World War I was an extremely bloody war that engulfed Europe from 1914 to 1919. Little ground was lost or won for any participant.

World War I saw an estimated 10 million military deaths and another 20 million wounded. Many hoped that World War I would be "the war to end all wars." In reality, the concluding peace treaty set the stage for World War II.

The start of World War I
The spark that started World War I was the assassination of Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie. It happened on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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. 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. Ferdinand was not very well liked, for many reasons, but Austria-Hungary used the shooting as an excuse to attack Serbia, its troublesome neighbor.

However, Austria-Hungary first got the backing of Germany, with whom it had a treaty, before it proceeded. This gave Serbia time to ask for Russia's help, and Russia asked France and Britain to join them.

By the time Austria-Hungary officially declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914, an entire month after the assassination, much of Europe had already become entangled in the dispute.

More would join later, but at the start of the war, these were the major players:

• Allied Forces (aka the Allies): France, the United Kingdom, Russia

• Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary

Map of military alliances of Europe in 1914. Map: Department of History, United States Military Academy/Wikimedia.

Schlieffen Plan vs. Plan XVII

Germany didn't want to fight both Russia in the east and France in the west, so it enacted its long-standing Schlieffen Plan. It was created by Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, an army strategist.
Schlieffen believed that it would take about six weeks for Russia to gather its troops. So, if Germany placed a small number of soldiers in the east, the majority of Germany's soldiers could be used for a quick attack in the west.

While Russia continued to mobilize, Germany decided to attack France by going through neutral Belgium. Britain had a treaty with Belgium, so it had a responsibility to defend them and join the war.

Meanwhile, the French quickly mobilized their army in response to a German attack through Belgium.

As German troops moved south into France, French and British troops tried to stop them. At the end of the First Battle of the Marne, fought just north of Paris in September 1914, a stalemate was reached. The Germans, who had lost the battle, had made a hasty retreat and then dug trenches. The French, who couldn't get the Germans out, then also dug trenches.

Neither side could force the other to move from its trenches, so each side's trenches became increasingly elaborate.

A war of attrition

A ration party of the Royal Irish Rifles in a communication trench during the Battle of the Somme. Photo from public domain. [click to enlarge]
From 1914 to 1917, soldiers on each side of the line fought from their trenches. They fired artillery onto the enemy's position 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. Out in the open, thousands of soldiers raced across this barren land in the hopes of reaching the other side, and most were shot down by machine gunfire before they even got close.

Because of the nature of trench warfare, millions of young men were slaughtered in the battles of World War I. With so many soldiers being killed daily, eventually 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 on their side. However, for years, the U.S. had tried to stay out of other countries' problems. Plus, the U.S. just didn't want to be involved in a war that seemed so far away and that didn't seem to affect them much.

However, two major events changed American public opinion about the war. The first occurred in 1915, when a German submarine torpedoed and sunk the British ocean liner the Lusitania. The Lusitania, which was nearly the size of the Titanic, 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 perished, including more than 120 Americans.

The second happened in early 1917, when Germany sent Mexico a coded message asking Mexico 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 — known as the Zimmerman telegram because German official Arthur Zimmermann sent it — 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 became swept up in revolution that removed its czar, or king, from power. The new communist government wanted to focus on problems at home, so it removed Russia from World War I on March 3, 1918.
With the war in the east ended, Germany was able to divert those troops to the west in order 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. The fighting was to end on the 11th hour of 11th day of 11th month — 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918.

For the next several months, diplomats came together to write up the Versailles Treaty. It would divide up land and end World War I. However, Germany felt that the terms of the treaty were unfair and that it had to pay too much money to other countries. Germany became poorer after the treaty. This treaty would later lead Germany to start World War II.

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