13 The Zenith of Nationalism
1914–1945 AD

The mood of rejoicing when the war began did not last when it became clear that the troops would not be home for Christmas.

The Russian armies advanced into Germany from the east quicker than expected and as a result part of the German army that had crossed Belgium and invaded France had to be put on trains and despatched to the east. The crushing victory over the Russians at Tannenberg by Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff hardly compensated for the failure to destroy the French armies and take Paris as in 1870. Instead, on the Marne the German army was halted and the attempts by the German and Franco-British armies to outflank each other led to a race to the sea. Trench warfare set in, and for both sides barbed wire, machine-gun defences and massive artillery barrages ensured huge slaughter of troops attempting to pierce the enemy line. There was relative stalemate too on the eastern front as the large but clumsy Russian armies manoeuvred over great distances against the equally cumbersome forces of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

The result was a number of attempts to break out of the deadlock. In 1915 the Germans used gas against the French at Ypres and initiated submarine warfare, declaring that any shipping in the waters around the British Isles would be sunk without warning. The Allies landed at Gallipoli, hoping Turkish defeat would lead to the creation of pressure on the Austro-German south-eastern flank. But the Gallipoli campaign ended in defeat and the submarine campaign was called off after protests from the United States, especially at the sinking of the liner Lusitania. The stalemate resumed. In 1916 two of the bloodiest battles in world history – at Verdun and the Somme – ended inconclusively, while in the North Sea, off Jutland, the failure of the German surface fleet to defeat the British would ensure a return to unrestricted submarine warfare. And warfare took on new dimensions with the introduction of the tank by the Allies and increasing use of airplanes.

1917, however, would see two events which would vitally affect the course of European history.

The first was revolution in Russia.
The nation had been exhausted and disorganised by the war. Nearly fifteen million men had been called up, many being sent to the front lacking adequate clothes and weapons. There were far too few victories to compensate for the horrific casualties. Desertions began, aided by seditious propaganda.

In February 1917 the lack of food and essential supplies led to riots and strikes. The police disintegrated and troops refused to fire on the demonstrators. A few days later the Tsar abdicated and three centuries of autocratic rule came to an end. A Provisional Government of liberals and democrats was set up, but it immediately faced a challenge from Bolshevik-dominated Soviets (Councils) of Workers and Soldiers Deputies, the Soviets demanding an immediate end to the war and drastic reforms at home. The Provisional Government needed money to provide supplies and restore order but the Allies would only provide the money if the Provisional Government continued the war and thus kept German and Austro-Hungarian troops tied down in the East rather than freeing them to reinforce their armies facing France and Italy. Reluctantly the Provisional Government agreed.

It was at this point that the Germans arranged for Lenin, then living in Zurich in neutral Switzerland, to return to Russia, counting on him to take charge of the revolution.

From then on it was Lenin and his Bolsheviks who dictated the course of events. When the new offensive ordered by the Provisional Government was crushed the demand for 'All Power to the Soviets', an end to the war, the nationalisation of banks and land, and the establishment of a Soviet republic proved irresistible. In October 1917 the Provisional Government collapsed, to be replaced by a Council of People's Commissars. Three decisions quickly taken were to end the war, nationalise the property of large landowners without compensation and to grant the peoples of Russia self-determination.

With Russia out of the war German troops could be switched to the western front where it was now vital to win a quick victory, and that was because of the second event of 1917, the entry of the United States into the war.

Since the end of the Civil War in 1865 America had grown to be the leading economic power in the world. The population had trebled to over ninety million, thanks to twenty million European immigrants.¹ There had been massive European investment in the railroads, and the oil and steel industries. In 1914 the United States