Everything You Need to Know About World War I

By ThoughtCo.com, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.17.17

Word Count 927
Level 830L

French soldiers behind a ditch awaiting an assault during the early days of World War I. Photo from the public domain

World War I was an extremely bloody war in Europe from 1914 to 1919. About 10 million soldiers died and another 20 million were wounded.
The start of World War I

World War I started with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914.
Franz Ferdinand was next to become emperor of Austria-Hungary. It was a huge empire made up of the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. Ferdinand was not very well liked. The empire ruled over many different groups of people, including some Serbians. Serbia and Austria-Hungary had already been fighting for control of areas in Austria-Hungary that had many Serbs. Then, a Serbian man shot Franz Ferdinand. This gave Austria-Hungary reason to attack Serbia, its troublesome neighbor.

First, Austria-Hungary asked Germany to help it in a war, which it did. Serbia got the backing of Russia, which asked for help from France and Britain.

Austria-Hungary officially declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. Now, much of Europe was caught in the fight.

At the start of the war, these were the major players:

- Allied Forces (also known as the Allies): France, the United Kingdom, Russia
- Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary
Schlieffen Plan vs. Plan XVII

Germany decided to first attack France by going through Belgium. Britain had a treaty promising to defend Belgium, so Britain decided to join the war.

As German troops moved south into France, French and British troops tried to stop them. The First Battle of the Marne, fought just north of Paris in September 1914, had no clear winner.

The Germans then retreated and dug trenches — large ditches. The French couldn't get the Germans out, so they also dug trenches.

Neither side could force the other to move.

A war of attrition

From 1914 to 1917, soldiers on each side fought from their trenches. They fired onto the enemy and tossed grenades.
The area between the trenches was called "No Man's Land." The only way to overtake the other side's trench was for the soldiers to cross No Man's Land, on foot. Thousands of soldiers raced across in the hopes of reaching the other side. Most were shot down by machine gunfire before they even got close.

Thousands of young men were killed daily in the trench warfare. It became clear that the side with the most men would win the war.

By 1917, the Allies were starting to run low on young men.

**U.S. enters the war and Russia gets out**

The Allies were hoping that the United States would join their side, as Americans had many men and supplies.

However, the U.S. had tried to stay out of other countries’ problems. Plus, the war seemed so far away and didn't seem to affect the U.S. much.

However, two major events changed America’s opinion about the war. In 1915, a German submarine sunk the British boat the Lusitania, which was traveling from New York to England with 1,900 passengers. The boat had 159 Americans on it, and most of them were innocent passengers, not soldiers. More than 1,100 passengers died, including more than 120 Americans.

The second happened in early 1917. Germany sent Mexico a secret message asking for help fighting the U.S. in the war. In return, Germany would help Mexico take back land in the U.S. that had once been part of Mexico. Germany was offering Mexico money to reconquer its lost territories of Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. The message was found by Britain and shown to the United States. The telegram gave the U.S. another reason to join the war.

On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany.

**The Russians opt out**

As the United States was entering World War I, Russia was getting ready to get out. The Russian people had rebelled against the Russian emperor and a new government had taken over.

In 1918, Russia left the war to deal with its own problems.

With the war in the east ended, Germany was able to send those troops to Western Europe to face the American soldiers.
The Versailles Treaty
While the European troops were tired from years of war, the Americans entering the war were fresh. Soon the Germans were retreating and the Allies were advancing. The end of the war was near.

At the end of 1918, a peace was finally agreed upon, and fighting was to end on November 11, 1918.

For several months, countries worked toward a peace agreement. It would divide up land as fairly as possible. They came up with the Versailles Treaty to end World War I. However, Germany thought the treaty was unfair. Germany thought it had to pay too much money to other countries. Germany became poorer after the treaty. This would later lead Germany to start World War II.

By the end of World War I, about 10 million soldiers were killed. That averages to about 6,500 deaths a day. Plus, millions of innocent civilians were killed. World War I is remembered for being one of the bloodiest wars in history.