

## World War I

In 1914, the countries of Europe had been at peace for many years. Some people thought that war on this continent was a thing of the past. But powerful forces had been at work through the early 1900s that would soon erupt into a devastating global war.

### Causes of the War

One of the chief forces that pushed the nations of Europe toward war was nationalism. People's feelings of deep pride in their countries were very strong in Europe at this time. The countries of Europe became intense rivals:

- France, Great Britain, and Germany each followed a foreign policy of **imperialism**. They vied for control of colonies overseas.
- Germany and Great Britain sought to outdo each other in industrial output and military strength.
- France wanted revenge on Germany for its losses in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71.
- Austria-Hungary and Russia vied for influence in the Balkans. National feelings were strong among the many different ethnic groups of this region.

"The Balkans" refers to the region of the Balkan peninsula, in southeastern Europe. Rivalries among its many different ethnic groups made the Balkans the "powder keg of Europe" in 1914—ready to explode at any minute.

The natural result of all this rivalry among nations was a buildup of military forces. Rival

countries wanted to be sure their armies and navies were as strong as those of other nations. **Militarism**—glorifying the military and focusing on being ready for war—became a strong force. This was especially true in Germany, where military officers controlled government policy.

A British cartoon of this time lampooned the arms race. A man declares, "We must build a bigger navy than the enemy will build when he hears we're building a bigger navy than he's building."

Next, distrust of rivals and fear of war led the great powers of Europe into **alliances**. (An alliance is an agreement among two or more nations that each will come to the aid of one of the others if it is attacked by any other country.)

- Germany, the empire of Austria-Hungary, and Italy formed the Triple Alliance.
- France, Russia, and Great Britain formed the Triple **Entente**. (An entente is a friendly understanding.)

Rather than ease tensions, these competing alliance systems raised them. Conflict between any two members of opposing groups could draw in all the other members. That is exactly what happened.

### The War Begins

World War I began with an **assassination**, in the volatile Balkans. In 1908, Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, home to many Slavs. This outraged the neighboring Slavic state of Serbia.

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## World War I (continued)

On June 28, 1914, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary made a state visit to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. A teenage Serbian terrorist shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie dead in their open car.

Serbian nationalists were furious that the archduke came to Sarajevo on June 28. This was the date when the Ottoman Empire conquered Serbia in 1389 and when Serbia regained its freedom in 1912. It was also the 14th wedding anniversary of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie.

The “powder keg” now rapidly exploded. Austria-Hungary blamed the Serbian government for the killings. So it declared war on Serbia on July 28. This brought the alliance system into play.

Russia supported Serbia, a fellow Slavic nation. It ordered the **mobilization** of its army. Germany responded by declaring war on Russia on August 1. France supported Russia, so Germany declared war on France also. To attack France, German troops swept through Belgium, a **neutral** nation. In response, an outraged Britain declared war on Germany.

The world war had begun. The fighting nations were aligned like this:

- France, Russia, Great Britain, and Italy were the Allied Powers. (Italy had left the Triple Alliance earlier.)

- Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), and Bulgaria were the Central Powers.

### A New Kind of War

World War I was unlike any war that had been fought before. It used new, highly destructive weapons. It involved civilians for the first time in a big way.

The new weapons of World War I included the machine gun, the tank, the airplane, the submarine, and poison gas.

Armies were made up mostly of civilian recruits, not professional soldiers. Civilians at home were very involved. They worked in wartime industry, endured shortages of goods and food, and often found themselves in the middle of the bombing and artillery fire. They were also bombarded with government-sponsored war **propaganda** aimed at pumping up popular support for the war effort.

As the war began, both sides expected a quick win. Instead, the war raged all around the world from 1914 to 1918. It involved so many nations and people that it was known in its time as the Great War. Most of the battles were fought in Europe, but Africa and the Middle East saw fighting as well. Navies fought in seas everywhere.

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## World War I (continued)

### The Western Front

Germany had hoped for a swift victory by attacking France. But Allied forces stopped the Germans at the Battle of the Marne, near Paris. The war in the west then became a stalemate. Germany and France dug long lines of trenches along their shared border, the western front. Troops settled into the trenches. From time to time, groups of soldiers went “over the top” and tried to reach enemy trenches. No one made much progress, but thousands died trying.

During the Battle of the Marne, the French forces desperately needed reinforcements. More than 600 taxicabs sped soldiers from Paris to the front.

### The Eastern Front

The eastern front was along the border between Russia and the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary. War here shifted from hard-fought battles to periods of winter stalemate. The Russians suffered many defeats, but they kept Central Powers troops tied up and away from the western front. Great Britain and France, meanwhile, tried to gain access to the Black Sea via Gallipoli, in Turkey. This campaign failed, with a cost of many Allied dead and wounded.

The Russian army was very poorly equipped. Some Russian soldiers sent into combat didn't even have rifles.

### The War in Asia, the Mideast, and Africa

In the Mideast, Arabs helped British forces fight the Turks and end Ottoman rule. In Africa, the Allies took three of Germany's four

colonies. In Asia, Japan (an ally of Britain) took German bases in the Pacific Ocean and China. Natives of British and French colonies fought in Europe.



### The United States Enters the War

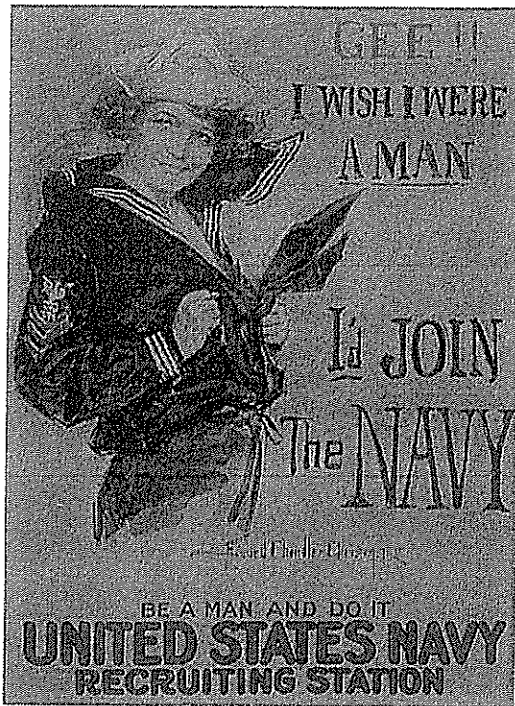
When World War I began, the United States had declared itself neutral. Most Americans wanted nothing to do with war in Europe. But the war on the seas drew the United States in. German submarines attacked and sank merchant and passenger ships sailing near Britain. Bowing to U.S. protests, Germany stopped these attacks in 1915.

By early 1917, Germany was struggling with severe food shortages at home, due in part to a naval blockade. German leaders decided once again to attack ships bringing supplies to Britain. They hoped to starve Britain into defeat before the United States responded to the ship sinkings by entering the war. The strategy failed. Americans were outraged at attacks on U.S. ships, and at a German plan to draw Mexico into the war. The U.S. Congress declared war on Germany in April 1917.

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## World War I (continued)



### The War Ends

Events in Russia in 1917 helped the Central Powers. Shortages of food and fuel, military failures, and corruption drove the Russian people to revolution. They swept away the tsar and set up a republic. The new Bolshevik rulers withdrew from the war. Germany could now concentrate almost all its forces on the western front.

The German army launched a last great offensive in France in the spring and summer of 1918. It almost succeeded, but fresh American troops gave the weary Allies a crucial boost. They pushed the Germans back, and the German ruler—the **kaiser**—had to step down. The new republic of Germany signed an **armistice** on November 11, 1918. The war was over.

World War I was incredibly expensive. More than 8 million people died in battle, and many more were wounded. Almost as many civilians died, from fighting, famine, and disease. Property losses were enormous. European nations were left unsettled, societies were unstable, and a lasting peace was elusive.

The war killed millions of soldiers and civilians. But a worldwide epidemic of influenza—flu—killed even more. More than 20 million people around the globe died of this disease in 1918.

### Searching for Peace

The fighting ended after Germany signed the armistice. For a lasting end to the war, the nations who took part had to work out and sign **peace treaties**. A conference to achieve this was held in 1919 in Paris, France.

Many nations took part in the peace conference. But the Big Three—Great Britain, France, and the United States—worked out the peace terms. These three nations had different agendas. U.S. President Wilson wanted a fair treaty that would achieve a lasting peace. Britain and France wanted to punish Germany and keep its military weak. Other nations pressed their own demands for changed borders and new lands.

President Wilson called his terms for peace the Fourteen Points. They included an end to secret treaties, free trade, freedom of the seas, fair treatment of colonial people, arms reductions, and an association of nations to keep peace.

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## World War I (continued)

After many heated arguments, the Big Three finally drew up the Treaty of Versailles. It treated Germany harshly:

- Germany had to accept full blame for causing the war.
- Thus, Germany had to pay **reparations**—payment for all civilian damage, a huge sum.
- Germany lost large chunks of its land to other nations, plus all of its overseas colonies.
- Germany had to shrink its military forces to a fraction of what they had been.

The Germans had no say in the terms of the treaty. They signed it because they had no other choice. But the German people were deeply angry about the treaty. They were bitter about being forced to admit “war guilt,” and they felt that the high payments were unfair. These festering grievances helped pave the way to the next world war, as President Wilson warned would happen.

The other members of the Central Powers signed separate peace treaties. These and the Versailles Treaty changed the map of Europe. New nations were formed from lands that had been part of Germany, Austria, and Russia. The Ottoman Empire lost almost all its lands.

The Versailles Treaty also created a League of Nations, an organization of the world’s countries. The League was a cherished goal of Woodrow Wilson. But the U.S. Senate refused to allow the United States to join the League.

The peace treaties created many problems:

- Germans were bitter.
- Russia, which had been excluded from the peace talks, resented its land losses.
- People in Southwest Asia were angry that Ottoman rule was replaced by British and French control rather than independence.
- Diverse ethnic groups thrown together by the new borders in Europe were not pleased.
- Colonial people who had fought in the war were angry that their nations remained colonies.

This discontent did not bode well for continued peace in the coming decades.



## Steps to War

**Directions:** A series of events from June 28, 1914, to August 4, 1914, moved the nations of Europe to war, one step at a time. Those steps are described below. For each, suggest alternatives that might have derailed or slowed that progression toward war.

June 28, 1914—Archduke Franz Ferdinand visits Sarajevo amid reports of anti-Austrian unrest.

July 23, 1914—Austria presents Serbia with an ultimatum, backed by Germany.

July 25, 1914—Serbia accepts most, but not all, Austrian demands.

July 28, 1914—Austria rejects Serbia's offer, declares war on Serbia.

July 28, 1914—Russian leaders order mobilization of troops and move them toward Austrian-German border. Tsar Nicholas tells Kaiser Wilhelm II that the moves are only a precaution.

August 1, 1914—Germany declares war on Russia.

August 1, 1914—Germany demands that France remain neutral, but France backs its ally, Russia.

August 3, 1914—Germany responds by declaring war on France.

August 3, 1914—German army invades Belgium on its way to France.

August 4, 1914—Great Britain, honoring a treaty guaranteeing Belgium's neutrality, declares war on Germany.

**Extra Challenge:** With classmates, role-play a discussion among top leaders and advisors in Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Russia, Germany, France, and/or Great Britain in response to one or more of these events. Or deliver a speech defending your country's position and actions.

