

World War I began in 1914 after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and lasted until 1918. During the conflict, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (the Central Powers) fought against Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Romania, Japan and the United States (the Allied Powers). Thanks to new military technologies and the horrors of trench warfare, World War I saw unprecedented levels of carnage and destruction. By the time the war was over and the Allied Powers claimed victory, more than 16 million people—soldiers and civilians alike—were dead.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand

Tensions had been brewing throughout Europe—especially in the troubled Balkan region of southeast Europe—for years before World War I actually broke out.

A number of alliances involving European powers, the Ottoman Empire, Russia and other parties had existed for years, but political instability in the Balkans (particularly Bosnia, Serbia and Herzegovina) threatened to destroy these agreements.

The spark that ignited World War I was struck in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where Archduke Franz Ferdinand—heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire—was shot to death along with his wife, Sophie, by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914. Princip and other nationalists were struggling to end Austro-Hungarian rule over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The assassination of Franz Ferdinand set off a rapidly escalating chain of events: Austria-Hungary, like many countries around the world, blamed the Serbian government for the attack and hoped to use the incident as justification for settling the question of Serbian nationalism once and for all.

Kaiser Wilhelm II

Because mighty Russia supported Serbia, Austria-Hungary waited to declare war until its leaders received assurance from German leader Kaiser Wilhelm II that Germany would support their cause.

Austro-Hungarian leaders feared that a Russian intervention would involve Russia's ally, France, and possibly Great Britain as well.

On July 5, Kaiser Wilhelm secretly pledged his support, giving Austria-Hungary a so-called *carte blanche*, or “blank check” assurance of Germany's backing in the case of war. The Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary then sent an ultimatum to Serbia, with such harsh terms as to make it almost impossible to accept.

World War I Begins

Convinced that Austria-Hungary was readying for war, the Serbian government ordered the Serbian army to mobilize and appealed to Russia for assistance. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, and the tenuous peace between Europe's great powers quickly collapsed.

Within a week, Russia, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Serbia had lined up against Austria-Hungary and Germany, and World War I had begun.

The Western Front

According to an aggressive military strategy known as the Schlieffen Plan (named for its mastermind, German Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen), Germany began fighting World War I on two fronts, invading France through neutral Belgium in the west and confronting Russia in the east.

On August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the border into Belgium. In the first battle of World War I, the Germans assaulted the heavily fortified city of Liege, using the most powerful weapons in their arsenal—enormous siege cannons—to capture the city by August 15. The Germans left death and destruction in their wake as they advanced through Belgium toward France, shooting civilians and executing a Belgian priest they had accused of inciting civilian resistance.

First Battle of the Marne

In the First Battle of the Marne, fought from September 6-9, 1914, French and British forces confronted the invading Germany army, which had by then penetrated deep into northeastern France, within 30 miles of Paris. The Allied troops checked the German advance and mounted a successful counterattack, driving the Germans back to north of the Aisne River.

The defeat meant the end of German plans for a quick victory in France. Both sides dug into trenches, and the Western Front was the setting for a hellish war of attrition that would last more than three years.

Particularly long and costly battles in this campaign were fought at Verdun (February-December 1916) and the Battle of the Somme (July-November 1916). German and French troops suffered close to a million casualties in the Battle of Verdun alone.

World War I Books and Art

The bloodshed on the battlefields of the Western Front, and the difficulties its soldiers had for years after the fighting had ended, inspired such works of art as “All Quiet on the Western Front” by Erich Maria Remarque and “In Flanders Fields” by Canadian doctor Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae. In the latter poem, McCrae writes from the perspective of the fallen soldiers:

To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Published in 1915, the poem inspired the use of the poppy as a symbol of remembrance.

Visual artists like Otto Dix of Germany and British painters Wyndham Lewis, Paul Nash and David Bomberg used their firsthand experience as soldiers in World War I to create their art, capturing the anguish of trench warfare and exploring the themes of technology, violence and landscapes decimated by war.

The Eastern Front

On the Eastern Front of World War I, Russian forces invaded the German-held regions of East Prussia and Poland, but were stopped short by German and Austrian forces at the Battle of Tannenberg in late August 1914.

Despite that victory, Russia's assault had forced Germany to move two corps from the Western Front to the Eastern, contributing to the German loss in the Battle of the Marne.

Combined with the fierce Allied resistance in France, the ability of Russia's huge war machine to mobilize relatively quickly in the east ensured a longer, more grueling conflict instead of the quick victory Germany had hoped to win under the Schlieffen Plan.