**The Beginning of WWI**

***The German Army Invade France***

Throughout August 1914, 1.5 million German soldiers tramped over Belgium into northern France. There they encountered about the same number of French soldiers plus a small British force. (Britain did not keep a large peacetime army, so few British soldiers reached France until early 1915.) As summer turned to fall, these two sides formed a battle line that became known as the Western Front.

At first, the French underestimated German strength. For years, French generals had stressed the importance of élan (ay-**LAHN**), or spirit, in battle. To attack the enemy boldly was all that counted. There was no need for defensive tactics, French army leaders reasoned, because victory would go to the army that attacked more vigorously.

Élan, however, was no match for the German fighting machine. All along the Western Front, German soldiers pushed back French forces. By September 2, German units were nearing the outskirts of Paris.

Germany now seemed within days of a victory on the Western Front. Problems quickly developed for Germany, however. The Germans had always fear Russia far more than France, and now Russia was mobilizing quickly. Therefore, the German high command decided to send thousands of men to the east. This move weakened the western army just at a time when the rapid advance into France had stretched German supply lines to the limit. Moreover, as the French retreated towards Paris, their lines of communication became shorter. As a result, the French and British were able to concentrate their forces.

***The Allies Struck Back***

On September 6, the Allies attacked a gap in the German lines northeast of Paris in the valley of the Marne River. Every available soldier was hurled into the struggled. When the French army ran out of trucks, hundreds of taxicabs from Paris rushed more soldiers to the battlefield.

At the Marne, the German advance was stopped dead in its tracks. On September 12, German generals gave the order to retreat. The German army fell back to a new line about 40 miles north of the Marne. Paris was saved.

Although it was only the first major clash on the Western Front, the Battle of the Marne was perhaps its most important single event. The German retreat left the Schlieffen Plan in ruins. A quick victory in the west was no longer possible.

Germany had no hope of a quick victory in the east either. Although the Germans won several battles against the Russians in 1914, Russia was simply too big for overnight conquest. Germany’s generals now faced the fearful prospect of a long war on two fronts.