

The First World War in the Army Museum

The vast department of World Wars I and II deals with the 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 conflicts. The course starts with the French defeat to Germany in 1871 and its consequences, and ends with the conclusive acts of World War II. Abiding by the chronology in the display of the collections allows to subdivide the course in two main parts : World War I and World War II.

The proposed course starts immediately after the 1871 defeat, when the spirit of revenge leads to an unprecedented recovery of the French army and makes patriotism the core civic value. This army becomes the instrument of the expansion overseas, which gives France the second colonial empire after Great Britain's one. The "Great War", as contemporaries called it, is a major historic event which influenced Europe's destiny and the world's in a decisive way. The exhibition rooms which are dedicated to it allow visitors to realize concretely why this war left such a deep mark on those who lived it, both on the front and behind the lines. The arms and equipments on display remind how the industrial revolution transforms the terms of the confrontation. They also convey the brutality of war the fighters had to sustain, while some of the personal objects on display give the conflict a moving dimension. The collections also show a wide range of the diversity of the belligerents, as well as the multiplication of fronts, which transform this conflict, European at first, into a genuine world war. They present an uneven assessment of the conflict, in the section "mourning and victory", then deal with the interwar period.

These exhibition rooms do not claim to be exhaustive ; they do, however, provide a living and global approach of the Great War. Audiovisual archives and various didactic materials allow for a better understanding of collection pieces, uniforms, arms, vehicles or personal objects on display in these showcases. Walls of posters and photography, often from private collections, illustrate some themes specific to this conflict.



6 « Aux soldats français morts pour la Patrie » (*To the french soldiers who died for the country*), ill.27 of the book « *Ceux qui n'oublent pas. Images et commentaires par l'oncle Hansi* » by Hansi, Paris, 1913, Inv. 20709 BIB, Eb 1527 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/ RMN-GP.

You will find at the end of this document a map of the museum's rooms, with the localisation of numbered items.

Towards the exhibition rooms of World War I, at the foot of staircase G, a FT 17 Renault tank, called the "Tank of Victory"
© Paris, musée de l'Armée.



Alsace-Lorraine room

“Honoured be the unfortunate bravery”, the defeat in painting

As a prologue, the Alsace-Lorraine room evokes the 1871 defeat through fragments of painted panoramas, released in 1882 by Alphonse de Neuville and Edouard Detaille **1**. These two military painters, fighters themselves during the Franco-German war, meticulously paint war scenes, enhancing the soldiers' heroism. They thus illustrate the phrase attributed to Napoleon, “honoured be the infortunate bravery”, and take part to the patriotic fervour which appears in France after the loss of Alsace and a part of Lorraine to Germany.



1 *Le fond de la giberne* - fragment of a panorama by E. Detaille et A. de Neuville, 1882 © musée de l'Armée / RMN-GP.

Reforming the army

As soon as the third Republic is proclaimed, it prepares for revenge. This means a full refoundation of the military institution in several fields : homeland defence, use of forces doctrine, staff formation. These points are dealt with through maps, pictures, publications or uniforms, among others. The Republic



2 Cocard of a conscrit, Inv. 25542 © Paris, musée de l'Armée.

opts for a conscription army which involves the progressive setting up of the compulsory military service for men. Hence the laws of 1889 and 1905 establishing a two years compulsory service. The soldier-citizen is then transferred to the reserve forces until the age of 46. He must upgrade his military instruction on a regular basis. In 1913, in order to keep a manpower similar to Germany's, the duration of the service increases to three years, and the final age to 48. The military service is considered an important stage in a man's life, and becomes an inspiring subject for a sometime comical popular art (banners, caricatures), displayed in the different showcases **2**. Pierre-Georges Jeannot's painting *The reservists* highlights the social blending generated by these periods of military instruction. The Ministry of Public Instruction also takes part in the formation of the soldier-citizen through the school battalions (from 1882 to 1890), which are evoked several times in this first room.

The adoption of the metal cartridge ('Gras' rifle), and the invention of the smokeless powder by chemist Paul Vieille in 1884, lead to rapid progress in weaponry, made perceptible through three thematic showcases and a vast arms tray. The infantry receives the repeating rifle, model of 1886, known as the “Lebel” rifle **3**, under the impulsion of General Boulanger.



4 Alsace-Lorraine room, the 75 mm canon. © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

The Saint-Etienne machine gun, model of 1907, **4** is chosen to replace the Gatling with handle. The 75 mm cannon, model of 1897, displayed with its horsedrawn front and various complementary devices, equips the artillery. With its swift and exact firing, this cannon is considered the best campaign cannon of the time.

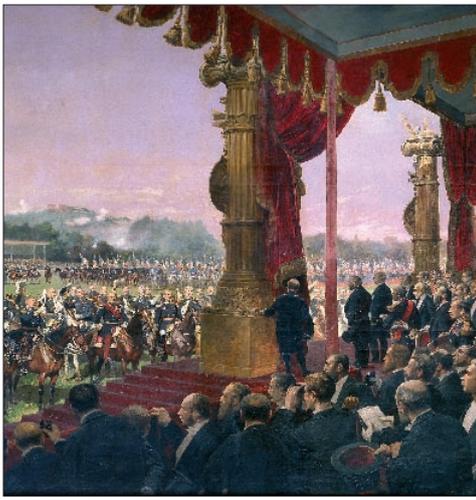


4 The Saint-Étienne machine gun, model 1917. Inv. 2002.13.15 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN -GP.

The army and the nation

Only the French uniform remains unchanged, in spite of several attempts to adopt less gaudy outfits, such as the reseda dress. A group of dummies wearing madder red trousers and gleaming breastplates **5**, along with the showcases displaying trial helmets, show how France remains fond of “the uniform's great era”, enhancing the military man and distinguishing each subdivision of the army.

The large painting by Edouard Detaille, **7** which portrays the delivery of its flags to the French army, on July 14th, 1880, illustrates the consensus established by the Republic about its army. Patriotism, developed by school and military service, and nationalism, are evoked around Déroulède's portrait **6** “revenge's bard”. The crisis through which the army goes, the Dreyfus affair for instance, do not undermine its prestige among the nation.



7 *Remise de ses nouveaux drapeaux et étendards à l'armée française* by E. Detaille, Inv. 0901
© Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

Joffre room

French colonial expansion

The first part of the Joffre room is dedicated to the colonial expansion led by the 3rd Republic. France, isolated in Europe by Bismarck's politics, resumes its colonial expansion and builds up, under the specific impulsion of Jules Ferry, the second empire worldwide, second to Great Britain's. Two ethnographic showcases **8** display objects from Asia, Africa and Madagascar, some of which belonged to well-known protagonists of these events. Uniforms of the Africa army and of the colonial army **9**, make it possible to present a sample of the troops, the recruitment of which is highly various, troops which took part in these conquests and ensured French presence in Africa, Asia and Madagascar. Personal objects evoke military men who became famous through their action towards pacification and development of overseas territories. Far away from their homeland, they do have some margin of action, which also leads to some whims : Lyautey's kepi with a monocle, or Gallieni's sedan chair, rank among them (Marshall Lyautey's tomb was, later, placed under les Invalides Dôme) **10**.

This expansion generates clashes with European neighbours. The large portrait of commodore Marchand reminds of the Fachoda affair, in Sudan, during which relations between France and the United Kingdom reach a crisis-level (1898). In Tunisia, France competes with Italy. In 1905 and 1911, in Morocco, France is faced with Germany's ambitions, a belated competitor in the colonial race, but a soaring country about which the United Kingdom is worried.

Europe and the world

At the beginning of the 20th century, Europe rules the world while the United States are on the verge of becoming the first industrial power, and in Asia modernized Japan inflicts severe defeats on Russia in the years 1904-1905.

The European context

In Europe, Bismarck's demission in 1890 modifies the diplomatic scene. Newspapers **11** comment on the rapprochement between republican France and tsarist Russia, including military agreements, then on the one between France and England leading to an *Entente Cordiale* in 1904. Russia and the United Kingdom settle their colonial disagreements in Asia and finally form with France the *Triple Entente* (1907). Since 1882, the *Triplice* rests on the ancient and solid alliance between Germany and Austro-Hungary, joined by Italy, gradually taken away from the central empires because of territorial disagreements with Austria.

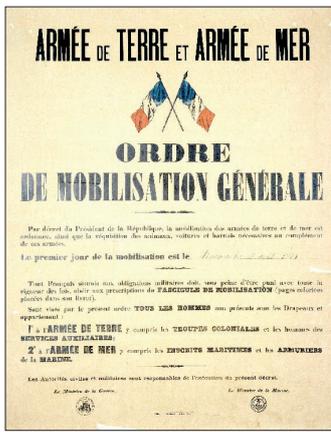
Sarajevo's assassination

This division of Europe in two blocs, clearly materialized by the museography, **12**, makes the instability of the young balkanic states (born out of the withdrawal of the ottoman power) even more dangerous as Russia's and Austria's ambitions clash there. The Sarajevo assassination, on June 28th, 1914, sets fire to the powder keg and trigger the spiral of alliances towards the war.



11 *Le nez de la triplice (The Triple Alliance's nose)*, *Le Petit journal*, October 25th, 1896, Inv. 2005.1.11 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

From this point, war years chronology is materialized on the ground, in golden figures on a black background



13 Mobilization order, August, 2nd 1914, Inv. 2005.1.35 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN GP.

The battle of the Marne

At the very beginning of August 1914, France and Germany have already mobilized **13**. On August 4th, with the British intervention, both camps are already at war, Italy excepted. They are all convinced that the war will be a short one. Germany fights on two fronts ; it has to defeat France swiftly before turning its forces against Russia. Therefore, it puts into practice the Schlieffen plan, which provides for the troops to cross Belgium, a neutral country, in order to skirt northwest the French army, most of which is congregated in the east. Thanks to its more powerful artillery and a better use of machine guns, it quickly gains ground.

On August 25th, General Joffre, commander in chief of the North and Northeast armies, has to order the retreat of its left wing. On September 6th, General Gallieni, commanding officer of Paris, convinces him to counter-attack, thus leading to the set of operations forming "the battle of the Marne".

Parisian taxis **15**, become then a symbol of French pugnacity by taking part in the troop transportation to the frontline. Mobile warfare goes on through outflanking attempts (improperly called "race to the sea"), without any decisive victory for one camp or the other ; in December, the armies bury themselves face to face, from the North Sea to the Swiss border. In the East, Russian offensives, quicker than expected, force the German command to fight on two fronts as soon as August : the rear alliance has worked well for France. A diorama **14** sums up the main stages of these first months at war on the western front.

The fights of 1914 are the most intensively deadly of World War I, demonstrating how far the general staffs are from understanding the full extent of fire's destructiveness on the battlefield. The equipment of the French, Belgian or German soldier in 1914, displayed around the diorama, are unsuited for the actual conditions of war.



27^e infantry regiment foot soldier, Inv. Ga 451 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN GP.

The "Poilus" room

Trench warfare



16 Scale model of a trench © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

At the entrance of the "Poilus" room, a wall displaying public notices from the German authorities evokes the fate of occupied departments.

The western front, from the end of 1914 to the spring of 1918, is characterized by the trench system. It is a new warfare, of which the organization in the field and the daily constraints are described through a scale model made by a French officer in 1915. **16**. It is completed by a wall of photographs, most of which were taken by the soldiers themselves. The very rough conditions of living (frost, mud, rats, lice...) the soldiers have to undergo, in addition to the anxiety of combat, imply efforts to adapt, at first improvised, then coordinated and rationalized. In both camps, the uniform changes in order to provide soldiers with a better protection against wounds and coldness **17**.

A showcase is dedicated to the designing of the new helmets, both French and German. The horizon blue outfit and the Adrian helmet progressively fit out the French soldier, the so-called "poilu".

Weaponry diversifies and increases **18** rifles, trench rifles, light machine guns, grenades, machine guns, "crapouillots" (slang for mortars). Poison gas and flame-thrower, which terrify soldiers, are used in this conflict for the first time. A toy penguin, mascot of lieutenant Pégoud, draws attention to the showcase dedicated to the French champions of World War I.



18 Crapouillots © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

Aviation is used as soon as the war starts to observe enemy lines and set artillery firing ; its technical improvements then allow it to engage in air fighting and bombing. The allied sea blockade progressively suffocates the German economy. In the beginning of 1917, William 2nd allows the German "U-Boote" to engage into a total submarine war which partly drags the USA into the war.

The accumulation of equipments and materials in this display space of the "Poilus" room gives a concrete dimension to the brutality of the conflict experienced by the fighters. The great offensives led by the French and the Britons in 1915 and 1916, in order to break the frontline in Champagne, Artois or Somme, lead to repeated failures ; none of the two camps succeeds in breaking through.

From February to November 1916, the battle of attrition led in Verdun by Germany in order to annihilate the French army remains in the collective memory as a synonym to hell. Félix Vallotton's painting, "Verdun", ¹⁹ depicts the destructive power and the dehumanization of industrial warfare. General Pétain's role in the victorious defence of Verdun imparts him with fame, but it is the attention he pays to the fighter's conditions of living, in the aftermath of the May-June 1917 crisis, that earns him great popularity. "The lasting war" intensifies the total war by mobilizing all of the human and material resources of the countries at clash. The weapon race implies to set up a war economy which requires a collective effort, both material and financial, of which the posters of the time testify. The great studded, wooden eagle takes place in this regard : each nail embodies the financial contribution of a German family to the war effort.



¹⁹ Verdun by F. Vallotton (1865-1925), Inv. Eb 1518 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.



²⁰ Pour la France versez votre or (For France give your gold) by A. Faivre, Inv. 2005.1.36 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

Soldiers' daily life

Maintaining the general population's spirits in order to carry on with the war effort becomes a major preoccupation. Belligerent states have official services available using propaganda and censorship to control the information. The wall of pictures dedicated to this topic offers a choice of photographs and posters which take part in the supervision of the general public. ²⁰.

Mail between the frontline and behind, exchanged on a very regular basis, provides another core support of everyone's spirits. The war cross and fourragère displayed in a showcase are two distinctions created in 1915 to honour the fighters' and units' individual and collective courage. The cassock and the jagged jacket with a medical label evoke the presence of chaplains, stretcher-bearers, doctors who often share the same dangers as the fighters in order to carry out their mission.

Colonial empires in the war

Lieutenant's Juin djellaba calls the attention to the military participation of the French and British colonies, brought in to relieve the manpower crisis ²¹. Indigenous troops make up for about 8% of manpower committed in the conflict by France. In 1915, the supply corps provides them with the mustard kaki uniform, visible on the Senegalese scout. The British empire calls up almost three million men, most of them from the dominions and India. These troops fight on all fronts, both in Europe and on peripheral fronts, and their presence sustains German propaganda. The banner exposed in this display space is a call to desertion aimed at the Muslims fighting in the French army. These units remain loyal and many of them gain a reputation of elite troops.



²¹ A spahi (algerian soldier) in trench, 1915, Inv. 15262.BIB © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

The other fronts

During these very same years, war has become a worldwide one **22**. Diplomatic activity brings new countries into the conflict. The Ottoman Empire in 1914 and Bulgaria in 1915 side with Germany and Austro-Hungary. France and England rally Japan as soon as 1914, Italy in 1915, Portugal and Romania in 1916, the United States and Greece in 1917. They are followed by other countries in Asia and Latin America. The Allies increase the number of fronts to compel the central empires to scatter their forces. German colonies in Africa, Caucasia, the Near- and Middle East become new theatre of operations. In the Balkans, after the failure of the Anglo-French expedition in the Dardanelles, the Allies get a foothold in Salonica, which becomes the eastern armies' base. The French eastern army then steps in to help Serbia. Maps and uniforms displayed in this space illustrate this extension of the conflict.

1917 is not an easy year. In France, social unrest revealing the population's weariness burst out from the early year on. The failure of the offensive at the Chemin des Dames triggers collective insubordination, the "mutinies", in the French army : the unit refuse to go up to the front, even if none leaves the trench. Caporetto's disaster in October confirms Italy's weakness. Russia, shaken by two revolutions, has to abandon combat and asks unilaterally the central empires for an armistice in December. This same year, on April 6th, the United States enter the war against Germany, but their army is not yet ready ; it will be operational only in the summer of 1918.

The Foch room

The Allies

In its first part, the Foch room presents the means of allied victory **23**. The US flag on display belonged to the volunteers arrived in France as soon as 1914. Other documents show the presence of Polish, Czech, Russian volunteers who fight alongside the Allies. Posters illustrate British and US recruitment campaigns ; England has to resign to establishing conscription. The progressive arrival of US troops on the western front gives an increasing numeric superiority to the Entente Cordiale's troops. French and British factories carry on producing large amounts of weaponry, especially tanks and planes, while the sea blockade suffocates the Reich's economy.

Towards the war's outcome

In the spring of 1918, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, rid of the Russian front, launch a series of offensives on the western front ; mobile warfare starts again. The German army breaks through the frontline, without achieving to gain decisive advantage, and the new defensive tactic recommended by general Pétain enables to stop their progression. Clemenceau obtains, for the first time since the beginning of the war, a unique commandment of allied armies, entrusted to general Foch (Marshal Foch's tomb was placed in the Saint Ambroise's chapel of the Invalides Dome). The deep defence tactic, the use of tanks **24** supported by aviation to back infantry forces and the progressive arrival of the Americans on the front give the Allies the final victory. In the Balkans, general Franchet d'Esperey, commander of the allied eastern armies, defeats the central empires'troops. . After its allies are knocked out, Germany, in the grip of a strong social and political unrest, asks for an armistice. On November 11th, 1918, the armistice is signed in Rethondes, in the Compiègne's forest. World War I is over.



23 *I want you for US Army*, J. Montgomery Flagg, Inv. 002.1.138
© Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.



25 *Le défilé de la Victoire, le 14 juillet 1919 (Victory's parade)* by F. Flameng, Inv. 1683 C1 © Paris, musée de l'Armée/RMN-GP.

A costly victory

The movie called "Mourning and victory" and the objects displayed in the next room illustrate the uneven assessment of victory obtained at great cost. Pictures of popular jubilation, of reunion alternate with those of ruins and mutilated. Marshal sticks and their honour swords, the painting « Le défilé de la Victoire » **25** are next to the plaster illustrating the effects of plastic surgery on a "gueule cassée" (broken face). Human losses of World War I are estimated at 9.5 million dead (1.37 for France). Monuments erected to commemorate their sacrifice addresses both domestic

and collective memory. The veteran status is set up in 1927, among which 100 000 severely invalid persons and 15 000 "gueules cassées". This decimated generation of young men affects France's demographic vitality during the interwar years. The scope of devastation which took place in the invaded departments requires a long and costly reconstruction.

German and Italian public opinions agree with difficulty to the peace treaties, which in Europe give birth to independent but frail nations, undermining peace's foundations. These frustrations, increased by economic crisis, will lead to the rise of totalitarianisms and the failure of the League of Nations.

The interwar years

France in the 1920's looks like a great power **26** : France in the 1920's looks like a great power : new countries of Central and Eastern Europe seek out for its protection, it puts an end to Abd el Krim's holy war in the Rif and steps in Syria to impose peace on the Druzes. The colonial empire reaches its peak and is the subject of a great popular exhibition in Vincennes, in 1931. In the thirties, France withdraws into itself. Nazi Germany openly breaks the stipulations of the Versailles treaty, forms alliances with other dictatorships and directly steps in the Spain war. Faced with the rise of perils, British and French liberal democracies experience strong pacifist trends and try to avoid a new general conflict in Europe. A selection of recruitment posters confronts two visions of the French army in the 1930's : some praise a modern, mechanized army, the others are built on the traditional image of a horseman. They convey the ambiguities of an army wavering between archaism and modernity. Mainly, the doctrine for the use of forces is ossified, the high command favouring a defensive strategy based on the Maginot line's fortifications. **27**



Casts of a «gueule cassée» before and after surgery, Inv. 2005.1.36
© Paris, musée de l'Armée / RMN-GP.



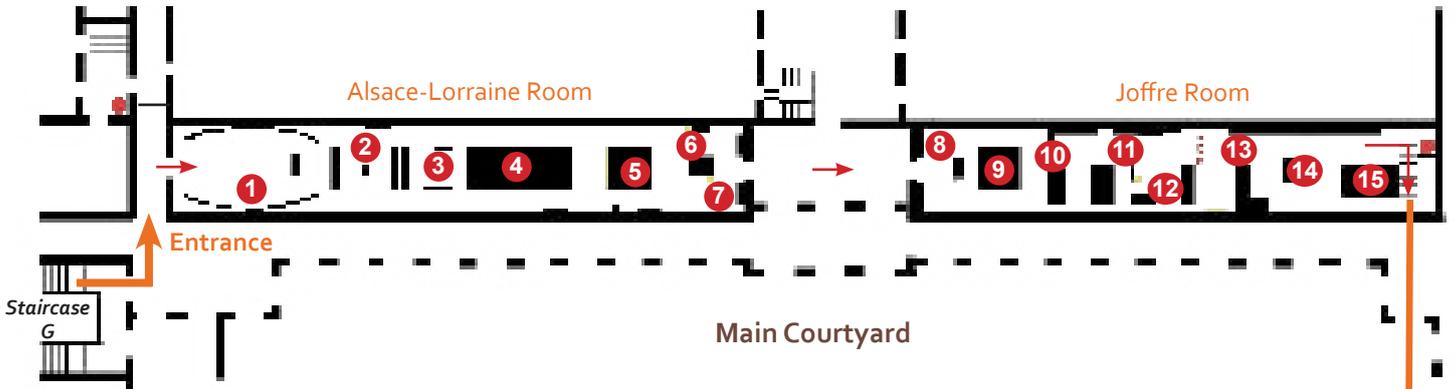
Entrance of the department « First World War » - Alsace-Lorraine room © Paris, musée de l'Armée / RMN-GP.

Map of « First World War » rooms

Level 1 (access by staircase G)

 multimedia devices

 elevators (disabled visitors only)



Level 2

