

3.1 Wartime Transformations

The First World War, as you know, was fought between two power blocs. On the one side were the Allies – Britain, France and Russia (later joined by the US); and on the opposite side were the Central Powers – Germany, Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey. When the war began in August 1914, many governments thought it would be over by Christmas. It lasted more than four years. The First World War was a war like no other before. The fighting involved the world's leading industrial nations which now harnessed the vast powers of modern industry to inflict the greatest possible destruction on their enemies. This war was thus the first modern industrial war. It saw the use of machine guns, tanks, aircraft, chemical weapons, etc. on a massive scale. These were all increasingly products of modern large-scale industry. To fight the war, millions of soldiers had to be recruited from around the world and moved to the frontlines on large ships and trains. The scale of death and destruction – 9 million dead and 20 million injured – was unthinkable before the industrial age, without the use of industrial arms. Most of the killed and maimed were men of working age. These deaths and injuries reduced the able-bodied workforce in Europe. With fewer numbers within the family, household incomes declined after the war. During the war, industries were restructured to produce war-related goods. Entire societies were also reorganised for war – as men went to battle, women stepped in to undertake jobs that earlier only men were expected to do. War Production of armaments increased rapidly to meet war demands. The Making of a Global World The war led to the snapping of economic links between some of the world's largest economic powers which were now fighting each other to pay for them. So Britain borrowed large sums of money from US banks as well as the US public. Thus the war transformed the US from being an international debtor to an international creditor. In other words, at the war's end, the US and its citizens owned more overseas assets than foreign governments and citizens owned in the US.