

World War I

World War I, military conflict, from August 1914 to November 1918, that involved many of the countries of Europe as well the United States and other nations throughout the world. World War I was one of the most violent and destructive wars in European history. Of the 65 million men who were mobilized, more than 10 million were killed and more than 20 million wounded. The term World War I did not come into general use until a second worldwide conflict broke out in 1939 (see World War II). Before that year, the war was known as the Great War or the World War.

AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR I

In the aftermath of World War I, the political order of Europe came crashing to the ground. The German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires ceased to exist, and the Ottoman Empire soon followed them into oblivion. New nations emerged, borders were radically shifted, and ethnic conflicts erupted. Victors and vanquished alike faced an enormous recovery challenge after four years of financial loss, economic deprivation, and material destruction. Amid this chaotic situation, the leaders of the victorious coalition assembled in Paris to forge a new international system that would replace the old order. The decisions they made would determine the future of Europe, and much of the rest of the world, for decades to come.

BRITAIN AFTER THE WAR

--The war changed British society like no event since the Industrial Revolution. The warring Conservative and Liberal parties formed a coalition government that included Labour representation. The unions pledged an end to labor unrest. Even the suffragettes called off their campaign of civil disobedience

--Lloyd George, who was minister of war and then prime minister, was the outstanding figure in the government. A constant innovator, he expanded the use of machine guns and tanks and introduced the mortar, one of the most effective weapons in the trench warfare that ensued. He also backed the convoy system, in which military and merchant ships traveled in large groups to discourage attacks by deadly German U-boats (submarines), which sank British cargo ships at will.

--The government fixed wages, took control of the munitions industry, ordered farmers to increase grain cultivation, and ultimately rationed food. It introduced a military draft in 1916 for men aged 18 to 41. More than 6 million British men became members of the armed forces. Women streamed into the industrial labor force, replacing men who were serving in the military. In 1918, before the war was over, women were given the vote in a bill for universal suffrage.

--The war lasted longer than anyone had predicted. The fighting was more gruesome and the weapons more destructive. Fighting along the border between France and Germany soon became mired in a bloody stalemate as armies dug defensive trenches and fortified their positions against attack. Trench warfare was both terrifying and demoralizing. Infantry soldiers lived in unsanitary conditions in muddy trenches that stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss border.

--The death of over 10 million men in combat left a gaping chasm in the social and economic life of the postwar world. Many of those who survived the war returned home with physical disabilities that prevented them from rejoining the work force. Others suffered the lasting effects of what in those days was called shell shock and what is today labeled post-traumatic stress disorder, a psychological affliction that prevents a successful adaptation to civilian life. Many of the dead left widows and orphans who had to cope with severe economic hardship and emotional loss.

--The war had a profound effect on the relations between men and women in the major belligerent states. As the men rushed to the battlefield, women moved into many traditionally male occupations in industry. They then began to achieve a degree of independence and self-reliance that had been unavailable before the war. Many of the countries involved in the war (including Britain, the United States, and Germany) granted women the right to vote for the first time shortly after the war ended.

--The war also profoundly disrupted the revered cultural tradition of the Western world. Optimism about human nature and about the glorious future of civilization was discredited as soldiers from what had been hailed as the most highly civilized societies on earth slaughtered each other without mercy. Artists began to produce works that mocked the self-confident assertions of humanism and portrayed the sordid realities of modern life. Social scientists and psychologists probed the sources of human aggression in an effort to explain the orgy of violence that had ended. Philosophers bemoaned the decadence of civilization and the decline of the west.

--The economic consequences of the war were felt throughout the world. All of the countries involved had to borrow heavily to pay for the costs of the war, either from their own citizens or from foreign lenders. Such deficit-financing generated inflation, which impoverished many citizens living on fixed incomes. Some governments, such as the Soviet regime in Russia, repudiated their foreign debts, wiping out the savings of frugal investors in many countries. The war also wrought political changes that had serious economic consequences. For example, the new states in Eastern Europe that were formed out of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire found it nearly impossible to achieve economic viability. When the empire was divided into separate countries, the new countries were cut off from their prewar markets and sources of food and raw materials.

--The postwar international order that was forged at the Paris Peace Conference proved to be unstable and short-lived. What Woodrow Wilson called "the war to end all wars" led to, within a generation, a second, even more destructive conflict. The early evaluations of the Versailles settlement were largely critical. People blamed the leaders of the victorious European powers for having betrayed President Wilson's principle of national self-determination by forcing Germany to cede territories with large German populations. They also criticized the imposition of crushing reparations on Germany. Some believed that the reparations would destroy Germany economically and guarantee the country's resentment.

--More recent scholarship has challenged this evaluation of the Versailles settlement as a harsh, vindictive, peace settlement. Germany's territorial losses were much less harsh than those imposed on its allies Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. In addition, some scholars have argued that Germany could have paid the reparations, if the country's standard of living had been reduced. The reparation settlement failed not simply because Germany was not able to pay but because many German people did not accept that Germany was more responsible for the war than any other country. In addition, the wartime coalition of Britain, France, and the United States, which might have been powerful enough to enforce the treaty, dissolved shortly after the war as each country concentrated on its own domestic issues.

--Troops made massive suicidal charges across open terrain against fixed enemy defensive positions that were lined with barbed wire and defended with machine guns. In the first Battle of the Somme, in 1916, there were nearly 60,000 British casualties on the first day alone. In 1917, at Passendale in Belgium, the number of British killed or wounded reached the staggering total of some 250,000 (see Battle of Ypres). Overall, the war cost Britain roughly 3 million casualties and resulted in large numbers of veterans with disabilities who returned to live in every corner of the British Isles.

-- The worldwide economic depression of 1929 struck Britain hard. Unemployment rose to 2.5 million within a year and to 3 million by the beginning of 1933. Ramsey MacDonald, the Labour prime minister, resigned in 1931 but agreed to sit in a national coalition government to handle the worsening crisis. The government put emergency measures into effect to raise income taxes on the wealthy, to reduce salaries of government workers, and to reduce unemployment benefits that were crippling the government.

--For the first time in a century, Britain abandoned free trade. The government placed duties on imports and encouraged the population to "buy British." Government programs to build houses and automobiles and expand electric utilities ultimately had their effect on the domestic economy. During the 1930s the government began to nationalize utilities, including coal, and to set wages and prices in large industries such as steel. By 1933 unemployment began to decline, especially in the newer industries, and by 1935 most sectors of the economy were recovering. Britain's share of world exports continued to shrink, however, and industries that had failed to modernize no longer remained competitive. Not only had the United States become an international competitor, but Germany, too, had survived the worst of the depression; its economy recovered as the result of a massive program of rearmament.