attacks. From 1916, A-shaped frames were used as the foundations for trenches in order to keep them as dry as possible. These wooden devices were known as 'A-frames' as they looked like a capital letter' A' held upside down. Duckboards were then placed on top of the frames, creating a drainage sump where the excess water was collected.*

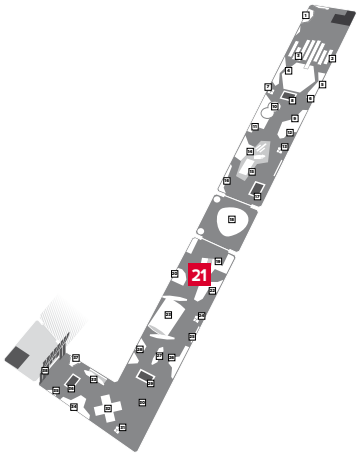
Daily life at the front: *Continually exposed to the elements and shellfire, the troops also had to share their trenches with thousands of rats. This, along with a serious lack of fresh water, often resulted in very poor hygienic conditions. The cramped conditions meant there was no privacy for the men and on top of the physical misery there was always the constant risk of attack.*



Underground Warfare 1915 – 1917 *(N. 20)*

At the end of 1914, trench warfare had, in effect, become a siege. New methods of attacking the enemy had to be found and one of these involved the undermining of enemy trenches. Many tunnels were dug beneath No Man's Land and mines were frequently exploded beneath the opposing trenches. The mass devastation and panic caused by these vast explosions meant that frequently the detonations were quickly followed by an over-ground infantry attack. One such tunnel network was excavated by 'the Diggers' (a group of amateur archaeologists) at the Yorkshire trench and dugout. During the war the Yorkshire trench was part of the frontlines, but today it is located in the heart of Ypres' industrial zone. Several objects from the excavation, along with a recreated German tunnel, help narrate the story of the underground war.



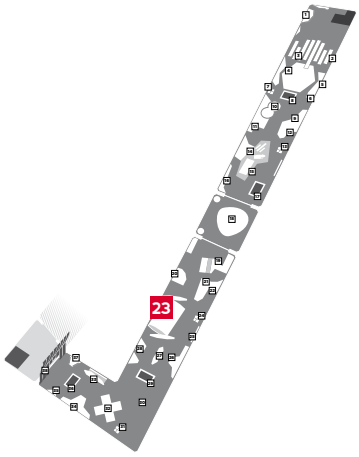


Observation *(N. 21)*

In war, observation of the enemy is paramount. From the trenches, however, sight was severely restricted and only No Man's Land and the enemy's first line defences could be observed. A wider perspective of the front line was provided by observation posts and tethered balloons, which were located further back from the front lines. Only planes were able to provide detailed information from the immediate front and aerial photography rapidly became an essential tool. A series of panoramic photographs in the museum show how No Man's Land and the front lines looked on these photographs. Vertically shot aerial images were used for daily situation updates at and behind the front, and also for the adjustment of trench maps showing the enemy's positions. Oblique aerial photographs, taken from planes or balloons at a lower angle, gave more depth of view to the photographs.

To learn more about this, museum visitors are given the opportunity to utilise technology to view the close-up details of five panoramic photographs in order to get a better idea of the contemporary observation and communication instruments that were employed. Even though every army in 1914 had planes at their disposal, they were initially only used for observation purposes. However, as the war continued, planes became used as weapons and their number greatly increased from several dozen in 1914 to many thousands by the end of 1918.





The Third Battle of Ypres 31/07/1917 – 10/11/1917 *(N. 23)*

After the failure of the French army on the Chemin des Dames in the spring 1917, the British commander, Sir Douglas Haig, decided to attempt a breakthrough from the Ypres Salient towards the coast. For the attack he deployed an unrivalled number of heavy guns along with three quarters of a million of men taken from across the entire empire. It was to end in failure. The bloody offensive lasted for 100 days and took place across terrain that was often impassable, as the artillery had ploughed up the battlefield and the incessant rain had turned it into a quagmire. The battle became known as Passchendaele – which referred to the village, which was supposed to be captured within 72 hours, but was not finally reached until 5 months later. Because other museums pay attention to the military history of the Third Battle of Ypres, we choose to tell the lesser-known story of what happened behind the scenes. 'The backwash of war' explains this dark tale and is narrated by nurse Ellen La Motte.

Ivor Gurney's poem "Memory, let it all slip" brings you to a video room where neurosurgeon Harvey Cushing, along with nurses Enid Bagnold and Ellen La Motte, tell their version of the war (see Iconic People Walk).

Ivor Gurney:
At the outbreak of the First World War Ivor Gurney volunteered as a soldier in the Gloucester Regiment. However, he was soon discharged due to his poor eyesight but, in 1915, he enlisted again and was assigned to the 2nd and 5th Gloucestershire Regiment. In 1916, Ivor served in French Flanders, the Somme valley and at Arras where he was wounded. In 1917, he was transferred to the Ypres Salient where he fought in the Third Battle of Ypres. In September 1917, he fell victim to a German gas attack (probably yperite).

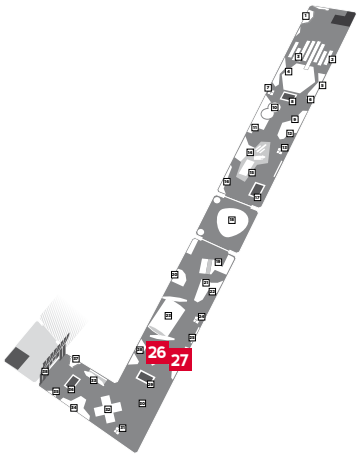


Memory, let all slip

Memory, let all slip save what is sweet
Of Ypres plains.
Keep only autumn sunlight and the fleet
Clouds after rains.
Blue sky and mellow distance softly blue;
These only hold lest I my panged grave shall share with you.
Else dead. Else cold.

IVOR GURNEY, Bangour October 1917

Along with the witnesses to the 'backwash of war' a 6-pounder gun barrel from a British tank symbolises the failure of the Third Battle of Ypres. The tank was one of the many new technologies employed in order to force a breakthrough on the Western Font. The first tanks terrified the German infantry, but this initial surprise quickly passed. Moreover, the tanks were slow and the crews had to deal with unbearable heat and noise inside the lumbering machines. In the muddy battlefields near Ypres, tanks were of little use and most of them sunk into the mud or broke down long before they reached the enemy's lines. The British tanks came in two versions: a male with machine guns and two canons, and a female with machine guns only.



The World War 1917 – 1918 and the 1918 Offensives *(N. 26 - 27)*

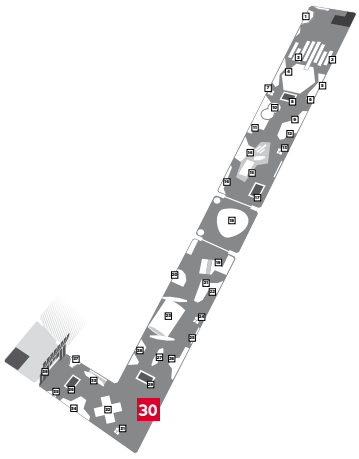
After some initial reservations, the United States of America finally declared war on the German empire and its allies on 6th April 1917. Despite this good news, the situation for the allies was going from bad to worse in 1917 and 1918. Their plans for a breakthrough had failed and the end of the war seemed further away than ever before. In May 1917, many French soldiers mutinied and the other allied armies were exhausted. In March 1917, there was a revolution in Russia and the Bolsheviks quickly seized power. Accordingly, in November 1917, peace talks began between the Russian and German governments, and on 3rd March 1918 a peace treaty was signed at Brest-Litovsk.
Now the war had ended on the Eastern Front, the Germans could fully focus on the Western Front in order to try and win the war before the American armies were deployed en masse. Commanding officers Hindenburg and Ludendorff attempted one last breakthrough when they launched the great Spring Offensive. But, despite some startling initial successes, first in France and then in Flanders, the attacks soon bogged down. During the offensive heavy battles were fought at the Kemmelberg near Ypres, where witnesses of the terrible fighting are still regularly uncovered in the earth.
On 18th July 1918, an allied counter offensive began in France and spread to Flanders on 28th September 1918. These last few months of war were the most successful in terms of land gained, but they were also some of the bloodiest months of the entire conflict. When the Armistice was signed on 11th November 1918, the whole world felt euphoric for a while, but above all, everyone was completely exhausted from four years of war.



Fighting Machines *(N. 28)*



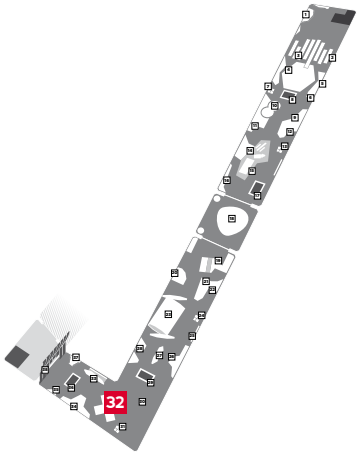
Those who entered into military service during the First World War immediately renounced their individual freedoms and independence as citizens. These individuals became part of a large military fighting machine and uniforms became the symbol of this full integration into the mechanics of war. Along with the uniform came a way of life. The armies provided soldiers with almost everything they needed and the soldier's unit became his family. In 1914, uniforms incorporated features from a previous era in terms of colour and design, but by the end of the war the uniforms had become drab and functional. In the big battles of 1917 and 1918, soldiers on all sides were well equipped for both attack and defence and the museum displays examples of American, French, German and Scottish Canadian uniforms side by side.



Artist in Residence *(N. 30)*

In the second half of the year we put this space at the disposal of a chosen artist. He or she is free to explore the theme however they wish. The artists are certainly inspired by the museum, its objects and images, and also by the many books and photographs to be found in the information centre. Inspiration is also taken by exploring the surrounding landscape – the last witness to the war – and by visiting the many monuments, cemeteries and battlefields in the area.



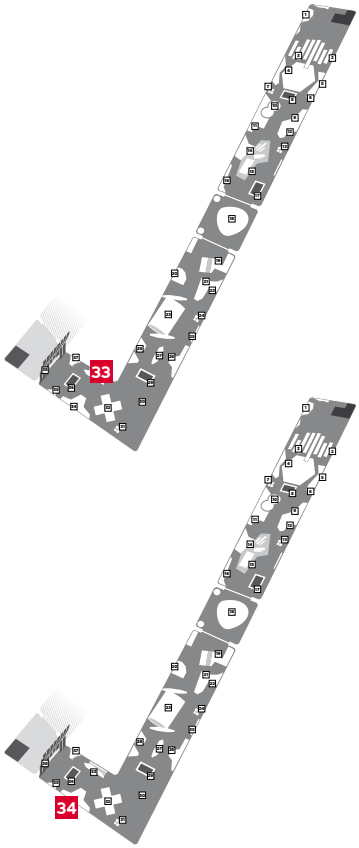


In Flanders Earth *(N. 32)*

Landscape is a complex thing and not always easy to read and understand. On the one hand it is full of objects and memories from a cruel war, but on the other, time, nature and (often) culture have brought beauty and some peace to the area; death has been covered by new life. The background to the war exists everywhere in Flanders, but today it shares the same space with modernity in the form of industry, traffic, homes and agriculture.

The battlefield landscapes of the war may have disappeared over time, but thousands of aerial photographs taken during the war are able to recreate the wartime scenes.

In Flanders Earth offers you a unique chance to travel back in time. Use the interactive multi-touch screens to view vertical First World War aerial photographs of any area between the North Sea and the French border. These photographs are projected onto contemporary maps and the screens highlight images of sites including cemeteries and monuments. Historical photographs can also be compared to contemporary pictures of the same area. We call these 'hot spots' and other location-linked images can be viewed using the Google Earth principle. Central to this installation is a section of a common oak taken from the castle park at Elverdinge, near Ypres. The tree was planted in 1760 and lasted until the end of 1994. The war has clearly left its mark on it and this silent witness is a potent symbol of the DNA of this entire region of the Western Front.



The Reconstruction *(N. 33)*

When the residents returned home to their shattered communities in 1919, they found nothing but destruction. From Nieuwpoort on the Belgian coast to the French region near Armentières a surface of almost 1,000 km² had been utterly destroyed. But, nevertheless, the people returned en masse and began to reconstruct their homes. A beautiful example of this is a façade of an authentic wooden barrack block, which was donated by the King Albert Fund in 1920. Inside this barracks, a 3D animation shows the gradual destruction and the reconstruction of the Cloth Hall. Right in front of the façade is the remains of a statue that originated from the Saint-Martin church. It takes the form of a naked and distorted male body, but the arms, legs and head are missing. It stands as a symbol of the survivors of the war who returned home to persevere with their everyday lives even though they were often terribly wounded and scarred from the war.

Remembrance *(N. 34)*

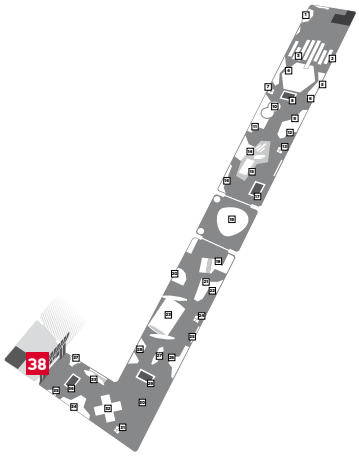
On 11th November 1918, the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, said, *"At eleven o'clock this morning came to an end the cruellest and most terrible war that has ever scourged mankind. I hope we may say that thus, this fateful morning, came to an end all wars."*
More than 550,000 of the almost 10 million casualties from the war died in the Westhoek (Flanders Fields). Survivors carried on with their lives, but had to cope with many scars to both their body and soul, which contributed to feelings of loss and disillusion. Inhabitants that had returned to their shattered homes were forced to live in an environment that even today is still marked by war and remembrance. The landscape of Flanders is covered with graves, monuments and relics from the war. On top of this, every year, human remains are found and farmers frequently plough up unexploded ammunition as they work their fields.

Every generation contributes its own ideas of remembrance to the history of the war. At the museum, our addition embraces virtual technology and includes, amongst other things, the online registration of a list of names. Our approach to the memory of the conflict is also universal and goes beyond the influence of the local culture, sharing the heritage of the Great War with the entire world. After all, the death register from the conflict contains the names of people from dozens of cultures and countries. The war highlighted that by 1914 the major European countries had developed into terrible machines of destruction, boosted by a fierce and resentful nationalism, and even in 1918 these attitudes still lingered, ultimately leading to the even more disastrous Second World War that was soon to follow.

The First World War brought a new dimension to the concept of war. Never before had countries demanded such sacrifices from their population and never before had so many people given their life for their country. As a result, countries promised to honour the memory of those that perished. Every British person that died in service was remembered individually and equally, and British casualties were not repatriated, but buried together where they fell. However, other countries did allow repatriation. The many cemeteries and official monuments attempt to stress the fact that people did not die in vain, but rather for glorious ideals such as freedom and democracy, or for the benefit of their native country. All these sites of remembrance incorporate a classic design that embraces the most sublime and perpetual architecture.



Besides the official remembrance, there is also individual remembrance, too. Over half a million of the almost 10 million military casualties from the war died or disappeared near Ypres. For those, the war had finally ended, but the survivors were confronted with the aftermath. Many had physical and mental scars, and many grieved for the loss of friends and were unable to gain employment when they returned home. Feelings of sorrow and missing were often expressed in stone engravings or through other personal objects such as framed photographs. Objects taken by soldiers from the battlefields became the carriers of extreme emotional memories. These objects are still as powerful today and many descendants of those that served in Flanders continue to return souvenirs taken from the region by their ancestors. Families often made small statues or monuments in order to express their sadness. One such example of individual remembrance is a piece of art entitled 'The Grieving Parents', made by Käthe Kollwitz who lost her son Peter in the war. It is a statue for him, but at the same time it is for all the war's young casualties.



Ypres City of Peace, Mayors for Peace, Peace Prize *(N. 38)*

'Remember the past' also implies that we are committed to a more peaceful world and Ypres wishes to present itself as a City of Peace. Accordingly, the city is part of the Mayors for Peace network, which was founded in 1982 by the mayor's of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The network continues to work towards world peace and one of their main objectives is the abolition of all nuclear weapons by the year 2020. In 2012, the membership of this worthy organisation is bigger than ever before.

Every three years, Ypres awards its Peace Prize to a person or organisation that has served the cause of world peace. Former prize winners include:

2002: War Child
2005: Helen Prejean
2008: Sima Samar
2011: Doctor Dennis Mukwege
2014: Malala Yousafzai
2017: The white helmets

For further information on the Peace Prize, see www.vredesprijs-ieper.be



2 Thematic Walk

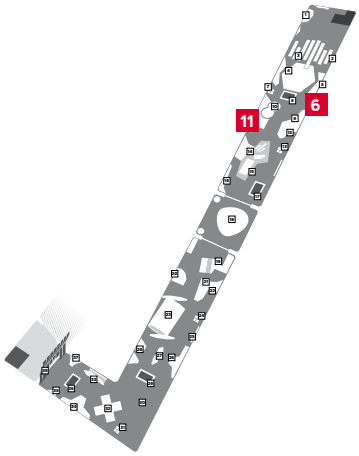
The path of this Thematic Walk can easily be recognised by the red window displays that guide the way. The content of these displays regularly changes. Scan your poppy bracelet to read the object information (in your own language) from the screens. The following themes have been included:



Propaganda *(N. 5)*

In the years before the First World War, the authorities of the major European countries had all learned to publish their own version of events regarding national and international incidents. From the start of the war, in August 1914, all blame for the catastrophe was placed on a cruel, parody-like enemy. This propaganda was used to promote general mobilization of the population, to help finance the war and to strengthen the relationship of the population with their native country and its allies.





Exile *(N. 6)*

The fear of the war's violence and terror meant that thousands of people fled their homes. At the height of the conflict, in October 1914, 1.5 million Belgians (one quarter of the population) fled to the Netherlands, France or Great Britain. Many of them returned some time later but the increasing violence of the war caused new floods of refugees later on. In November 1918, about 600,000 Belgians were still abroad and others had found places to live in the small part of Belgium that wasn't occupied. On the German side of the lines, many of those that lived in the region of the front lines were removed and often deported inland by the Germans. Refugees and those that were forcibly evacuated were deprived of their homes and often became dependent on charity for survival.

The Ruins of Ypres *(N. 11)*

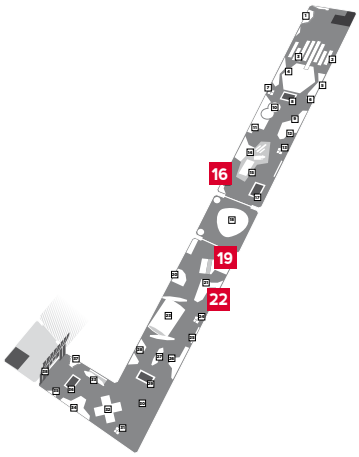
In the middle of an arch-shaped bulge in the lines (known as a salient) sat the old city of Ypres. Ypres' medieval Cloth Hall, a masterpiece of gothic architecture built between 1260 and 1304, dominated the city's skyline. From October 1914, Ypres was attacked by German artillery and on 22nd November 1914, the Cloth Hall and Saint-Martin's church were lost to fire. By May 1915, the last residents were forced to leave, as Ypres was subjected to an onslaught of military violence. By the end of 1917, there was not a single house or tree left standing in the city. Fragments of the pre-war city, saved in time or found in the ruins, have become silent witnesses to a rich heritage that was lost forever beneath the guns of war.



Medical care *(N. 15)*

During the first months of war the need for medical services was overwhelming, both due to the type of injuries and the sheer number of wounded people. In spite of remarkable improvements in medical care made during the war, amputation was often the only option when it came to saving lives. When a soldier was wounded in action, he was brought to the nearest first-aid post. After initial care was administered, he was sent to the bandaging station, after which a painful trip by ambulance or horse-drawn vehicle to the closest field hospital awaited. The low survival rate meant that cemeteries were often built next to first-aid posts and hospitals, and today they mark the end of the medical evacuation route that can still be seen in the landscape.





Prisoners of War *(N. 16)*

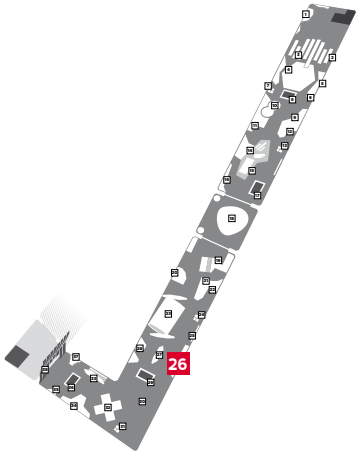
People captured on the battlefield were usually marched back and placed in an improvised ‘cage’, often consisting of an open space near the battlefield surrounded by barbed wire. These prisoners were then processed and moved to a more permanent camp. Almost 7 million people (about 10% of the deployed military staff) were imprisoned during the war. Any serviceman who ended up in the neutral Netherlands was disarmed and imprisoned. Life in the prison camps was hard and monotonous. Prisoners were often deployed as cheap workers and the German empire regularly deployed Italian and Russian prisoners of war to the front in Flanders. On the allied side, German prisoners of war were deployed in working squads right up to the beginning of 1920 and were forced to transport wounded soldiers and clear up the tonnes debris that littered the battlefields.

Trench Warfare *(N. 19)*

(Note: Trench Warfare is included in the Chronological Walk but there is also one themed window display)

Behind the Front *(N. 22)*

As the war continued, the hinterland became covered with railway lines, roads, depots, training fields, rest camps, hospitals and airfields, all of which were employed to wage industrialised war. Often, too, the cohabitation of civilians and soldiers could be difficult and when the situation became too dangerous, entire villages and cities were evacuated. The German occupation of Belgium and northern France was brutal. Coercion and terror were constant and more and more civil liberties became restricted. Civilians were forced to work and occupied areas were always plundered ensuring that survival became harder as the war progressed.



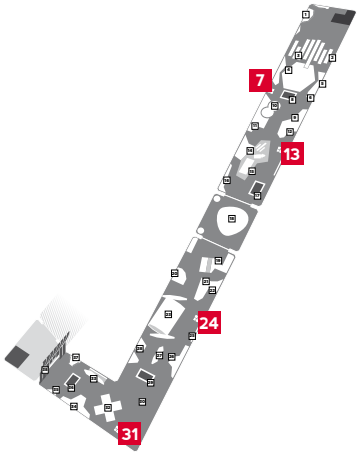
Multicultural war *(N. 26)*

The soldiers and workers on the Flanders front came from over 50 (contemporary) countries. Entire empires were mobilized and therefore the self-governing nations within the British Commonwealth such as Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa all found themselves at war. As early as October 1914, British-Indian units, along with northern and western African *tirailleurs*, were also deployed. Later, they were complimented with units from South Africa, the Caribbean and even the Fijian islands, and these colonial troops embodied many ethnic minority groups such as American Indians, Sikhs and Maoris. Many thousands of workers belonging to the Chinese Labour Corps also appeared on the Western Front, representing the support of the young Chinese republic for the allied cause.



3 Iconic People Walk

The Iconic People Walk, a journey during which the war's history is told with the aid of ordinary, personal histories has a strong presence in the Flanders Fields Museum and each of the four historical people portrayed play an important role in the museum.

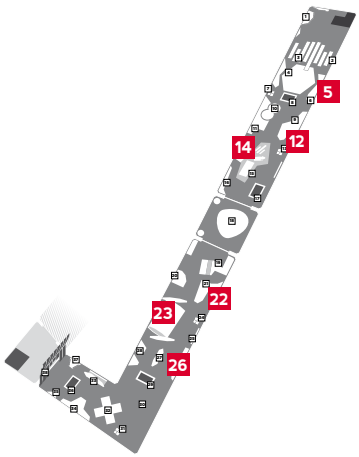


Meeting Points *(N. 7 / 13 / 24 / 31)*

Four points for individual meetings must be activated with the poppy bracelet.
The computer calculates a matrix by means of the information inserted at the log in desk, giving you a unique opportunity to (if possible) meet someone from your own region, along with random others including someone of the opposite sex as well as a person of a different age.

The four meetings are chronological. Three war stories (1914, 1915-1916 and 1917-1918) and one post-war story. For many of the historical people that are encountered, traces in the landscape such as graves, monuments, or buildings can still be found.





Iconic People

Actors personify the historical people you will encounter during your trip. These actors use the exact words of the people from history and look you right into the eye when narrating these voices from the past. The uniforms the actors wear are real, as real as the object relating to the historical person in question that is exhibited in front of the video screen. It is important to remember that a picture, a drawing, a letter, a diary, a book or an object are also witnesses to the war and they are just as important as the stylised recordings you watch and hear in helping you to understand the various histories of the war.

Richard Wybouw *(N. 5)*, Belgium, tells his story of being a refugee. The window display shows the cane he always had with him. It is the last tangible object of his exile…

The Christmas Truce *(N.12)*. With the use of actors, the Christmas truce is relived by four people who were actually there: Greg Nottle (UK), Karel Lauwers (B), Maurice Laurentin (FR) and Kurt Zemisch (D) and each tells their own version of the event. The window display nearby shows a photograph of Nottle and a drawing made by Karel Lauwers.

On 22nd April 1915, gas, as a weapon of mass destruction, was used for the very first time. Professor of chemistry (and later Hauptman pioneer), Fritz Haber, was central in turning chlorine gas into a lethal weapon. Gefreiter Pioneer, Willy Siebert, was a gas pioneer in the front line and helped to open the 6,000 bottles of gas that were used in the first attack. Two privileged witnesses give their version of the story. *(N. 14)*

"There is a dirty sediment at the bottom of most souls. War, superb as it is, is not necessarily a filtering process by which man and nation may be purified. There are many people to tell you of the noble side, the heroic side, the exalted side of war. I must tell you of what I have seen, the other side, the backwash."

These are the words of the American nurse, Ellen Newbold La Motte, who worked at the Mary Bordens Hôpital Chirurgical Mobile No 1, near Roesbrugge. You can also hear British nurse and ambulance driver, Enig Bagnold, and American neurosurgeon, Harvey Cushing, working at the Casualty Clearing Station No.46 in "Mendinghem", Proven. Together, these encounters form a 17' long experience that offers a different view on the Third Battle of Ypres. *(N. 23)*

Achiel Van Walleghem *(N. 22)*, Sub-Priest of Dikkebus, who moved to Reningelst in June 1916, kept a diary during the entire war. In his own words he tells the story of the life behind the front line. The 1918 offensives are embodied by Belgian priest, Jerôme Verdonck, who was a Second Lieutenant in the French army, and by British Private, Eric Hiscock, author of *'The Bells of Hell go Ting-a-Ling-a-Ling'. (N. 26)*

Individual cabinets

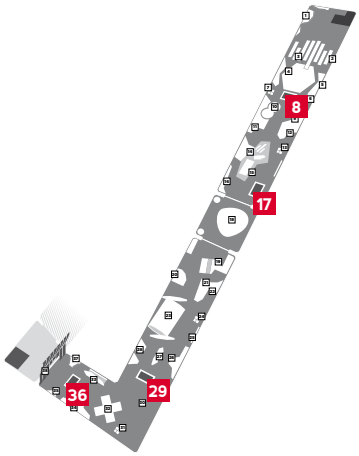
Eleven people are represented via some of their personal objects and every one of them vividly recalls the war. These cabinets can be found all over the museum (Numbers 4, 10, 18-19 and 26). German officer Rudolf Lange has two cabinets, one in 1914 and another in 1918. Belgian private and artist, Karel Lauwers, is an iconic character from the period and he too has an individual cabinet.



Literary encounters

Excellent records of many individual war experiences still survive from the conflict in the form of diaries, poetry, books and art work, allowing us to better appreciate the human experience of the war several generations later. Besides John McCrae, to whose poem 'In Flanders Fields' the museum is named after, and Ivor Gurney, who was the initial inspiration for the representation of the Third Battle of Ypres, we also present texts in German (Stefan Zweig), Belgian (Cyriel Buysse), French (Jean Giono), British English (Siegfried Sassoon) and American English (Mary Borden). Most of these texts are reproduced on the black cloths attached to the windows in the museum.

4 Reflective Walk



Reference Posts

The museum has four large posts, or towers located throughout the building. These imposing, grey constructions are as tall as the highest point on the ceiling of the Cloth Hall and once inside you are separated from the public. Enclosed in these towers you are confronted with the visceral consequences of modern, industrial war and they provide an intimate moment for you to reflect on the things you have seen.

Museums are often anxious when showing horrible images, as when enlarged, they might appear to sensationalise violence. However, we feel that when viewed in an intimate way, almost from one person to another, these images promote reflection and contemplation.

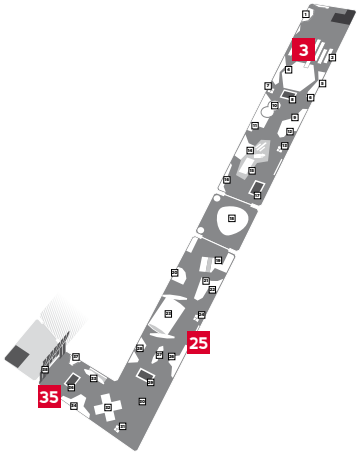
Reference Post 1: Loss (N. 8)
Vottem (Liège), 6th August 1914. After a fight in the village, the German and Belgian troops had withdrawn leaving their dead and wounded to the care of the village inhabitants. Wounded soldiers were taken to the monastery where Belgians and Germans were put in separate rooms. Dead soldiers were buried in two mass graves, but were first photographed two by two for later identification. The 11 photographs of the German casualties helped to prevent German retaliatory measures against Vottem. Most of the Belgian casualties in the 22 pictures could be identified.

Reference Post 2: Death (N. 17)
Langemark, Steenstrate, Pilkem, Sint-Juliaan, 23rd April 1915. On the morning following the first gas attack, German soldiers were told to bury those who had died on the battlefield during the gas attack. They took many pictures of the victims but also of others who had been killed. Mostly those photographed were fallen enemies, but often also German casualties, too and later many of these photographs were traded or changed into postcards to be sent home.

Reference Post 3: Destroyed (N. 29)
Europe and the world, 1914 – 1918. Trench warfare had not only destroyed a wide swathe of land on both sides of the front line, but it had also resulted in the deaths of millions. For those that survived, the body and soul was often severely damaged. During the war, medical help was developed for mutilated and/or psychically traumatised people. Many injured soldiers had lost a limb or become *Gueules cassées* (men with broken faces), and these unrecognisable and mutilated people became a constant visual reminder of the barbarity of the First World War.

Reference Post 4: The Last Witness (N. 36)
Front region, 1998 – today. During the construction of the industrial zone along the Ypres-Yzer canal, archaeologists discovered human remains on a weekly basis and more than 200 bodies of Great War soldiers were unearthed. Many other excavations still reveal human remains today. These human remains are perhaps the last true witnesses to a war that never ends… To mark the exhumation of British body N. 206, found in the industrial zone in Boezinge near Ypres, Koen Koch wrote: *"We shiver in the cold November wind, but mainly because of the thought how terrible it must have been for his friends to see him, with torn up flesh, blood and intestine."*





Counter voice

Not everyone agreed with the practices before and during the First World War. Three of these 'counter voices' are also given a place in the museum.

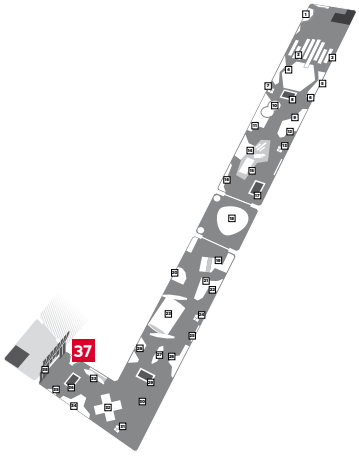
Counter voice 1 (N. 3)
The fear that the battle for world power and the arms race would result in a great war, made many people choose a completely different way. The 19th century was also characterised by a large peace movement that made people gather every year. In 1889, Austrian Bertha von Suttner published Die *Waffen Nieder!* – a pleading for peace by disarming. Thanks to her, Alfred Nobel started awarding Nobel Prizes. She herself was awarded one ,in 1905. Both in 1909 and 1913 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Belgians Auguste Beernaert and Henri La Fontaine.

In his 6-volumes of *La guerre future* Polish industrial Jan Bloch demonstrated that the combination of trenches, barbed wire and machine guns made any breakthrough on the battlefields almost impossible. He inspired the Russian Tsar to evoke the first Peace Conference of Den Hague (1899) and built one of the first peace museums to warn of the horrible consequences of an industrialised war.

Counter voice 2 (N. 25)
Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'A wooden Cross' is dedicated to Stephen Gordon Harbord, a friend of the British poet and officer. Before the war they hunted together. Captain S.G. Harbord, MC, died on 14th August 1917 with his artillery battalion near Wieltje. He is buried in Vlamertinghe New Military Cemetery. Sassoon heard the news of Harbord's death while staying at Craiglockhart hospital, where he was being treated for shell shock after his public protest against the continuation of the war. This protest, "A Soldier's Declaration", was also inspired by pacifists such as Bertrand Russell and Philip and Lady Ottoline Morrell. It was read on 30th July 1917 by Hastings Lees-Smith in the British House of Commons and published in The Times the following day.

Counter voice 3 (N. 35)
Many considered the official justification for the war's many casualties absurd and grotesque. To those people, a profound and international collaboration was the best solution in preventing such a war from occurring again. One of these people was the Flemish artist, internationalist and pacifist Frans Masereel. During the war he worked as a Red Cross volunteer in Geneva. He also applied his talents to take aim at the behaviour of all the countries involved in the war. Many writers/witnesses were critical about the remembrance of the war and those that died, and Sassoon famously referred to the Menin Gate as a 'sepulchre of crime'. Today, Ypres calls itself a city of peace, and the old rituals of remembrance and identity still resonate in the city's voice, contributing to a global commitment towards peace.





Log out and extra information *(N. 37)*

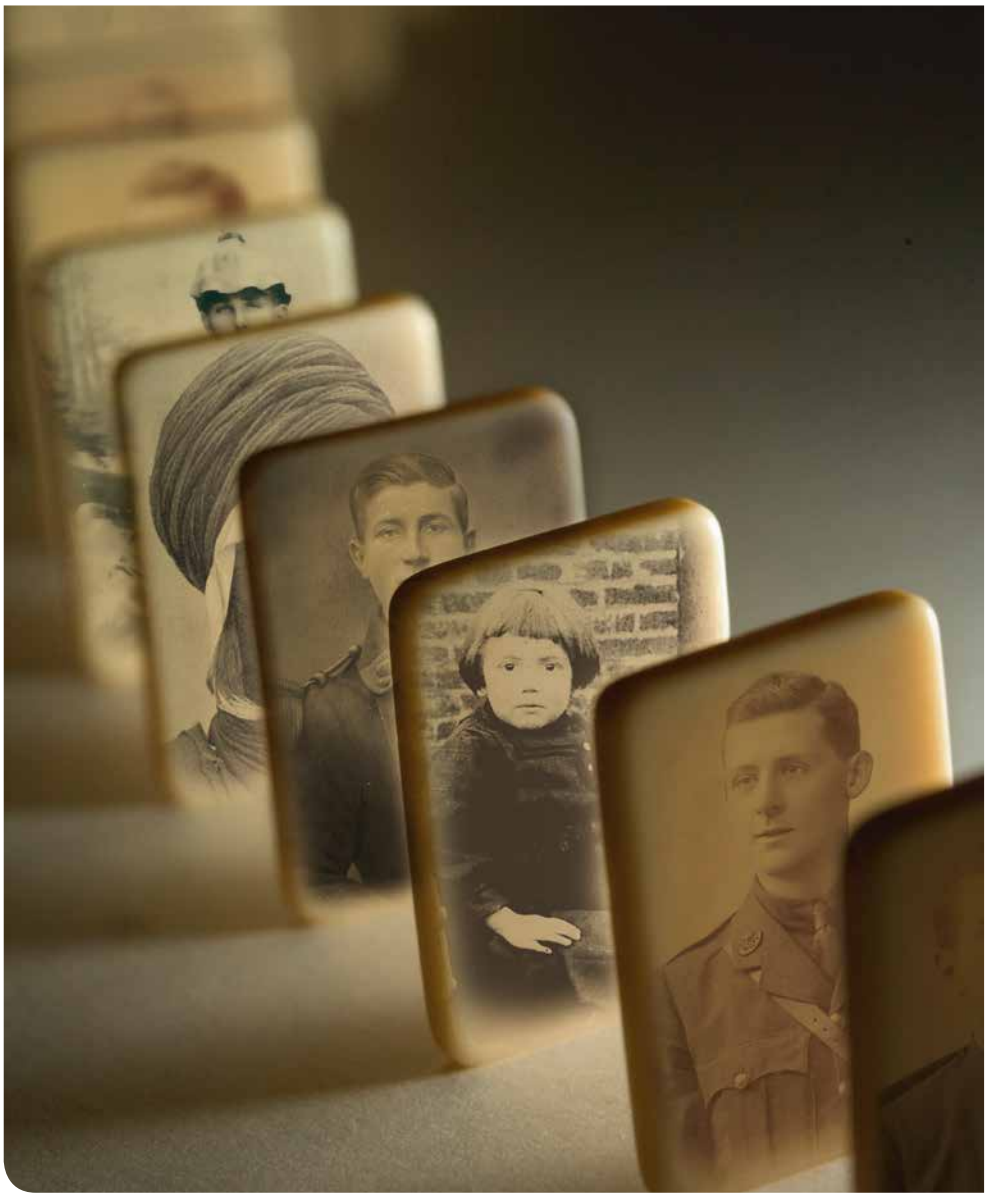
The log-out screens group together the four people you encounter at the museum and include references to the Flanders Fields landscape and/or publications, for immediate or later use. This information can be sent directly to your e-mail account or to a smartphone.

List of Names

Located in the centre of the Westhoek, the IFFM conceives itself as a caretaker of the Belgian WW1-battlefield. From there rose the project of setting up, for this war theatre, an inclusive register of victims: a list including both civilians and soldiers, irrespective of nationality, former friends and foes alike, Belgians who died in their own country or abroad, and non-Belgians who lost their lives or were fatally wounded here before dying somewhere else.

Their names are projected (on two reference posts No. 7 and No. 36) on the day of their death and grouped together during the years of war.

If you want to find out how many namesakes or local anesthetics feature on the list you can consult the List of Names (n° 34 and http://www.inflandersfields.be/en/namelist/searchname).



Timeline
Historical Overview

The intention behind this fairly extensive historical overview is to outline the time frame in which the In Flanders Fields Museum is to be placed.

Europe at the turn of the century

At the turn of the century Europe underwent a period of extraordinary upsurge.

Industries were spreading rapidly. Railways and steamboats were making transport easier. Towns and cities expanded dramatically. For the first time, people travelled in machines that were heavier than the air, and in horseless carriages. Thanks to sport, people were more healthy and felt in peak condition. All these new attainments and inventions gave rise to a euphoric faith in progress.

Side by side with the confidence in progress, there was the fear that the forces of the machine age would be unleashed and turn against mankind. In the period just before the First World War, all the ingredients for an arms race were in place - new technologies and machinery for manufacturing heavier weapons, powerful industrial trusts, imperialist heads of government, and a growth in population that made possible many new recruits for the armies.

In 1914, the emperors and kings of Europe were still influential and powerful. Within their own borders, they often held sway over a variety of ethnic groups. Outside Europe, they had colonized a whole gamut of foreign peoples. The English, French, Germans, Belgians, Dutch, Portuguese and Italians drew prosperity and power from these overseas kingdoms. But the position of the major European powers was under threat from a number of sides. Ethnic minorities were claiming their rights - the Irish in Britain and the Bosnians in Austria-Hungary, to name but a few. They were proud of their people, their language and their culture and were rebelling against these alien oppressors. Nationalist feelings were glorified in every possible way.

Alliances

At the turn of the century, Europe was the arena for a complex interplay of forces. The great powers were juggling with coalitions, treaties and alliances like professional chess-players. An additional factor was that a number of ruling royal families were related. The king of England, for instance, was at one and the same time a relative both of the German emperor and the tsar of Russia.

Two great power blocs - the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy) and the Triple Entente (United Kingdom, France, Russia) - were brought face to face. These were agreements for military cooperation. If two countries engaged in combat, the four others would automatically be drawn in. As early as 1907, through these alliances, a major war seemed inevitable.

Over and above the two major alliances, the great powers had here and there signed treaties with smaller countries. Thus Serbia had the support of Russia - a dangerous situation, since Serbia was an enemy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A conflict between Serbia and the Dual Monarchy could draw in Russia, and with Russia, the rest of Europe. The time bomb was ticking away.

The world outside Europe still played no role in 1914. Africa and Asia were almost entirely colonized by European states. For the time being, the United States stood aside from quarrels between neighbours on the old continent. They were not to enter the war until 1917.

The great powers

Alliances did not come about by chance. Behind the paper of the treaties were hidden long-term conflicts and conflicting interests. For the balance of European powers, the greatest threat was the rise of the German Reich.
In 1914, Germany was still very young. For centuries it had been parcelled out into duchies, palatinates and little principalities. It was only towards the end of the 19th century, under the leadership of Prussia, that unification had come into effect. In 1871, after a dazzling victory over France, the German Empire was proclaimed. From that point on, not only did Germany experience a population upsurge, but it was also becoming a great economic power. From a political, military and colonial standpoint, however, it remained a secondary power - at least in the minds of the Germans themselves. Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, who was noted for his arrogance, this was bound to change. Germany had begun its fight for its 'place in the sun'.
The other great powers felt themselves threatened by the rise of Germany. France was afraid of becoming eclipsed. It had fewer inhabitants - 39 million French citizens as against 65 million Germans - and its economic position was less favourable. But it had extensive colonies in Africa and in southeast Asia. Moreover, France still harboured the idea of revenge for 1870. Above all, the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to the Germans was never accepted.
At the turn of the century, the United Kingdom was at the pinnacle of its power. The British Empire covered vast swathes of the globe. The foundation of this world dominion lay in its sea power. The British calculated that their fleet must be at least as great as the second and third greatest fleets combined. Thus, when the Germans began to assemble a powerful fleet, the British felt themselves directly threatened.

Nationalisme

This was the era of nationalism. Peoples wanted their own nationhood, and nations wanted to extend their power.

Nationalism represented a danger, mainly in Austria-Hungary, Germany's ally in central Europe and in the Balkans. In fact, the Dual Monarchy included at least ten different ethnic groups. Furthermore, young neighbouring countries like Serbia and Romania had a jealous eye on pieces of the multiethnic state.

Centres of conflict

Even before 1914, the interplay of strength between the great powers had already brought Europe to the brink of war. In 1908, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, thus provoking the rage of Russia and Serbia. In 1911, Germany had entered into conflict with France and Britain over Morocco. In 1912 and 1913, there had been the First and Second Balkan Wars. Turkey had lost almost all its European possessions, but the great powers had not intervened.

Finally, in 1914, world war broke out. The spark was struck in the Balkans, the 'powderkeg of Europe'. An incident in Sarajevo caused the fragile balance of power in Europe to collapse like a house of cards.

Ieper: the mediaeval town

The reputation and wealth of Ieper was at its height in the Middle Ages. Woollen cloth woven in Ieper (the Flemish name), Ypres (French) or Ypern (German), was traded as far away as Russia. Chaucer even refers to the skills of the weavers of 'Ipres and Gaunt' (Ghent) in the Canterbury Tales.

The original of the rebuilt Cloth Hall, an astonishing construction for its time, was built between 1260 and 1304 as a market and warehouse for wool and cloth. The city was then a busy port and most of the wool arrived by boat. Barges entered town along the river Ieperlee (it now flows underground) and moored alongside the Cloth Hall. It was easier to move goods by water rather than by land because the plain of Flanders was reclaimed from the sea and tended to become waterlogged, as it still does.

For a while Ieper, Ghent (Gent) and Bruges (Brugge) shared control of the region. But in 1383, during the Hundred Years' War, an English army supported by troops from Gent besieged Ieper for two months. The population of some 20,000 resisted the siege but the city was cut off from its all-important supplies of English wool. Trade suffered irreparable damage.





Although Ieper still looks like the prosperous mediaeval trading centre it once was, not a single building in the city is more than 80 years old. Ieper was so devastated during the First World War a man on horseback could see from one side to the other. Yet within weeks of the Armistice, the people returned to try and make their city fit to live in again. The Cathedral was completed in 1930 and the belfry tower of the Cloth Hall was rebuilt to its original design in 1934. The last stone of the Hall itself wasn't put into place until 1967.

Ieper before the Great War

Ieper before the Great War was a military centre, with an army riding school and a barracks for the infantry. Thanks to the presence of numerous officers, a significant minority of Ieper's citizens led a prosperous and rather worldly existence. The rest made their living by manufacturing ribbons, lace, cotton and soap. Visitors came to admire in particular the largest non-ecclesiastical Gothic building in the whole of Europe, the Cloth Hall, a structure which had survived centuries of intermittent siege and warfare.

Life in early-twentieth-century Ieper was largely uneventful. The headline in the local newspaper 'Deadly Blow for Local Commerce' spoke of nothing more harrowing than the proposed loss of two Carnival days during the mid-Lent period. And as to the most pressing national issue of the day, the Army Reform Act of 1913 which proposed conscription, leading Catholic citizens seemed more concerned about the potentially damaging influences of life in barracks on their adolescent sons than they were about the needs of national defence.

The Ieper Salient

Why did the name Ieper or 'Wipers' (the British soldier's version of the French 'Ypres') become so notorious during the First World War? And what was the Ieper Salient? A 'saillant' is a French military term. It means ground which protrudes so far into the enemy's lines that they can shoot right across it. Defenders thought of it as a place where you could get shot from behind as well as from the front. And from either side as well.

The line around Ieper formed a salient to the east which contracted and expanded spasmodically as the more or less continuous fighting intensified into three all-out battles. It took this shape at the outset because of the Flemish Ridge which starts at Klerken in the north and forms a rough semi-circle around the city via Passendale, Geluveld and Wijtschate to Mesen in the south. Incidentally, the Ridge is distinct from the group of hills south-west of Ieper, known ironically as the West Flemish Mountains.

From the city, the Ridge is indiscernible. From its 'heights' however (never more than 85 m), its importance is obvious on a clear day. There is Ieper in the centre of a hollow. A sitting target. So was the infantry defending it from the trenches on the Salient. So too was the artillery. At first there were trees and buildings to provide troops and artillery with cover. By the end of 1917 there were none left.

The beginning of the war

The Armies



United Kingdom
The United Kingdom was the only great power to have a professional army. It was a fairly small one - not even 200,000 men. Alongside this strength there were reservists, and, of course, the navy. The land forces wore khaki uniforms.

War had scarcely broken out when volunteers began to flood in. Furthermore, in 1916 military service became compulsory. At the end of the war, the British army was to have reached a strength of 5 million men.



Germany
The growth of German power and nationalism endangered the balance between the European powers. The consequence was the arms race and the build-up of armed forces.
The German army had large numbers of men in its ranks - no less than 3.8 million soldiers. They wore a new field-grey uniform. The German reserves were better trained and armed than the French reserves. Germany also possessed much heavier field-guns. Its fleet was the second largest in the world after the British navy. Furthermore, for their aerial reconnaissance and bombing raids, the Germans had zeppelins.



Russia
Russia had the largest army of any country. But the majority of its soldiers were underequipped and badly trained. This did not prevent the Germans from fearing the 'Russian steamroller'.

As early as August 1914, however, the Germans were victorious over the Russian bear on the eastern front. The threat was temporarily averted.



Austria-Hungary
Although the Austro-Hungarian army was large, it was an amalgam of too many nationalities. Three-quarters of the men were not of German-speaking origin. For this reason it was a difficult army to lead.



France
France had an army as large as Germany - 3.8 million men. Compared with the Germans, the French used lighter field-guns. These were manoeuvrable and rapid, but considerably less powerful. The men were still dressed in their old uniforms which were hardly unobtrusive - a blue tunic and red trousers. These conspicuous colours would cost many soldiers their lives.

The Schlieffen plan

Germany was hemmed in between two enemy countries - France and Russia. In 1893, these two countries had entered into a military agreement. Germany was therefore faced with a major dilemma: if either of them attacked, Germany would immediately be confronted by two enemies, and on two fronts simultaneously. In order to forestall a war of this kind, the German high command had a plan - the Schlieffen plan, from the name of the then chief of staff, Count Alfred von Schlieffen.

The entire Schlieffen plan hinged upon the factors of speed and timing. The Germans had calculated that it would take six weeks for Russia to mobilize its army. Germany and France, however, would take no longer than two weeks. For this reason, the Germans were staking everything on a rapid victory over France - within six weeks. Once the French were defeated on the western front, the Germans could attack the Russians without hindrance on the eastern front. At least, that was the aim.

The French would be expecting the attack through Alsace-Lorraine, Schlieffen thought. Since the Franco-Prussian war, France had placed a chain of forts along its new border in the east of the country. In order to avoid them, Schlieffen decided to invade France from the north. The Franco-Belgian border was hardly protected at all. The Germans would advance rapidly as far as Paris, would attack the French army from the rear, and destroy it.

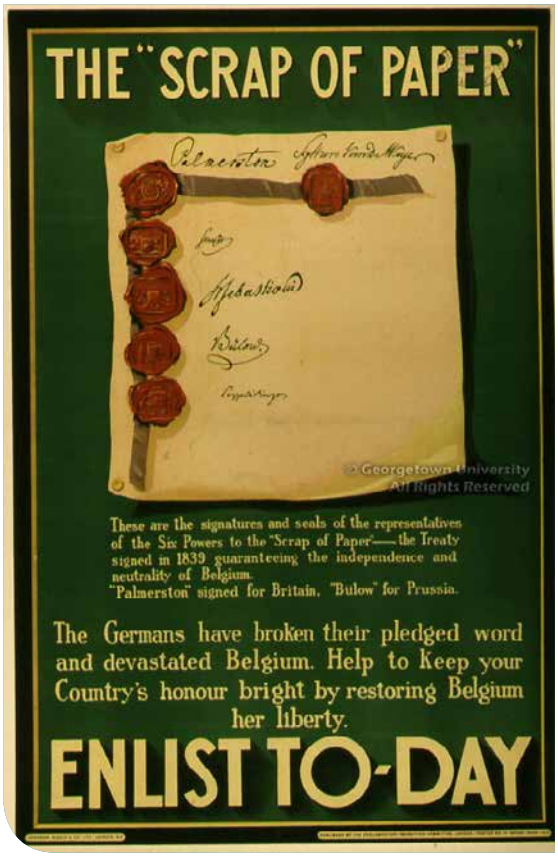
Belgium

There remained one big problem with regard to the Schlieffen plan - Belgium was a neutral country. It went even further - Germany was one of its 'guarantors'; in 1830, along with the United Kingdom, France, Austria and Russia, it had solemnly promised to protect Belgian neutrality. And yet the Germans remained committed to the Schlieffen plan. The possibility of opposition on the part of Belgium scarcely bothered them. That little country would not dare to resist, they thought.

France

There were almost no defensive installations along the Franco-Belgian border. This error in French strategy had several causes. The main one was the doctrine of the offensive à outrance, the all-out offensive. For French military strategists, to attack was noble and honourable, to defend was underhand and cowardly.

The French did not imagine that the Germans would encroach upon Belgian neutrality, either, for in this way the British would be drawn into the conflict. Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, felt that a circular movement by the Germans would even be a good thing, as that would leave them vulnerable at the centre.



A French general put it this way: 'So much the better if they get as far as Lille. All we have to do is cut the German army in half!' But the French were not reckoning with the call-up of the enemy reserves, which enabled the Germans to attack in the west, and simultaneously hold firm in the centre.

When war finally broke out, the French acted just as the Germans had anticipated. They had concentrated all their troops in Alsace-Lorraine and ignored their border to the north. As a result, the German armies could cross Belgium and the north of France rapidly, and march on Paris. The French and British armies were pushed back. There was every reason to believe that Germany would overcome Allied opposition within six weeks, in keeping with their plan.

Failure

Despite all the preparations, the Schlieffen plan was a fiasco. Just before Paris, General von Kluck, who commanded the westernmost German army, decided to depart from the plan. Instead of advancing in the direction of Paris, he went off at a tangent towards the south-east. In this way he gave his opponents the opportunity to regroup and attack him on the flank. This was the Battle of the Marne, in which two million soldiers took part.

Why did the Germans deviate from their original plan? Was Kluck afraid of being cut off from his line of supplies? Were his men exhausted from a march of several days? We shall never know for certain. What we do know, is that the Schlieffen plan looked fine on paper, but unravelled dismally in the chaos and confusion of the opening days of the war. Like the French, the Germans had failed to reckon with one thing - no-one could remain in command of a war on this scale.

After the Battle of the Marne, the Germans had to withdraw. A few weeks later, the Allied movements also came to grief in the mud of northern France and the plain of the IJzer. From the North Sea to the Swiss border, an uninterrupted line of fortified trenches was drawn. Mobile warfare had become bogged down in a bloody impasse which was to drag on for four years. In order to achieve this stalemate, hundreds of thousands of people had died.

Sarajevo

'Some damned foolish thing in the Balkans' would set in motion a new war, Bismarck had predicted. The summer of 1914 proved him right. The incident in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, was the spark which would set all of Europe alight.

In 1908, Austria-Hungary had annexed neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina. From that moment on, Bosnian and Serb nationalists were harbouring plans of revenge.

On 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir-apparent to the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, visited Sarajevo with his wife. They were shot at point-blank range by a student, Gavrilo Princip, with a pistol made in the Belgian FN munitions factory. Princip was a member of the nationalist Young Bosnia movement, which in turn had connections with the Serb terrorist organization Black Hand. From this, Austria-Hungary came to the conclusion that Serbia was behind the assassination.

On 23 July, Vienna attributed responsibility for the assassination to Serbia, and issued an ultimatum. Serbia accepted most of Austria's conditions, but Vienna remained unsatisfied. On 28 July, war was declared. The following day, the Austrian artillery shelled the Serbian capital Belgrade. Austria-Hungary could count on the support of the German Empire. As a result of mutual commitments and alliances entered into on either side, conflict on an international scale was now inevitable.



The war begins

As France announced a general mobilization and armies were being made ready, tension mounted.
On 2 August, the German army crossed the border with Luxembourg. Two days later, the Germans also invaded Belgium.

For Britain, this was a reason for declaring war on Germany.
The First World War had begun.

Immediately after the start of the war, Germany lost one of its allies. Italy, the third member of the Triple Alliance, had withdrawn.
The Italian view was that the two other allies had themselves launched the attack. Italy therefore felt that it was not required to come to their assistance.



The Battle of the ijzer

Belgium was a neutral country, her neutrality guaranteed by France, the United Kingdom and the German Empire. The Germans tore up the guarantee on 4 August 1914. Thirty-eight divisions of the German 1st, 2nd and 3rd Armies (some 850,000 men) crossed the Belgian border. The plan was to overwhelm the tiny Belgian army of 200,000 before sweeping south to surround and destroy the French.

But the Belgians were not easily overwhelmed. While the British Expeditionary Force was busy crossing the Channel, the Belgians fought tenaciously, delaying the advance by a crucial day or two here and there, and harrying it at Antwerp. The Germans had expected to take Paris and overcome the French within 39 days; instead, they were forced to a standstill by the Allies in early September. So both the Germans and the Allies began to transfer forces northwards, towards the Channel ports, each one attempting to outflank the other as they pushed onwards.

Meanwhile the remnants of the Belgian army, retreating from Antwerp, turned and stood their ground on the left bank of the IJzer River north of Ieper. The German Fourth Army attacked them on 20 October. Two days later part of a German division managed to cross the river, forcing the Belgians back to the Nieuwpoort-Diksmuide railway line. At Diksmuide itself, 6,500 French Fusiliers-marins, sent as reinforcements, suffered 50 per cent losses. The line held, but for how much longer?

On 25 October, King Albert I, commander of the Belgian army, ordered the land behind the IJzer River to be flooded. On the coast at Nieuwpoort, the lock gates were opened before the next high tide and closed again before it began to ebb. With two high tides a day, it took several days to trap sufficient sea and block its various means of escape. But just as the Germans were about to make a final push on 29 and 30 October towards the Channel ports, the river and the flooded land became impassable. The Germans were compelled to retreat. Despite repeated attacks, the floodwaters secured the IJzer sector for the rest of the War.

The First battle of Ieper

By mid-October 1914 the line along the Flemish Ridge - 4 to 8 km from the centre of Ieper - was held by the French and British. On 18 October, the British 7th Infantry Division and 3rd Cavalry Division were ordered to march eastward and join the French cavalry in Roeselare. They never did. They had no idea of the scale of forces about to attack them.

Two days later, it was the Germans who were on the high ground along the Flemish Ridge, including Passendale, which they held for the following three years. The next day, 21 October 1914, they launched their attack on the city and the First Battle of Ieper began. At Langemark, hardened professionals from the British 1st Division faced massed ranks of German reserves and volunteers, mostly army cadets and university students with only six weeks of military training. At least 3,000 died. A large number lie in the Studentenfriedhof, the German cemetery at Langemark.

Despite their losses, the Germans pushed back the Allies relentlessly. By 31 October they had taken Geluveld and almost broke through the British line on the Menen Road. The next day they took the Mesen Ridge and Wijtschate while British troops recaptured Geluveld. The fate of Ieper hung in the balance. On 11 and 12 November the Germans took Sint-Elooi. By now the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) as a professional army was virtually destroyed and cooks, batmen, signallers and other non-combatants were being ordered into action, with or without firearms.

As the German attacks began to slacken, both sides subsided into exhaustion. It was the end of the First Battle of Ieper and the beginning of trench warfare - and winter. To prevent the Allies from using the city as winter quarters the Germans shelled it constantly and on 22 November set the Cloth Hall ablaze, together with the rest of the city centre. By now the Salient was less than half its original size and already some 100,000 men had lost their lives there. Another 400,000 or more would die there in the following three years.

The Christmas Truce

There were signs of tacit agreements to ‘live and let live’ as soon as trench warfare began in November 1914. At various points, soldiers on both sides wrote about lulls in the fighting, especially at breakfast time, and also during the evening when the rations were brought up to the front line.

Yet even though informal truces had occurred in almost every major campaign since the Peninsular War, the extent of the fraternization between British and German troops during Christmas 1914 was surprising. Contemporary accounts by officers and ordinary soldiers alike suggest at least two-thirds of the British-held sector was involved. The French and Belgians had similar experiences.



Christmas Eve was a beautiful frosty moonlit night, made still more beautiful when the Germans lit candles on small Christmas trees and propped them on the parapet 'like the footlights of a theatre' as one British soldier described them. There was carol singing ('I don't think we were so harmonious as the Germans'). Then came cries of 'Hello, Tommy!', and 'Hello, Fritz!' 'Enemies' took tentative steps into No Man's Land, shook hands, lit each other's cigarettes, and exchanged gifts of German sausages and cigars, Maconnochie's tinned stew and Wills' tobacco, family photos and London newspapers.

The truce lasted at least until the end of Boxing Day. At several points it continued until New Year and on into January. But in other sectors the war went on as usual. The situation could differ every 200 metres, depending on the attitude of the battalion commander. Wherever the truce happened, both sides took the opportunity to bury their dead and to improve their trench systems.

Dilemmas
During the Christmas Truce, men encountered 'enemies' who shared their longing to walk away from the horrors of the first four months of the War. Winston Churchill, Britain's 39-year-old First Lord of the Admiralty, had seen the Boer War at first hand as a correspondent and understood their dilemma. In November 1914 he wrote to his wife: 'What would happen, I wonder, if the armies suddenly and simultaneously went on strike and said some other method must be found of settling the dispute!'

For many there was no such dilemma. Lt. Tyrell, the Medical Officer with 2 Lancashire Fusiliers, wrote in his diary: 'Thursday 24th, Christmas Eve. No peace here! Guns blowing off around Ploegsteert and Messines'. Others found themselves, at least temporarily, in a moral quandary. Brigadier Count Edward Gleichen, who was commander of the 15th Infantry Brigade at the time of the Christmas Truce, later wrote, 'When German soldiers came out of their trenches and walked across unarmed, with boxes of cigars and seasonable remarks, what were our men to do? Shoot? You could not shoot unarmed men.'

There was no dilemma in the minds of those who led the Christian churches. They were all equally convinced that their side was fighting a just war. Yet to a man such as the Flemish artist, internationalist and pacifist Frans Masereel, the concept of 'a just war' was as absurd as it was grotesque. Masereel worked as an unpaid volunteer for the Red Cross in Geneva, sorting post for prisoners of war before using his artistic talent to make savage comments on the conduct of all the warring nations. His etchings appeared first in the pages of a monthly anti-war magazine called Les Tablettes and later in the daily newspaper La Feuille. Masereel used to arrive at 11pm, two hours before the paper went to press, pick his topic and etch his view of it then and there. It had to be right at the first attempt. There was no time for revisions.

Frans Masereel, Flemings in Bucharest
Cover page of La Feuille, 8 May 1918
- What are you thinking about?
- About being naturalised as a Romanian!
- That's funny, I was thinking the same thing.

Yet the war dragged on inexorably and officers who feared that the inertia of life in the trenches might lead to the very 'live and let live' philosophy of the Christmas Truce instructed subordinate commanders to encourage 'the offensive spirit of the troops, while on the defensive, by every means in their power'.

The position war

At the front

Life in the trenches
Of all the military engagements of the Great War, the deadly battles of Verdun, the Somme and Passendale touch our imagination the most. And yet the word 'battle' features only rarely in memories and eye-witness accounts. What the men remember is the trenches: the boredom, the cold, the mud, the vermin and the rats, the wretchedness, and lastly, in the face of everything, adventure and friendship.

Mud
Bad weather was the curse of the trenches. Just a shower was enough to transform everything into a sea of mud. Shell-holes several metres deep filled up immediately with mud in which men, field-guns and tanks became mired. The trenches, therefore, had to be constantly maintained. It was sometimes hard to find them, so unrecognizable had they become. For General Foch, the worst enemies were 'boue et boche' ('mud and the Boche').





Cold
After the mud, the second curse was the cold. The winter of 1917 was extremely harsh: -20º at Ieper. The cold cut through everyone's clothes. It was scarcely possible to move in the trenches. As for making a fire, that was completely out of the question. Those who were on night watch suffered martyrdom. As a result of standing for long periods in the damp, cold trenches, men caught 'trench feet' - blue, lifeless feet, liable to develop gangrene.

Rats and lice
Rats swarmed in and around the trenches. Not only did they gnaw away at the soldiers' meagre provisions, but they also attacked the corpses which lay in no man's land. In his novel Im Westen nichts Neues ('All Quiet on the Western Front'), Erich Maria Remarque called them 'dead men's rats':

'They ate everyone's bread. Kropp rolled his bread up in his tent canvas and hid it under his head, but the rats ran over his face looking for the bread, stopping him from going to sleep.'

Lice too were a dreadful curse. Hygiene in the trenches left something to be desired, and everyone suffered from lice. A louse can live for days on end without blood and can withstand the cold easily. With some men, they lived in their hundreds on every part of the body. Delousing constituted an excellent cure for boredom, and became a social activity.

Mental suffering
The suffering was not only physical, but mental, too. Life at the front was debilitating in several ways. First and foremost, there was boredom. In addition, there was the fear of death.

Each day brought new victims of a grenade or some sniper. The soldiers were often face-to-face with death. The corpses in no man's land could not always be buried. Sometimes decomposing bodies stayed in front of the trenches.

Lack of sleep, powerlessness and the daily confrontation with death and injury sapped the morale of the troops. According to the Echo des tranchées-ville (Trench-Town Echo) the soldiers were utterly miserable. 'One is plunged in a kind of despondency, worn down by the bleakness, with no more zest for life.'

Some succumbed to madness. Although the army command made little of it, many underwent treatment for mental disorders, especially in the last years of the war.

Consolation
In the trenches, there were good moments, too. The men waited impatiently for the distribution of the rations, even if the cooking was poor and monotonous. If the rations came late or not at all, the soldiers were irritated to the point of mutiny.

Another consolation was tobacco. Smoking had become very popular before the war at every level of society. Compared with now, tobacco and cigarettes cost nothing.

Cats and other pets from derelict farms were coddled by the soldiers. The men had warm feelings, too, for the working animals - the mules, and above all the horses. Thousands of horses fell victim to grenades, bullets, sickness and exhaustion. Though apparently unmoved by the groans of fellow-soldiers, even the most battle-hardened veterans had difficulty in holding back the tears when a horse died.
Although it might seem strange, many former combatants also had good memories of the war years. And not only those who idolized the heroism of the years spent at the front, such as the German Gefreiter, Adolf Hitler. A common purpose and shared dangers created links of friendship which made many old soldiers nostalgic about the past.

The battles

In almost every battle on the western front, thousands of soldiers met their deaths in order to win but a few hundred metres of land.

Each battle began with an artillery barrage. The artillery, placed behind the front, attempted to destroy the enemy trenches. Continuous fire could last for hours and made an infernal din - so much so that when the wind came from the continent, artillery fire near to Ieper could be heard as far away as in London!
After the barrage had stopped, the troops moved onto the attack. At an agreed signal, thousands of soldiers left their trenches in formation, followed by wave after wave of soldiers.

Things seemed simple on paper. First, the artillery barrage would eliminate the enemy defence. After that, the attackers would cross no man's land, deal with whatever resistance they found, and occupy the enemy positions.

In practice however, things were more complicated. The barrage might cause a lot of damage, but the defenders often managed to survive, safely hidden in underground shelters. When the barrage stopped, they hurried out into the open and started shooting the attacking forces.

After a few metres, many soldiers were hit by a bullet or shrapnel. They would either die on the spot or be badly wounded. If they could not reach their own trenches, they would have to hang on for help. Failing that, death was waiting for them.

The trenches were defended by huge rolls of barbed wire, often intact despite the artillery fire. Faced with an obstacle of that sort, the attackers were picked off with ease.

Often, the soldiers who managed to cross no man's land did not know what they were to do afterwards. On the battlefield, every step out of the trenches or a shell-hole could be fatal. During the fighting, it was almost impossible to communicate or pass on orders. The telephone was of no help, as the lines ended where no man's land started. Only luminous signals turned out on occasion to be useful.









When night fell, it was time to measure the metres of terrain gained, and to count how many men remained. On 31 July 1917, the first day of the Battle of Passendale, the British suffered 30,000 casualties, a quarter of whom died. Casualties always included the dead, the wounded and the missing. Some of the missing might have been taken prisoner, but others were left dead on the battlefield. In four years' time, over 200,000 men were reported missing on the Belgian front.

On some battlefields, dozens of men died for each square metre of ground gained. With their machine-guns and howitzers, the defenders were always in a strong position. Aware of this advantage, the generals decided to send enough soldiers for there to be some left on arrival. Tens of thousands of soldiers paid for this tactic with their lives...

No man's land

What was no man's land? It was the strip of ground that lay between the front-line trenches of the opposing armies. No man's land ran like a ribbon all along the western front. The width varied. It could be as much as 1,000 m or as little as 50 m. It was fortified with barbed wire and jagged with tree-stumps blasted by shellfire. It was infested with rats that fed on the bodies of dead men and the putrefying carcasses of horses. It was pockmarked with shell-holes which filled with rainwater. Soldiers fell into them and drowned. And in Flanders they drowned in the mud, dragged under by the weight of their equipment.

Sometimes, instead of 'going over the top', the infantry had to crawl into no man's land and lie waiting for the signal for a major attack. Every night, patrols crossed it on reconnaissance, or on raids to kill and capture the enemy. A patrol caught in the light of a flare would be destroyed by machine-gun bullets. Ernst Jünger, a German officer, said the noise of a sustained night-time artillery bombardment drove men to the point where they could neither recall their name nor count to three. Yet by day there might be little noise other than the occasional 'crack' of sniper fire.

Weapons

Until the early nineteenth century, weapons were made by artisans and battles were fought between small armies. War was a matter of traditional tactical formations, dashing improvisation and individual acts of heroism. By the end of the century, industry could churn out the machine gun in thousands, and as one account of the battle of Verdun put it, '...three men and a machine gun can stop a battalion of heroes'. The nature of war had changed fundamentally and for ever. Weapons had become more important than men. And simpler. Machine-gunnery required none of the skill of rapid rifle fire.







No-one fully understood this in August 1914. It became apparent, at least to astute men in the front line, only after the Germans dug in to defend their territorial gains at the end of the year. However hard the Allies tried to break through the German line, they were stopped by automatic fire and pulverized by artillery: the 'new' weaponry and the 'old'. The defender held all the cards.

Artillery in World War I fired further than it had in any previous major war (well over 20 km in the case of the biggest howitzers) so guns could be kept literally out of sight behind the lines. Increasingly sophisticated shells and the new and better mastery of recoil action also allowed guns to be fired rapidly without losing accuracy - as long as they were on firm ground. And by 1917, the firing pattern was far more sophisticated, with five or six successive lines of shells creeping steadily forward in front of the infantry as it advanced.

Even so, neither side had a clear advantage in weaponry, not even the machine gun. So both sides turned to new inventions to try to break the deadlock. They defended themselves with vast quantities of barbed wire which was almost impossible to destroy until tanks were developed, and with concrete shelters. They attacked with gas, flame-throwers, bombs, tanks and grenades. (Grenades were to World War I what the bayonet had been to the battle of Waterloo). They dug mines under enemy lines and packed them with high explosives.

Gas

22 April 1915 was an ill-omened date, as that was the very first occasion when toxic gases were used. A yellowish-green cloud of chlorine gas crept towards the Allied trenches at Steenstrate. Canadian and French soldiers were the first victims.

During the entire war, the Germans were to retain supremacy in chemical weapons. Major companies such as Bayer and BASF manufactured gases, each more effective and more deadly than the last. Initially the gas was emitted from large cylinders simply by opening a tap. Later, gas grenades were more successful.

Gas was extremely dangerous, but fortunately difficult to use. The wind had to be coming from the right direction. Otherwise the gas would hang in a cloud or might return. Where the wind was concerned, the Germans found themselves on the wrong side of the front, on the east, in an area where the wind generally blows from the west.

At Steenstrate, the Germans used chlorine gas. In December 1915, they attacked with the distinctly more toxic phosgene. Mustard gas (or yperite, from the name Ypres) was used for the first time at the front in July 1917. The purpose of this gas was not to kill but to render soldiers unfit for combat.

The only protection from gas was to wear a gas mask. A few weeks after the first attack, the British received their first primitive masks. But it was not until 1917 that a mask was developed which was truly effective against all gases except mustard gas, which also penetrated through the skin.

More than 90 percent of victims returned to the front after a gas attack. Even so, many of them were to suffer all their lives from respiratory disorders and anxiety.













Medical care

War on an industrial scale produced casualties to match. In theory the Allies were well-prepared, in practice they were not. Two-thirds of the Belgian soldiers who lost their lives because of The Battle of the IJzer died at the railheads of Dunkirk and Calais, lying in rows for days on end waiting for treatment that never came. Without the help of the volunteer ambulance units, even more Belgians and French marines would have lost their lives.

In the first months of the War, medical staff on both sides were overwhelmed as much by the nature of the injuries as by the numbers. On the Western Front, the War was being fought on richly manured farmland. Soil filled with bacteria got into the wounds which putrefied and ballooned up, full of gas. This was gas gangrene, a condition that had nothing to do with gas warfare but which killed men - even with relatively minor wounds - in far greater numbers. There were no antibiotics and none of the antiseptics developed during the War were effective. The best treatment was to remove damaged tissue as quickly as possible.

When a soldier was wounded in the line, he was taken to the nearest regimental aid-post, poste de secours, hulppost or Verbandplatz, which was usually close by. Once the wound was dressed, he either walked or was carried back to an advanced dressing station for an anti-tetanus shot and a bone-shaking ride by motor ambulance or horse-drawn vehicle to the nearest mobile hospital, known as a Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), hôpital mobile, veldhospitaal or Feldlazarett.

Some of these mobile hospitals were in commandeered buildings but many were under canvas, springing up like small towns beside the railheads so that the wounded could be evacuated easily. But the trains that took away the wounded - the conveyor-belts of this industrialized war - also brought back fresh stocks of ammunition, as well as fresh troops. The ammunition was stockpiled beside the railheads, a sitting target for the enemy artillery shells which inevitably crashed into the flimsy hospital structures nearby.

Large numbers of wounded died before they got to the mobile hospitals. Others died lying on stretchers outside, waiting for a bed. Of the British soldiers, those who could be saved were taken slowly and circuitously by rail to the safety of one of the base hospitals near the Channel coast, stopping from time to time at other aid-posts and mobile hospitals. If you were unlucky, you were treated in a base hospital and sent back to the line. But every British soldier prayed that his wound would be a 'Blighty one', something bad enough to justify a trip in a hospital ship back to England (nicknamed 'Blighty' by soldiers serving in

India, from the Hindustani bilayati meaning ‘a place some distance away’), but not so bad as to handicap them for the rest of their lives.









Behind the front

A mixed population

Apart from the soldiers in billets, there were many other military behind the front such as transport troops and labour corpses. They had to bring material and ammunition up to the front or they had to repair roads. One of them was the Chinese Labour Corps, consisting of labourers from the territory of Wei-hai-Wei. Also many large Casualty Clearing Stations (Field Hospitals) were to be found behind the front. Nowadays some large military cemeteries remind us of this function.

There were countless women behind the front. Mainly they were young Belgian refugees: nurses, laundry-workers, women who deloused uniforms, or who earned a living in cafés, restaurants or brothels. Many women worked indirectly for the army, for instance in the armaments factories. There they replaced men who had gone to the front.

The prisoners of war formed a separate group behind the lines - men who had been taken prisoner or who had surrendered. Surrender was dangerous, as any wrong move might get you killed. Those who were accepted were generally well treated. They were transferred to camps behind the front where they were given fatigue-duties. Propaganda from either side at the front aimed at encouraging soldiers to surrender.

Propaganda and censorship

In the view of the authorities, bad news could only demoralize the people. The press was censored so that everyone remained in ignorance. Braving the censor, Le Canard enchaîné was launched in Paris. As its founder, Maurice Maréchal pointed out, ‘Everyone knows that without exception the French press passes on to its readers only news of impeccable truth. Well then, the public has had enough. The public wants untrue news for a change. That’s what they will get.’

On both sides the most fantastic rumours were told about the enemy. In the early months of the war, the allied press accused the ‘Huns’, as the Germans were called, of cutting of the hands of Belgian children. On the other hand, the Germans believed that all Belgian civilians were armed and had the intention to shoot at them from behind.

Apart from leave, parcels and letters constituted the only link with home. But letters were censored. In this way the army command wanted to ensure that no valuable information was passed on to the enemy, and that life at the front was not depicted in too negative a way. By reading the letters, at the same time the army command knew the morale of the troops.

Poperinge and Roeselare

The luckiest soldiers were quartered near to a town. There, they found food, drink, cigarettes, women and souvenirs. The Allies went to Poperinge, Bailleul and Saint-Omer, and the Germans to Roeselare, Ghent or Ostend. The soldiers tried to make the most of their meagre pay - a British infantryman earned a shilling a day, and a Belgian private had only a fraction of what a working man earned.

In some towns, such as Poperinge or Roeselare, there were prostitutes everywhere. As hygiene in the brothels left something to be desired, there was a real risk of venereal disease. Any infected soldier was out of circulation for at least a month. The army tackled the problem in several ways - with punishment, contraceptive sheaths, medical inspections of the 'short arm', even setting up official brothels, called 'houses of tolerance', which were easier to keep a check on.

Care was taken of the souls of the soldiers, most of whom were believers. Each army had its chaplains, and private organizations were also active. One of the best known was Talbot House in Poperinge. It was a club for soldiers with one unusual difference - officers and men were treated on an equal footing. Services were held in the attic chapel, often for men who were to leave for battle the following day

The homefront

During the Great War, not only armies, but entire nations clashed. They needed so many weapons and men that the home front, too, had to fight in its own way. In order to provide the huge quantities of weapons and ammunition, the armaments industry swallowed up the entire workforce. In 1914, 50,000 Frenchmen worked in weapons manufacture, as against 1.7 million in 1918! The economy had become a war economy.

The absence of hundreds of thousands of young men had major social repercussions. Their place in the fields and factories was often taken by women. As a result, the social position of women underwent a radical change during the war. Well-to-do women made themselves useful in charity work. In the early years of the war, a large number of committees took care of refugees, the wounded and the homeless.

Women who had a husband, a son or a brother at the front lived in perpetual anxiety. The longer the conflict lasted, the greater the number of dead in each village, neighbourhood or street. The British Pals' Battalions - all volunteers from the same factory, the same neighbourhood or association - were stationed together at the front, and sometimes lost over half of their manpower in one swoop. Their families and loved ones suffered a dreadful ordeal.

The people had a hard life. Usury was rife - anything which was scarce became extremely expensive. In nations at war, the main foodstuffs were rationed; coupons were needed to obtain them.





Occupied Belgium

The situation in occupied Belgium was dire. Agriculture, industry and imports had come to a standstill. The Comité National d'Aide et d'Alimentation had received permission from the German authorities to organize food supplies. American food aid came from the Committee for the Relief of Belgium, which was overseen by the future President Hoover. Throughout the world, aid campaigns were organized for 'brave little Belgium'.

In occupied Belgium, civilians had to have a permit in order to travel (since then, every Belgian has had an identity card). The economy was harnessed to the German war machine. Even so, hundreds of thousands of people were without a job. In 1916, the occupiers introduced compulsory work for all men between the ages of 14 and 60 - later it was the women's turn. Some 120,000 Belgian civilians were occupied behind the front or deported to Germany, some willingly.

In Belgium, armed resistance was almost nonexistent, but military information was passed on, and the railway line to Aachen was sabotaged more than once. Young people tried to flee the country in order to join up with the army behind the IJzer. To stop them, the Germans had closed the Dutch border with high-voltage electrified barbed wire. Many youngsters were killed by it.

On guard, in billets and on leave

GNo soldier spent all the war years at the front. A spell in the front-line trenches generally did not last more than four days, except when relief was late coming. After that, the men spent two or three days on guard in the second line, where they did light duties and could, if needed, send reinforcements to the front lines. After guard duty, the men had the right to two to four days' rest in their quarters.

Generally the men stayed in huge camps, consisting of huts or tents. Some were billeted with local people. Each soldier waited impatiently for the moment of the relief. 'It is marvellous to be out of the trenches. It is like being born again. We are free to say 'in an hour's time'. When freedom to anticipate is being permanently challenged, one understands as never before how much a man lives by hope.' (C.E. Montague)

The men returning from the front were exhausted. The first thing they did was sleep. After that, they went off in search of hot water, clean clothes and a good meal, things which they had sometimes gone without for several weeks. The camps were tedious. Apart from pottering about, playing cards or even gardening, there was nothing to do. Resting, too, was relative - there were generally plenty of fatigue-duties.

The British, the Germans, most of the French and a few of the Belgians occasionally went away on leave, but it happened only rarely. The men waited eagerly for their papers. But they came back ill-at-ease. Their families did not understand what was happening at the front. Some soldiers hardly had time to get any benefit from their leave. Scottish soldiers received exactly one week, just like the English, but they had much further to travel.

The continuation of the fights

Second battle of Ieper

On 22 April 1915, at 5 pm, a greenish-yellow cloud rose slowly into the air from the German lines at Steenstrate.

This was chlorine gas. The French and Algerian soldiers in the front line fled to the rear, yet many of them would never reach safety. In a few hours' time, the Germans had moved forward four kilometres towards the Ieper-IJzer Canal. The speed of their advance surprised even them. The German troops were given the order to dig themselves in.

Following the gas attack, the Allied commanders realized that Ieper was now in danger. The Canadians therefore launched a counterattack to cover the flanks of the retreating French. They were joined the next day by the British, Indians and Belgians. This marked the start of the Second Battle of Ieper. The fighting would last five weeks.

The threat was greatest to the north of Ieper, where German units had crossed the Ieperlee Canal in two places. Inch by inch, French and Belgian troops managed to drive them back. However, heavy German shelling and renewed gas attacks claimed many lives. The positions at Passendale, Zonnebeke and Polygon Wood were all cleared.

To the east of Ieper, the Germans were confronted by British troops. At Hill 60, Sanctuary Wood and Hoge, there was fierce fighting for every inch of ground.

The civilians who hadn't already fled from Ieper were now ordered to evacuate. Even Camille Delaere, the enterprising priest of St Peter's, and Geoffrey Winthrop Young, the head of the voluntary Friends' Ambulance Unit, were told to leave the city. Only the military remained. Although Ieper was still in British hands, it was by now little more than a deserted ruin.

The Second Battle of Ieper drew to a close at the end of May, due to lack of ammunition and manpower. The Germans had succeeded in pushing forward several kilometres across a large part of the Ieper Salient, thereby advancing ever closer to the city. Five weeks of fighting had taken a heavy toll. The Germans had lost 35,000 dead and wounded, the British 60,000, the French 10,000 and the Belgians 1,500.









Artois and champagne

In May 1915, French and British troops launched an attack in Artois. The fighting lasted several weeks and cost the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers. Apparently, the heavily-defended German positions were extremely difficult to take. It was a hard lesson, yet neither side took it seriously enough at this stage.

In autumn 1915, the Allies again tried to mount an offensive. This time they were to attack on two fronts: the French in Champagne and the British in Artois.

In Champagne, the artillery bombardment lasted three days. The Germans were therefore hardly surprised when the French infantry emerged from their trenches, and they were able to repulse the attack. Eighteen days later, the French were forced to withdraw. They had lost almost 150,000 men.

Verdun

Early in 1916, the Germans felt that the time had come to launch an attack on the western front. The place they chose was Verdun.

Like Ieper, Verdun was located in a salient, which meant that the defenders were being attacked on three flanks. However, the Germans didn't want to take the city. They hoped instead that the French army would defend Verdun - a city with immense symbolic value - to the last man. Their aim was to cause the French such heavy losses that they would beg for peace.

On 21 February 1916, the shelling began. Verdun was not well enough defended and the French were overrun. After four days, the 'impregnable' fort at Douaumont fell with hardly a struggle. The Kaiser, who went to visit the battlefield, was wildly enthusiastic.

On the very same day, the defence of the city was entrusted to General Pétain, who mapped out a Voie sacrée between Verdun and Bar-le-Duc. Each week, this road was used to transport 90,000 men and 50,000 tonnes of equipment to the front.

After a few weeks, the German advance on Verdun was brought to a standstill. Despite the use of flame-throwers and phosgene, a new and deadly gas, the Germans were no longer able to force a breakthrough.

At Verdun, hundreds of thousands of men on each side engaged in a life-and-death battle for every hill, bunker and scrap of land. Soldiers and officers were cut off from their units and literally fought to the death. This bloody stalemate would drag on for nine months.

'On les aura,' Pétain had said, and he was proved correct. In autumn 1916, the French were finally able to push back the Germans - but at an unspeakable cost. The French lost 160,000 dead and missing and over 200,000 wounded. The German losses were almost as high.

After Verdun, both commanders-in-chief were forced to resign. In August, the German General Falkenhayn made way for the joint commanders Hindenburg and Ludendorff. On the French side, Joffre was replaced by Nivelle in December.



The Somme

The long-drawn-out fighting at Verdun was progressively exhausting the French army. At the request of the French, the British therefore launched a huge diversionary attack further west. This would become known as the Battle of the Somme.

The United Kingdom was the last of the major protagonists to introduce mandatory conscription, which it did in early 1916. As the Battle of the Somme claimed more lives, conscripts were drafted in to take the place of the professional soldiers and volunteers.

1 July 1916, the first day of the Somme, was a disaster. For an entire week, the British artillery had fired off more than 1.5 million shells. The British firmly believed that nothing would be left of the enemy. But the Germans were so deep underground that most had survived the bombardment. Moreover, the British shells were of very uneven quality. The result when the British emerged from their trenches was sheer slaughter. In one single day alone, they lost more than 57,000 dead and wounded.

On 15 September, at Flers, the British unveiled a new weapon the tank. However, 31 of the 49 tanks used during the attack succumbed to mechanical difficulties.

The Battle of the Somme did not end until mid-November, with the approach of winter. By this time, the British had lost 400,000 (dead, missing, wounded or prisoners-of-war). The Germans had lost an equal number, the French half that figure. These enormous sacrifices had won the Allies barely 12 kilometres of ground.

The Somme was to the British what Verdun was to the French. The losses of 1 July were especially traumatic, and helped to dispel forever any remaining illusions about the invincibility of the Empire. After the disasters of Verdun and the Somme, no-one knew how to go on. The German Prince Max von Baden wrote: '1916 ended in bitter disappointment for both sides.

The Hindenburg Line

1917 began with a major surprise when the Germans pulled back across a large section of the front in northern France, sometimes by as much as 40 kilometres. The new front line - the Siegfriedstellung or Hindenburg Line - was far better defended than its predecessor. German Pioniere had worked on these defences for several months.

On their way, the Germans destroyed villages, laid mines, poisoned wells and blocked roads to make it impossible for the Allies to pursue them.

Arras and the Chemin des Dames

The German withdrawal was no coincidence. At the time, the Allies were planning a major offensive and the Germans had found out about it. In April 1917, the offensive in question was finally launched: the British and Canadians attacked towards Arras and the French attacked at the Chemin des Dames.

The French attack was a fiasco; the attackers stood little chance against the powerful German defences. After five days, the French had sustained 130,000 losses, including 35,000 dead.

For many French soldiers, the attack at the Chemin des Dames was the last straw. They accepted the war but not the way it was conducted. Mutinies broke out among several French units and entire units refused to go to the front.

In the meantime, the newly appointed French commander-in-chief, General Nivelle, had himself been replaced. His successor, General Pétain, showed a greater understanding of the soldiers and their needs and was therefore able to restore order.

Mesen

In June 1917, the British again decided to launch a major offensive. This time their goal was to break through the Ieper Salient and move towards the North Sea ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge where the dreaded German U-boats were berthed.



On 7 June, the British dealt their first blow. From Hill 60 to Ploegsteert Wood across Mesen Ridge, they exploded a total of 19 underground mines. Entire battalions were buried alive and the reverberations were felt as far away as London and Paris.

Unfortunately, the Allies failed to exploit the breach they had made in the German lines. Rather than pushing through their advantage immediately, they stuck to their original plan of not attacking until July, thereby losing precious time

The Battle of Passendale

On 16 July 1917, the British artillery began shelling the German defences in the Ieper Salient. However, after two weeks the German positions were far from obliterated. The terrain also proved a problem for the British. Because the Germans held the higher ground on the Salient, they could see everything across a very wide front. On 31 July, the infantry emerged from the trenches. The Third Battle of Ieper had begun. It would enter the history books as the Battle of Passendale.

Over 14 weeks, the British would try at least 10 times to break through to Passendale. Sometimes they managed to gain a few hundred metres of ground, but usually the attack became bogged down in the mud. The summer of 1917 was the wettest in living memory. The battlefield was nearly impassable for the soldiers, let alone the heavy artillery. But the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, insisted on sticking to his plan. The British prime minister Lloyd George failed to intervene.

On 10 November, the weather forced the pointless struggle to a conclusion. A few days earlier, Canadian troops had finally taken the ruins of Passendale. The Allies had moved barely 10 kilometres closer to their goal. In 1918, they would again lose all these gains in just three days. In the 100 days of the Battle of Passendale, the British lost 300,000 men (dead, missing or wounded). Tyne Cot Cemetery in Passendale contains the graves of 12,000 men and commemorates a further 35,000 missing.



Spring 1918 - The Germans attack!

In spring, the Germans staked everything on one bold move. In Russia, the tsar had abdicated and the country had withdrawn from the conflict. The Germans no longer had to worry about the Russian front. On the other hand, fresh American troops were to arrive. Hence the Germans' haste to finish once and for all. In March 1918, they launched a major offensive against Paris.

The signal for the attack was given on 21 March 1918. Victorious at first, the Germans advanced 60 km and took 80,000 prisoners of war. For the first time since 1914, there was fighting in fields, woods and villages which had until then escaped the ravages of war. The Germans closed in on Paris. With their powerful field-gun Langer Gustav they could shell Paris from a distance of 120 km. For six months the city was shelled regularly.

The Allies were aware that they needed to cooperate in order to halt the German advance. Foch was appointed generalissimo of the Allied armies, and subsequently promoted to the rank of marshal of France. After a few days, the Allies, having regained their presence of mind, organized the defence. At the beginning of April, they stopped the German advance. But the fact remained that since 1914 the Germans had never captured so much territory.

In May 1918, the Germans attacked close to the Aisne. They took the Chemin des Dames, crossed the river and occupied Soissons. Paris was no more than 50 km away. Initially, it was Ludendorff's intention to strike in Flanders simultaneously, but he did not have enough fresh troops to do this successfully. Sickness, hunger and desertion were undermining an exhausted and already decimated German army. It became clear that the Germans were at the end of their strength.

The Americans

And then, finally, the Americans came. From the beginning of 1918 onward, the US sent a large fighting force to Europe. In July, August and September, some 10,000 American soldiers a day came ashore in the French ports. Increasingly, the Germans found themselves in a position of inferiority.

The fresh troops arriving direct from America restored French and British morale. But at the same time, the encounter with the Sammies was a culture shock. 'The Americans love sardines, jam and biscuits,' a French soldier observed. 'It's really disgusting to watch them eat, because they make a revolting mixture of everything and wash it down with several mugs of plonk.'



The tide is turning

On 8 August 1918, luck finally turned. British, Canadian, Australian, and French troops gathered outside Amiens to attack. In a single day, 15,000 Germans surrendered.

Victory was close. From 8 August to 25 September, the Allies attacked uninterruptedly with planes and tanks. All told, 140,000 German soldiers were taken prisoner and half a million deserted. Defeat of Germany was now just a matter of time.

Allied superiority had become incontrovertible - they had more troops, more field-guns, more tanks and more planes. Unlike the Germans in the previous spring, they decided to advance slowly, to allow the infantry to follow the artillery. The Germans were therefore forced further and further back.

In September, the Allies finally took the Hindenburg line, thought of as impregnable. Although some Germans defended like lions, others surrendered like sheep.

The eastern front

Just as on the western front, the situation on the eastern front became untenable for the Germans and their allies. The Turks and the Bulgarians were hemmed in on all sides. At the end of September, Bulgaria surrendered, followed a month later by Turkey.

In order to save the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and his own reign, Karl I promised great autonomy to the various peoples. But it was already too late: Budapest was in open rebellion, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia declared their independence. Vienna was in turmoil. At the end of October, the Austrian army was annihilated by the Italians. The country was to surrender on 3 November.

November 1918

On 9 November, the German Republic was proclaimed in Berlin. On learning that he was no longer emperor, Wilhelm II left his headquarters in Spa, and took refuge in the Netherlands, which had remained neutral throughout the war.

On 11 November 1918, the German capitulation was signed at Compiègne, in a railway carriage. On the eleventh day of the eleventh month at 11 am, arms were finally laid down.

The end of the War

The reckoning

Of course, there were celebrations in all the Allied countries. The city of Brussels emptied to welcome King Albert I on his triumphal return. Salutes re-echoed in Paris and London, where hundreds of thousands of people were reunited. But the festivities masked a sad truth: four years' war had devastated their countries.

During the course of the Great War, 68 million men were mobilized. Among them, there were 9 million deaths - in other words, almost as many as the current population of Belgium. Russia lost 2 million men, Germany 1.8 million, France 1.3 million, the United Kingdom 1.1 million, and Austria-Hungary 1 million. All told, Belgium was mourning for about 40,000 soldiers and over 5,000 civilians.

The dead were commemorated everywhere. Military cemeteries were created along the front. In each capital, a monument was erected to the unknown soldier. Generally, this was an unnamed soldier picked out by a blind victim of the war. Each village put up its own monument to the dead.

Heavy economic consequences

The war had also devastated the economies of the combatant nations. In the region of the front, entire villages, roads, bridges and factories had to be reconstructed. In Belgium, one fifth of the prewar infrastructure was destroyed. In the twenties, hundreds of hectares of arable land were littered with explosives and war debris and criss-crossed with trenches. Even today, munitions stores and unexploded shells are regularly found.

The combatant nations were on the point of bankruptcy. Although it is true that the United Kingdom and France had won the war, the two countries were heavily indebted to the USA, the new superpower. Neither France nor Britain was ever to regain its prewar influence.

Germany was completely ruined, partly on account of crippling war reparations. The outcome was rapidly felt - inflation reached an absolutely dazzling level. Anyone who had money spent it immediately, as in a few hours it would no longer be worth the paper it was printed on. Zeroes piled up at an incredible rate - ten marks became a hundred marks, a thousand marks, a million marks, ten million marks.

The Versailles Treaty

The Treaty of Versailles was very harsh for Germany, which had to forego one seventh of its territory. Alsace-Lorraine reverted to France. To the east, the new Poland acquired part of Prussia. Other regions were given to Denmark, and later to Lithuania. Danzig (Gdansk) became a 'free city'. As for Belgium, it was awarded the eastern towns of Eupen and Malmedy.

Germany had to renounce its colonies, which now were held under mandate. Ruanda-Urundi was placed under Belgian mandate.

The German army and economy underwent a harsh shock. The army was reduced to 100,000 men. In June 1919, the Germans had to sink their own fleet near to Scapa Flow, off Scotland. The heavy industry of the Saar valley came under French control, and, lastly, the Rhineland became an occupied region.

Germany was also ordered to pay huge war compensation: 20 million gold marks for the first two years alone!

The map of Europe is redrawn

President Wilson of the USA felt that every people had a right to its own nationhood. It was therefore decided to dismantle the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Austria suddenly became a small country, as did Hungary. The rest of the territory was shared out between Poland, Italy, Romania and two new nations, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.

Of the great Ottoman Empire, only Turkey remained. The Near East was subjected to British and French rule.

The victors authorized the creation of four new nations which formerly were part of Russia: Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Poland and Romania were also to be given Russian territories





The league of nations

The Treaty of Versailles also led to the League of Nations, within which conflicts were henceforth to be negotiated. Neither the defeated nations, however, nor the Soviet Union, were accepted as members. Furthermore, the American Senate refused to ratify the treaty, despite the insistence of President Wilson. The United States was never part of the League of Nations. The ambitious project became a colossus with feet of clay.

The balance of power is transformed

After Versailles, Europe was completely reshaped. New states emerged: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Finland. Romania doubled its size. Germany, Russia, Turkey, Austria and Hungary all lost extensive territories. The armistice also sounded the death-knell for several great dynasties: the Hohenzollerns in Germany, the Habsburgs in Austria, the Romanovs in Russia and the sultans of the Ottoman Empire.

The balance of powers between the various nations had been transformed. France and the United Kingdom had lost influence. It gradually became clear that the United States was the new superpower. The Soviet Union would soon follow.

In Germany, Adolf Hitler was to override the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles one by one. Twenty years later, the country was ready to start a new world war.

1919 – Social changes

Changes

For many people, the end of the war was the start of a new era. There was a prevalent impression that the time was ripe, that the moment had come for sweeping change. Events in Russia gave rise to a new hope - the tyrannical tsar had been ousted and a new society was born, even though a bloody civil war was still tearing the country apart.

Changes occurred at every level. All at once it seemed perfectly normal to introduce an eight-hour day, to increase wages and have socialist ministers. These measures, which would have been unthinkable four years earlier, encountered hardly any resistance. The middle classes realized that if they didn't make a few concessions the workers would become infected with revolutionary ideas.

Women

For four long years, workers and peasants had defended their homeland. After the war, they were rewarded with single universal suffrage: everyone had the right to one single vote. But in France and Belgium, it was not until the end of the Second World War that universal suffrage was also granted to women.

During the war, women had replaced men in the factories and in the fields. But life resumed its course after the war. For most men, a woman's place was in the home. Once again, it was only after the Second World War that things would change.

Timeline
Terminology

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

To clarify a few terms, some of which are often confused.

Military
Military people in military service subdivided
1) according to rank: officers, non-commissioned officers or privates
2) according to status: professional soldiers, conscripts, territorials or volunteers

soldiers
Privates servicemen of the lowest rank: subdivided
1) according to corps (infantrymen, cavalrymen etc.)
2) according to regiment (grenadiers, lancers etc.)

Killed in action
Servicemen who have died on the battlefield: either killed outright or died without aid from medical personnel

Dead
K.I.A. + those who succumb to wounds or illness + accident victims

Losses
dead + wounded + prisoners-of-war + missing + sick

Great Britain
an island consisting of England, Scotland and Wales

United Kingdom
a state, in 1914 consisting of Great Britain and Ireland (now: Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

British Empire
the United Kingdom + the overseas territories (until 1926)

Commonwealth
a community made up of the United Kingdom and its former colonies (from 1926)

English
of England (part of the United Kingdom)

British
1) of Great Britain
2) of the United Kingdom
3) of the British Empire

German Reich
The German Empire from 1871 to November 1918

Germany
From November 1918

Dual Monarchy
Austria-Hungary

Central Powers
German Reich + Austria-Hungary + Turkish Empire + Bulgaria (1915)

Allies
France + Russia + British Empire + Belgium + Serbia + Montenegro + Japan + Italy (1915) + Portugal (1916) + Romania (1916) + United States (1917) + Greece (1917) + a number of Latin American countries (1917-1918)

Neutral
did not take part in the war. In Europe: Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Spain, Albania, Switzerland

Frontline
line of contact between opposing forces

Trench
Ditch that provides cover

No-man's-land
No-man's-land was the thin strip between the two enemy positions. It varied in width between a few dozen yards to a few miles.

Flooding
by nature

Inundation
by man

Gun
flat-trajectory artillery piece (with a relatively long barrel

Howitzer
curved-trajectory artillery piece (with a relatively short barrel)

Mortar
steep-trajectory or launching artillery piece (with a short barrel)

bomb
dropped from an aircraft or balloon or fired from a mortar and bringing about an explosion

Shell
Projectile, fired by gun, howitzer, mortar, rifle or thrown by hand, which on exploding flings (lead) shrapnel and/or fragments through the air

infantry
foot soldiers, servicemen on foot with portable weapons

cavalry
soldiers on horseback

artillery
everything that belongs to gunnery, including the men who operate it

Military engineer
Troops responsible for constructing military works, such as the building of fortifications and roads, destruction of bridges, and communication.

Light machine gun
Light rapid-fire weapon (on a bipod, with butt), individual weapon, also
used in attack

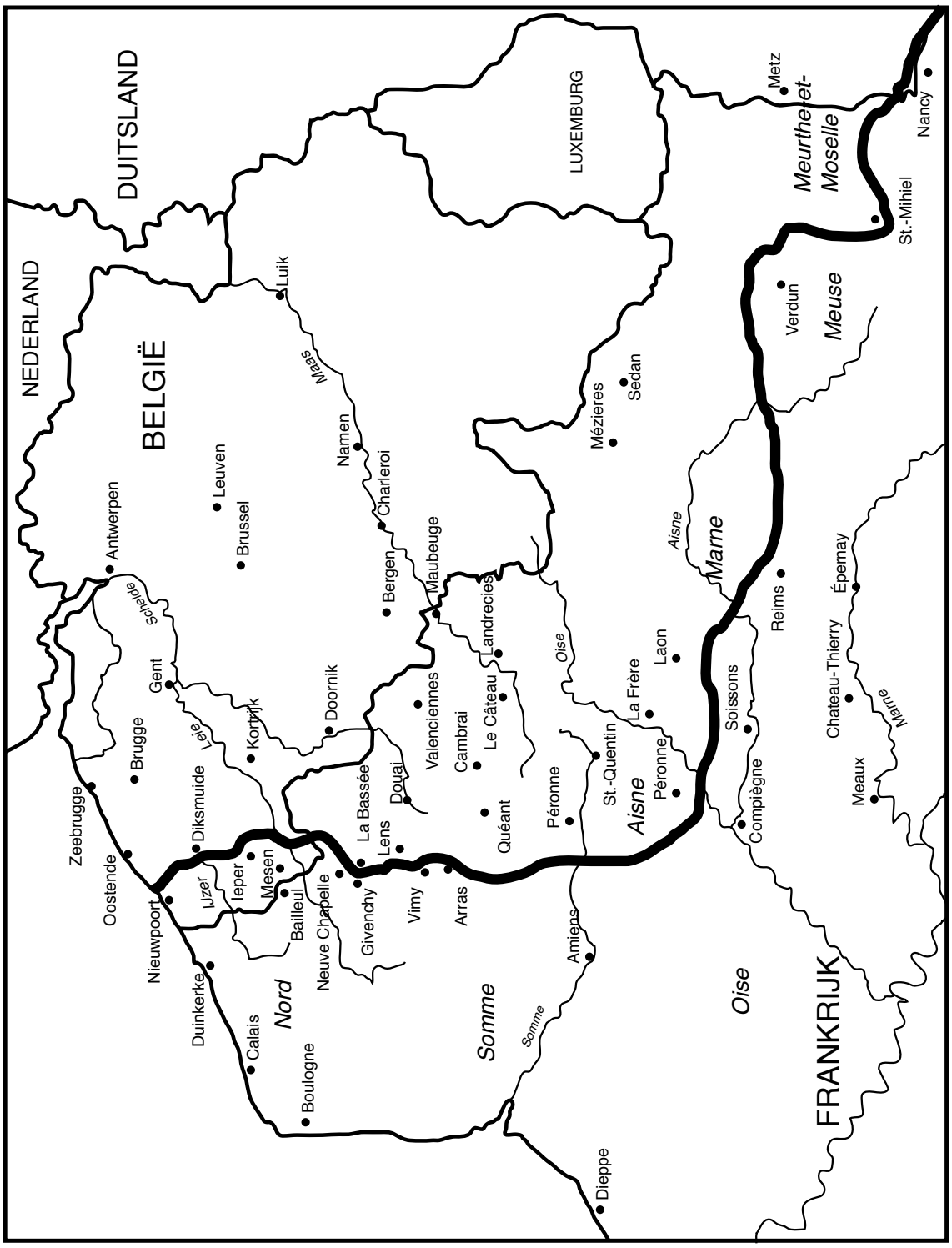
Heavy machine gun
Heavy rapid-fire weapon (on a tripod), collective weapon, particularly for defence

Armistice
The cessation of all hostilities pending a peace treaty, 11 November 1918

peace treaty
agreement between different countries on the terms for peace, Treaty of Versailles: 28 June 1919

Timeline

The Western Front



Practical

School visit to the In Flanders Fields Museum

The In Flanders Fields Museum is interactive, which means that visitors largely determine for themselves what they hear and see. A visit to the In Flanders Fields Museum is an individual experience and therefore is different for everyone. Besides these individual experiences, the museum frequently uses interactive applications, films and sounds to immerse you in the atmosphere.

The IFFM can only be guided according to the "silent guide" principle. Each pupil receives an individual device with ears from which the explanation of an educational employee of the In Flanders Fields museum can be heard. It is not allowed to give an explanation to your class in the museum.

You will feel a certain peace that permeates through the museum. We therefore kindly ask you to respect the museum's peace – the museum staff are very strict on enforcing this.

The best way to visit the museum with a class is to give the students the opportunity to discover the museum for themselves, possibly combined with a pre-planned task.

The educational department has edited a worksheet that may be copied free of charge. It can also serve as a guideline for students during their visit and make them aware of the entire museum story. The worksheet does not include questions that sound out the student's knowledge. This was done on purpose, because we noticed that such questions often result in perfectly copied answers! Besides, students often end up queuing in certain places and this may hinder individual visitors. When a visit to the IFFM museum is booked, teachers can present the booking note to the counter staff and prepare their school visit free of charge. The educational package includes a detailed description of the different museum walks and we think it is best to inform students of what they can expect, before they visit the museum.



Practical information:

You can find the toilets on the ground floor of the Cloth Hall near the reception and at the exit. It is best to inform pupils about this before the visit.

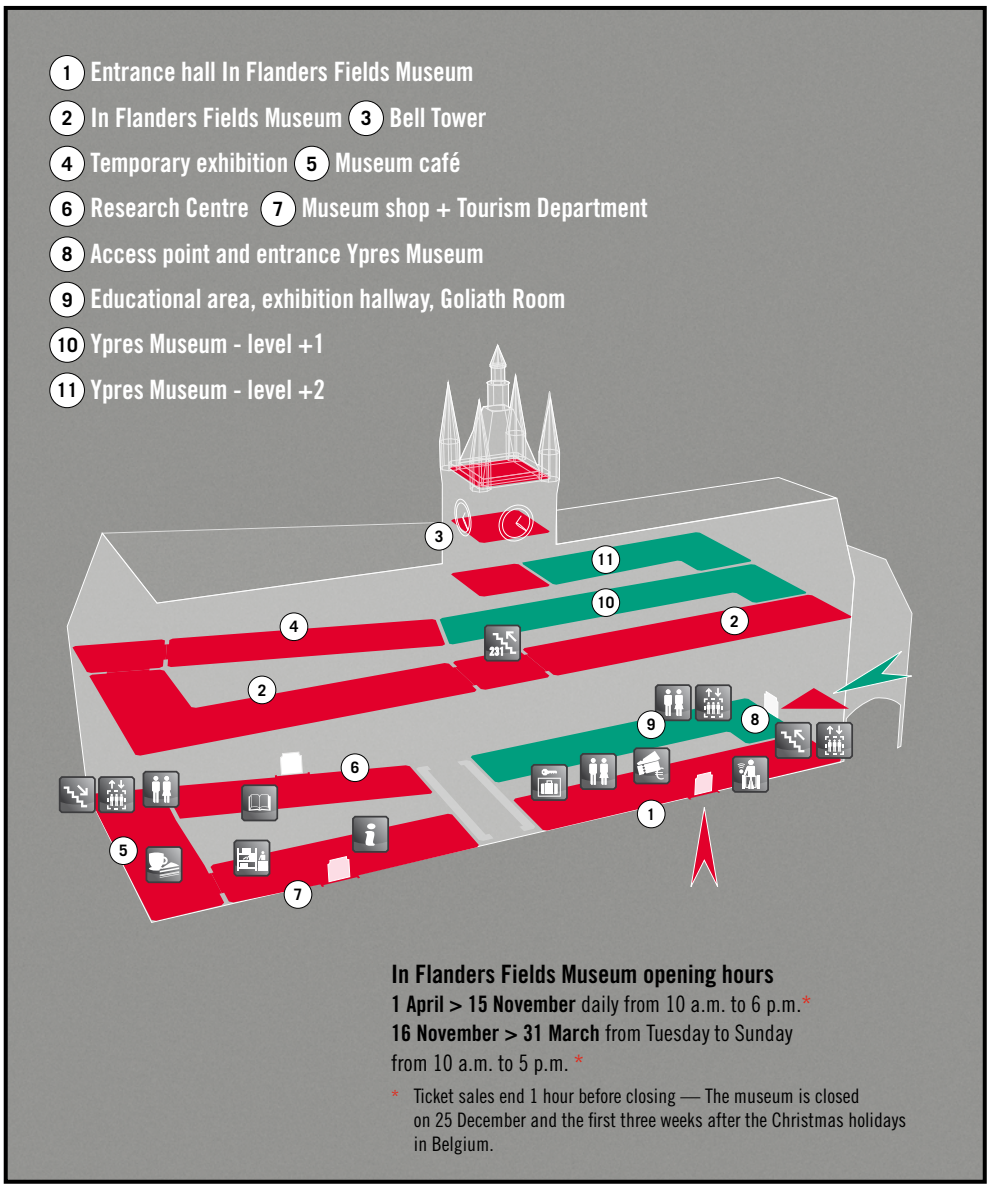
At the reception there are lockers and a group cloakroom which can be closed. Please keep in mind that the entrance and exit of the museum are not at the same location.* If possible, it is better to leave jackets and backpacks on the bus or take them into the museum.

*(The reason for this is that the Cloth Hall is a protected monument (part of the UNESCO-World heritage). This implies that inner structures cannot be altered and one has to be creative in organizing the space.

Lunch can, if booked beforehand, be taken in the museumcafé. We offer seats for maximum 50 people every half hour. It is obligatory to buy a consumption on the spot.

When pupils execute written assignments we ask not to put the documents on the exhibition cases or displays. If necessary clipboards can be obtained at the reception.

It is allowed to take pictures without flashlight.



More than a museum visit

IN FLANDERS FIELDS MUSEUM

You can't win waging war. Sometimes it looks like the only way out, but then you have failed as society. Whatever the stake is , you are destructive. When you chose for an armed conflict, you destroy things: people, landscapes and cultural heritage. People that put 'conquering freedom' in the centre, one hundred years after WWI , easily forget that war means loss and grief.

Naturally one will argue that 'you can't make an omelet without breaking the eggs' but at least reflect on the broken eggshell…

Maybe the appetite for an omelet will disappear effortless.

100 years ago the area around Ypres was the set of one of the most destructive conflicts in history. Now that the last witnesses have passed away, the Flanders Fields Museum is more than ever the gate to WWI in Flanders. With the educational team of the museum we thus want to demonstrate that this history is still relevant even 100 years after date.

