

World War I (1914–1919)

Source: SparkNotes

Overview

World War I took place between 1914 and 1918. Although the conflict began in Europe, it ultimately involved countries as far away as the United States and Japan. At the time, the English-speaking world knew it as the “Great War”—the term “World War I” was applied decades later. Historians still actively disagree over the fundamental causes of the war. The period leading up to the war was a complex tangle of diplomacy and political maneuvering—many countries debated over strategies and alliances until nearly the last minute—and the first few weeks of the conflict were similarly chaotic and confusing. However, historians agree nearly unanimously about the war’s consequences: World War I led almost directly to World War II and set the stage for many other important events in the twentieth century.

By conservative estimates, around 9 million soldiers died in battle—many of them defending entrenched front lines that were so stalemated that they rarely moved even a few yards in either direction. Civilian loss of life totaled an additional 13 million. Epidemics of influenza and other diseases, either induced or exacerbated by the war, raised the death toll by at least an additional 20 million. In total, counting battle casualties, civilian deaths, and victims of disease, the loss of life worldwide surpassed 40 million.

Political tensions ran high in early twentieth-century Europe. Abroad, Europe’s great powers were increasingly coming to impasses over the acquisition of new colonies. As the unclaimed lands of the earth ran short, the race to claim them became fiercely competitive. At the same time, the Turkish-ruled Ottoman Empire, which had existed for hundreds of years, was slowly decaying. Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and other southern European nations that had been under Ottoman rule became independent, changing the balance of power in Europe. The many ethnic groups of Austria-Hungary, inspired by these new southern European nations, began to agitate for their own independence. Furthermore, Serbia wanted back the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, lost to Austria in a previous war.

At the same time, technological and industrial developments in Europe were advancing with unprecedented speed. Military technology was at the forefront of this trend, and a horrible war using these new weapons was both feared and seen as inevitable. Indeed, World War I turned out to be a showcase of new technologies that would change the nature, speed, and efficiency of warfare in the century to come. Tanks, airplanes, and submarines changed the way wars were fought. Other types of motorized vehicles, such as trucks, cars, and especially trains, vastly improved the speed with which troops and supplies could be deployed and increased the distance over which they could be transported. Guns in all categories, ranging from pistols to major artillery, greatly improved in accuracy and range of fire, enabling armies to fire upon each other across long distances and in some cases without even having to see each other. The machine gun made it possible for a single soldier to effectively take on multiple opponents at once. Chemical warfare was seen on a large scale for the first time, with results so gruesome that most countries vowed never to use such weapons again.

By war’s end, the map of Europe began to resemble the one we know today. The German and Austro-Hungarian empires ceased to exist. Much of eastern Europe, in particular, was redivided along ethno-linguistic lines, and Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland all became independent countries. Several other nations were awkwardly combined into the countries of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. A major reorganization of the Near and Middle

East also took place following the war, establishing the forerunners of the countries we know today as Armenia, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

The aftermath of World War I also marked the practical end of monarchy on the continent and of European colonialism throughout the rest of the world. Most European nations began to rely increasingly upon parliamentary systems of government, and socialism gained increasing popularity. The brutality of the conflict and the enormous loss of human life inspired a renewed determination among nations to rely upon diplomacy to resolve conflicts in the future. This resolve directly inspired the birth of the League of Nations.

Summary of Events

The Start of the War

World War I began on July 28, 1914, when **Austria-Hungary** declared war on **Serbia**. This seemingly small conflict between two countries spread rapidly: soon, Germany, Russia, Great Britain, and France were all drawn into the war, largely because they were involved in **treaties** that obligated them to defend certain other nations. Western and eastern **fronts** quickly opened along the borders of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

The Western and Eastern Fronts

The first month of combat consisted of bold attacks and rapid troop movements on both fronts. In the west, Germany attacked first **Belgium** and then **France**. In the east, **Russia** attacked both Germany and Austria-Hungary. In the south, Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia. Following the **Battle of the Marne** (September 5–9, 1914), the western front became entrenched in central France and remained that way for the rest of the war. The fronts in the east also gradually locked into place.

The Ottoman Empire

Late in 1914, the **Ottoman Empire** was brought into the fray as well, after Germany tricked Russia into thinking that Turkey had attacked it. As a result, much of 1915 was dominated by Allied actions against the Ottomans in the Mediterranean. First, Britain and France launched a failed attack on the **Dardanelles**. This campaign was followed by the British invasion of the **Gallipoli Peninsula**. Britain also launched a separate campaign against the Turks in **Mesopotamia**. Although the British had some successes in Mesopotamia, the Gallipoli campaign and the attacks on the Dardanelles resulted in British defeats.

Trench Warfare

The middle part of the war, 1916 and 1917, was dominated by continued **trench warfare** in both the east and the west. Soldiers fought from dug-in positions, striking at each other with **machine guns**, **heavy artillery**, and **chemical weapons**. Though soldiers died by the millions in brutal conditions, neither side had any substantive success or gained any advantage.

The United States' Entrance and Russia's Exit

Despite the stalemate on both fronts in Europe, two important developments in the war occurred in 1917. In early April, the **United States**, angered by attacks upon its ships in the

Atlantic, declared war on Germany. Then, in November, the **Bolshevik Revolution** prompted Russia to pull out of the war.

The End of the War and Armistice

Although both sides launched **renewed offensives** in 1918 in an all-or-nothing effort to win the war, both efforts failed. The fighting between exhausted, demoralized troops continued to plod along until the Germans lost a number of individual battles and very gradually began to fall back. A deadly outbreak of **influenza**, meanwhile, took heavy tolls on soldiers of both sides. Eventually, the governments of both Germany and Austria-Hungary began to lose control as both countries experienced multiple mutinies from within their military structures.

The war ended in the late fall of 1918, after the member countries of the Central Powers signed **armistice agreements** one by one. Germany was the last, signing its armistice on November 11, 1918. As a result of these agreements, Austria-Hungary was broken up into several smaller countries. Germany, under the **Treaty of Versailles**, was severely punished with hefty economic reparations, territorial losses, and strict limits on its rights to develop militarily.

Germany After the War

Many historians, in hindsight, believe that the Allies were excessive in their punishment of Germany and that the harsh Treaty of Versailles actually planted the seeds of World War II, rather than foster peace. The treaty's declaration that Germany was entirely to blame for the war was a blatant untruth that humiliated the German people. Furthermore, the treaty imposed steep **war reparations** payments on Germany, meant to force the country to bear the financial burden of the war. Although Germany ended up paying only a small percentage of the reparations it was supposed to make, it was already stretched financially thin by the war, and the additional economic burden caused enormous resentment. Ultimately, extremist groups, such as the Nazi Party, were able to exploit this humiliation and resentment and take political control of the country in the decades following.

