

# World War I

The build up that created World War I began in the 1800s. Several major events took place that created a time of tension in Western Europe. The Crimean War, the Unifications of Germany and Italy, the Franco-Prussian War and the political unrest in the Balkans, combined with the fall of the Ottoman Empire all created nationalism and uncertainty within the region.

Between 1871 and 1914, Western Europe went through an era called the “Long Peace” but during these years there remained doubt in the minds of the people as to how long the tranquility would last. Despite the birth of the modern Olympic Games in 1896 and the first Nobel Peace Prize being awarded in 1901, Western Europe was living under the ambitions of radical nationalism. Terms such as *saber rattling*, *jingoism* (a British nickname for belligerent patriotism), and *brinkmanship* (a diplomatic term referring to a country’s willingness to risk war in order to get its way) became part of the daily vocabulary.

Imperialism in Africa was a major cause of aggression. By the late 1800s, Western European countries saw that there were fewer places left for expansion. Africa had been divided into new nations, controlled by these foreign nations. Germany, once united in 1871, took a stance that it believed that they deserved “*a place in the sun*” – demanding that they be allowed equal military and imperial status with the older imperialistic nations such as Britain and France. This was especially true while Germany was under the rule of Kaiser Wilhelm II. When he came to the throne in 1888, it only took him two years to dismiss Otto von Bismarck and create an aggressive and forceful nation. The Kaiser’s actions made the rest of Europe extremely nervous. His military build-up included the creation of a strong and modern navy, direct competition to the British Royal Navy who currently ruled the high-seas.

During the 1880s new Alliance Systems were formed. These alliance systems created conflict between nations and did little to create peace. In 1879, Germany and Austria signed an agreement to be allies. Then in 1881, the newly unified nation of Italy became the third country to the agreement forming the *Triple Alliance*.

Germany had a friendly relationship with Russia during these years and maintained a relationship with Britain that was based on neutrality. Britain however saw Russia as its most serious rival within the European countries. France was isolated; it had no real allies during the 1880s and still carried a major resentment towards Germany due to their defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. The jostling for power between these Western European nations became to be known as the *Great Game*.

In 1904, the British made an agreement to ally themselves with France. Then in 1907, they finally saw that Germany had become a greater threat to their sovereignty than Russia. The informal agreement now made between these three nations became known as the *Triple Entente*.

Now the European powers were divided into two evenly matched alliances, both pledging to go to war if any of the two nations within these coalitions began to fight each other.

## The “Powder Keg of Europe” – the Balkans.

The areas in Southeastern Europe known as the Balkans were caught directly in the middle of the imperial paths of Russia, Austria, Italy and the Ottoman Empire. Each nation believed that they should have power over this region. However, the Balkan people thought otherwise. They had hopes, expectations, and dreams of their own nationalism or national identity. Beginning in the 1820s with the Greek war of independence from Ottoman rule, the various Slavic peoples and other ethnic minorities within the Balkans wanted their own freedom from imperialism. They were willing to wage war if necessary. By the early 1900s, the nationalist ambitions of these Balkan people, especially the Serbs, had become a major issue for the Western European alliances. In 1912 and 1913 two short wars took place in the Balkan regions and by 1914 the Balkans had become known as the “*Powder Keg of Europe*,” a region that could explode at any minute.

The actual “spark” that caused World War I came on June 28, 1914 in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo. During the two wars of 1912 and 1913, Serbia had become an independent nation and now had ambitions to grow larger. In 1908, Austria had annexed Bosnia and claimed that it ruled the region. Russia believed that it was to rule the region and both Austria and Russia constantly disagreed who was to rule the area.

In an attempt to display imperial power and control to the region, *Archduke Francis Ferdinand*, heir to the throne of Austria, and his wife Sophie, openly paraded through the streets of Sarajevo in an attempt to convince the Bosnian people that they should be ruled by Austria and not Russia. During the parade a Bosnian student of Serb descent, *Gavrilo Princip*, who was also a member of the radical group called the *Black Hand*, which was funded by Serbia, openly assassinated the Archduke and his wife. The shooting became known as “**the shot heard around the world.**”

The assassination created an international outrage. Austria blamed Serbia for the murders. On July 23, 1914, Austria handed Serbia an ultimatum, which was a list of humiliating demands, and threatened to declare war on the nation if the terms of this agreement were not met. Because of the alliances systems already in place, Russia came to Serbia’s aid as their “big brother” and proclaimed that they would intervene against this Austrian domination. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany then backed his ally Austria, announcing that he would give them a “*blank check*”, an assurance of German support of any action Austria might take against Serbia, even if Russia intervened. These actions also meant the France was ready to aid Russia in the event of a war.

On July 28, 1914, Austria declared war on Serbia. In a chain reaction, the alliance agreements were honored and Europe was at war. Between July 28 and August 4, Serbia, Russia, Germany, France and then Britain entered the war. The incident in the Balkans was just one of many factors that caused World War I. The thralls of nationalism and imperialism that spread across Europe were really the underlying factors. Any international incident could have easily started the war. It just so happened that the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand was the event that began World War I.

### The Schlieffen Plan

As early as 1906 the Germans had developed a plan that they believed would quickly end any war, making Germany victorious. If a war was to break out it would be fought on two fronts, the **Western Front** (against France and possibly England) and the **Eastern Front** (against Russia). Germany realized that the longer a conflict would last the less chance they and Austria had to win.

**The Schlieffen Plan**, named after a German general, called for a daring gamble. At the first sign of war Germany was to send 75% of its army to fight the French, capture Paris and take out the French army within six weeks. The remainder of their army, combined with the Austrians, would then defend against Russia. The Germans believed that it would take the Russian army months to mobilize so by attacking France first they would gain an immediate advantage. Germany's surprise attack would send the main armed forces along the shortest route towards Paris. This meant that they had to cross through **Belgium**, a neutral country prior to 1914. As soon as the Germans invaded Belgium, Britain, who had previously signed a pact with Belgium, declared war on Germany.

<b>The Triple Alliance (the Central Powers)</b>	<b>The Triple Entente (the Allies)</b>
<b>GERMANY</b> <b>AUSTRIA/HUNGARY</b> <b>ITALY*</b> Bulgaria Ottoman Empire	<b>FRANCE</b> <b>RUSSIA</b> <b>GREAT BRITAIN</b> Canada New Zealand Australia South Africa

Many other nations became involved in the war but the above table reflects the major combatants.

\***Italy** will change sides during the war as they were promised by Britain and France large portions of the Austrian territories if they fought on the side of the Allies.

The illegal invasion of Belgium caused the death of many civilians. Any good reputation that Germany once had was changed; Allied propaganda made them the aggressors and gave the Germans the nicknames of "**barbarians**" and "**Huns.**"

The Schlieffen Plan was put into effect in August 1914 and by early September, it had failed. The Belgians resisted the German invasion force. The Russians mobilized more quickly than anticipated forcing the Germans to divert more troops to the Western Front. The German army did reach the outskirts of Paris but the French army made a heroic stand along the banks of the Marne River, saving Paris from German occupation.

**The Battle of the Marne** ended the Schlieffen Plan and took away any hope that the war would end quickly.

## The Western Front

For the remainder of 1914 and for the next two years, **Trench Warfare** developed along a **500 mile line** that stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss border. The fighting was at a stalemate. Both sides were evenly matched and were armed with the latest in industrial-era weapons. The use of heavy artillery (field-guns), machine guns and modern rifles made the battlefields deadly. The old warfare tradition of full battle charges was no longer of use. The spraying of bullets from the machine guns and the use of barbed-wire across “**no-man’s land**” created horrific scenes across Western Europe. Both sides dug deep trenches for protection and mazes were made between the front and back lines so that reinforcements could be quickly brought to the battle lines and the wounded or dead could be removed to the rear. Railway lines were built to carry weapons, supplies and reinforcements to the fighting. The lines abruptly stopped at the trenches without any stations being built. Towns and villages that stood in the way of these trenches were completely destroyed and the occupants were evacuated.

Life in the trenches was just as miserable as the warfare. Between the mud, rats, lice, disease and the dead bodies the smell was terrible and very unsanitary. For the first three years of bloody fighting neither side gained any ground. The **Battle of Verdun** and the **Battle of the Somme**, both in 1916, are known as the most futile battles in all of modern warfare. There were hundreds of thousands of casualties in both battles yet neither side gained more than a few yards of land. **Poison gas** was also used for the first time during World War I. The gas was heavier than air so it remained within the trenches. Gas masks became part of a standard military uniform. If gas was detected a person only had a few seconds to put on the mask before the fumes killed you. Death was very painful and for those who did not die immediately the gas had major side effects that lingered within a human for many years.

Many great works of literature were written about life in the trenches in Western Europe. Two books of note are:

*All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque

*Goodbye to All That* by Robert Graves

In addition Britain had several war-poets such as Robert Own, Siegfried Sassoon and Stephen Spender who captured the fighting eloquently within their works.

## The Eastern Front

The Eastern Front was much longer, the line of fighting extended well over 1,000 miles. The fighting was also different. The battles were decisive, especially in favor of the Germans and Austrians. At first there were several Russian victories but over time the Triple Alliance killed, wounded and captured millions of Russians. The Central Powers also took hundreds of square miles of Russian territory. Once Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire joined the war on the side of the Central Powers, Russia was cut-off from its allies and had to fight the war without supplies or assistance. By 1917 Russia was nearing the end of its capacity to fight along the Eastern Front.

## The Battles at Sea

One of the major causes of tension between Germany and Great Britain was the race to build the largest navy. Ironically World War I saw no major ship-to-ship battles. The British (Royal Navy) imposed blockades on Germany and Austria attempting to stop all supplies shipped to the enemies. In response to these blockades, Germany used its newest and most effective naval weapon, the submarine, also called the **U-Boat**. The use of submarines enabled Germany to take a major advantage during the war. As Britain is an island it relies on supplies to be shipped in from outside sources. The U-Boat sank many convoys of these supply ships. Several times during the war Britain was severely low of food supplies because of these U-Boat attacks.

The use of submarines was a political risk to the Germans. There were many instances when submarines attacked and sank neutral ships or killed civilians from neutral countries. This was especially true when after many submarine attacks the United States of America responded, subsequently blaming the U-Boats as one major reason for bringing them into the war in 1917.

## The War in Europe becomes a Global War.

As discussed, a major factor in the cause of World War I was imperialism and the spread of European colonization. When Britain declared war on Germany so too did its empire. The British imperial dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa also declared war on the Central Powers. Colonial armies in both French and British Africa fought against German colonial troops. According to one estimate, **more than 2.5 million Africans were involved** in the war effort one way or another. In addition, the British mobilized **Indian Sepoys, Sikhs and Gurkhas** from Nepal to fight in the Middle East.

The war in the Middle East witnessed a battle for power between the British Empire and the Ottoman Turks. The conquest did not start well for the British. In 1915 Australian and New Zealand troops tried to defeat the Ottoman's by invading **Gallipoli**, an area southwest of Istanbul. From there they planned to attack Istanbul and take control over the Turkish Empire. The campaign was a total disaster. Over 50% of the British Commonwealth troops died in this failed invasion. Better luck came later on during the war. A British officer, T.E. Lawrence (**Lawrence of Arabia**) was successful in persuading local Arab princes to rise up against their Ottoman rulers. By 1917 and into early 1918 the British were in the position of defeating the once mighty Ottoman Empire.

## Censorship and Curtailment of Civil Liberties

All countries imposed censorship during the war. Those suspected of espionage or treason were arrested, tried then sentenced without due process. There was no criticism of the government during the war. Anyone talking negatively about the war or not being patriotic was under suspicion by their government. In most cases, the penalty for any of these crimes was death.

## The Home Front

World War I was a total war. Every person of every nation involved participated in one way or another. Civilian populations became a crucial part of each nation's war efforts.

Before the war began the average size of each nation's army was approximately 1 to 2 million men. However, this was not enough due to the physical areas of conflict. Countries such as Britain which prior to the war maintained an all-volunteer army were forced to draft men into the armed services. All of the Western European nations had to resort to **conscription** (the draft) and by the time the war was over **more than 70 million men were drafted by both sides**.

World War I was a war of technology and the new weapons utilized required vast amounts of raw materials for their manufacture. The most valuable products were iron, steel, petroleum, rubber and cloth along with many other miscellaneous items. The workforces of each nation had to make uniforms for the soldiers, weapons and ammunition.

Agricultural industries had to produce food more than ever before just to feed the men fighting along the front lines. With so many fighting the war, the strain of these industrial and agricultural demands fell on to the general populations of each nation. **Women** were now put into roles they had never worked before. Prior to the war the old-fashioned male-dominated societies did not allow women in the daily workforces. Now women became machinists, ammunition and gun makers, even farmers.

In Britain, over 1,350,000 women who had never worked before had to take jobs in the factories to support the war effort. In Germany, the nation's largest arms manufacturer, Krupp, had 40% of its workforce comprised of women. Even France allowed women to work in their factories, many of whom were paid a minimum wage to sew and produce military uniforms for their troops.

Entire nations faced **large-scale rationing** and any extra items in the household were turned in for recycling into valuable war materials. Most private industries were taken over by their governments in order to achieve maximum production of war goods and materials. Despite all of these heroic home-front efforts, by the end of 1916 and in early 1917 all of the European nations were suffering terrible shortages. Britain's food supplies were almost depleted due to the German U-Boats. German and Austrian troops were so short of food that during the winter of 1916-1917 many men survived the "**turnip-winter**" by living off a diet solely of these vegetables. At the same time the Russian soldiers along the Eastern front were so short of food and equipment that new soldiers were being sent to the front by the trainloads, but few of them had boots or guns. They had to scavenge these items from dead troops lying in the battlefields.

## The Final Stages of World War I (1917 and 1918)

1917 was a crucial year for the war and a turning point that would start to bring the war to an end. Both sides were tired of fighting out a stalemate. In addition the German navy could not win any decisive sea battles. This meant that the next German move was to increase the naval blockade against England and try to starve them out of the war. **Unrestricted submarine warfare** was used with effect by the Germans; during the spring the British only had six weeks of food supply left.

Unfortunately for the Germans they also sank several American merchant ships. The United States, which had tried to be neutral during the war, now shifted its sympathy toward the Allies. The final straw for the Americans also came in the spring. The British intercepted a telegram from Germany to Mexico. The **Zimmerman Telegram** as it became to be known after the German general who sent it, tried to convince Mexico to declare war on the United States. If they did then Germany would give them financial and military aid. The response was immediate by the United States and in April of 1917 they declared war on Germany. **The United States had now entered World War I.**

While the United States was readying for war Russia was collapsing. In March, 1917 the tsarist regime fell. The new government attempted to continue the war but the Russian army was devastated by mass desertions of unhappy soldiers wanting to end their needless war. When **Vladimir Lenin** and the **Bolshevik Party** staged their Communist takeover of Russia in October to November of 1917, the revolutionaries immediately began to pull their nation's troops out of the war. This Russian retreat meant that Germany could now send thousands of additional troops to the Western Front, which would hopefully change the stalemate.

The last year, from 1917 to 1918 was now a military race. Who would arrive first at the Western Front and take advantage of the situation, Germany or the United States? Germany's plan was in two parts. First, by using their U-boats and sinking the troop ships carrying the American troops across to Europe, they would gain a distinct advantage of sheer numbers. The second part was then to have the reinforcements from the Eastern Front knock out the weary French and British troops. Which ever side could reach Western Europe first would win the war.

Time was against the Germans so in the spring of 1918 they launched a massive offensive against northern France with the hope of capturing Paris. Similar to 1914 their plan to capture Paris failed again at the Marne River. During the summer of 1918 British, Canadian, French and now American troops that recently arrived started to push the Germans back. By the fall of 1918 the Germans were in full retreat, all the way back to the border of France and Germany. In early November, strikes and mutinies within their armies convinced the Austrian and German governments to surrender. World War I finally came to an end on November 11, 1918. An **ARMISTICE** (a cessation of hostilities as a prelude to peace negotiations) began on the eleventh hours of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Today Europeans still have **Armistice Day** as a day of remembrance.

The fact that an Armistice had been signed on the Western Front did not mean that the war came to an end on the Eastern Front. Treaties were signed in late 1917 and Romania had pulled out of the war in late December but fighting still continued in the areas that once belonged to Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The Eastern Front came to an end when all the nations involved saw that nothing further was to be gained by fighting and an armistice on the Eastern Front was also declared.

With both fronts ending the war the terms of peace were led by American **President Woodrow Wilson** who created his **Fourteen Points** as instructions for the conference and the terms of the treaties that were now required. The **Paris Peace Conference** was set for mid 1919. Many of Wilson’s decision for his Fourteen Points were drawn from the statistical costs of World War I.

### **The Paris Peace Conference**

The terms for peace after World War I were held in Paris. The conference was from 1919 to 1920. All of the decisions were made by the Allies who saw themselves as the victors of the war.

Representing the Allies were:-

- President Woodrow Wilson – United States of America
- Prime Minister David Lloyd George – Great Britain
- Premier Georges Clemenceau – France
- Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando – Italy

The Allies prepared five separate treaties, once each for Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire. The most famous was the **Treaty of Versailles**, the agreement between the Allies and Germany.

Woodrow Wilson’s plan was not well received by the European Allied nations. The following table shows the differences between the two sides:

Demands by the United States	Demands by Britain, France and Italy
<u><b>American Idealism</b></u>	<u><b>European Revenge</b></u>
<p>Woodrow Wilson wanted to “make the world safe for democracy” and prevent future war</p> <p><u><b>The Fourteen Points</b></u> wanted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An end to secret treaties</li> <li>• Freedom of the seas</li> <li>• Free trade</li> <li>• Arms reduction</li> <li>• Decolonization</li> <li>• New European borders according to the “self-determination” of national groups</li> <li>• Establishment of a global dispute/resolution body to be called <u><b>The League of Nations</b></u></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Britain and France wanted Germany to pay for the war</li> <li>• France wanted to keep Germany from rising up again and becoming a threat to European peace</li> <li>• Italy wanted the Austrian land and German colonies it had been promised by Britain and France when it changed sides during the war</li> <li>• Britain, France, and Italy were strongly opposed to Woodrow Wilson’s plan for decolonization</li> </ul>



## The Terms of the Treaties

### The First Four Treaties

- **Austria-Hungary was dismantled** – The Hapsburg Empire was destroyed. Austria and Hungary became two separate states, both losing vast areas of territory.
- **New Nations were formed** – lands taken from the Hapsburg Empire, Germany and Russia on the Eastern front were divided into the new countries of **Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.**
- **Italy's promise by the Allies** – Italy received some of the lands it was promised, but not all of it. It gained lands in part of the Tyrol region but not the lands on the Adriatic Sea coast which they really wanted
- **Population Transfers in the Balkans** – Thousands of Turks who lived in southeastern Europe were expelled and sent back to the Ottoman Empire. The same happened to the large number of Greeks who lived in the Ottoman Empire. They were deported back to Greece.
- **The Middle East** – The lands in the Middle East once held by the Ottomans were now controlled by the British and French. Britain also controlled Palestine. The **Balfour Declaration** in 1917 created a Jewish homeland in this region however the British delayed this agreement due to the Arabs being unhappy. They fought against the Ottomans and believed that they should gain parts of this territory but were denied by the more powerful France and Britain.

### Germany and the Treaty of Versailles

The most important sections of the five treaties involved Germany, of which the main terms were:

- **War Guilt** – Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles stated that Germany receive the full blame for World War I, even though Serbia and Austria were the original two nations who took the first shots.
- **Loss of Territory** – Germany lost about 13% of its territories, a total of 25,000 square miles which was the home of 6 million people. These areas were:-
  - Alsace and Lorraine – given to France
  - Saar Valley now belonged to Belgium and France
  - The Rhineland was now occupied by France and kept as a Demilitarized Zone
  - The remainder was split between Denmark, Belgium and Poland
- **Loss of Colonies** – All of Germany's colonies were taken away. Woodrow Wilson fought to keep them under Allied trusteeship otherwise they would have been taken by both Britain and France and run as their other colonies.
- **Disarmament** – France and Britain feared that Germany would rise again. To prevent this, the following laws were forced upon Germany:-
  - They were no longer allowed to have any military aircraft, submarines, battleships of heavy artillery.
  - Germany could only keep an army of 100,000 soldiers and they were only to be used in need for defense of the nation.
- **War Payments** – Against the wishes of Woodrow Wilson, France and Britain insisted that **Germany pay for the full cost of the war.** This was calculated at **\$32 billion.** A schedule for repayment was given to Germany and their final payment of this penalty would be 1961 (this schedule would be changed several times in the future).

## The Short-Term Consequences of World War I

- A total of 10 million soldiers were killed
- Between 3 to 5 million civilians were killed
- 28 to 30 million people were wounded
- The cost of the war was \$ 32 billion (over \$400 billion in today's prices)
- Millions of people, especially in Eastern Europe were homeless and had no country as their old nations' borders had been seized during the war.
- Famine spread across Western Europe as the war destroyed so many fields and the men were away fighting.
- A global epidemic of Spanish flu struck in the latter stages of the war. By the time the flu had been contained almost 20 million worldwide had died.

## The Long-Term Consequences of World War I

- **Destruction of Eastern and Central European Powers** – the empires of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottomans had fallen
- **Communism in Russia** – the tsarist regime was now replaced by the Soviet Union, a communist state. Communism was to quickly spread to other Eastern European nations.
- **Instability in Eastern Europe** – the new nations of Eastern Europe were instable and weak. Most would experience internal economic and political difficulties.
- **Social and Political Transformations** – The traditional aristocracy of Western Europe was replaced by the rising lower and middle-classes.
- **European Economies** – although devastated by the war they slowly began to rebuild modern and efficient industrial centers and cities.
- **Women's Suffrage** – due to the role of women during the war their rights began to change. In Scandinavia, the Low Countries, Russia, Britain and the United States, women were given the right to vote soon after the war. France and Italy resisted this movement; women could not vote until the 1940s.
- **German Resentment** – Almost all Germans saw the Treaty of Versailles as unfair against their nation. They were angry about the war repayments and later on, these resentments would give rise to the Nazi Party, Adolf Hitler, and World War II.
- **Decline in European economic and global powers** – The Allied countries still possessed their overseas empires but keeping control of them would become very difficult in the 1920s and 1930s.
- **Weakness of League of Nations** – even though proposed by President Woodrow Wilson the bill was not passed in Congress. This meant that there was no major power to rule the League and it would not be strong enough to stop the rise of Germany in the 1930s. Wilson tried to campaign across America to have the people pass the bill but was taken ill and soon died. The League of Nations without American backing was doomed to fail.