World War I

By: Gorman, Robert F. Salem Press Encyclopedia. 5p. Abstract: The advent of World War I came as a surprise to few astute observers, but the carnage it wrought, especially in the very heart of Europe, was a great shock to civilized nations. War fever had gripped much of Europe prior to the outbreak of World War I, most thinking that a quick war would settle the various balance-of-power considerations then motivating European governments. The two previous Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, although brutal, had been quite local affairs, so even after the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, few believed that such an event would trigger the most devastating war waged in human history to date. With the benefit of hindsight, however, several factors can be seen as setting the stage both for the outbreak of the war and for its unprecedented destructive impact.

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World War I

Date June 28, 1914–November 11, 1918

World War I devastated the great powers of Europe and brought sweeping consequences for the entire world, including the deaths of millions, the reshaping of empires and colonial territories, deadly innovations in warfare, and an unstable peace that eventually ushered in the even more destructive World War II.

Also known as Great War; War to End All Wars

Locale Global, especially Europe

Key Figures
- Francis Ferdinand (1863–1914), prince and archduke of Austria-Hungary
- Wilhelm II (1859–1941), emperor of Germany, r. 1888–1918
- George V (1865–1936), king of Great Britain, r. 1910–1936
- Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924), president of the United States, 1913–1921
- Nicholas II (1868–1918), czar of Russia, r. 1894–1917

Summary of Event

The advent of World War I came as a surprise to few astute observers, but the carnage it wrought, especially in the very heart of Europe, was a great shock to civilized nations. War fever had gripped much of Europe prior to the outbreak of World War I, most thinking that a quick war would settle the various balance-of-power considerations then motivating European governments. The two previous Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, although brutal, had been quite local affairs, so even after the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Bosnian Serb named Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, few believed that such an event would trigger the most devastating war waged in human history to date. With the benefit of hindsight, however, several factors can be seen as setting the stage both for the outbreak of the war and for its unprecedented destructive impact.
German soldiers posing in trench during World War I. Library of Congress
TIME LINE OF WORLD WAR I

June 28, 1914  Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist, assassinates Austria-Hungary’s Archduke Francis Ferdinand at Sarajevo
Aug. 4, 1914   Great Britain’s declaration of war on Germany opens World War I
Aug. 14-25, 1914  Battle of the Frontiers
Aug. 23, 1914  Battle of Mons
Aug. 26-31, 1914  Battle of Tannenberg
Sept. 5-9, 1914  First Battle of the Marne
Sept. 9-14, 1914  Battle of Masurian Lakes
Oct. 30-Nov. 24, 1914  First Battle of Ypres
Dec. 8, 1914  Battle of Falkland Islands
Feb. 19, 1915-Jan. 9, 1916  Gallipoli Campaign
Apr. 22-May 25, 1915  Second Battle of Ypres
May 2-June 27, 1915  Battle of Gorlice-Tarnow
June 23, 1915-Sept. 12, 1917  Eleven Battles of the Isonzo
Dec. 8, 1915-Apr. 29, 1916  Siege of Kut-al-Amara
Feb. 21-Dec. 18, 1916  Battle of Verdun
May 31-June 1, 1916  Battle of Jutland
June 4-Sept. 30, 1916  Brusilov Offensive
June 24-Nov. 13, 1916  Battle of the Somme
Mar. 11, 1917  Battle of Baghdad
Apr. 6, 1917  United States declares war on Germany
Apr. 9-15, 1917  Battle of Vimy Ridge
June 15, 1917  Espionage Act: U.S. Congress passes the Espionage Act; implementation leads to the suppression of free speech and the press during the war and to the prosecution and incarceration of political dissenters
July-Oct., 1917  U.S. forces mass in eastern France; General John J. Pershing establishes headquarters in Chaumont
July 8, 1917  Mobilization: U.S. government organizes the War Industries Board to direct economic resources for the war effort
July 31-Nov. 10, 1917  Third Battle of Ypres
Oct. 24-Nov. 12, 1917  Battle of Caporetto
Oct. 31, 1917  Battle of Beersheba
Nov. 20-Dec. 7, 1917  Battle of Cambrai
Dec. 7, 1917  United States declares war on Austria-Hungary
Apr. 6, 1918  Picardy Offensive: Germans attack Allied lines near Amiens
May 27-July 1, 1918  Battle of Chateau-Thierry/Belleau Wood
July 15-18, 1918  Second Battle of the Marne
Aug. 8-Sept. 4, 1918  Battle of Amiens
Sept. 12-16, 1918  Battle of St. Mihiel: Offensive mounted almost totally by United States; ends German threat in the region and demonstrates U.S. military force
Sept. 20, 1918  Battle of Megiddo
Sept. 26-Nov. 11, 1918  Battle of Meuse-Argonne: U.S. offensive cuts off railroad supplies to Germans; United States suffers heavy casualties in this last significant battle of the war
Nov., 1918-Jan., 1923  Postwar demobilization: Two million members of the American Expeditionary Force are reintegrated into the U.S. economy
Nov. 11, 1918  Armistice ends the war
Jan. 18, 1919  Peace conference opens in Paris
June 28, 1919  Germany signs Treaty of Versailles
July 2, 1921  Joint resolution of U.S. Congress recognizes a formal end to the war
Background Factors

Among the major causes of World War I were the rising nationalist sentiments among governments and peoples throughout the world, especially in Europe. This involved not just the rise of nationalist sentiments in the Balkans as expressed in the royal assassination but also long-term rivalries among the major European powers. The French resented the loss of the Alsace-Lorraine to the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71). Germany feared the rising tide of Slavic nationalism, especially in Russia, whose prestige in the Balkans had grown even as it began a rapid military buildup. In the weeks prior to the war, popular support for martial action in Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and France was palpable. Adding to this were the frustrated national aspirations of minority populations not only of Serbs but also of Poles, Ukrainians, and Ruthenians against German, Austrian, and Russian imperial domination.

Coupled with rising nationalism was a growing arms race, as the major powers—in particular Germany, France, Great Britain, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Russia—sought to expand their military capabilities, develop weaponry and naval capacities, conscript large armies, and perfect the process of rapid mobilization of forces. This expansion of power extended to the far-flung colonial holdings of Germany, Great Britain, and France, as well as to the control over neighboring minority populations exerted by Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Other smaller powers, including Turkey, the new Balkan states, Italy, and Spain also competed for territorial sway, while the United States and Japan, fresh from victories over Spain and Russia, respectively, also expanded their political and economic influence, especially in the Pacific region. The emphasis on naval power grew, as almost all of the major world powers raced to build battleships. Britain and Germany were foremost in this shipbuilding push, with the United States, France, Japan, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire following, and even Italy and Russia joined the
race for dominance of the seas. World War I, then, would be fought not only in Europe but also on the high seas and in the colonial territories of the European powers.

Another major factor in the dynamic movement toward war was a complicated series of diplomatic treaties and defensive alliances meant to assure each major power of military support should war break out. Germany maintained an alliance guaranteeing support to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, even as Russia and France allied themselves against the threat of German aggression. Britain remained largely aloof from such alliances, preferring a policy of neutrality, but even it was party to an agreement guaranteeing Belgian neutrality, which would eventually be violated by Germany. The defense pacts implied, among other things, that any threat of aggression against an ally would initiate mobilization of forces by treaty partners, and, once initiated, these mobilizations would be difficult to reverse.

Still, the economic interdependence and trade among European countries was significant, and the blood ties between European monarchies suggested that the diplomatic and peaceful resolution of disputes could be achieved. George V of England, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, and Czar Nicholas II of Russia were all related to one another and presumably had no intention of exposing their peoples to any prolonged or destructive war. Despite these ties, however, such a war began during the summer of 1914, as the great powers of Europe began to march inexorably toward what each thought would be a short and decisive confrontation but what instead descended into four years of brutal war.

Road to War

The road to war began with the assassination of Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, by a young Serbian member of the ultranationalist Black Hand movement, which was not officially supported by Serbia. Austria accused the government of Serbia of having sponsored the assassination and, after three weeks of deliberation, demanded that Serbia make humiliating concessions or face war. Germany initially pushed Austria toward invasion of Serbia but reconsidered on actually seeing the conciliatory response of Serbia. Serbia agreed to do everything Austria demanded, with the exception of permitting Austrians to participate in the judicial action against perpetrators found in Serbia. This, Serbia said, should be submitted to international arbitration. By this time, Austria was already engaged in a partial mobilization. Russia, despite threats from Germany, secretly agreed with Serbia that it would mobilize, and Serbia itself—not trusting to a peaceful Austrian response—also mobilized.

Austria rejected the conciliatory Serbian reply to its ultimatum, even as Britain proposed a peace conference, which was rejected by Germany. Austria bombarded Belgrade on July 29, and Russia ordered a general mobilization on the following day. Germany demanded that France declare that it would remain neutral in any war between Germany and Russia. The French responded that they would pursue their own best interest and then mobilized their troops. Germany responded on August 1 by declaring war on Russia and on August 3 by declaring war on France.

Britain, hoping to remain neutral, sought guarantees from both France and Germany for respect of British neutrality. France agreed, but Germany demurred from a clear response, and when German troops invaded neutral Belgium on August 4, Britain was compelled to declare war on Germany. The pattern of mutual defense alliances had drawn all of the major powers of Europe into war. Italy remained neutral. Japan declared war on Germany on August 23, while Turkey joined the Germans as part of the Central Alliance on November 3. Within four months, what began as a European war had already taken on a more global coloration, as Japan seized German island territories in the Pacific Ocean. Germany and Britain clashed in naval battles off the coast of Chile in the Pacific and off the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic, as massive armies squared off against one another in Europe. Germany initially enjoyed a rapid forty-day advance deep into French territory, but the Battle of the Marne in September ended any German hopes for a swift victory.

A terrible war of attrition on the western front followed, as none of the combatants could score a decisive victory during four years of carnage. Serbia fended off Austria’s military offensive, even as Russia and the combined
German and Austro-Hungarian forces largely fought to a standstill in a seesaw battle that saw Russia crush initial Austrian advances in Poland, followed by German reinforcement that led to a swift advance nearly to the gates of Moscow, before the Russians repelled the central power offensive. The war spread even to South Africa, as German and British forces clashed there. By the end of 1914, the hopes for swift victory were met by stalemate on every front, as casualties mounted to unprecedented levels. The one great power remaining out of the fray was the United States, which declared neutrality.

**A War of Attrition and Frustration**

New kinds of warfare and weapons were introduced as the war continued. Trench warfare on the western front saw the use of heavy artillery, machine guns, tanks, and even flamethrowers, all of which contribute to high levels of casualties. On April 22, 1915, Germany introduced the use of chlorine gas at the Battle of Ypres. This weapon, although deadly, was unpredictable and offered no real military advantage. Despite this, various deadly gases, including mustard gas, were later introduced.

At sea, Britain established its dominance with its victory in the naval Battle of Jutland in late May 1916. Although the British sustained heavier damage, Germany's fleet was sufficiently reduced that it no longer played a decisive role in the war. However, Germany's submarine forces continued to wreak havoc on Allied shipping in the Atlantic and began a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare against all shipping, including that of neutral parties in 1916. The sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, served as a turning point in US opinion against Germany, as more than one hundred American lives were lost. Still, the United States persisted in its policy of neutrality. Only after unrestricted German warfare did the United States break diplomatic relations with Germany in February 1917, mobilize for war, and deploy ground forces during the fall of that year.

The global nature of the conflict was underscored as Britain moved against Ottoman holdings in the Middle East. British forces advanced rapidly through southern Iraq in 1915, only to be stopped at Kut by Turkish forces, even as Ottoman forces unleashed a genocide against Armenians that eventually left as many as two million civilians dead. Trench warfare came to characterize Allied efforts to gain a foothold in Asia Minor against Turkey. Forces from Australia and New Zealand joined the British in the ill-fated Gallipoli Campaign of that year. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, with help from Bulgaria, managed to subjugate Serbia in 1915. German forces in southwestern Africa were defeated by British-supported South African forces, and Anglo-French forces eventually defeated Germany in the Cameroons in February 1916, but in Central and East Africa, German forces continued fighting until the war's end in 1918. In the Middle East, Britain collaborated with Arab nationalists in 1917 to mount attacks against Ottoman holdings in Arabia and Palestine, consolidating advances made against Turkish forces in oil-rich Iraq.

**The War Ends**

Three decisive diplomatic events occurred in 1917 that eventually determined the outcome of World War I. First, in January the Allies promised independence to peoples living under Central Power rule. The Austro-Hungarian Empire immediately saw the implication of this for its multinational empire of Poles, Czechs, Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, and Romanians, and began to seek a negotiated end to the war. Second, the Germans had encouraged and assisted the return of Vladimir Ilich Lenin to Russia, in hopes that a Bolshevik victory would lead to Russian withdrawal from the war. The Bolshevik October Revolution realized this hope, allowing Germany to focus its military assets on the western front. However, the US entry into the war on the side of the Allies, the third decisive event, more than compensated the Allies for the loss of Russia. The US forces—deployed under the slogan of “making the world safe for democracy” and backed by the powerhouse American industrial economy—and their military weaponry began flooding into Europe. The Allies repulsed three major German offensives in 1918. Austria and Bulgaria fell to Allied forces, as Ottoman forces were routed. On the western front, the British, Canadians, Australians, Americans, and French pressured the German Hindenburg line, which they breached in September. Germany, bereft of allies and with a navy in mutiny, sued for peace. An armistice was signed on November 11, 1918.
Significance

Unprecedented in its bloodshed and destructiveness and in the lack of inhibitions restraining the use of new and more destructive weaponry and forms of warfare, World War I provoked a worldwide sense of revulsion at what supposedly civilized peoples were capable of doing to one another. The number of dead is estimated to have been about 8.5 million; 5 million among the Allies and 3.5 million among the Central Powers. That figure does not include civilian deaths or the even more significant numbers of dead produced by the Spanish flu epidemic that struck in 1917 or the Armenian genocide of 1915.

The war provoked the emergence of communism in Russia, which was quickly embroiled in a civil war of its own that produced around three million refugees. These refugees from the Russian Civil War were added to the ten million people in Europe and the former Ottoman Empire who were displaced as a result of the world war. The suffering inflicted on civilian populations was unmeasurable. A whole generation was scarred by these human losses, especially in the countries most centrally involved, including France, Germany, Russia, and Britain, each of which lost one to two million service members to the war.

The rise of communism during World War I set the stage for a century of ideological conflict of global proportions. Conscious of new security threats, governments throughout the world introduced visa and passport requirements in an effort to protect and control their borders. Former territorial holdings and colonies of the Central Powers fell under new administrative authority, as the principle of self-determination gained currency and eventually led to a proliferation of newly independent states. The experience of war even in the colonies of Allied countries, such as British India, stoked the fire of independence movements that would eventually blossom after World War II.

World War I stimulated a proliferation in international cooperation and diplomacy, with the creation of the League of Nations and numerous related international bodies, but national rivalries after the war prevented these new institutions from curbing the nationalist resentments that would eventually lead to the outbreak of World War II. Indeed, attempts to assign blame began immediately after World War I, with the French at the forefront of those seeking major punishment for Germany. Germans, on the other hand, felt both undefeated and improperly maligned. Despite efforts by US president Woodrow Wilson to moderate the terms of the peace, the Treaty of Versailles of 1919 placed blame for the war squarely on Germany, imposing harsh territorial transfers and reparations on that nation. The territorial transfers precipitated major emigration out of former German territories. Although most of the reparations were never actually paid, many Germans deeply resented them, and this resentment reinforced German nationalism, which was further manipulated by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in the 1930s. Many historians regard World War I and its complicated conclusion as a major cause of World War II, which was even more global and more devastating than had been World War I, which had been dubbed “the war to end all wars.”

World War I continues to hold a major role in collective memory and culture and is generally seen as one of the landmark events of the twentieth century and modern era in general. Memorials to the war have been erected at the local and national level across the world. The conflict has been widely reflected in literature and other arts, including Erich Maria Remarque’s novel All Quiet on the Western Front (1929)—and its film adaptation—which stressed the futility of war and provided perhaps the most lasting popular impression. The centenary of World War I beginning in 2014 brought about renewed efforts to commemorate it, with many countries planning special events and exhibitions on the history and legacy of the war.

Bibliography


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