By the early 1900s, Europe was engulfed in tension. For some decades prior to this, European countries had been competing for control of land and shipping routes, and for natural resources, money and trading partners. The assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 28 June 1914 was only the spark that lit the ‘powder keg’. By August that year, World War I was declared between the Great Powers.

Within months, Europe’s political borders were redrawn along hostile war fronts — the Eastern Front and the Western Front (see the map at the end of this worksheet). These fronts, which grew as the war advanced, were ‘hot spots’ of bitter and prolonged fighting. The Western Front separated Germany from France to the west, and the Eastern Front from Russia to the east.

Germany’s plan of attack

Germany’s plan of attack at the start of the war (Schlieffen Plan) involved swiftly knocking out one major threat, France, before attacking the other, Russia. Fearing a German attack, however, Russia launched its own campaigns against Germany in the same month that Germany attacked France. Germany’s worst fears were realised — fighting a war on two fronts. The extra strain this placed on her manpower, armaments and supply lines eventually ground her to defeat. It was a painful lesson that Germany was destined to repeat just 20 years later in World War II — with the same result.

Front warfare

At its height, war on the Western Front was characterised by bitter stalemates. Enemy troops lined up a few hundred metres apart along kilometres of deep trenches riddled with stinking dead bodies looking for gaps in the other’s defences. Powerful long-range artillery and rapid-fire machine guns kept troops bunkered down in these muddy lines for months on end. Any territorial gain cost hundreds of lives as squads charged over a featureless ‘no man’s land’ between the trenches under waves of machine gunfire and cannon shells. Some six million people lost their lives.

The Eastern Front was more fluid, with great armies marching backwards and forwards across many hundreds of kilometres. Wheel-mounted artillery and experimental tanks came into their own during the ‘open ground’ attacks and counter-attacks. Statistics on this front were also grim, however. More than three million people were killed and more than nine million wounded.

Use the information in this worksheet and in the source listed as a Reference to complete the following activities.

1. Which countries made up each of the two Great Powers — the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente?

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2. Which Triple Alliance country defected to join the Allies?

3. Describe, in general terms, what were the Eastern and Western fronts.

4. Refer to the map on page 105 of SOSE Alive History 2 and a landforms map of Europe. Suggest why the Schlieffen Plan proposed the attack route indicated. Why, for example, might Germany have not decided to attack from another angle?

5. How was the failure of the Schlieffen Plan linked to the development of the Western Front?

6. Suggest why stalemates were so common in the trench fighting on war fronts.

7. Why do you think fighting on the war fronts of World War I would have been such a terrible experience? Imagine that you were a young soldier on one of these fronts. Use the map and other information in this worksheet, and details in SOSE Alive History 2, to write a letter home. You will describe not only where you are and what you are physically experiencing, but also how you feel and think.

Reference: SOSE Alive History 2, pages 98–9, 104–5 • SOSE Alive 4, p. 9