

chapter 15

The Great War (World War I) and Its Aftermath, 1914–1919



Historians generally agree that the nineteenth century did not begin and end with the calendar, but that it began and ended with two major historical milestones. It began with the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and ended abruptly with the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. (The name “World War I” did not come into use until much later, since of course no one knew at the time that there would be a World War II.)

The war happened primarily for two reasons. The first was nationalism: Serbian nationalism was the motive for an assassination in the Austrian royal family, and German nationalism was the motive for the major buildup of the German military in the years before the war. The second reason for going to war was maintaining the balance of power. The unification of Germany had changed things by creating a large, strong, powerful entity in central Europe—a nation-state whose ambitions caused grave concern to Britain, Russia, and especially France.

The war would be fought between the Allied or Entente powers (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Central powers (Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, and the Ottomans). The United States and Italy would later enter the war on the side of the Allies.

Europe had never seen violence on the scale of the Great War. The Industrial Revolution made it possible to transport more troops longer distances more quickly, and had enabled the invention of a variety of mechanized weapons. The clumsy muskets of earlier wars were replaced with much more efficient guns. Cavalry regiments were replaced with tanks. Hand-to-hand combat was replaced by long-distance sniper fire.

At the end of the war, the three most powerful European nations—Britain, France, and Germany—were severely weakened. Millions of their young men had been slaughtered, their military forces were destroyed, their economies were devastated, and vast swaths of northeastern France, site of four years of trench warfare, lay in ruins. The United States came out of the war as the world's strongest nation.

CHAPTER 15 OBJECTIVES

- Identify the causes of the Great War.
- Identify the Allied or Entente powers and the Central powers, and explain how each nation chose which side to fight on.
- Describe the course of the fighting.
- List and explain the major provisions of the Peace of Versailles.

Chapter 15 Time Line

- 1908 Austria-Hungary annexes Bosnia-Herzegovina
- 1914 June 28 Gavrilo Princip assassinates Franz Ferdinand and Sophie of Austria-Hungary
- July 28 Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia
- July 30 Russian troops mobilize against Austria-Hungary
- August 1 Germany declares war on Russia
- August 3 Germany declares war on France; German troops invade Belgium

- September 6–7 Battle of the Marne
- October 29 Turkey enters the war on the side of the Central powers
- November 10–18 First Battle of Ypres
- 1915 Trench warfare begins
- April 22 First use of poison gas by German troops at Second Battle of Ypres
- May 7 German U-boats sink *Lusitania*
- May 24 Italy enters war on Allied/Entente side
- November 15 British defeat at Dardanelles
- 1916 February 21–July Battle of Verdun
- May 31 Battle of Jutland
- July–November Battle of the Somme
- September First use of the tank in battle by Entente troops
- 1917 April 4 United States declares war on Germany
- October 21 U.S. troops arrive on Western Front
- November 7 Russian Revolution
- 1918 February 23 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
- September–October Massive influenza epidemic
- November 11 German surrender; signing of armistice
- 1919 June 28 Peace conference and signing of Treaty of Versailles

Buildup to the War

World War I was largely a struggle among the Great Powers of Europe—Germany, France, Britain, Russia, and Austria. No one nation had dominated Europe since the defeat of Napoleon; an entire century had gone by in relative peace among the Great Powers.

All this began to change with the unification of Germany in 1871. Previously, it had been a collection of small states. Now it was a large and powerful

state. Germany's new position of power came from two major sources: geography and economy.

Geographically, Germany's central position on the continent made it a dangerous neighbor. It was in a position to attack several nations simply by marching over the border. Because this central position made it equally vulnerable to attack in its turn, Germany invested heavily in its army and navy, continuing the aggressive policy inaugurated under Frederick the Great see Chapter 6.

Economically, Germany had become Europe's strongest nation. Germany had been quick to industrialize after unification, and the country soon surpassed even Britain in this regard. National prosperity gave rise to an excess of boastful national pride—particularly as embodied in Kaiser Wilhelm II, crowned in 1888—that made Germany unpopular among its neighbors.

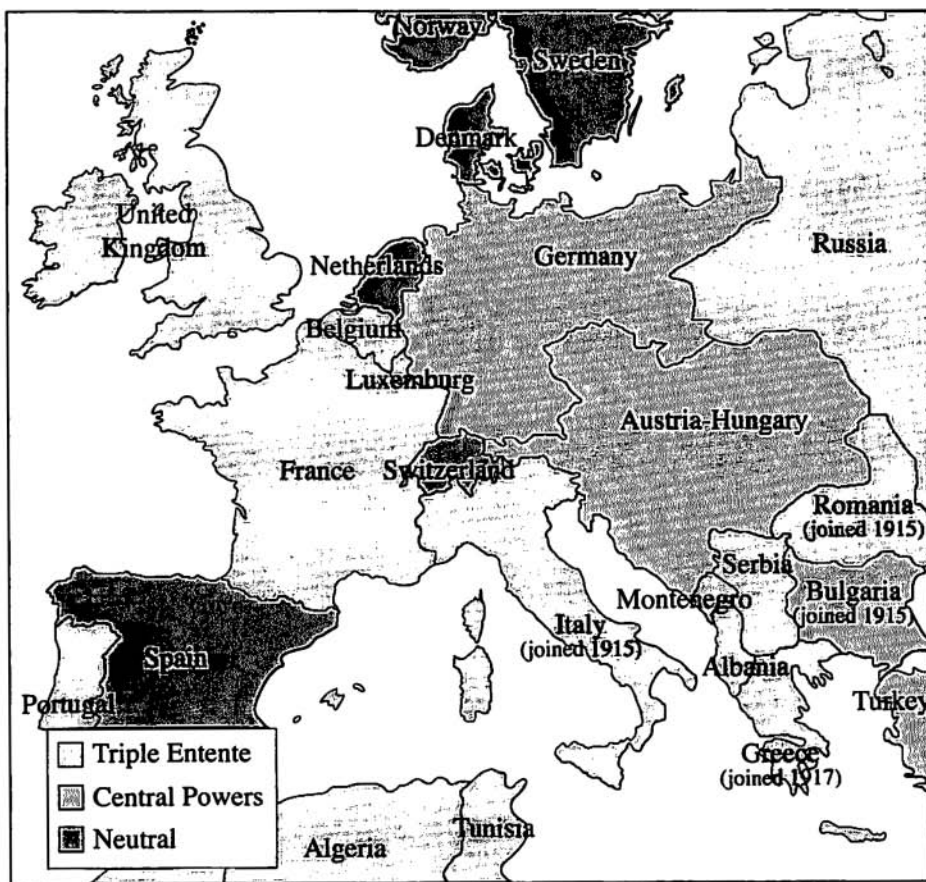
Between German unification and 1910, the European powers formed a series of alliances. These agreements established relationships that would pit the nations of central Europe against the nations on either side.

EUROPEAN ALLIANCES, 1881–1907

1881 "Three Emperors' Alliance" Germany, Russia, Austria	This alliance crumbled because Germany quickly came to view Russia as a threat rather than an ally.
1882 "Triple Alliance" Germany, Austria, Italy	This alliance brought all of central Europe together. It divided the eastern and western nations, making it difficult for them to help one another; on the other hand, it meant that the Central powers would have to defend themselves on two fronts if war broke out. The alliance with Italy did not last; Italy joined the Entente powers in 1915.
1894 France and Russia	These nations were natural allies against the threat of the nations that lay geographically between them. Neither had enough natural resources or manpower to defeat the Central powers on its own.
1904 France and Britain	France and Britain had been enemies ever since the Norman conquest of England in 1066. However, German industrialization and the massive buildup of the German navy alarmed Britain and contributed to British desire for a strong ally on the continent.
1907 Britain and Russia	This agreement cemented the "Triple Entente" among Britain, France, and Russia.

The alliances showed another new factor that had emerged in European politics—the direct involvement of Britain. Britain had largely remained aloof from continental border wars and power struggles. British troops had occasionally participated, especially in the Napoleonic Wars, but Britain’s geographical detachment from the continent had generally reflected its lack of central involvement in major power struggles among the other nations. This changed with the series of alliances made in the years before the Great War.

Ironically, three of the European monarchs were closely related family members: George V of Britain and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany were first cousins, and Czar Nicholas II of Russia was their first cousin by marriage. However, the family relationships among the monarchs did not prevent them from going to war against one another.



Europe in 1914

The Outbreak of War

In the last decades before the outbreak of war, almost all the Balkan states won their independence from the Ottoman Empire: Romania and Serbia in 1878, Thessaly in 1881, Bulgaria in 1908, and Albania and Macedonia in 1913. The only exception was Bosnia-Herzegovina, which remained under Austrian control (see Chapter 12).

Serbia resented Austria's takeover of Bosnia for two reasons. First, Bosnia was a Slav nation, populated by a mix of ethnic Croats, Serbs, and Turks—people who had little in common with their Austrian rulers. Second, Serbia had hoped for a political union with Bosnia, so that the two states together could form one larger and stronger one.

In June 1914, Serbian resentment found expression by means of an assassin's bullet. A Serbian named Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and Archduchess Sophie as they rode in an open car through the streets of Bosnia's capital, Sarajevo.

Many historians believe that if Austria had immediately invaded Serbia, the war would have been between these two nations only and would have been concluded quickly. However, while Austria hesitated, Russia began to mobilize its army in preparation for the defense of Serbia, which it would support as a fellow Slav nation. Germany considered this mobilization a serious threat of war and promptly came to Austria's defense by declaring war on Serbia.

The Schlieffen Plan and the Western Front

The German military had long since assumed that it would one day have to fight a war against France and Russia, and it had worked out a war plan, known as the Schlieffen Plan after the officer who designed it. The Schlieffen Plan called for an immediate march on France through Belgium, which stood between their borders. The German army would then march south, capture the capital city of Paris, and thus sew up a quick victory on the Western Front before the Russians had time to muster an attack on Germany from the east.

However, the army did not proceed according to the Schlieffen Plan. Due to disagreements among the commanding officers, the army turned aside before reaching Paris, and met the French army on the Marne River. When the French unexpectedly won the Battle of the Marne, the Germans changed their plans;

the Western Front would now become a setting for trench warfare. By this time, Britain had declared war on Germany as well.

Both sides dug hundreds of miles of trenches stretching roughly along the north-south axis of Europe, from the North Sea to the border of Switzerland. The trenches served the infantry on both sides as both home and fort throughout four years of fighting. The trenches were dreadful places, especially on the British-French side. The Allies had assumed the war would be over quickly and had dug the trenches hastily. They were always muddy, often knee-deep in rain water, crawling with lice and rats, sweltering in summer and freezing in winter. Soldiers had no way to keep themselves, their sleeping places, their rations, or their precious personal possessions clean or dry. The German trenches were somewhat more bearable; the German army had taken a much more methodical approach to trench-building, laying down board floors and installing electricity.

German and French trenches were only a few miles apart, with the zone between them labeled “no-man’s-land.” When the order came for attack, soldiers would leap out of the trenches and rush at the enemy trenches with their guns firing.

No-man’s-land had no cover; it was open and barren ground. For centuries, European soldiers had been fighting battles in which the armies clashed on open ground, with the stronger side usually winning a decisive victory in short order. The types of weapons used meant that most combat was up close and hand-to-hand; eighteenth- and nineteenth-century muskets and rifles had little accuracy over a long distance, and of course swords and sabers were only meant for hand-to-hand combat.

Modern weapons were entirely different. Machine guns, grenades, and other new weapons developed during the Industrial Revolution were most effective from a distance. They were best suited to an ambush-style combat, with soldiers firing on the enemy from the protection of trees, buildings, or, in this case, trenches. Since the attacking soldiers were charging forward across open ground, the defenders in the trenches could fire on them from a position of relative safety. Through four years of trench warfare, neither the Germans nor the French seemed to grasp this lesson; the generals continued to send their men forth from the trenches to be slaughtered by enemy fire. Millions of soldiers died on both sides, and neither side ever advanced its lines more than a few miles into enemy territory. The Western Front was a stalemate throughout most of the war.

The War at Sea

Thousands of British troops joined the French in the trenches, but Britain also used its powerful navy against the Germans. The British navy blockaded Germany and set mines in the North Sea. The British searched all ships entering the North Sea and intercepted any goods that appeared bound for Germany. On its side, Germany had always planned to use its U-boats (*unterseeboots*, literally “undersea boats,” or submarines) to cripple the British navy. The U-boat was a highly effective weapon because it could sail silently under water, unheard and unseen, and then suddenly blow up a ship on the surface that had had no warning of its approach. The Germans published advertisements warning the public that they intended to attack passenger ships as well as cargo steamers; of course, many people still took the risk of sailing. On May 7, 1915, when the Germans sank the British passenger liner HMS *Lusitania*, more than a hundred American passengers died. This event proved a major catalyst in the United States’ decision to join the war in 1917.

The Eastern Front

The sheer size of the Russian population and the enormous dimensions of the country made it a formidable opponent. However, the Germans won a major early victory against the Russians at Tannenberg on the Russian border. The Russians fought back decisively during 1915, but over the next two years the German army advanced some distance into Russia. By 1918, the Germans were halfway to Moscow.

Events took an unexpected turn when Russia abruptly withdrew from the war. The Russian Revolution (see Chapter 16) brought a new government to power in Russia, whose only desire was to get out of the war as quickly as possible so it could settle its own domestic affairs. Russian leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin signed a peace treaty with Germany in the city of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, surrendering a good deal of territory in exchange for the German withdrawal from Russia. This freed the German army to turn all its attention to the Western Front.

The End of the War

In the fall of 1917, French troops began to mutiny. They had been fighting in the trenches for what seemed to them like a lifetime, making no advance against the enemy, watching their comrades get blown to pieces, and knowing that all the time the generals and commanders were safe behind the lines of fire. They put down their guns and refused to fight. The arrival of American troops in 1917 put new heart into the French troops: in addition to manpower, the Americans provided fresh supplies and weapons.

The Germans now launched a massive attack on the Western Front, which would prove to be their final attempt at victory. With the added strength of the American troops, the French and British were able to beat back the German offensive. Fighting raged on into the autumn of 1918. Finally, in the Battle of the Argonne Forest, it became clear that Germany would have to surrender. On November 9, the Germans formally announced the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm. Early in the morning of November 11, the leaders on both sides signed the armistice. At 11 A.M., the guns stopped firing for the last time.

The Terms of the Peace

The peace conference that would settle the issues of the war convened at Versailles. A powerful symbol of French authority and supremacy, it had been deliberately chosen to intimidate the German delegation. The Germans were humiliated still more by being brought to France by train, along a route that took them through many of the battlefields and forced them to view the devastation for which the world would demand they take sole blame.

For the first time in history, a non-European nation would play a major role in the peace settlements. U.S. troops had been a decisive factor in the last year of fighting and had a level of industrial and economic might that dwarfed all the European nations; additionally, the United States had lost comparatively few troops during the war.

The leaders of the Great Powers were divided in their goals. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to establish a lasting peace in Europe. Premier Georges Clemenceau of France wanted to humiliate Germany. Prime Minister David Lloyd George of Britain wanted to achieve a new balance of power, rather than weakening Germany so much that France would take its place as

the sole great power on the European continent. Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando wanted to recover certain Italian territory from Austria.

Despite having fought on the winning side, Russia—soon to become the Soviet Union—took no part in the negotiations at Versailles. Far too much mutual distrust existed between Russia and Western Europe on both political and economic grounds. The Russians resented the lack of European support for their new government, while the Europeans considered that the Russians had sold them out by withdrawing from the war and making a separate peace with Germany. Economically, the forces of communism and capitalism were inherent enemies.

Provisions of the Treaty of Versailles

- Created new nations (Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia)
- Restored the independence of Poland, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia
- Restored Alsace and Lorraine to France
- Gave France control of Saarland region until 1934
- Designated the Rhineland a demilitarized zone between Germany and France
- Created the League of Nations, an international peacekeeping force
- Drastically and permanently reduced the German military
- Forced Germans to admit full responsibility for the war
- Charged Germany billions of dollars in reparations

Restoring the balance of power and achieving peace involved three measures. The first was to redraw European borders along ethnic lines to achieve self-government by nationality. This had been tried in 1815 with mixed success, since the lines had been rather arbitrary. This time the leaders took more care to accommodate the forces of nationalism; they created several new states, expanded others, and broke up the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Once again, their aims were not entirely successful.

The second measure was to reduce Germany's strength and increase France's. Alsace and Lorraine changed hands once again, this time returning to French control. The Rhineland on Germany's western border would be maintained as a demilitarized zone. Additionally, the Germans were to admit full responsibility for the war, to pay enormous reparations, and to reduce their army and navy

to small forces. Although the United States argued against these punitive measures, France insisted on them. The United States argued that they would ruin the German economy for decades to come and that it was not reasonable to reduce the German military to the point where the country could not defend itself. The French argued that Germany was the aggressor nation and thus fully responsible for the war—which had devastated France and murdered an entire generation of its young men. Since Clemenceau refused to compromise on this issue, Wilson reluctantly consented. A storm of protest from the German delegates had no effect. The “war guilt clause,” as it came to be known, would largely contribute to the German aggression of the 1930s and 1940s.

The third measure toward maintaining a balance was President Wilson’s suggestion for an international peacekeeping force. Wilson had recently given a speech in which he laid out “Fourteen Points”—a list of measures that he believed would lead to a lasting peace throughout Europe and the world. The last point on his list proposed an international peacekeeping organization that would protect large and small nations on an equal basis. Members of this League of Nations could discuss conflicts over a conference table and resolve them peacefully, with war becoming a last resort. If one nation behaved aggressively, all other nations would unite against it, effectively putting a stop to attacks.

The League of Nations eventually came about in 1920. Ironically, the United States did not become a member of the League. The American system of government required that Congress approve international treaties; the opposition party refused to approve the League of Nations clause in the Treaty of Versailles on the grounds that it committed the United States to defend any European nation attacked by an outsider.

The War’s Impact on Europe

Casualties of the Great War totaled more than 37 million people—an entire generation of Europeans of all nations, either dead or severely wounded. Millions more died of a severe flu epidemic that struck not only Europe but the rest of the world as well. Many soldiers would never recover from the horrors of combat; they were left in a condition of mental illness called shellshock. Chronic nightmares, hallucinations, severe depression, lethargy, and outbreaks of violent behavior were common symptoms of shellshock. Today doctors refer to this result of combat experience as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Moreover, "an age was dead and gone," as Woodrow Wilson commented in a 1918 speech. The tank had replaced the cavalry regiment. The machine gun had replaced the bayonet. Elected ministers of state had replaced almost all the hereditary monarchs. Mechanized warfare was a horror that no one had anticipated.

The United States, geographically far removed from the combat, emerged from the war far stronger than the European powers. The war effort had bolstered the American economy; in addition, fighting side by side with the British and French cemented good relations between the nations and gave the United States a level of power and influence over Europe that would persist for the rest of the twentieth century. This influence showed at Versailles, where the United States was an equal participant in the peace process despite not having participated equally in the fighting. The balance of international power had shifted from the Old World to the New. The United States was on its way to becoming a superpower.

QUIZ

- _____ was forced to assume total responsibility for World War I.
 - Austria-Hungary
 - France
 - Germany
 - Russia
- Britain's main source of anxiety during the years before 1914 was
 - the buildup of the German navy.
 - the success of Russian industrialization.
 - the status of its colonies in the Middle East.
 - the Austrian annexation of Bosnia.
- _____ was the main motive for the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and Sophie in Sarajevo in 1914.
 - Anarchism
 - Nationalism
 - Economics
 - Religion

- 4. Why did other nations consider the unified Germany a threat to the balance of power?**
- A. because it created a new hereditary monarchy
 - B. because it annexed a number of small neighboring states
 - C. because it combined size and power with a central continental location
 - D. because it was a long-standing enemy of France
- 5. Trench warfare resulted in a stalemate primarily because**
- A. weather conditions made it too problematic.
 - B. modern weapons were not suited to that style of combat.
 - C. the German army had to divide its forces on two fronts.
 - D. the French trenches were badly and hastily dug.
- 6. The Schlieffen Plan failed because**
- A. the German army did not march all the way to Paris.
 - B. the Russians won a major victory in their first clash with the Central powers.
 - C. the Italians deserted the Central powers and fought on the Entente side.
 - D. Britain used its navy to blockade Germany in the North Sea.
- 7. Which of the following nation-states was newly-created by the leaders at Versailles?**
- A. Austria
 - B. Greece
 - C. Poland
 - D. Yugoslavia
- 8. Which of the great powers did not take part in the negotiations at Versailles?**
- A. Britain
 - B. Germany
 - C. Russia
 - D. United States
- 9. France's main goal at Versailles can best be described as**
- A. the achievement of a lasting peace in Europe.
 - B. the reestablishment of a balance of power.
 - C. the humiliation and ruin of Germany.
 - D. the redrawing of national borders along ethnic lines.

10. A major "first" in the Great War was
- A. the outbreak of battles in the empires outside of Europe.
 - B. the impressive military force demonstrated by Germany.
 - C. the alliance between France and Russia.
 - D. the decisive participation of a non-European nation.