



WORLD WAR I

GREAT
BATTLES
FOR BOYS

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WITH
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World War I

Great Battles for Boys
EXCERPT

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with
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World War I
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Excerpt Edition

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FOREWORD



Images of WWI

IMAGINE YOU'RE WALKING down the street with your friend. Some other boys are coming toward you.

"I don't like your friend," one of them says.

Then he throws a punch.

You try to stop the fight, but the other boys are all jumping into the clash, throwing their own punches. Before you know it, that first punch has triggered an all-out brawl.

That's sort of how World War I started.

In June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot and killed by an assassin.



Archduke Franz Ferdinand

The archduke was the leader of a country called Austria-Hungary. His assassin—the man who shot him in the neck—was from Serbia, one of the European countries controlled by Austria-Hungary. Along with those other countries, Serbia wanted its independence. But Austria-Hungary refused to allow it. When the

assassin killed the archduke, it was sort of like that guy throwing the first punch at your friend.

The fight was on.



This 1914 poster shows an Austrian fist crushing a Serbian holding a bomb and knife. The Austrian phrase translates, "Serbia must die!"

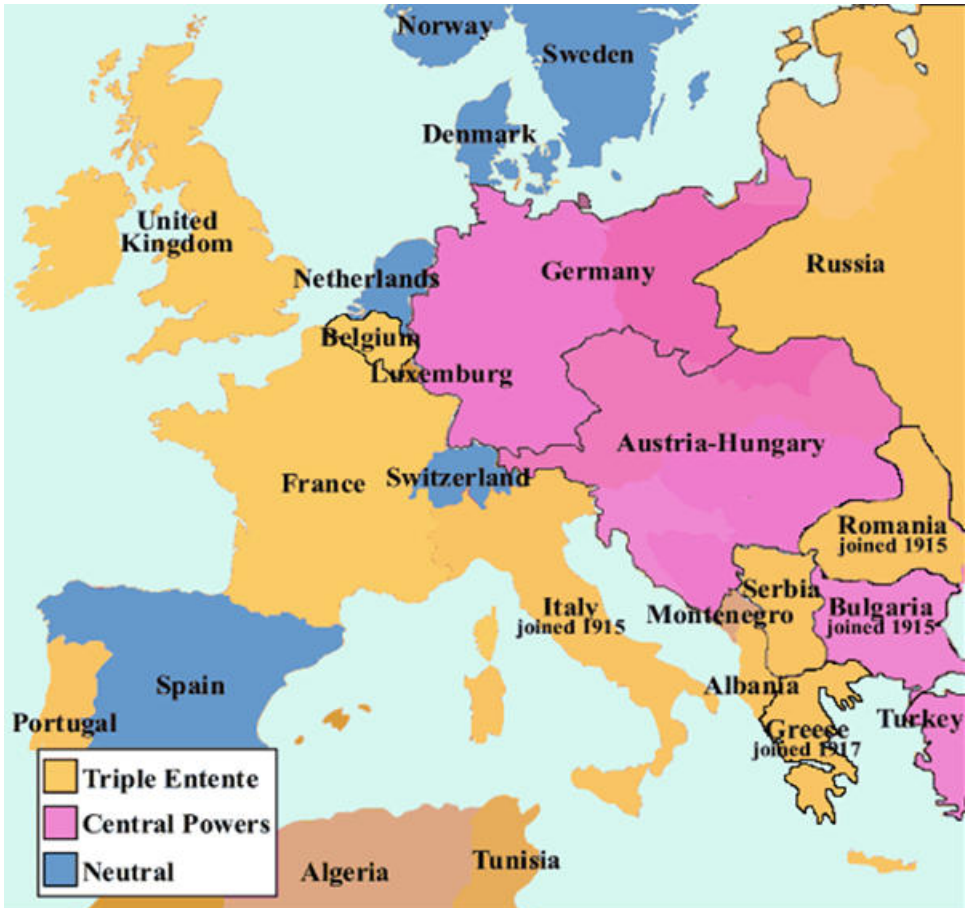
Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and formed an alliance with Germany, a country that was already preparing for war. When two or more countries form an alliance, that means they agree to stick up for each other.

Soon after forming this alliance, Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia. The aggression drew the rest of Europe into the fight, forcing these other countries to protect themselves and their alliances. The United Kingdom (England), France, and Russia formed one alliance. That group was called the Allies.

The other side—Germany and Austria-Hungary—was called the Central Powers. Later the Ottoman Empire and the country of Bulgaria would join the Central Powers, too.

As you read about these WWI battles, keep these two groups in mind—Allies and Central Powers—because you’ll be hearing a lot about them, and what happened to them during the war.

Look at the map below. It shows Europe in 1914, just after WWI broke out. Find Germany and Austria-Hungary. Then find Russia, France, and the United Kingdom which includes England (Great Britain), Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Also notice that some countries, such as Spain, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden stayed “neutral,” meaning they didn’t take sides in WWI. (You’ll also find a list of the Allies and Central Powers at the back of this book).



National Archives of Britain

Germany already had a plan for this war. It had long wanted to expand its borders and grow richer by taking control of other countries. To win this new war, Germany planned to strike fast to the west, conquering France within two weeks. Then it would wheel its forces around and fight Russia to the east.

But in this plan to conquer France, the German army first needed to invade Belgium. Look at the map again. Belgium sits between the northern edge of Germany and France.

Belgium had declared itself neutral—it didn't want any part of this war.

But on August 3, 1914, Germany invaded Belgium.

The invasion was brutal.

German troops burned down homes, terrorized people, and killed civilians—ordinary folks who were not soldiers. These actions were all part of Germany's plan to scare the Belgian people into submitting to German authority.



German army invading Belgium, 1914

Great Britain (part of the United Kingdom) threw its support behind Belgium and France. It declared war on Germany.

See how quickly this fight escalated?

Many of the WWI battles you're going to read about take place around Belgium and France, an area that would later be known as the Western Front.

The Eastern Front formed along the border between Russia and Germany.

When the war broke out, most people thought the fighting wouldn't last long. In August 1914, as German troops burst into Belgium, Kaiser Wilhelm II—Germany's leader—assured his soldiers, "You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees."

The Kaiser was wrong.

WWI lasted four long years, killing about 10 million military personnel and seven million civilians. The war's casualties—meaning, the wounded—were even higher, about 37 million people total. These almost unbelievable numbers reveal why WWI would later be called "The Great War"—not because it was so good, but because its losses were so big.

How did all of it happen?

Let's find out.

Battle of Mons

August 23, 1914

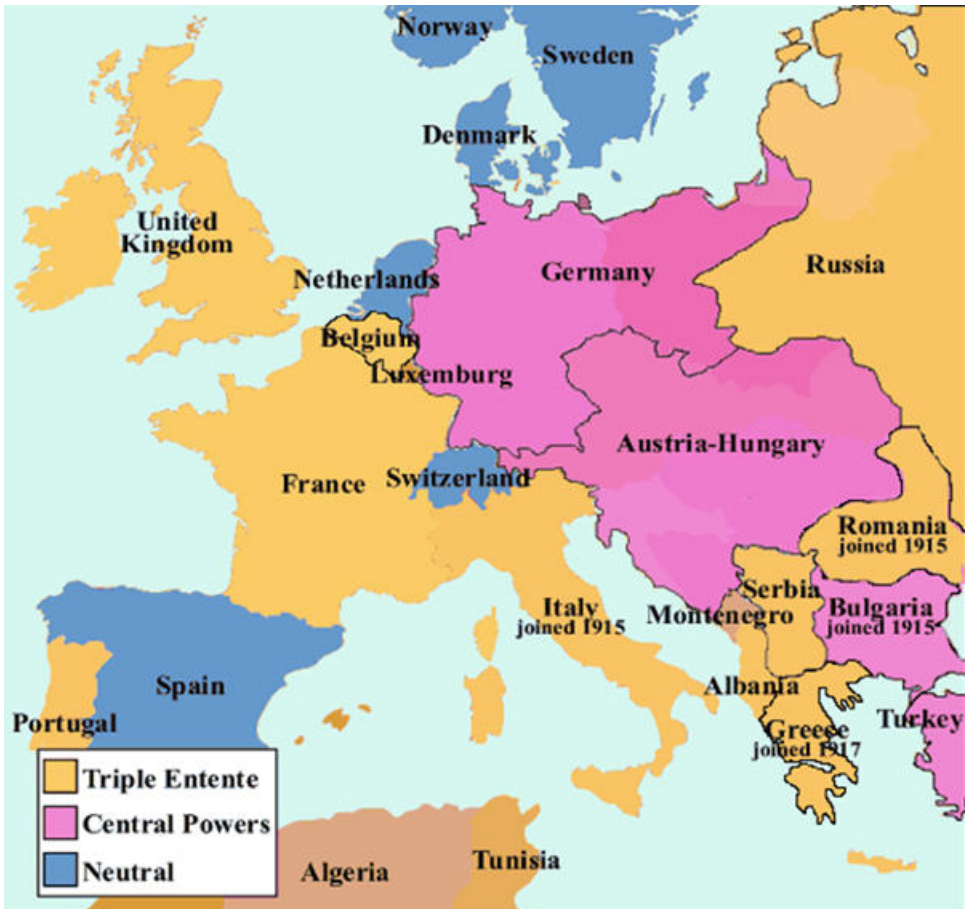


British cavalry soldiers attack German troops at Mons.

WHEN GERMAN MILITARY forces invaded Belgium in August 1914, their plan was to storm across that country into its neighbor, France. From there, the German army would seize control of France's most famous city, Paris, giving it vast control over important parts of Europe.

To combat the German plan, the French army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) set up defensive positions along the border between France and Belgium. This area would later become an important part of the Western Front.

Look at that map again. Notice how small Belgium is compared to its neighbors Germany and France.



The Allies wanted to halt the German invasion at the Belgian border, then drive the enemy all the way back into Germany. If this Allied plan had succeeded, World War I might've ended right there.

Instead, during this first month of the war, both sides witnessed the new and devastating power of modern weapons and warfare. Machine guns. Artillery. Airplanes. Chemical gas. Tanks. These inventions were going to make WWI different—and much more deadly—than any war that came before it.

Although there were skirmishes during this first month, WWI's first major clash was the Battle of Mons.

Mons is a Belgian mining town with a nearby canal. This waterway would be really helpful for moving soldiers and supplies around the area. That's why both sides wanted control over Mons and its waterway.

On August 21, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was setting up positions to protect the French army that was already in the area. The BEF also sent out a cavalry unit—soldiers on horseback—who rode ahead of the Allied position to scout for Germans. The cavalry hoped to set up an ambush and flush any enemies from the area. An ambush is a trap, usually involving soldiers hiding behind camouflage, such as trees, bushes, and buildings, before pouncing on the enemy in a surprise attack.



WWI French cavalry armed with lances

However, a German cavalry unit spotted the British cavalry, ruining any chance of an ambush.

The German soldiers galloped away.

But the British soldiers chased them, swords flashing, lances raised, rifles firing.

“The enemy fire was hellish,” recalled British Second Lieutenant Roger Chance. “We galloped along a black coal dust that blew around us in dark clouds. We could not see a yard in front of us. My horse Spitfire, jumped over two dead horses just in time. Bullets and shells seemed to be everywhere. When we reached a building to shelter, only ten members of my troops were left. I had been struck by a bullet on my metal collar badge but had not noticed it.”

The BEF cavalry eventually won this skirmish and took German prisoners.

Now the battle turned to the city of Mons.



WWI British soldiers inside a machine gun trench

The British took up positions along the Mons canal. The waterway’s twenty-five miles and twelve bridges made it a huge

territory to protect. In order to defend the bridges, the British placed artillery—cannons, machine guns, and artillery shells (explosives)—along the canal. But even with all that firepower, the soldiers struggled to find any good “field of fire” positions—places where they could clearly see the enemy.

Meanwhile, the German army assumed the British were still in France, trying to mobilize—gather together—a military force. Instead, British forces had positioned themselves at Mons—right where the Germans were planning to attack!

Unfortunately, things still didn’t look good for the British. At Mons, the Allies had only about 80,000 soldiers and military personnel, plus some 300 artillery weapons. The Germans had around 250,000 soldiers—giving them an advantage of more than three to one. The Germans also had twice as many artillery weapons.

The British did have one big advantage, the Royal Flying Corps. British planes flew over Mons and the pilots spotted the massive German force marching toward the town. One British pilot also tried to warn the French commanders whose forces were nearby, but the pilot’s warning was ignored.



WWI French soldiers awaiting German attack. Notice their distinctive caps, called Kepis.

The British dug in, using the canal and the explosives on the bridges as their defensive line. If the Germans started to break through the line, the British would blow up the bridges, holding back the Germans from crossing the canal.

On August 23, Sunday morning church bells rang out in Mons. But the calm didn't last.

At 7:30 a.m., German artillery shells smashed into Mons, blowing up both soldiers and civilians. Behind this bombardment, the German army pounded forward with its massive infantry and cavalry force. The British struggled to defend the long defensive line, and soon they were also getting flanked—attacked from the sides.

But the canal's water was too deep for German infantry or cavalry to cross. The only way into Mons was over those bridges.

The 4th Royal Fusiliers were holding the Nimy Bridge, under the command of Captain L.F. Ashburner with nearby support from two machine guns commanded by Lieutenant Maurice Dease.

The German soldiers marched toward the Nimy Bridge in close order formation—the soldiers gathered together to form a concentrated tactical force. But this formation also created good targets for the British soldiers who now aimed their Enfield rifles at them. The British soldiers were so well-trained with these weapons that they could fire thirty rounds in one minute. That meant, every two seconds, the soldiers cocked the gun, fired, locked and loaded. Over and over again.

Nearby, the British machine guns were firing 600 rounds a minute.

The German fire was just as constant, and during the fight, Lieutenant Dease was wounded three times. He refused to leave his crew. Each time one of the machine guns stopped working, Lieutenant Dease would leave his position and go fix the gun, exposing himself to enemy fire. Dease's third wound, however,

proved fatal. After the war, he was posthumously—after death—granted Britain’s highest military award, the Victoria Cross.



Belgian soldier firing machine gun against the German advance, 1914

The British firestorm of bullets forced the Germans to retreat. However, the Germans learned their lesson. On their next attack they advanced in looser formations, creating less of a target, and they added artillery and planes. German pilots flew up on surveillance—scouting—and marked the enemy’s positions on a map. This information gave the ground soldiers even better firing accuracy.

Up and down the Mons canal, all the bridges were under heavy attack. By 3:00 p.m., the Germans strengthened their push with reinforcements. Soon the Germans began to flank, forcing the British to defend both front and sides, stretching their defensive forces even further.

And then, bad news arrived.

The nearby French 5th Army was withdrawing from this battle. The British were ordered to withdraw, too.

But with any withdrawal, an army needs someone to stay behind and cover their retreat. Private Sidney Godley volunteered. Manning a machine gun, Godley kept up a steady fire against the Germans, even after being wounded. His cover gave the 4th Royal Fusiliers time to retreat from the Nimy Bridge.

In order to slow down the pursuing Germans even more, the British blew up five bridges. Over the next two days, British forces held back the German advance, costing the invaders both time and lives. The British also retreated in “good order.” That’s when a military force doesn’t just run away but fights while backing up to leave the battlefield.

The Battle of Mons was over.

The Germans had won.

But this first major battle of WWI proved the British Expeditionary Forces were prepared to fight. The Battle of Mons is also considered one of military history’s best retreats. Despite losing the battle, outnumbered and overwhelmed British forces still managed to hold back a German onslaught. The British also protected nearby French forces, ensuring that the Allies lived to fight another day.

But the German plan hadn’t changed. They were still fixed on marching into France and conquering Paris.

WHO FOUGHT?



Private Sidney Godley

Sidney Godley joined the Royal Fusiliers in 1909. He was twenty years old and known for being a good soccer player and cross-country runner.

His battalion was among the first sent to France and Belgium, arriving at Mons on August 22. When the battalion reached the Nimy Bridge outside town, French forces were struggling against the German advance. The next morning, the British Expeditionary Force dug into its defensive positions. Godley's job was to help supply ammunition to the position's machine gun.

The Germans nearly destroyed the entire battalion, and when Lieutenant Dease was killed, the troops were ordered to withdraw.

Godley volunteered to take over the machine gun to protect the retreat. He volunteered knowing that his choice had two possible outcomes: either he would die in this fight, or the Germans would take him prisoner.

Single-handedly, Godley held the bridge for two hours, giving his fellow soldiers in the Royal Fusiliers time to fully withdraw. When Godley finally ran out of ammunition, he broke up the machine gun and threw the pieces into the canal, keeping the weapon out of German hands.

Despite a bullet lodged in his head, Godley managed to crawl back from the bridge to a main road. Two Belgian civilians dressed his wounds, but the Germans captured the post and took Godley prisoner. Although questioned heavily, Godley gave the Germans only his name, rank, and number.

Godley was sent to Berlin, Germany and underwent surgery for the bullet in his head and for injuries to his back—injuries that required 150 stitches. He was then transferred to a Prisoner of War camp.

In 1919, after the war ended, Godley was released and returned to England.

Private Sidney Godley was the first WWI *private* to receive Britain's highest military honor, the Victoria Cross.

BOOKS

Journal of William Brazear: An Eye Witness Account of the Battle of Mons by William Brazear

Mons 1914: The BEF's Tactical Triumph by David Lomas

INTERNET

Documentary on the Battle of Mons:

[youtube.com/watch?v=oEFoZsuLRoE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEFoZsuLRoE)

The Battle of Tannenberg

August 23–30, 1914



Russian troops awaiting German attack

AT THE BEGINNING of WWI, the Germans didn't have much respect for the British army—or the Russian army.

Russia is a huge country with many resources, but it wasn't well prepared for modern warfare. When WWI broke out, Russia didn't even have enough rifles for all its soldiers. Or artillery.

Russia also didn't have enough communication wiring. Unlike today's wireless networks that use satellites and other technology, in the early 1900s people used telegraphs and radios to speak directly to each other over long distances. Without wiring to connect these devices, people had to resort to slower communication methods, such as sending letters by mail, or messengers with notes, or even carrier pigeons.

These negative factors were part of the reason Germany felt confident about defeating the Russians.

Making matters even worse, the Germans had also broken the Russians' secret code. Any time a top-secret message was sent among the Russians, the Germans could read it and find out exactly what the Russians planned to do. This code-breaking gave the Germans a huge advantage in battle.

Still, the Russians managed to move their 1st and 2nd Armies into the WWI battlefield sooner than expected. By mid-August, Russian soldiers were at the Eastern Front. Now they would face Germany's fierce 8th Army.

Look at the map. The Eastern Front ran along the border between Russia and Germany, concentrated mostly in that deep U-shaped curve that bulged into Germany.



The Russians planned to capture the German 8th Army in a pincer movement. That's when an army sends out two flanking forces, left and right. Those forces create something shaped like an open claw. As the claw closes, the enemy is trapped inside.

Only problem was ... the Russian forces had yet *another* problem.

The Russian territory was so vast and the Russian armies so large that the military struggled to keep its soldiers supplied with food and ammunition as it moved them from place to place. There were also thousands of horses that needed grain and hay. Without supplies, the troops would be forced to forage—live off the land—something that's very hard to do with hundreds of thousands of men and animals.



WWI Russian soldiers in a forest trench

After a series of skirmishes that were mostly won by the Russians, the Russian 2nd Army moved forward, pressing into the outnumbered German lines.

But instead of joining the 2nd Army, the Russian 1st Army stopped to rest.

This decision caused a serious problem (or you might say, *another* serious problem) for the Russians.

It would also lead to one of the worst disasters of WWI, the Battle of Tannenberg.

As the two Russian armies separated, the Germans decided to move their main force against the 2nd Army.

At first the German plan was just to hold back the 2nd Army. But on August 23, several new German generals took control and they decided to attack with the 2nd Army full throttle. General Erich Ludendorff later explained his reasoning.

“Our decision to give battle arose out of the slowness of the Russian leadership and was conditioned by the necessity of winning in spite of inferior numbers...”

The Russian 2nd Army was marching about ten miles a day. Supply lines struggled to keep up that pace. The Russian soldiers were tired and growing hungrier by the day.

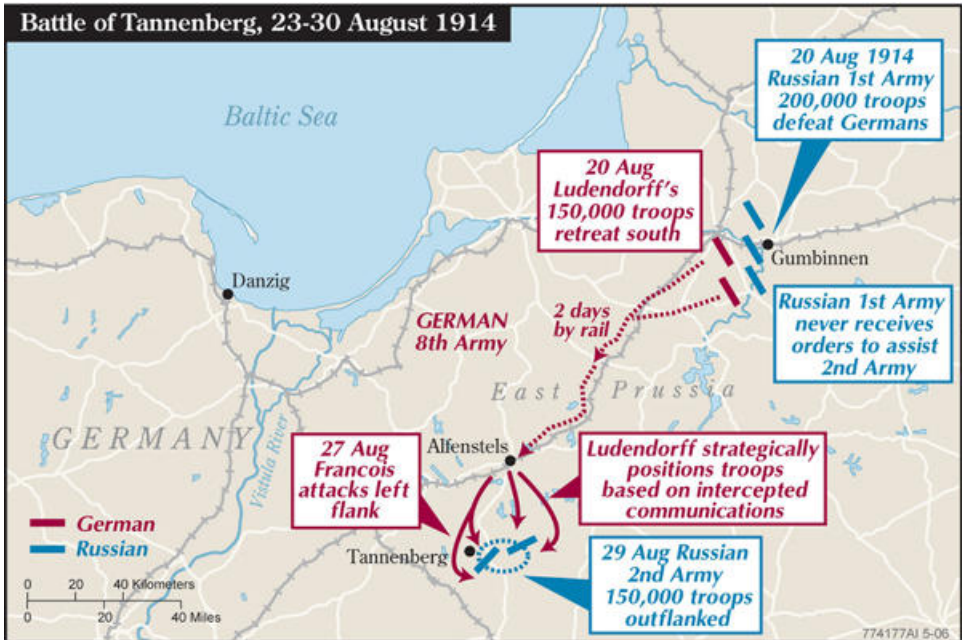
The Germans, on the other hand, sent some of their forces ahead by railroad, which was a lot less tiring than marching over ground. Another advantage for the Germans was the land where the Russians were headed. Full of lakes, swamps, and forests, it provided excellent coverage for hiding and ambushing. And finally, the Germans knew this country really well because they had used it as their training grounds.



Russian troops marching to the Eastern Front

The German army closed in around the Russian 2nd Army, and the Russians had no idea it was happening. Basically they were marching into a very clever trap—a trap that was almost identical to the pincer movement the Russians had planned to use on the Germans!

Look at the map below. It shows how on August 20, the Russian 1st Army had stopped to rest in the north (upper right corner). The Russian 2nd Army was far to the south (lower right). Between them, the German forces led by Ludendorff was coming by railroad.



In late August, German gunfire burst through the forest. Black smoke choked men's lungs. German machine guns spewed a seemingly endless supply of bullets. Russian flanks started retreating. Although the Russian center managed to make some advances, the Germans had dug into trenches and were using the terrain's excellent cover to keep the Russians from gaining much ground. Finally, after realizing the oncoming slaughter, the Russians broke and ran—retreating so quickly that soldiers dropped their rifles.



Germans in machine gun trench

As German artillery shells burst around them, Russian soldiers used their hands to dig into the hardened dirt, hoping to find cover. Wounded men screamed as they fell. Bullets hailed overhead.

The Germans refused to let up.

Climbing from their trenches, they went in for close-combat fighting. While some Russian soldiers raised their hands in surrender, others raced into the woods, hoping to escape.

German General Ludendorff later described the scene:

“As we at the head of the column came out of the dreadful wood, a shower of infantry fire suddenly hailed down on us. Lieutenant Colonel Schultz stopped a bullet in the temple and fell like a board, but he soon came to, swore frightfully and asked for a cigarette. Meanwhile, we had brought up artillery from the wood, and the Russian rabble, leaving behind a number of rifles and

packs, beat a hasty retreat, back into the darkness from which it had emerged.”

The Germans destroyed Russia’s 2nd Army.

The Battle of Tannenberg was over, and the Germans had won—decisively.

The Tannenberg defeat was so humiliating for the Russians that the commander of the 2nd Army, General Alexander Samsonov, walked into the nearby woods, pulled out his revolver, and killed himself.



Russian prisoners at Tannenberg

In the battle, Germany lost 20,000 men, dead or wounded. Russia lost about 140,000 men, dead or wounded. Another 150,000 Russian soldiers were captured.

Hearing the news, Russia’s 1st Army—so far away it couldn’t help its fellow soldiers—was ordered to retreat.

WHO FOUGHT?



Russian Cossacks serving as soldiers in WWI

The Cossacks were among the most legendary fighters of WWI.

Tall and strong, the Cossacks were excellent horseback riders. They lived on the far borders of Eastern Europe and fought on behalf of Russia during the war. Usually the Cossacks were tasked with scouting ahead of the advancing army or with covering an army's rear.

The Cossacks were armed with M1891 carbines (a type of rifle). They carried thirty rounds of ammunition in two oilskin bandoliers—a belt with pockets, often slung over a shoulder. But even with that weaponry, the Cossacks preferred hand-to-hand fighting—which was one reason their enemies found the Cossacks so terrifying. In close-combat battles, the Cossacks used a saber sword called a shashka.

French military general Napoleon Bonaparte once described the Cossacks as “among the best light troops among all that exist. If I

had them in my army, I would go through all the world with them.”

But ironically at Tannenberg, the Cossacks were among the factors that put a strain on the Russian forces. The Russians sent a large number of Cossacks to fight the Germans on the Eastern Front.

But horses require even more food than people.

BOOKS

World War I: A definitive visual history by DK

DK Eyewitness Books: World War I by Simon Adams

INTERNET

Quick video with footage of WWI cavalry, including the Cossacks on the Eastern Front. Also information about wolf packs attacking wounded soldiers! [youtube.com/watch?v=XovnkqJaqL8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XovnkqJaqL8)

MOVIES

History's Great Military Blunders and the Lessons They Teach (2015 video)

Get the rest of the book at GreatBattlesForBoys.Com and Amazon!

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