Modern World: Notes: World War One (1914 – 1918)

“The war to end all wars” – war slogan

World War One was the first major war of the twentieth century. It was a largely pointless war that basically destroyed a generation and set the stage for even worse war twenty years later: World War Two. The term “World War One” was only applied to the conflict after World War Two. In the aftermath of World War One, it was simply known as “The Great War.” The name “The First World War” was first used by British Journalist Charles Repington in 1920. The staggering statistics of the war give an idea of the true extent of the horror of this conflict. In four years of fighting, it is estimated that eight million were killed and twenty million were wounded. One problem with statistics for the war was that in Russia and many of the smaller warring countries the official record were poorly kept and any statistics need to be approximated. The casualty statistics (dead, wounded & missing) for the major participants in World War One:

- Russia – 9 million
- Germany – 7 million
- France – 6 million
- Britain – 3 million
- Ottoman Empire - 550,000
- United States – 116,516

The fact that the total casualties for the war totaled 30 million, which is roughly 57% of soldiers that served, is an indication of how the war annihilated a generation of young men. Unlike World War Two, most of the casualties were soldiers and not civilians.

The primary reason for the terribleness of the war was that all of the major powers of Europe were involved. They were divided into two sides that were equally matched in military strength. The two sides were:
- The Allies – Britain, France, Russia, and later Italy and the United States.
- The Central Powers – Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.

While the battles of World War One were fought in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and some ways North America – most of the fighting was based around Europe. In Europe, the Central Powers were surrounded by the Allied countries. All the battlefronts in Europe were named based on their location to the position of the Central Powers. The main battlefronts were:
- Western Front – France, Britain (later the U.S.) against Germany.
- Eastern Front – Germany & Austria-Hungary against Russia
- Southern Europe – Italy against Austria-Hungary
- Balkan Front – Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire against Serbia and Britain.

Europe Before World War One

For Europe, the decades prior to World War One were like an Indian Summer. The capital cities of Europe – London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and St. Petersburg – were centers of artistic, cultural and scientific growth. The prosperity created by the Industrial Revolution was raising the living standards of people across Europe. This prosperity can be observed in growing European populations, as given in the chart to the below. In addition, many Europeans were proud of the world-wide empires their countries controlled. Many Europeans confidently expected that the Twentieth Century would be a time of continuing social and economic progress. The terms that Europeans apply to this period describe peaceful and prosperous times that preceded the war. The English refer to it as the Age of Progress, and the French call it La Belle Epoque or “the beautiful times.” Still, beneath the surface of optimism, many Europeans feared that a dark tragedy was approaching. The
Austrians describe this period with the phrase *Fin de Siecle* or the “end of the cycle” to imply the fatalistic luxury and decadence of an era that seemed to be doomed.

While Europe was changing in terms of culture and technology, with the exception of France and England, it had not changed politically and was still ruled by monarchs. Europe had changed greatly over the previous two hundred years, yet its political systems seemed frozen in time. Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph noted this when he said to American president Teddy Roosevelt, “I have known for a long time how much of an anomaly we are in today’s world.” When he said this, the 86 year old Franz Joseph, who had held power since 1848, was the only monarch most of his subjects had ever known. More than any other factor, the image of Franz Joseph united the ethnically diverse Austro-Hungarian Empire.

At the start of the twentieth century, the idea that a large scale European war could happen seemed remote in part because of the interrelations of all the ruling families in Europe. An example of this was that 15 of British Queen Victoria’s children or grandchildren either ruled or were married to the rulers of European countries. British King George V, Russian Czar Nicholas II, and German Kaiser Wilhelm II were cousins.

In addition, over the later part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the countries of Europe had grown more culturally and economically intertwined with each other. A widely popular book, the “Great Illusion” by Norman Angell, published in 1910, argued that a large-scale modern war in Europe was impossible because of the financial and economic interdependence of the major nations. In theory, no nation would start a war due to the economic losses.

However, this optimism that economic rationality would prevent any war did not take into account the growing feeling that war was a national necessity. This thought permeated Europe and it was best summed up in the 1911 book “Germany and the Next War” by German General von Bernhardi with chapters titled “The Right to Make War,” “The Duty to Make War” and “World Power or Downfall.” The same thoughts were expressed by English singer Gilbert Hastings Macdermott when he coined the world jingoism, meaning warlike patriotism, by singing, “We don’t want to fight, but, by jingo, if we do, we’ve got the ships, we’ve got the men, and got the money too.”

In the decades prior to World War One, the countries of Europe organized themselves to be prepared to fight a major war. This was in part because countries viewed military superiority as the best means of avoiding conflict. The dominant military doctrine of the period held that a large number of well lead and motivated infantry could break through any line of defense. For this reason, countries needed to be able to field large armies in time of war. The war colleges of major European countries drafted detailed mobilization plans for their armies in case of war. These plans detailed how million men armies were to be mobilized and made ready for war in a few days. As a result, every European army stood on the brink of war, and in a crisis there would be little time available for diplomats to prevent hostilities. Young men were conscripted into armies for several years of active service and then held in reserve units into their mid-forties. Counties were divided into military districts for ease of mobilization. In reality, the civilian society of Europe was shadowed by an invisible military society that was ready to go to war at a moment’s notice.

The combination of industrial technology and military organization had developed military units of awesome firepower. European armies were organized according to units called divisions comprised of 12,000 rifles, 72 artillery pieces and 24 machine guns. In one minute, one division could fire 120,000 bullets and a thousand explosive shells. In 1914, the year World War One began, Europe contained over 200 active or reserve divisions.

The cost and awful destructive power of modern war was not lost on political leaders. In 1899, Russian Czar Nicholas II called for an international conference, called the Hague Conference, to establish a court where countries could settle disputes by arbitration. Arbitration is method of solving disputes using a third party to reach an agreement. The flaw with the international court was that participation was voluntary. In the many crises that gripped Europe before World War One, no country turned to this court to solve its crises.

**Causes of World War One**

While World War One was started over a single issue – an assassination in a remote part of Europe – the causes for the war had been building for several decades. In general, the major causes for the war can be divided into the following categories:

- **Nationalism** – The idea that people of a common identity should live in the same nation had been a growing force in Europe since the French Revolution. Throughout the nineteenth century, nationalism had been a force for uniting countries (Germany and Italy) and dissolving empires (Austria and the Ottoman Empire). The idea of nationalism also began to change as the major powers began to exert their power to benefit smaller nations that shared a common national identity. For example, the Russians believed that they had a responsibility to support their fellow Slavs, an idea called Pan-Slavism, particularly the Slavic people of the Balkans. In the Balkans, the Russians formed the closest...
connections with the Serbians. As the Ottoman Empire was pushed out of the Balkans, Russia, in support of Serbia, began to come into conflict with Austria-Hungary, which also wanted to establish its dominance over the Balkans. Using the same idea of idea of nationalism, Germany supported Austria, a Pan-Germanic nationalism, in any conflict with Russia.

- **Imperialism** – The desire of major powers to control important areas beyond the borders of their countries for strategic and economic needs had been an important part of the imperialist drive of European countries during the nineteenth century. For example, England wanted to control the Mediterranean Sea and sea routes to India, while Germany wanted to build an overseas empire – mainly in Africa. In 1896, German Kaiser Wilhelm II declared that Germany was now a “world power.” This sense of imperialism drove both Russia and Austria-Hungary to view the Balkans as their sphere of influence. This point of overlapping spheres of influence created increased hostility between the two countries.

- **Militarism** – Among the major powers, it was understood that countries needed to have strong militaries and be willing to use force to solve international disputes. The peace of Europe was based on a “balance of power” where a nation and its allies were of equal military strength to its enemies. This system meant that no country could be allowed to have military dominance. The “balance of power” strategy encouraged countries to build up their militaries to maintain the balance of peace. Germany believed it needed a strong army to defend itself, and England needed a strong navy to protect its access to colonies. In a burst of national pride, in 1900 the German Kaiser Wilhelm II issued the Second Naval Law ordering Germany to match England’s naval strength. As a result, Germany and England became involved in an “arms race” to build larger navies and battleships. This action placed England and Germany, traditional allies, at odds with each other. Other nations, such as France and Russia, having suffered humiliating defeats, rebuilt the strength of their armed forces. In addition, due to industrial modernization, the size of armies and destructive power of armaments had grown tremendously since the Franco-Prussian War – the last war between major powers in Europe.

- **Alliance System** – In order to reinforce the balance of power, the countries set alliances to hold their national opponents in “check.” Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy signed the Triple Alliance in 1882. In 1892, Russia and France signed a defensive treaty that surrounded Germany. In 1907, Britain joined this alliance with Russia and France, in reaction to the large navy that Germany was building. The alliance became known as the Triple Entente. With all the major power divided into either the Alliance or the Entente, the major powers had created a situation where a war between any two European major powers could spread to involve all of Europe – and because of world-wide empires – the whole world.

### World War One Begins

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 was the event that triggered World War One. At the time of the assassination, few people thought this event would cause a worldwide war because Franz Ferdinand was neither popular nor did this appear to be more than a local incident. In fact, most of Europe ignored the move to war until it became unstoppable. The assassination triggered a chain of diplomatic events that led quickly to world war.

The circumstances that resulted in World War One were based in the fact that the Ottoman Empire was in decline. The weakening Ottoman Empire created a power vacuum in the Balkans as national groups began to break free of Ottoman control. In the first decade of the twentieth century the newly independent Balkan nation of Serbia wanted to expand to build a larger nation of “Yugoslavia” or “Southern Slav.” This brought Serbia into conflict with Austria-Hungary. Austria -Hungary was nervous that a strong Slavic nation in the Balkans would create more nationalist problems within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1908, Austria-Hungary annexed the former Ottoman territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Serbia turned to Russia for aid in this conflict. However, the Russians failed to support the Serbs only because Germany openly supported Austria-Hungary. This diplomatic humiliation caused Russia and Serbia to resist future Austrian expansion in the Balkans.

In 1912-1913, two Balkan Wars were an indication of the instability of the region. In the first, newly independent Montenegro and Albania declared war on the Ottomans, and then second, the various Balkan nations fought over control of the territory of Macedonia. The problem with the Balkans was that intermixed nationalities resulted in the incomplete emergence of nation-states. The constant conflict between the Balkan nations over territory combined with the intense interest of Russia and Austria to have the region in their sphere of influence meant that any local conflict was magnified into European conflict. Unfortunately, the other European powers did not try to solve the dispute, but rather supported either Russia or Austria in the conflict. This made the region a flash point for the start of a European war, which because of imperial empires would become a world war.

The spark that set off the conflict of World War One was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He had traveled to Sarajevo, the capital of the province of Bosnia, to oversee military maneuvers by the Austro-Hungarian Army. While on this official trip, he and his wife were assassinated by a nineteen year-old
Serbian terrorist, Gavrilo Princip. Princip was a member of an organization called the Black Hand that received weapons and training from the Serbian secret police. The initial reaction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire did not indicate that this event would cause a war. Neither Franz Ferdinand nor his wife were liked by the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph or the Austrian people because his wife was not of sufficiently noble birth.

In the month after the assassination, the Austro-Hungarian Empire used the assassination as an excuse to crush Serbia. After gaining a guarantee of German military support, on July 23, 1914, Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum to Serbia that demanded that Serbia stop all anti-Austrian activities and allow for Austrian forces to enter Serbia to arrest all members of the Black Hand. The Austrian carefully crafted the ultimatum that the Serbians would have to reject. This goal was made clear when Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold wrote, “What demands could be pinned that would be wholly impossible for Serbia to accept?” Austria gave Serbia 48 hours to respond. Five minutes before the deadline, Serbia replied by accepting most of the demands and expressing a willingness to negotiate on the others. The fact that Berchtold did not even bother to read the Serbian reply indicated the Austrian position. On July 28, Austria-Hungary announced this was not acceptable and declared war on Serbia.

This declaration of war triggered a chain of events that pulled all of Europe into war. Even before the declaration, the major powers were moving toward war. For example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov, after hearing about the Austrian ultimatum, said, “This means a European War”. In many ways, the countries of Europe became trapped in their own mobilization schedules. British historian AJP Taylor said it was war “by timetable”. On July 29th, in support of Serbia, began to mobilize its army for war against Austria-Hungary. Russia planned six weeks to get its army ready. The basic tactic of the Russian mobilization was to activate its military units that would march to the Russian borders and collect other Russian units as they moved. This would form a “steam-roller” of men and material.

On August 1st, Germany, in support of Austria-Hungary, declared war on Russia. Here is where things get tricky. Germany did not want to fight a two front war where it would be pinned between Russia and France. The German High Command developed the Schlieffen Plan to prevent this situation. In case of war with Russia, Germany would first attack and defeat France (Russia’s ally) while Russia was still mobilizing its army. Based on the experience of the Franco-Prussian War and the fact it would take Russia six weeks to be fully mobilized, the Germans predicted they could quickly knock France out of the war and have time to turn their armies east to attack Russia. The plan was for the German Army to defeat France in 42 days. In order to insure a quick defeat of France, the German battle plan called for avoiding the French forces on the Franco-German border by invading France by way of Belgium (a neutral country protected by Britain). This invasion plan was logistically complex and involved moving the support for the German army with 500 trains of more than 50 wagons each. There were two major flaws to this plan. First, von Schlieffen, who developed the plan, did not believe that the German Army could execute the plan. Second, the Germans had no plan of what to do if this plan failed to achieve its goals.

As a result of the Schlieffen Plan, once Germany declared war on Russia it had to move very fast. On August 3rd, Germany invaded Belgium, which brought France and Britain into the war. The British perspective on joining the war was voiced by the British Foreign Secretary when he told the British House of Commons, “If we are engaged in war, we shall suffer but little more than we shall suffer if we stand aside.” In a little over a month from the assassination, and a week from Austria-Hungary’s declaration, all the major powers of Europe were at war. Of course, all the countries involved believed it would be a short war. Across Europe, young men eagerly went off to fight believing they would be “home for Christmas.”

In the early days of the war the German army smashed through Belgium and far into France. The German army swung like a massive arm through Belgium and aimed southwards to Paris. By the end of August, the German Army was crushing through the French countryside. Neither the French or British armies seemed capable of stopping the Germans. By early September, the Germans were within 30 miles of Paris. The French government moved out of Paris under the expectation of the city falling to the Germans. However, the Germans had advanced too fast and left parts of their army exposed to counter-attack. A French observation plane noticed this weakness and the French immediately employed 1200 taxicabs to transport the soldiers gathered for the defense of Paris to counter-attack against the Germans. This French and British counter attacked, called the Battle of the Marne, stopped the German advance and pushed the Germans back. This crushed Germany’s plans to avoid a two-front war and dreams of a quick war. The Battle of the Marne also demonstrated the massive casualties of modern war. In 7 days of fighting, 234,000 had been killed and 1,400,000 had been wounded.

Both sides, unable to defeat the other in a direct battle, sought to gain an advantage by “out flanking” the other (get around the side of the other). It was military doctrine that if one side could out-flank the other, it would force the other side to retreat. Both the Germans and the combined British and French forces (called the Allies) attempted flanking maneuvers. This became know as the “Race to the Sea,” as both sides spread their armies out to form a five hundred mile battlefront that stretched from
the English Channel to the border of Switzerland (a neutral country). The Germans had roughly 1,900 and the Allies 2,500 men for every mile of the front. These borders limited the ability of the armies to maneuver. Unable to push the other army back or maneuver around the other army, both sides used massive artillery to blast the other side from its positions, which had the result of destroying the trees and buildings soldiers used as shelter. To protect themselves, soldiers built defensive trenches. These trenches formed the frontline or the fighting zone for the next four years. Despite the amounts of men and material poured by both sides into the “Western Front”, the front line would only shift by 11 miles over the next four years.

As the war on the Western Front settled into trench warfare, the defensive strength of the trenches was improved by digging bunkers to protect soldiers during artillery bombardments, building machine-guns into the defenses, and stringing the approaches to the trenches with barbed wire to slow down an attacking force. The strip of land between the opposing trenches, anywhere from a hundred yards to quarter mile in width, was called “no-man’s land.”

Both sides used massed infantry assaults to attack the other side’s trenches. In these assaults, an army would order their soldiers to go “over the top” of their trenches to attack the enemy army’s trenches. This mass infantry attack on entrenched soldiers using machine-guns meant massive casualties for the attacking side. For example, in the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the British lost 60,000 men – the worst day in the history of the British Army. Because the British army was composed of volunteers that enlisted together, military units are organized according to towns and regions – commonly called “Pals battalions”. As a result, towns could lose hundreds of young men in a single battle. For example, the Pals battalion from Accrington England lost 235 killed and 350 wounded in the first half-hour of the Battle of the Somme. Historian Robert Graves wrote that, “The western front was known among its embittered inhabitants as the “sausage machine” because it was fed with live men, churned out corpse, and remained firmly screwed in place.”

In order to “soften up” a section of trenches before an infantry assault, both sides used massed artillery barrages to destroy the ability of defenders to resist an attack. For example, before the German offensive at the Battle of Verdun, the Germans bombarded a fifteen-mile stretch of French trenches with over a million artillery shells. The larger German artillery pieces were called Big Birthas and could fire a 1-ton shell a distance of 5.5 miles. The Germans actually developed and employed a gun that could shoot 82 miles and used it to bombard Paris! Artillery accounted for about 70 percent of the battle casualties in the war.

Despite the horrific casualties of trench warfare, the generals of each army continued to order large numbers of soldiers to attack enemy trenches. This was because military tactics stressed offensive action, rather than defensive, and the governments of the warring countries put aggressive generals in command. The goal of the attacks was to break through the other side’s system of trench fortifications. However, the entrenched soldiers were difficult to dislodge, and the result of the most of the battles of World War One on the Western Front were horrific losses. For example, in the five month Battle of the Somme in 1916, the British lost over 600,000 men to move the front line about five miles – inflicting 400,000 casualties on the Germans. The British were not alone in sacrificing their young men in worthless offensives. In the 11-month German offensive called the Battle of Verdun in 1916, the Germans and French both lost over 300,000, with the Germans only gaining four miles. In the case of the Battle of Verdun, gaining land was not the objective of the battle. Instead, the German commanders intended it to be a battle of attrition that would inflict so many casualties on the French that they would lose the will to fight the war. As German General Falkenhayn said his goal in attacking the French was to “Bleed them white”.

While the losses on both sides were massive, and seemed pointless because of the small amounts of land gained, there were improvements in strategy and tactics over the course of the war, that ultimately helped in allowing the Allied armies to break the German army in the fall of 1918. The first improvement was in the support of large military units in the field – making sure soldiers had enough food and equipment to keep fighting. A second improvement was to coordinate actions along different parts of the front line. For example, the British launched the Battle of the Somme to take pressure of the French at the Battle of Verdun. The third improvement was the coordination of units in offensive operations, such as advancing artillery barrages and the development of special units of “shock troopers” armed with machine guns and flame throwers to “break-through” enemy lines.
In an effort to break the deadlock of trench fighting on the Western Front, countries developed new weapons:

- **Airplanes**: Airplanes were first used in the war to spot targets for artillery and over the course of the war became fighters (to shoot down observing planes) and bombers. These early airplanes were small and made of wood covered with canvas which were very hard to fly – the British lost more than 8000 pilots in training accidents. These early airplanes fought each other in the skies over the trench-covered battlefields in battles called “dogfights.” The average pilot had a life expectancy of six weeks. However, some pilots were able to survive for longer and shot down many enemy planes – they were known as “aces.” The most famous “ace” of World War One was the Baron von Richthoffen, known as the **Red Baron**. It was during this war that Germany conducted the first “air raids” on British cities. In 1915, large German blimps called **Zeppelins** bombed London. By 1917, large German airplanes were bombing London. While these raids did kill over a thousand people, they did more psychological damage than physical damage.

- **Tanks**: The British were the first to use tanks in war. Introduced at the Battle of the Somme, the early tanks were large slow-moving vehicles armed with machine guns and were designed to support infantry as they crossed no-man’s land. However, in their early use, tanks frequently broke down. As a result, military leaders did not recognize the potential of the tank in breaking through enemy trenches and tanks had little impact of the nature of fighting in the war.

- **Poison gas**: The Germans were the first to use poison gas at the **Battle of Ypres** in 1915. Mustard Gas (it had a yellow color) and chlorine gas could blind, burn skin, and kill soldiers. Also, because these gasses were heavier than air, the gas would settle into the trenches and bunkers soldiers built to defend themselves. At first, soldiers had nothing to protect themselves from gas attacks. As both sides began to use gas on a regular basis, soldiers were issued gas masks.

**The War at Sea**

When the fighting on the Western Front did not work to break the stalemate, the Allies and Central Powers used their navies to starve the other side into submission. Britain used its large navy to blockaded Germany and stop any ship trying to bring supplies to Germany. The British blockade was devastating to Germany, resulting in at least 750,000 Germans dying of starvation during the war. In response, German submarines, called Unterseeboot or **U-boats** tried to sink ships carrying supplies to Britain. U-boat attacks during the war killed 75,000 people and destroyed millions of tons of war materials.

The U-boat attacks worked to persuade Americans to support the Allies. The United States was a neutral power during the first three years of the war. However, as the war progressed, Americans began to side with the Allies. On May 7, 1915 a German U-boat sank the British ocean liner Lusitania killing 1,198 people, of which 128 Americans. The killing of American civilians pushed American popular opinion to support the Allies. However, after this attack, the Germans promised to suspend U-boat attacks in order to keep the United States out of the war.

The **Battle of Jutland**, May 31, 1916, was the only large sea battle of the war. The German navy tried to break the British blockade of Germany. While the Germans inflicted higher loses on the British, at the end of the battle, the Germans failed to break through the British blockade and retired to their Baltic Sea bases to sit out the rest of the war. The Germans considered their navy too valuable to lose in war.
The War on Other Fronts

While the war raged on the Western Front, simultaneously the war was also fought out in Eastern Europe between Russia and the combined forces of Germany and Austria Hungary. This was the Eastern Front. In contrast to the Western Front defined by immobile trench warfare, the Eastern Front was fluid, and not even the massive Russian army could hold a continuous front line. In August of 1914, while the bulk of the German army was marching through Belgium and France, the Russians began an invasion of Germany. While this Russian offensive caught the Germans off guard (forcing them to divert needed soldiers from the offensive into France to defend Germany), the Germans won a tremendous victory at the four-day Battle of Tannenberg in which more than 30,000 Russian soldiers were killed or wounded and 95,000 were captured.

The main reason for the German victory was that the Russian army was in a wretched state. At the outset of the war, the Russian government drafted 5 million men into the Russian army. Since the loss of the Russo-Japanese War, the Russians had been rebuilding its army, but at the time of outbreak of the war, these reforms were incomplete. The government was unable to equip such a large force. Many Russian soldiers did not have uniforms, boots, or guns. Despite putting more than 75% of Russia meager industrial capacity into the war effort, the Russian army suffered large amounts of equipment shortages. The leadership of the Russian army was inept and tried to use its numerical superiority against the German and Austrian armies. However, modern weaponry, specifically machine guns, inflicted massive casualties on the Russians. In 1915, the Russians suffered more than 2 million casualties. Despite the losses, the Russians just drafted more men into the army and sent them against the Central Powers. While the Russians could not hope to win a victory, they played a strategically valuable role for the Allies by tying down German forces that could not be used on the Western Front.

In contrast to the forcefulness of the German army, the Austro-Hungarian army was weak and poorly lead. All the problems that could affect a multi-national army plagued the Austro-Hungarian army. It had poor sense of national unity and its soldiers did not speak the same language as their commanders. In the first year of the war, the Austrians were defeated by the Russian army in western Ukraine and proved incapable of invading Serbia – it was the conflict that started the war. In 1914, Austria launched three invasions of Serbia, and they all failed. Serbia was only overrun in 1915 when a combined German-Austrian Army attacked. In defeat, the Serbians withdrew to the Greek island of Corfu. In fact, Austria was only victorious when its armies were supported in battle by German soldiers. Over the course of the war, the Germans would constantly rush soldiers to support the Austrian army whenever the Russians appeared to be victorious against the Austrians. While this tactic allowed Austria to put off defeat, it had the result of weakening Germany’s own war effort. One German officer described the situation by saying that Germany was “chained to a corpse.”

In an effort to support the Serbians, who sought refuge in northern Greece, the Allies pressured Greece to join the war. However, Greek King Constantine favored the Central Powers and kept Greece neutral in the conflict. The Allies enacted a naval blockade and actually tried to undermine the Greek government by forming a rival Greek government in the city of Salonika. Finally, in June 1917, the Allies forced Constantine to abdicate, and the Allies invaded Greece with 300,000 men. By the end of the month, under a new government, Greece joined the Allies. In September 1918, using Greece as a base, 700,000 allied troops attacked the Central Power’s forces in Serbia and retook the Balkans.

The war in the east expanded in October 1914 when the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). Ottoman involvement in the war meant that Britain and France would have difficulty in supplying Russia, because the Ottomans controlled the entrance to the Black Sea and the northern Russian ports froze over in the winter. With the goal of supporting Russia, the British developed a plan to invade the Ottoman Empire and seize the Dardanelles (the passage of water from the Mediterranean Sea to the Black Sea) and Istanbul. However, the British invasion, begun in February 1915, became bogged down at the mouth of the Dardanelles on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The defending Ottoman forces were entrenched, determined to defend their capital, and supported by German military advisors. After suffering 250,000 casualties, the British were forced to retreat from Gallipoli in December 1915. As a result, Russia became more isolated as the war continued.

In the middle of the war, the Ottoman Turks perpetrated one of the first mass killings of civilians in the twentieth century. It is an event that is still disputed today between the modern nations of Turkey and Armenia. The root of the problem was that Christian Armenia was on the border between Russia and the Ottoman Empire – Armenians also lived in communities throughout the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the end of the nineteenth century, the Armenian population had suffered abuse, including massacres, at the hands of the Ottoman government. In 1915, Armenians organized themselves to support and fight in support of the Russian war effort. Some Armenians drove the Ottomans out of Armenia and allowed the Russians to occupy Armenia. In response, the Ottoman army massacred hundreds of thousands of Armenian men and ordered that one million
Armenians be deported though a forced march into Syrian Desert. Even today the estimates of the number that died are contested and range anywhere from 500,000 to 1.5 million. Armenians, and many countries around the world, consider this event to be a “genocide,” – the systematic mass killing of people with the goal of destroying the population in part or in whole. The charge of genocide is supported by the evidence gathered by Americans living in Turkey and German army officers attached to the Ottoman army (the Germans were horrified by the violence). In contrast, the modern nation of Turkey denies that it was a genocide, and instead calls it a “Tragedy.” In the aftermath of the war, the Allies did attempt to bring the leadership of the Ottoman government and military to trial for the massacres of Armenians and other Christians, and while they leadership was found guilty, they were never punished because they escaped or were released through post-wars deals with the new Turkish government. However, many of these Ottoman leaders were later assassinated by Armenians.

In the Middle East, the British had greater success against the Ottoman Empire. The British formally took over Egypt in order to secure the Suez Canal. The British used Egypt as a base to invade Ottoman controlled Palestine and in 1917, the British captured the city of Jerusalem. In an effort to gain the support of the Jewish population, in 1917, British foreign secretary Lord Balfour issued the Balfour Declaration which stated that Britain would encourage the establishment in Palestine of “a national home for the Jewish people” as long as it did not harm the civil and religious rights of the Palestinians. Many people cite this as the origin of the current Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, British soldier, T.E. Lawrence (better known as Lawrence of Arabia), organized the Bedouin Arab tribes into a guerrilla army to fight the Ottomans. This combined British-Arab force was able to conquer much of Arabia to Damascus. A third British-Ottoman front was Mesopotamia, modern Iraq. In 1914, Britain invaded Ottoman Mesopotamia, and by 1917, the British took Baghdad and had advanced to Tikrit.

In Africa, British forces moved out of South Africa to capture both German South West Africa and German East Africa. In contrast to the European battles in which large numbers of soldiers fought over small pieces of land, in Africa, armies of 10,000 to 20,000 soldiers fought over vast areas. In South West Africa, the Germans sent raiding parties into British South Africa, which proved to be a double blunder by turning the Boer Afrikaners to the British side and forcing the British to invade the German territory. By 1915, all of South West Africa was controlled by the British. The war for German East Africa raged until the spring of 1917, when British finally could claim victory. Although the remains of one German army continued to fight a guerrilla war until the end of the war in November 1918, and only surrendered after the fighting in Europe ceased.

While in Asia, Japan (allied with England in the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of 1902) took over German possessions in China and Germany’s Pacific islands. Japan viewed these gains as part of its own growing empire. Following the war, Japan would use the post-war peace treaties to secure its claims to these lands.

In May 1915, Italy declared war on Austria, thereby entering the war on the side of the Allies. Italy did not enter the war for noble or national reasons, it joined the war because the Allies promised it Austrian lands in return for entering the war. Italy entered the war with an army of 800,000 soldiers ready to invade Austria. Austria, which was already weakened and struggling against Russia and Serbia, was only able to send 100,000 soldiers to defend the Italian-Austrian border. However, in defense, the Austrians had a major geographic advantage. The Italian-Austrian border was the Dolomite Mountains. In 1915, the Italians launched four offensives on the Austrian lines, all to no effect – except for the loss of a quarter of a million Italian soldiers. By the end of the war, the Italians had launched 11 offensives on the Austrian lines, none of which succeeded. In the end, it was the Austrians who were able to push the Italians out of the mountains and back on to the plains of northern Italy.

Home Front

The demands of supporting large armies in constant combat demanded that the warring nations commit their industrial capacity and production to supply their armies with weapons, war materials and supplies. As a result, the workforce, factories and farms became as important and any battlefront in the war effort and were referred to as the “home front”. In contrast to earlier wars where military engagements decided victory, World War One was fought at a “total war” where an army could only be defeated if its nation’s ability and will to fight could be destroyed. As the war progressed, the process of mobilizing and
organizing the home front to support a protracted war had profound effects on the politics, economics and social structures of the countries at war.

The combination of the length and high costs of the war put tremendous stress on the home fronts of all the countries involved in the war. In response to this stress, governments became more authoritarian; demanding sacrifice for the “war effort” and suppressing individual rights. Every country practiced strict censorship of war related news, including reading the letters of soldiers back to their families. In England and France, where civilian political leadership directed the war efforts, the different political parties put aside their differences to unite behind the war effort. For example, the British prime minister’s cabinet was composed of an equal number of Conservative and Labour party leaders. In France, the president united the different parties with the idea of “union sacree”. In Germany, the strain of the war resulted in a military-industrial dictatorship that marginalized the Kaiser to be a figurehead of the government. By the later part of the war, the two generals, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorf, exercised absolute power over Germany.

The main focus of governments was to marshal all of their forces to fight the war. For this reason, the governments of each major nation in the war took over the planning, organization, and production of their economies to support the war effort. Governments that had previously supported free market capitalism moved to take control of industry and agriculture. In Britain and France, the civilian governments took direct control of industry and dictated war production. In Germany, Hindenburg and Ludendorf appointed Walter Rathenau to organize “war socialism” under which the military controlled all aspects of German industry, conscripted factory workers from the population and directed scientists to develop substitute materials for the natural resources that were in short supply due to the British naval blockade. For instance, the German scientist Fritz Haber was able to extract nitrogen (an important material for making explosives) from air, which allowed the German army to keep fighting even though the Allied blockade had stopped shipments of mined nitrogen from reaching Germany.

The war had the effect of changing the role of women in European society. Women became the core of the workforce as they replaced men who went into the army. In England, almost a million women worked in factories producing weapons. In France, 40% of the workforce was women and 38% of the German armaments factories were women. Thousands of these women died from exposure to the chemicals used in weapons. In addition to women working in military production, there were millions of women who filled other jobs in all other parts of the economy. In fact, there were cases of women soldiers during the war. The most famous example was the Russian Battalion of Death composed entirely of women volunteers whose husbands had been killed in the war. Women’s participation in the workforce had a long run impact on the role of women in society. For example, the extension of voting rights to women across Europe and North America after the war shows how once women entered the workforce, they were unwilling to give up the power they had gained.

Every nation in the war used propaganda to encourage the workforce to do its part in the war to produce war materials and endure the shortages of food, fuel, and clothing. In order to prevent the large shortages from causing too much suffering for the home front populations, every nation rationed the amount of food, fuel, and clothing that people could buy. Submarine warfare meant that in April 1917, Britain was down to 7 weeks of food supplies for the entire country and the British had lost more than 25% of its merchant ships. The severity of the British blockade of Germany caused food shortages in Germany, which had imported 20% of its food before the war, and led to the German population to suffering through the “turnip winter” (because turnip flour was used to bake bread) of 1916. The true cost of the British blockade was the fact that 750,000 Germans died of starvation and malnutrition during the war. However, as the war progressed, the shortages created increasingly difficult hardships on the populations of all the major powers, and in the end, the stress on the home front would push the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German Empires, over the edge. It was the collapse of the home fronts of the Central Powers that ended the war.

**United States Enters World War One**

For the first three years of the war the United States tried to remain neutral – it did not side with either the Allies or Central Powers. During this time the United States produced weapons and sold weapons to both sides. The banks in the United States also loaned money to both sides so that they could buy weapons. However, most of this support aided the Allies since the British navy stopped any American ships going to Germany.
The German U-boat attacks in the Atlantic worked to persuade Americans to support the Allies. On May 7, 1915 a German U-boat sank the British ocean-liner Lusitania killing 1,198 people, including 128 Americans. This event pushed American popular opinion to support the Allies. However, afterward the Germans promised to suspend U-boat attacks, and the U.S. remained neutral.

In 1916, President Wilson offered to broker negotiations between the warring countries to end the war on terms that provided “peace without victory”. The Central Powers accepted this offer, but the Allies reject it because at that point in the war the Central Powers were in a stronger position. The Allied believed that they would be forced to cede more concessions to the Central Powers.

On January 31, 1917, Germany announced it was returning to full submarine warfare. Shortly after that, the British gave the United States the Zimmermann Telegram. The British had intercepted this message from the German government to the German Ambassador in Mexico in which the Germans promised to aid Mexico in a war against the U.S., and promised Mexico the lands of American southwest if this war was successful. The Zimmermann Telegram was the item that pushed the U.S. into the war. However, the concept that Mexico would have any success in a war against the United States was absurd, especially since Mexico was embroiled in a revolution that had brought chaos to Mexican politics and an American army was already active in northern Mexico trying to capture the outlaw/revolutionary Francisco “Pancho” Villa. In the end, the United States pulled its army out of Mexico in 1917, because it needed to prepare the American army to fight in Europe and it had been unable to capture Pancho Villa.

On April 2, 1917, American President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany and the other Central Powers with the larger goal to “make the world safe for democracy.” With this statement, Wilson stated that America was entering the war to reshape and improve the world. Even though it had declared war, it would still take the United States almost a year to build up a large enough army in Europe to fight as an independent army (not under the command or control of British or French generals).

**Russia Pulls Out and America Enters**

World War One exhausted the major powers of Europe. The loss of men and resources pushed these countries to their breaking points. By 1917, it was clear that war would not end as a result of strategic battlefield victories and the basic goal of the nations fighting in the war was to break their enemies’ home front, or their ability and will to fight. In addition to the losses of manpower and material that the war was inflicting on both sides, the British blockade of Germany was creating a situation of starvation for German citizens. Simultaneously, German U-boats were sinking roughly 800,000 tons of Allied shipping a month driving England to the point of starvation. In addition, in May 1917, 54 French army divisions staged a mutiny and refused to attack German trenches. With the greatest secrecy the French managed to put down mutiny and restore the army. By this point in the war, all the European powers were at their breaking points.

Russia was the first country to break. In March 1917, the Russian people and army rose up in revolt and overthrew Czar Nicholas II in an event called the February Revolution (this was because Russia operated on the Orthodox Christian calendar, which is roughly two weeks behind the Western calendar). The war effort had resulted in 15 million men being drafted into the Russian army and by 1917 the Russians had lost 5.5 million men. The war took them out of the labor force, which caused a massive decline in amount produced by the labor-intensive Russian economy, which further weakened the Russian war effort. In addition, the wretched conditions of the Russian army and its poor leadership made the soldiers a prime audience for revolutionary ideologies. The February Revolution began with food riots in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) and quickly spread to the rest of Russia and its army. On March 14th, Czar Nicholas abdicated the throne for himself and his son (who had hemophilia). This ended the Romanov reign of Russia. A democratic Provisional Government was quickly formed, with its legislative body called the Duma. The Duma came under the leadership of a young socialist, Alexander Kerensky. Under pressure from the Western Allies (Britain & France), Kerensky announced Russia would stay in the war. However, most Russian soldiers and people wanted out of the war. In July 1917, the Provisional Government ordered the army to launch an offensive on the Austrian Army. The two-week offensive at first met with great success, but as it ground to a halt, the Russian army disintegrated and deserted.
With secret help from the Germans, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of a Marxist communist group called the Bolshevik Party returned to Russia. While the Bolsheviks were a small group within Russia, having only a little power within the cities, they appealed to many groups of poor Russians and soldiers with the slogan “Peace, Land, and Bread.” Through appealing to the soldiers, workers, and peasants, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were able to seize power from the Provisional Government on November 7, 1917 (the October Revolution). The Bolshevik seizure of power was far from complete or successful. After the October Revolution, Russia fell into a civil war that lasted five years.

The October Revolution provided both the Bolsheviks and the Germans with an reason to end the fighting on the Eastern Front. The Bolsheviks needed to use their army to fight the Russian Civil War. At the same time, the Germans needed to free up their armies from Eastern Front to move them to the Western Front for one last drive to defeat France before the American army arrived in Europe. The mutual need of both sides to end the war on the Eastern Front led to the Germans and the Bolshevik government of Russia signing the Treaty of Breost-Litovsk in March 1918. With this treaty, Russia pulled out of the war. In the treaty, Russia gave large parts of territory (Poland, Ukraine, the Belarus, and the Baltic areas) to Germany. In total, Russia ceded about 25% of European Russia and 34% of its population to Germany. However, the reality of the situation was that the German forces already controlled these areas. Following the treaty, the Germans planned to use the captured lands of Ukraine to feed its population already starving because of the British blockade. However, the chaos of post-war Ukraine made it impossible for the Germans to profit from these conquered lands.

With Russia out of the war, Germany planned to turn west and concentrate all of its forces on the Western Front and defeat France before the U.S. could build a strong army in Europe. In March 1918, Germany launched one last offensive against France called the Ludendorf Offensive. The Germans put all their resources into this last offensive, and it drove 40 miles into Allied territory coming within 37 miles of Paris before it was stopped. In June 1918, the American army landed in France and began to fight against the German Army. With the large influx of American soldiers, the Allies were able to break through the German trench system on the Western Front in the late summer of 1918 and begin to push the German army back towards the German border. By the fall of the 1918, the German army was being pushed back, and the German High Command recognized that the war was lost.

End of World War One

In January 1918, American President Woodrow Wilson, in a speech to Congress, outlined the Fourteen Points on which he believed a peace settlement should be based. In essence, Wilson’s Fourteen Points described a peace that called for no indemnities or financial punishments, territorial settlements based on the “self-determination” of the local population, and no spoils for the victors. For the Germans, Wilson’s Fourteen Points offered a solution to the war that was better than could be expected from the other Allied nations. The Germans believed they could get a “just peace” under a peace settled according to the Fourteen Points.

At the same time, Germany’s allies, the rest of the Central Powers, began to collapse and drop out of the war. In October and early November 1918, Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire, and Austria-Hungary all stopped fighting and surrendered to the Allies. In the case of Austria-Hungary, the Empire disintegrated before it could formally stop fighting. On October 21, Czechoslovakia declared independence. On October 29, Yugoslavia (the regions of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro) declared independence. On November 1st, Hungary declared its independence. On November 3rd, the Austrian government, representing the rump region of Austria, formally stopped fighting.

On November 3, 1918, the German navy revolted when ordered to sail out and engage the British navy in a battle to the death. The German navy, considered too valuable to lose during the war, had sat out most of the war remaining inactive in its bases. By 1918, the German navy was no longer maintaining its ships and had been infiltrated by communist Bolshevik agents. The revolt that began with the navy quickly spread across Germany as soldiers and workers joined and established their own governing councils. On November 9, 1918, Kaiser William II abdicated and Germany was declared a republic under a new government. Then, the entire German war leadership of Kaiser William, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorf, gave up power and responsibility to an inexperienced civilian government. Shortly after this, Kaiser William and Erich Ludendorf left Germany. The new German government was immediately faced with the harsh reality of ending the war and negotiating a peace treaty.

The new government moved quickly to end the war. On November 8, even before the Kaiser abdicated, the Germans opened negotiations with the Allies. At 5 a.m. on November 11, the Germans and Allied forces reached an agreement to end the war and engage in peace talks based on the Fourteen Points. This agreement, called an armistice ended the fighting later in the day. At 11 a.m. on November 11, the fighting of World War One ended.
At the time it ended, World War One was the most costly war ever fought. Roughly 8 million soldiers were killed and 20 million were wounded. This does not account for people killed by indirect means of starvation and disease. The cost of fighting the war exceeded $180 billion, and the cost of damages was around $150 billion.

In addition to the horrors of the war, as World War One drew to a close, the world was swept by an influenza epidemic that killed around 20 million people world-wide, although some estimates place the number at 40 million. Even with the lowest estimate of the epidemics mortality, more people died of influenza than in all of World War One! This virulent form of the flu began in North America and spread around the world in six months — generally spending a month in any location - before it disappeared after 18 months. The strain of this form of flu has never been determined and is considered by epidemiologists to be the worst epidemic since the Black Death of the 1300’s.

**Treaty of Versailles**

The armistice that ended World War One stopped the fighting. However, it did not answer the larger question of how to settle the peace. World War One had wrecked havoc across Europe. Four major empires – German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman – had ceased to exist. The areas of these former empires were filled with nationalistic groups, often exposing radial political ideologies, which fought against each other to establish their own counties. In addition, the remaining powers, England, France, and Italy, were in debt and greatly weakened. The post-war Paris Peace Conference had two goals: to settle the peace with Germany and to redraw the borders of Eastern Europe and the Middle-East (Ottoman lands). The peace conference attempted to re-shape the post-war world through a series of peace treaties, of which the **Treaty of Versailles** is the most famous. While the treaties established a peace following the war, they also inadvertently established many of the causes that led to World War Two twenty years later.

In January 1919, American president Woodrow Wilson with his Fourteen Points went to France, to participate in the post-war peace conference in Paris. The Fourteen Points outlined how Wilson wanted the post-war peace to create democracy around the world and set up a League of Nations to maintain world peace. Wilson believed that an international organization with a mission of establishing and maintaining world peace was crucial to preventing another world war. In addition, Wilson was not interested in establishing which countries were guilty in starting the war or punishing those countries. Wilson believed that this would only lead to future wars. The idealism of the Fourteen Points made Wilson a hero to all of Europe. However, in the end, Wilson gave in on thirteen of his points, everything but the League of Nations. Wilson believed that the League of Nations would later correct the problems of the peace conference and secure a lasting peace.

The Paris Peace Conference was dominated by the Big Four, who were the leaders of the major Allied countries - the United States, England, France, and Italy. The Central Powers of Germany, Ottoman Empire, and the remains of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were not invited to participate in the writing of the treaty. They would be notified of the treaties once the Big Four had finished drafting the treaties. Without a voice at the negotiating table, the Germans hoped that Wilson’s Fourteen Points would decide the condition of the peace. In addition, Soviet Russia was in the midst of a civil war and refused to send representatives to the peace conference. While the decisions of the Big Four shaped the post-war world and contributed to many of the post-war problems, it should be recognized that the Big Four were limited in dictating the terms of peace, especially in eastern and southeastern Europe. This was because many of the nationalistic groups in these regions had already established the borders of their new nations and the Big Four were reluctant to send their soldiers to change the borders. Decisions made by the Big Four simply legitimized the existing realities in these regions.

From the outset of the peace conference, the British and the French wanted to punish Germany and were not interested in founding a peace on the Fourteen Points. Their basic goal was to “Make Germany pay” for the war. The British and the French had lost a generation of young men and indebted their countries to pay for the war. In fact, the only chance England and France had of paying their war debts to the United States, without suffering further economic loses, was to pass on the cost of the war to Germany. Even though Germany had suffered the same losses and was economically ruined, it was viewed as the loser in the war. More importantly, from the perspective of England and France, Germany had started the war and it was justifiable to make it pay for the damage caused by the war.

However, following the armistice, Germany existed in a state of political and economic crisis. The German republican government, based in the city of Weimar, did not fully control the country. The survival of the young German republic was dependent on the support of paramilitary groups comprised of soldiers returned from the war. These soldiers represented a generation of young men who only knew how to be soldiers and had returned to
Germany without a clear purpose and were unable to readjust back to civilian life. The most important of these paramilitary groups was the Freikorps, which fought to protect Germany’s eastern borders from Polish nationalists and to crush communist uprisings in Germany. The Freikorps were crucial in the violent suppression of the communist Spartakist Rebellion in Berlin in January 1919 and the Bravarian Socialist Republic in March 1919. However, after a failed attempt to seize power in 1920, the Freikorps were disbanded. Some members were later drawn to Hitler’s Nazi Party.

The Treaty of Versailles was the treaty that Big Four wrote for Germany. As a result of the treaty Germany was left as a single country, but it did lose territory to France and Poland. It lost Alsace and Loraine (taken in the Franco-Prussian War) and all lands gained under the Treaty of Breast-Litovsk. As part of the treaty, Germany had to sign the War Guilt Clause (accepting responsibility for starting the war), reduce its army to 100,000 men, and pay $33 billion in reparations to the Allies. The amount of reparations was high, however, when compared to the economic base of Germany, the cost of the reparations was less in real terms than the reparations the Germans forced the French to pay after the Franco-Prussian War. In addition, the ships of the German navy and merchant fleet as well as German property in lands lost to Germany counted toward the reparations bill. England and the United States argued over which country should be given the bulk of the German ships. The German navy literally scuttled this plan when it sank all of its ships on June 21, 1919 in protest of the peace treaty. Over the course of the 1920’s, the German government was able to get large parts of the reparations cancelled. If the Germans made all the payments, they would have been paying until 1987. The issue of payments became an ongoing point of dispute into the 1920, which would be paid through a massive bond issue (payment on those bonds was suspended by Hitler and taken up again after World War Two) that was only fully repaid in the fall of 2010!

In May 1919, at the Palace of Versailles, the Big Four presented the treaty to representatives from Germany for their signature. Since they were not allowed to attend the peace conference, this was the first time the Germans had seen the treaty. The combination of the “war guilt clause” and the reparations placed on Germany caused uproar in Germany. Many Germans, who expected a peace based on the Fourteen Points, blamed Wilson for the treaty. No leaders in the German government wanted to sign the treaty, since it was so unpopular within Germany. Finally, under the threat of a resumed Allied attack on Germany, the Germans accepted the treaty. On June 28, 1919, five years after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors. This was the room where Kaiser Wilhelm I had been proclaimed Kaiser at the end of the Franco-Prussian War. Only after Germany had signed the Versailles Treaty was the Allied blockade of Germany lifted. Thousands of Germans had died as a result of the continuation of the blockade since the signing of the Armistice.

Both the Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles became a point of great bitterness in post-war Germany. Despite the reality that Germany was exhausted by 1918 and unable to continue the war effort, many Germans did not believe that they had been defeated – this is in part because the German army was still fighting in France at the time of the Armistice and had defeated Russia and won lands in the Treaty of Breast-Litovsk. Another reason for this was because, after he returned to Germany in 1919, Ludendorff (who knew condition of the German army in 1918) began spreading the rumor that Germany had been “stabbed in the back” (Ludendorff would later be a strong supporter of Hitler and the Nazis). Finally, the “take-it or leave-it” way the Allies had presented the Treaty to the Germany caused many Germans to view it as a “diktat”, or “dictated peace”. In 1921, two Freikorps soldiers assassinated Matthias Erzberger, the leading German politician in support of signing the Versailles Treaty. Both assassins were later considered heroes in Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany.
Division of Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire

Since both empires had collapsed, the Big Four had more difficulty in dealing with establishing a peace treaty for the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Any peace treaty would have to deal with the new countries that were forming in the remains of these empires. Woodrow Wilson believed that the new nations should be based on the idea of national self-determination, in which the national identity of a population would determine the borders of a nation. The problem with using the concept of national self-determination to form countries was that the areas of the Austrian and Ottoman Empires were not clearly divided between national populations. As a result of the new nations, an estimated 20 million people were now living in countries in which they were ethnic minorities and many of these populations were intermixed. For example, the city of L’viv, the regional capital of the Eastern Austro-Hungarian Empire, was an enclave of Austrians, Poles, and Jews, surrounded by a countryside populated by Ukrainians. It was unclear how this and similar cities could be easily be formed into nations. The same problem existed in the Sudetenland, on the border of Germany and the newly formed nation of Czechoslovakia, which had a majority population of Germans. The conflict over borders of these new Eastern European nations caused long-term conflicts between these nations because they were based around the population of a dominant group that ruled over other minority populations. Often the dominant population treated the minority populations badly. One result of this was that it poisoned the relations between these countries and it was hard for these new nations to unite against their future common enemies of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.

In terms of defining and identifying borders, the Big Four were limited to mostly recognizing the de facto division of Austria-Hungary that began before the war even ended. In the end, Austria-Hungary was divided into five new countries – Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland. At the end of the war, nationalist forces across the Austro-Hungarian Empire seized the opportunity to claim their independence, often resulting in conflict and chaos between the different groups. For example, in March 1919, Hungarian communists proclaimed the Hungarian Soviet Republic, which proved to be a political and economic fiasco, and launched a failed invasion of the newly formed Czechoslovakia. In August, a Romanian army invaded Hungary and drove out the communists and established a new government. Further south in the Balkans, where World War One began, the country of Yugoslavia was formed by merging all the Slavic peoples of the region into one country, under the domination of Serbia. Serbia suffered the worst losses in World War One. It lost almost 800,000 out of a population of 5 million (15% of population).

As for Austria itself, all that remained of the once powerful empire was the city of Vienna and the surrounding Germanic population. Many Austrians hoped they would be united with Germany – called the Anschluss. However, the Big Four, which viewed Austria to be an “enemy state”, refused to allow this to happen, and the Treaty of St. Germain forbade any possibility of Austria joining Germany. The new state of Austria faced many problems. The population of Vienna was filled with ex-soldiers, refugees, and unemployed government workers (now unemployed due to the collapse of the empire). In addition, Austria was unable to feed its population. If it was not for post-war Allies’ food relief the country might have suffered a famine. The condition of post-war Austria gave rise to anti-Semitism against Jewish refugees from other parts of the former empire and the political desire to be united with Germany. Both events would lead into World War Two.

The Big Four used the Paris Peace Conference as an opportunity to recreate Poland. The creation of Poland, which had not existed since 1795, was a point of dispute since it shared a western border with Germany and an eastern border with Soviet Russia, which was not represented at the peace conference. The new Polish state was the creation of Joseph Pilsudski, a Polish military leader who had organized Poles to fight for Austria-Hungary and wanted to re-create the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. While the Big Four recognized his government, establishing the borders of Poland was often the result of
military force. In western Poland, Pilsudski’s forces fought the German Freikorps, and in Ukraine, they fought Ukrainian nationalists for the city of L’viv. In the end, the Poles and the Ukrainian nationalists united to fight the Soviet Red Army in the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920. This war is significant in preventing the spread of communism because Poland was the only country standing between the Soviet Union, which was ideologically committed to spreading Communism, and Germany, which had a large communist movement. The course of the war swung back and forth across Poland and Ukraine, with the Poles capturing Kiev at one point and Soviets nearly taking the Polish capital of Warsaw at another point. However, neither side was able to defeat the other. The treaty that ended the war finally set the borders of Poland and the Soviet Union. Roughly 12,000 people died in this war.

The border with Germany was settled in the Treaty of Versailles, which awarded Poland a strip of land, called the “Polish Corridor,” which ran through Prussia to access the German Baltic port city of Danzig which was made into a “Free City” – not formally connected to any country. While the Polish Corridor made Poland a viable country, it infuriated the Germans since it isolated Prussia from the rest of Germany. This Polish settlement would be the place where World War Two would begin.

The final work of the Paris Peace Conference was the decision of how to break up the Ottoman Empire. The Arab lands of the Middle East, while promised some form of independence during the war, became territories under the mandate control of either Britain (Iraq, Jordan, Palestine) or France (Lebanon and Syria). Under the mandate system, Britain and France declared that they would rule their areas of the Middle East until the people there were able to govern themselves. In theory, the British and the French were to prepare these regions for future independence. In practice, they incorporated them into their world-wide empires. The borders created by the Big Four for the most part remain the borders of the modern nations of the Middle East. Similar to Africa, neither the local populations nor their history was considered in drawing the borders. For example, Iraq, which was three separate provinces in the Ottoman Empire, was created without the consideration for the cultural or religious divisions within the country. In 1920, Iraqis revolted against the mandate system. After British soldiers put down the rebellion, Iraq was made a kingdom, under British control, with Prince Faisal as its king. Faisal was one of the Arab leaders who helped Lawrence of Arabia. When the French would not allow Faisal to be king of Syria, the British made him king of Iraq. In 1922, Egypt gained semi-independent status. Both Arabs and Jews claimed that Britain had betrayed wartime promises to create independent countries. These demands would latter be revived following World War Two and would cause many of the current conflicts in the Middle East.

In addition, the Big Four ignored any aspirations of the Turks in the forming a new nation and in the Treaty of Sevres gave large parts of Anatolia, the region now called Turkey, to either Greece or Italy. Turkey was reduced to a small country in the center of the Anatolian peninsula. Aided by Allied navies, the Greek army occupied the city of Smyrna, which had a large Greek population that traced it ancestry back to the ancient world.

At the same time, a Turkish General, Mustafa Kamal, who had led the Turkish army at Gallipoli, organized a new nationalist Turkish government and army in the city of Ankara, in the center of Anatolia. Prompted by the British to crush Kamal’s new Turkish government, the Greek army advanced toward Ankara. However, Kamal won a surprising victory against the much large and better-equipped Greeks and forced the Greeks to retreat back to Smyrna. After this, the British withdrew their support for the Greeks, and in August 1922, the Turks captured Smyrna from the Greeks and massacred the Greek citizens of Smyrna. In the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War, a million Greeks were expelled from their ancient ancestral homes in Anatolia and sent to Greece, and a half-million Turks were expelled from Greece. Upwards of 300,000 people were killed or died as part of this forced migration. The influx of impoverished Turkish-speaking Greek refugees destabilized Greek politics. The Treaty of Lausanne, in 1923, ended the Greco-Turkish War.

In the aftermath of the war, Kamal established the Republic of Turkey in 1922. Following the ideals of the Young Turks, Kamal made Turkey a secular Muslim society. He ordered that Latin letters replace Arabic script, theological schools closed, and that a European style code of laws replace Islamic law. All citizens were provided with an education, and women were given political rights (voting and holding political office). People had to wear western style cloths and had to adopt surnames. Kamal took the name “Ataturk” or “Father Turk”. Kamal ruled Turkey as a dictator until his death in 1938.

Ireland

Just as the war created the opportunity for nationalists in central and southern Europe to rise up and establish independent countries, the Irish took advantage of World War One and its aftermath to create the Irish Free State (later the Irish Republic). Ever since the invasion of Oliver Cromwell in 1649, the population of Ireland had been divided between Catholics and Protestants, with the Protestants holding the political and economic power. The grim division of the Irish population was
shown in the 1847 potato famine, which reduced the Irish Catholic population by 3 million people either through death or immigration, mainly to the United States. The Irish war for independence began on Easter Monday 1916, when a group of Irish Catholic nationalists staged a rebellion in Dublin called “Easter Rising.” In an effort to weaken the British, the Germans directly supported the Irish nationalists. After a few hours of intense fighting in the center of Dublin, the British Army put down the rebellion. At the time of the rebellion, it did not have popular support. However, the British policy of executing the rebellion’s leaders made them martyrs, which created popular support for the cause of Irish nationalism.

In the 1918 general election Irish nationalists or republicans, under the leadership of Eamon de Valere, ran for seats in the British Parliament as the political party Sinn Fein (“Ourselves Alone”) and won a majority of the Irish seats. However, they refused to attend the London Parliament and declared Ireland independent and established the Dail or Irish Assembly in January 1919. The Anglo-Irish War began same day when two policemen were killed in rural Ireland.

The Anglo-Irish War lasted from 1919-1921. Michael Collins organized and led the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in a guerilla war against the British. The goal of the IRA was to launch spectacular attacks on British police that would cause a brutal British reprisal on the local Irish population. The IRA leaders believed this would push the Irish population to support the IRA. “Bloody Sunday,” November 21, is the best example of this tactic. On “Bloody Sunday” the IRA killed 19 British police agents. A few hours later, in response, the police shot up a crowd at a soccer match, killing 12. In another tactic, the IRA organized itself into small groups called “flying columns” which would conduct raids on rural British police outposts. The success of these raids forced the British to surrender control of the countryside to the Irish Republicans.

In response, the British recruited World War One veterans to support the British Royal Constabulary (police). Roughly 10,000 British veterans volunteered to fight in Ireland. This group became known as the “Black and Tans” because of their uniforms. The Black and Tans, war veterans untrained for police work, brutalized the Irish population, including razing Catholic neighborhoods. The war fought between the British and the IRA was a struggle where civilians suffered excessive violence and terror. In the course of the war, 1,300 people were killed, 800 of which were civilians.

In July 1921, the Irish Republicans and British reached a truce. The Anglo-Irish Treaty that ended the war was signed in December 1921 and divided Ireland in two. The 26 countries of southern Ireland, mostly Catholic, became the independent Irish Free State and the six counties of Protestant dominated Northern Ireland remained British territory.

However, the treaty divided the Irish Republicans and did not stop the fighting in Ireland. The treaty ignited a dispute between the Irish Republicans over whether the King of England should be a symbolic figurehead of Ireland and whether Ireland would become a self-governing part of the British Empire. IRA leader Michael Collins supported the treaty and led the Free State Army. However, republican leader Eamon de Valere organized a guerrilla war against the Free State. The fighting between the two sides was vicious, with former comrades killing each other. Collins was assassinated, and de Valere was imprisoned. In the end, the Free State forces won the civil war in 1923. However, de Valere remained a powerful force in Irish politics and over the next three decades, under his influence, Ireland moved away from England and in 1948 declared itself a republic.

New and Unresolved Problems

The Treaty of Versailles created problems that would lead to the Second World War:

- Germany was humiliated and forced to pay crippling reparations. This created the political and economic chaos that would aid Adolf Hitler in his rise to power.
- Russia (Soviet Union after 1922) felt ignored and threatened by the Allies. This led the communist Soviet Union to work with Germany in the 1920’s and 1930’s.
- The treaty did not establish international peace. Russia and parts of Europe would be troubled with wars during the 1920’s and 30’s. China, already beset by revolution, would fall into greater fighting with Japan over control of Manchuria and Korea.

As for the League of Nations, it was created by the Treaty of Versailles and began working in January 1920 in Geneva, Switzerland. Germany joined the League in 1926 and the Soviet Union joined in 1934. The League proved to have mixed effectiveness. It was not effective in maintaining peace. This would be demonstrated in the years leading up to World War Two.

“It cannot be that two million Germans should have fallen in vain... no we do not pardon, we demand—vengeance!”
- Adolf Hitler 1922
However, it did provide a place for countries to work together on issues that involved international cooperation. One of the greatest weaknesses of the League of Nations was the absence of the United States. Woodrow Wilson wanted the U.S. to become part of the League, but there was opposition in the U.S. to membership in the League. In the end, the United States did not accept the Treaty of Versailles and did not join the League of Nations. The failure of the United States to join the League of Nations indicated a growing disillusionment in the United States with European affairs. During the period of the 1920’s and 1930’s, the United States withdrew into a period of isolationism, where the United States government largely ignored events in Europe and Asia, unless they directly involved the United States.

In addition to the League of Nations, in 1928, the major powers agreed to the Treaty for the Renunciation of War or the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact. The agreement was named for U.S. Secretary of State Frank Kellogg and French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand. Both men were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1929 for their efforts. The fifteen nations that signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact agreed to renounce war as an instrument of foreign policy and to settle all international disputes through peaceful means. While this treaty proved to be useless in preventing war, it established the international concept of war as an outlaw act by an aggressor state on a victim state. This concept would be used to prosecute Nazi and Japanese war criminals after World War Two.

Lost Generation

In the aftermath of World War One, European culture attempted to come to grips with trying to find a meaning for the war. The great novels of the war, particularly Erich Maria Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front”, portrayed how an entire generation fought a pointless war and died meaningless deaths. Remarque based the book on his personal experiences fighting in the German Army in the war. The French film “Ja Accuse” depicted dead soldiers rising from the grave to confront the living. The American writer Gertrude Stein called the people who fought in and survived World War One the “Lost Generation”. The term describes the disillusioned and cynical culture that followed the war and captures the crisis of meaning that gripped Europe after the war. The British writer, Robert Graves, who had wounded so badly in the Battle of the Somme that he reported as being killed to his family, wrote the book “Good-Bye to All That” in which he rejected all the pre-war culture of patriotism and religion.

The tremendous carnage and destruction of the war forced many Europeans to questions their assumptions about Western Civilization. Prior to the war, European culture was based on a faith in liberal rationality, the natural flow of human progress, and European superiority. This view of the world could not explain the reality of a self-inflicted self-destructive war that bankrupted Europe and killed a generation of young men. This crisis of meaning caused many people to turn against the rational, liberal and progressive view of the world and turn to views that described the irrational nature of the universe and man. Many people came to believe that Western Civilization contained within itself the seeds for its own destruction. For example, following the war, Otto Spengler published a book “The Decline of the West” that put forth the idea that Europe was in its final stage of its life cycle, the stage of death and decay.

In this post war world, the ideas of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was largely ignored in his own life and died in obscurity in 1900, became popular. Nietzsche wrote that there was no rational order to the universe, and that Western Civilization was built on a view that was false. Worse, Nietzsche believed that rationality trapped Western man in a slave morality. Nietzsche summed up this view with his quote that, “God is dead”, meaning that any idea that man will be rewarded or punished according to a rational moral system was false. Instead of constrained rationality, Nietzsche believed by unleashing man’s primitive and irrational passions, which he called “the will,” man could reach great creativity. Unleashing the will would also result in violence and destruction caused by conflicting wills. For Nietzsche, man was driven by his “will to power.” Nietzsche believed that if man pursued the “will for power” this would create a world based on creative freedom and individualism. However, he also recognized the “will to power” would create a world where strong dominated the weak and the rule of law was replaced by the rule of force.

The writings of Nietzsche affected the avant-garde art of the Dadaist movement that emerged in post-war Europe. Dada, which is a nonsense word, held that only irrational acts made sense in an absurd world. Essentially, the Dadaists were nihilist who held nothing had any value or meaning. Dadaist believed that man’s rational mind held back his creative potential, and the only way for art to show the irrational nature of the world was for it to be based on spontaneity. Dadaist would make collages of seemingly random pieces of photographs to show the irrationality of the world. One Dadaist, Marcel Duchamp, poked fun at the old order of the world by painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa and declaring that a urinal placed in an art gallery was a piece of art. In Germany, war veteran artist such as Otto Dix and George Grosz took the irrationality of Dada to show the barbarous
nature of post-war German society by painting grotesque scenes of fat and corrupt officials and businessmen ignoring starving deformed soldiers. The Dadaist summed up their approach to art by saying, “der kunst is tot” or “art is dead”.

Following the war, the works of Sigmund Freud in psychology gained greater prominence. Freud’s work examining the conflicts between the different levels of the human psyche gave new insights on human behavior and the power of the unconscious mind. Freud argued that human behavior was torn between the rational and irrational impulses in the brain. In his book “Civilization and its Discontents”, Freud explained that civilization was only possible because man was willing to repress his irrational desires in order to live in the protection of society. For this reason, civilization was a balancing act where rationality tried to channel irrationality into artistic and scientific pursuits. In contrast to the liberal view that civilization was based on human enlightenment, Freud held that it was a product of human fear. Freud explained that as civilization progressed, man needed to further repress his irrational side. This also countered the liberal ideal the civilization was perfectible. Freud believed that there was no solution to this problem, and that civilization always stood in risk of a violent war if irrationality gained the upper hand. However, in contrast to Nietzsche, Freud did not advocate that people should embrace the irrational.

Freud’s work had a tremendous influence on the Surrealist artist who tried to create a new reality that merged man’s irrationality and rationality in their work. The term “surreal” means “above or beyond reality.” Salvador Dali is the most famous of the surrealist painters. Dali’s paintings tried to capture the mixture of reality and dreams. Dali would paint recognizable objects in settings that made no rational sense, for example watches that seemed to melt. Often his paintings were placed against a barren desert landscape. Dali described his painting method as pushing his brain to spontaneously hallucinate, which would form the basis of his works. The dream like quality of Dali’s work can be seen in the titles of his paintings such as, “Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate One Second Before Waking Up” or “Persistence of Memory”.

![Dali's painting](image-url)