



# World War I : Its Causes and Effects

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## Abstract

First World War is considered as one of the largest wars in history. The world's great powers assembled in two opposing alliances the Allies (British Empire, France and the Russian Empire) versus the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). WWI lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. Over the course of the 19th century, rival powers of Europe formed alliances. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy formed the Triple Alliance. Great Britain, France, and Russia formed the Triple Entente. Tensions grew between Austria-Hungary and Serbia as Serbian nationalists attempted to unite all Slavic peoples living in the Balkan region into a single state, including South Slavs of Austria-Hungary. German success in the Franco-German War established the German Empire. Germany's takeover of Alsace-Lorraine created a desire for revenge by the French. The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife by Bosnian Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914, suddenly stirred up brewing conflicts in the region. Austria-Hungary used the assassination as an excuse to settle its dispute with Serbia. In anticipation of Russia's support of Serbia, Austria-Hungary gained support from William II of Germany before presenting a warlike ultimatum to Serbia. Serbia accepted most of Austria-Hungary's demands but sought international arbitration on some issues. Convinced that Austria-Hungary was ready for war, Serbia appealed to Russia for support. Austria-Hungary severed diplomatic relations with Serbia, and, on July 28, 1914, declared war on Serbia. Within a week most of Europe was at war.

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## 1. Introduction

It is generally recognized that history does not boil down to reconstruction of actual life and experience. It also constitutes a process of interpreting which occurs in the minds of the subjects who create it. When looking at historical figures, historians demand that each person takes full responsibility for their own story. In the context of the history of violence and war such a perspective first requires the formulation of rough definitions. A solemn speech about the solid foundation of war, about the father of all things (Ger. Vater aller Dinge) or just about history as a set of rational rules and regulations, expires in the trenches of war. The first world war, you should remember, was the outcome of a chain of events taking place in Europe, as well as in other parts of the world during the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century. You will find out in these pages that it was not merely a war but an event which made a tremendous impact on the world scene. It dismantled quite a number of the existing socio-economic and political structures. Our main objective here is to familiarise you both with the main causes of the war and its more important consequences.

## 2. Causes of The World War

The causes of the first world war are so complex that any attempt to describe them adequately would involve nothing less than the writing of the diplomatic history of Europe since 1870. In facts we may have to go back to 1789 or even to the age of Louis XIV. The causes of this war are to be sought in the conjunction of various forces and tendencies which had been operating for a long time among the nations of Europe. However, let us look into some of the important factors which led to the first world war. Although many Americans wanted to stay out of the war, several factors made American neutrality difficult to maintain. As an industrial and

imperial power, the United States felt many of the same pressures that had led the nations of Europe into devastating warfare. Historians generally cite four long-term causes of World War I, and the formation of a system of alliances.

### **3. Nationalism**

Throughout the 19th century, politics in the Western world were deeply influenced by the concept of nationalism a devotion to the interests and culture of one's nation. Often, nationalism led to competitive and antagonistic rivalries among nations. In this atmosphere of competition, many feared Germany's growing power in Europe. In addition, various ethnic groups resented domination by others. They longed for their nations to become independent. Many ethnic groups looked to larger nations for protection. Russia regarded itself as the protector of Europe's Slavic peoples, no matter which government they lived under among these Slavic peoples were the Serbs. Serbia, located in the Balkans, was an independent nation. However, millions of ethnic Serbs lived under the rule of Austria-Hungary. As a result, Russia and Austria Hungary were rivals for influence over Serbia. Imperialism for many centuries, European nations had been building empires. These nations had slowly extended their economic and political control over various peoples of the world. Colonies supplied the European imperial powers with raw materials and provided markets for manufactured goods. As Germany industrialized, it competed with France and Britain in the contest for colonies.

### **4. War Breaks Out**

Despite their hopes, the major European powers' long history of national tensions, imperial rivalries, and military expansion proved too great for alliances to overcome. As it turned out, a single spark set off a major conflict. An Assassination Leads to war that spark flared in the Balkan Peninsula. This area was known as "the powder keg of Europe." In addition to the

ethnic rivalries among the Balkan peoples, Europe's leading powers had interests there. Russia wanted access to the Mediterranean Sea. Germany wanted a rail link to the Ottoman Empire. Austria-Hungary, which had taken control of Bosnia in 1878, accused Serbia of subverting its rule over Bosnia. The "powder keg" was ready to explode. In June 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, visited the Bosnian capital Sarajevo. As the royal entourage drove through the city, Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip stepped from the crowd and shot the Archduke and his wife, Sophie. Princip was a member of the Black Hand, an organization promoting Serbian nationalism. The assassinations touched off a diplomatic crisis. On July 28 Austria-Hungary declared what was expected to be a short war against Serbia. German emperor Wilhelm II (center) marches with two of his generals Hindenburg (left) and Ludendorff, during World War I. 316 Module 7 The alliance system pulled one nation after another into the conflict. On August 1 Germany, obligated by treaty to support Austria-Hungary, declared war on Russia. On August 3 Germany declared war on Russia's ally France. After Germany invaded Belgium, Britain declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Great War had begun.

## 5. The Fighting Starts

On August 3, 1914, Germany invaded Belgium, following a strategy known as the Schlieffen Plan. This plan called for a holding action against Russia, combined with a quick drive through Belgium to Paris. After France had fallen, the two German armies would defeat Russia. European leaders were confident of a short war. Kaiser Wilhelm II even promised German soldiers that they would be home "before the leaves had fallen." As German troops swept across Belgium, thousands of civilians fled in terror. In Brussels, the Belgian capital, an American war correspondent described the first major refugee crisis of the 20th century. Unable to save Belgium, the Allies retreated to the Marne River in France. There they halted

the German advance in September 1914. After struggling to outflank each other's armies, both sides dug in for a long siege. By the spring of 1915, two parallel systems of deep rat-infested trenches crossed France. The trenches stretched from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps. German soldiers occupied one set of trenches, Allied soldiers the other. The scale of slaughter was horrific. During the First Battle of the Somme which began on July 1, 1916, and lasted until mid-November the British suffered 60,000 casualties the first day alone. Final casualties totalled about 1.2 million, yet only about seven miles of ground changed hands. This virtual stalemate lasted for more than three years. Elsewhere, the fighting was just as devastating and inconclusive.

## 6. In The Trenches

The stalemate was mainly an effect of trench warfare, in which armies fought for mere yards of ground. On the battlefields of Europe, there were three main kinds of trenches front line, support, and reserve. Soldiers spent a period of time in each kind of trench. Dugouts, or underground rooms, were used as officers' quarters and command posts. Between the trench complexes lay "no man's land." This was a barren expanse of mud pockmarked with shell craters and filled with barbed wire. Periodically, the soldiers charged enemy lines, only to be mowed down by machine-gun fire. Life in the trenches was miserable. The soldiers were surrounded by filth, lice, rats, and polluted water that caused dysentery. Many soldiers suffered trench foot. This condition was caused by standing in cold, wet trenches for long periods of time without changing into dry socks or boots. First, the toes would turn red or blue. Then, they would become numb, and finally, they would start to rot. The only solution was to amputate the toes, and in some cases, the entire foot. A painful infection of the gums and throat, called trench mouth, was also common among the soldiers. The soldiers also suffered from lack of sleep. Constant bombardments and other experiences often led to battle

fatigue and “shell shock.” This term was coined during World War I to describe a complete emotional collapse from which many never recovered.

## **7. Americans Question Neutrality**

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Just after the fighting in Europe began, President Woodrow Wilson declared that the United States would remain neutral. His statement reflected a longstanding American commitment to isolationism. Most Americans agreed that there was no reason to join a struggle 3,000 miles away. The war did not threaten American lives or property. This did not mean, however, that certain groups and individuals in the United States were indifferent to who would win the war. Public opinion was strong but divided. Divided loyalties Socialists criticized the war as a capitalist and imperialist struggle between Germany and England to control markets and colonies in China, Africa, and the Middle East. Pacifists, such as lawyer and politician William Jennings Bryan, believed that war was evil and that the United States should set an example of peace to the world. Many Americans simply did not want their sons to experience the horrors of warfare, as a hit song of 1915 conveyed. Millions of naturalized U.S. citizens followed the war closely because they still had ties to the nations from which they had emigrated. For example, many Americans of German descent sympathized with Germany. Americans of Irish descent remembered the centuries of British oppression in Ireland. They saw the war as a chance for Ireland to gain its independence. Pressure from some of these ethnic groups in the United States contributed to American neutrality. Some immigrants created organizations to help the causes of their homelands. Some even advised the government on policies that affected the people of their homelands. On the other hand, many Americans felt close to Britain because of a common ancestry and language as well as similar democratic institutions and legal systems. Germany’s aggressive sweep through Belgium increased American sympathy for the Allies. The Germans attacked civilians, destroying

villages, cathedrals, libraries, and even hospitals. Some atrocity stories spread by British propaganda later proved to be false. However, enough of them proved true that one American magazine referred to Germany as “the bully of Europe.” Maintaining neutrality proved difficult for American businesses. America’s economic ties with the Allies were far stronger than its ties with the Central powers. Before the war, American trade with Britain and France was more than double its trade with Germany. With the start of the war, America’s transatlantic trade became even more lopsided. The Allies flooded American manufacturers with orders for all sorts of war supplies. These included dynamite, cannon powder, submarines, copper wire and tubing, and armed cars. The United States shipped millions of dollars of war supplies to the Allies, but requests kept coming. By 1915 American factories were producing so many supplies for the Allies that the United States was experiencing a labour shortage. Some businesses, seeking to remain neutral, tried to continue dealing with Germany, but this trade became increasingly risky. Shipments were often stopped by the British navy. In addition, President Wilson and others spoke out against German atrocities and warned of the threat that the German empire posed to democracy. From 1914 on, trade with the Allies quadrupled, while trade with Germany fell to near zero. Also, by 1917 American banks had loaned \$2.3 billion to the Allies, but only \$27 million to the Central powers. Many U.S. leaders, including Treasury secretary William McAdoo, felt that American prosperity depended upon an Allied victory.

## 8. The War Hits Home

Although the majority of Americans favored victory for the Allies rather than the Central powers, they did not want to join the Allies’ fight. By 1917, however, America had mobilized for war against the Central powers in order to ensure Allied repayment of debts to the United States and to prevent the Germans from threatening U.S. shipping.

## 9. The British Blockade

As fighting on land continued, Britain began to make more use of its naval strength. It blockaded the German coast to prevent weapons and other military supplies from getting through. However, the British expanded the definition of contraband to include food. They also extended the blockade to neutral ports and mined the entire North Sea. The results were twofold. First, American ships carrying goods for Germany refused to challenge the blockade and seldom reached their destination. Second, Germany found it increasingly difficult to import foodstuff and fertilizers for crops. By 1917 famine stalked the country. An estimated 750,000 Germans starved to death as a result of the British blockade. Americans had been angry at Britain's blockade. It threatened freedom of the seas and prevented American goods from reaching German ports. However, Germany's response to the blockade soon outraged Americans.

## 10. German U-Boat Response

Germany responded to the British blockade with a counterblockade by U-boats (from Unterseeboot, the German word for submarine). Any British or Allied ship found in the waters around Britain would be sunk and it would not always be possible to warn crews and passengers of an attack. One of the worst disasters occurred on May 7, 1915, when a U-boat sank the British liner Lusitania off the Irish coast. Of the 1,198 persons lost, 128 were Americans. The Germans defended their action on the grounds that the liner carried ammunition. Despite Germany's explanation, Americans became outraged with Germany because of the loss of life. American public opinion turned against Germany and the Central powers. Despite this provocation, President Wilson ruled out a military response in favour of a sharp protest to Germany. Three months later, in August 1915, a U-boat sank another British



liner, the Arabic, drowning two Americans. Again the United States protested, and this time Germany agreed not to sink any more passenger ships. But in March 1916 Germany broke its promise and torpedoed an unarmed French passenger steamer, the Sussex. The Sussex sank, and about 80 passengers, including Americans, were killed or injured. After this attack, Wilson threatened to end diplomatic relations with Germany unless it stopped killing innocent civilians. German officials feared that the United States might enter the war, so Germany issued the Sussex pledge, which included a promise not to sink merchant vessels “without warning and without saving human lives.” But there was a condition: if the United States could not persuade Britain to lift its blockade against food and fertilizers, Germany would consider renewing unrestricted submarine warfare.

## **11. The United States Declares War**

Despite Wilson’s efforts on behalf of peace, hope seemed lost. The Allies were angered by Wilson’s request for “peace without victory.” They blamed the Central powers for starting the war and wanted them to pay for wartime damage and destruction. Germany, too, ignored Wilson’s call for peace.

## **12. German Provocation**

Germany’s leaders hoped to defeat Britain by resuming unrestricted submarine warfare. On January 31 the kaiser announced that U-boats would sink all ships in British waters hostile or neutral on sight. Wilson was stunned. The German decision meant that the United States would have to go to war. However, the president held back, saying that he would wait for “actual overt acts” before declaring war. Document-Based Investigation Historical Source “Peace Without Victory” After the 1916 election, President Wilson tried to mediate between the warring alliances in Europe. The attempt failed. In a later speech, the president asked the

Allied and Central powers to accept a “peace without victory,” in which neither side would impose harsh terms on the other. “The treaties and agreements which bring [the war] to an end must embody terms which will create a peace that is worth guaranteeing and preserving, a peace that will win the approval of mankind, not merely a peace that will serve the several interests and immediate aims of the nations engaged. . . . it must be a peace without victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor’s terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand. Only a peace between equals can last.” President Woodrow Wilson, from an address to the Senate, January 22, 1917

Analyze Historical Sources How does this speech reflect Wilson’s ideas about equality in a postwar world? Reading Check Analyze Effects How did the German U-boat campaign affect U.S. public opinion? The overt acts came. First was the Zimmermann note, a secret telegram from the German foreign minister to the German ambassador in Mexico that was intercepted and decoded by British agents. The telegram proposed an alliance between Mexico and Germany and promised that if war with the United States broke out, Germany would support Mexico in recovering “lost territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.” The Germans hoped that an American war with Mexico would keep the United States out of the war in Europe. Excerpts of the telegram were printed in newspapers. The American public was outraged. On top of this, the Germans sank four unarmed American merchant ships, with a loss of 36 lives, further angering Americans.

## 16. A Revolution In Russia

Meanwhile, events in Russia also troubled the United States. By the end of 1915 Russia had suffered about 2.5 million casualties in the fight against the Central powers and was

experiencing massive food shortages. Blaming the Russian czar for the nation's losses, revolutionaries ousted him in March 1917 and established a provisional government. In November, a group known as the Bolsheviks overthrew the provisional government and set up a Communist state. The new government withdrew the Russian army from the eastern front and signed a peace agreement with the Central powers. With Russia out of the conflict, Germany was free to focus on fighting in the west. It looked as if Germany had a chance of winning the war. These events removed the last significant obstacle to direct U.S. involvement in the war. Now supporters of American entry into the war could claim that this was a war of democracies against brutal monarchies.

### **17. America Acts**

A light drizzle fell on Washington on April 2, 1917, as senators, representatives, ambassadors, members of the Supreme Court, and other guests crowded into the Capitol to hear President Wilson deliver his war resolution. Congress passed the resolution a few days later. With the hope of neutrality finally shattered, U.S. troops would follow the stream of American money and munitions that had been heading to the Allies throughout the war. But Wilson's plea to make the world "safe for democracy" wasn't just political posturing. Indeed, Wilson and many Americans truly believed that the United States had to join the war to pave the way for a future order of peace and freedom. A resolved but anxious nation held its breath as the United States prepared for war.

### **18. World War And India**

Although not a direct participant, India could not, however, escape the effect of the war. The world war affected the Indian society and economy very profoundly. But it is important to note that the war had a different impact on different section of the population. Among the

poorer class of Indians it meant increased misery and impoverishment. It also brought heavy taxation on the people. War demands created a scarcity of agricultural products as well as other daily necessities of life. As a result there was a phenomenal increase in their prices. Driven to desperation the people became ready to join any movement against the government. Consequently the war years also became years of intense nationalist political agitation. Soon India was to witness a massive mass movement, called the Non-Cooperation Movement, led by Gandhi, about which you will learn in a subsequent unit. On the other hand the war brought fortunes for the industrialists. It created an economic crisis in Britain and for the war demand they had to depend on Indian industries. Jute industry, for example, flourished in this period. In this way the war promoted the industrial advance of India. The Indian industrialist took the maximum advantage of the opportunities offered. They made fortunes and wanted to preserve it, even after the war came to an end. For this reason they were prepared to organise themselves and support the organised nationalist movement. Thus, the war helped in bringing about a wave of nationalism among various section of the population, although through different processes. India's independent economic advance also began to take shape, which was to grow in years. Subsequent units will explain these Phenomena in greater details.

## 19. Effects

- As many as 8.5 million soldiers and 13 million civilians died as a result of the war.
- Failure to deliver mandated reparations leads to the armed occupation of the Ruhr River valley region by French and Belgian troops.
- German militarists perpetuate the myth that the German Army was undefeated in battle, undermining faith in the civilian government of the Weimar Republic.

- Imperial dynasties in Austria-Hungary, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia collapsed.
- Mass movement of troops and refugees helped spread the Spanish flu, a devastating influenza pandemic that claimed as many as 50 million lives in 1918-19.
- Ottoman territories in the Middle East are divided up among the victorious Allied powers at the Conference of San Remo.
- The League of Nations is established, but its effectiveness is hampered by the non-participation of the United States.

## 20. Conclusion

Our aim here was to put forward before you the main causes and consequences of the First World War. You must have noticed that the only common and agreed objective of the Allies in 1914 was to crush Germany and diminish its hegemony in Europe. They did not go to war to bring about communist revolution in Russia, to destroy old Empires, to establish new Arab Kingdoms or even to begin a new experiment of a League of Nations. The richest fruits were harvested by the semi-belligerents or non-belligerents. U.S.A. became a great economic power, Japan gained economic and naval strength in the Pacific, and India made great progress towards self-government. The victorious Allies in spite of achieving certain particular aims, bequeathed to the world a most burdensome legacy of devastation, debt, poverty, refugees, minority problems and inter-allied frictions. The League of Nations was a world organisation contrived to replace the old system of 'power politics'. It was a machinery for the peaceful settlement of disputes and arbitration which replaced the old methods of secret diplomacy and separate alliances and quest for a balance of power. You are aware of the peculiarities of the international situation in Europe in 1914. It has been described as

'international anarchy' but it was actually semi-anarchy where the colonial and dynastic and national disputes threw the whole of Europe into terrifying ordeal of war.

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