Everything You Need to Know About World War I

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World War I was a bloody war that engulfed Europe from 1914 to 1919.

About 10 million soldiers died and another 20 million were wounded.

Many hoped that World War I would be "the war to end all wars." In reality, its final peace treaty set the stage for World War II.
The start of World War I

World War I started with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914.
Franz Ferdinand was due to become emperor of Austria-Hungary, a huge empire that was a union of the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. Ferdinand was not very well liked, for many reasons. 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 Serbians. Then, a Serbian man shot Franz Ferdinand. This gave Austria-Hungary reason to attack Serbia, its troublesome neighbor.

First, Austria-Hungary made sure that its ally Germany would 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, and now, much of Europe was entangled in the dispute.

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

![Map of Europe during World War I](https://newsela.com/image/32355136)
Schlieffen Plan vs. Plan XVII

Germany didn't want to fight both Russia in the east and France in the west. Instead, it followed a plan from Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, an army chief planner.

Schlieffen believed it would take about six weeks for Russia to gather its troops. So, Germany would place a small number of soldiers in the east. That way, most of Germany's soldiers could be used for a quick attack in the west.

Germany decided to attack France by going through Belgium. Britain had a treaty promising to defend Belgium, so Britain had 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 large ditches, called trenches. 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 of the line 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 this stretch of land on foot. Thousands of soldiers raced across No Man's Land in hopes of reaching the other side. Most were shot down by machine gunfire before they even got close.

Millions of young men were slaughtered in the trench warfare of World War I. With so many soldiers killed daily, 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 needed help and they were hoping that the United States, with its vast resources of men and materials, would join their side. 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 American public opinion about the war. The first occurred in 1915, when 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, when Germany sent Mexico a secret message asking it to join World War I against the United States. 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 intercepted by Britain and shown to the United States, giving it more reason to join the war.

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

The Russians opt out

As the United States was entering World War I, Russia was getting ready to get out.

In 1917, Russia was swept up in revolution that removed its czar, or king, from power. A new communist government was in place in Russia that wanted to focus on problems at home. It removed Russia from World War I on March 3, 1918.

With the war in the east ended, Germany was able to send those troops to the west to face the new American soldiers.
Armistice and the Versailles Treaty
While the European troops were tired from years of war, the new Americans entering the war were enthusiastic. 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 the fighting was to end at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918.

For the next several months, each country’s diplomats worked toward a peace agreement. They came up with the Versailles Treaty to end World War I. However, Germany felt the deal’s terms were unfair. Germany thought it had to pay too much money to other countries. Germany became poorer after WWI. This would later lead Germany to start World War II.

By the end of World War I, an estimated 10 million soldiers were killed, as were millions of innocent civilians. On average, there were about 6,500 soldier deaths a day, every day. World War I is remembered for being one of the bloodiest wars in history.