

The Great War
AP World History
Kienast

World War I involved two groups of powers and several main countries involved within those powers. The Central Powers consisted of Germany, led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, Austria, led by Kings Francis Joseph (1914-16) and Karl Joseph (1916-18), and the Ottoman Empire, led by Sultan Mehmed V. The Allied Powers consisted of Britain, led by King George V and Prime Minister David Lloyd George (1916-18), France, led by President Raymond Poincaré (1913-14) and President Georges Clemenceau (1914-18), and Russia, led by Tsar Nicholas II.

Of course the war started when Austria declared war on Serbia in July of 1914, but the fighting began when Germany invaded the neutral country of Belgium, August 2, 1914. A huge disadvantage that Germany had was defeating the three countries that surrounded them, France, Britain, and Russia. The German plan for beating France, Britain and Russia was called the Von Schlieffen Plan. Developed by a German army commander named Alfred von Schlieffen in the late 19th century, the plan involved rapidly taking over France by defeating the French and British armies first. Germany would surprise France and Britain by moving their armies through neutral Belgium instead of across the direct border between Germany and France. With a quick victory over France and the British armies, Germany could then turn their attentions to Russia. Russia was expected to take much longer in mobilizing their armies for war because they were not a particularly organized and industrialized country. So, the plan hinged on two variables: defeating France and Britain quickly and Russia being slow to mobilize. The plan quickly fell to pieces. The Belgians, under the leadership of their king, Albert, surprised the Germans by fighting back instead of allowing the Germans to pass through their country uncontested. The Belgians held the German armies off for a month, allowing the French and British to set up defenses around Paris.

The first large battle for Paris was called the First Battle of the Marne, about forty miles northeast of the city. The battle ended with the Germans unable to take Paris. Coupled with the fact that Russia mobilized much quicker than expected, the Von Schlieffen plan failed and the war bogged down into a stalemate. Two fronts in the war developed: a Western Front involving Britain and France against Germany and an Eastern Front involving Russia and Germany. If you are wondering what happened to Austria, and Germany's hope that Austria would help with Russia, the Austrians had difficulty in defeating Serbia and could never send much assistance to Germany other than supplies. The war in southern Europe had little significance, ironic due to the fact that the war began in southern Europe.

From the very beginning, the war grew rapidly out of control. New styles of warfare, like the use of gas and heavy artillery, produced new kinds of horror and unprecedented levels of suffering and death. As a German army crossed into Belgium, heading for Paris, the Russian Army - moving faster than the German generals had anticipated -- was already pushing into East Prussia. The German forces on the Eastern Front, however, quickly defeated the Tsar's army at the Battle of Tannenberg.

In the west, as the German army invaded Belgium, rumors and stories quickly spread of the atrocities the German soldiers inflicted upon Belgium civilians.

When the German invasion of France failed to take Paris or destroy French and British resistance on the river Marne, stalemate quickly followed, and a line of trenches soon stretched along the war's Western Front from the Swiss Alps to the English Channel. In the spring of 1915 the trenches along the western front were filled with millions of soldiers, at the average rate of one soldier per four inches of trench. The job behind the front lines was to keep the men fed, equipped and ready to continue the fighting until the end came. The civilians behind the lines were as important to victory as the men on the lines. Because of their value to the war-making power of each nation, civilians became the target of the enemy. Since both sides targeted both civilians and military personnel, and mobilized men and resources at an unprecedented rate, the Great War was a "total war." Total war involved using unusual strategies such as trench warfare and blockades, ideologies such as nationalism, new weapons such as gas, airplanes, submarines, and machine guns, and the mobilization of not only armies but also a nation's colonies and civilian population. By 1915, the conflict had spread across boundaries between continents and peoples, becoming a global war--a fact grimly confirmed by the unlikely battle between Turks and Australians on the Turkish cliffs of Gallipoli. The Allied force eventually abandoned the assault with 46,000 dead.

This total war affected the lives of many different people: in some communities unprecedented casualty rates especially among young officers stripped young women of all their male contemporaries; West African soldiers were shipped in from the colonies to fight in the trenches; brave Englishwomen traded other jobs for more dangerous jobs in weapons factories. Everyone was affected. The first genocide of the 20th century -- the ultimate form of total war against civilians -- was also part of this conflict. Turkish ethnic cleansing practices killed more than a million Armenians. A practice later noted by Hitler when he remarked to his high command: "Who remembers the Armenia massacres today?"

When the war stalemated, the nations involved tried new strategies to end the conflict. Britain tried to win the war at sea by imposing a blockade on all shipping into Germany. This strategy was unorthodox due to the fact that it stopped *all* shipping, including food and medicine to Germany. The seizure of food and medicine was, and still is, illegal according to international law. To counter the British blockade of their country, the Germans used submarines, called U-boats in the early 20th century. Submarines were also considered illegal according to international maritime law. The Germans declared a "War Zone" around British Isles and warned ships of all countries to stay away. This policy, called "Unrestricted Submarine Warfare" enraged countries who traded heavily with Britain, including the United States, which was a neutral country at the outset of the war.

Britain and Germany also tried new strategies on the ground. Trying to stop supplies from reaching Germany from the south, Britain invaded the Ottoman Empire in 1915. The hope was to force the Ottoman Empire out of the war and invade Austria from the south, cutting off supply lines and creating a third front in the war against Germany. The battle, called the Battle of Gallipoli, failed miserably and nearly led to the end of the career of its planner, Winston Churchill, who was then the head of the British navy.

Germany decided to end the war through an overwhelming ground assault near the French town of Verdun. The battle lasted nearly a year and led to nothing more than a million dead British, French and German soldiers.

Britain also tried to involve the U.S. in the war, hoping that supplies and resources from the U.S. would tip the balance of the stalemate. Britain knew that Americans were sympathetic to England due to several factors. There were strong cultural ties between the United States and Britain and Americans were angry over unrestricted submarine warfare and the disruption in trade that it caused. The British tried to change American minds about neutrality through use of propaganda. Propaganda typically involves using ideas or statements that are often false or exaggerated. These ideas are spread in order to help a cause, a political leader, a government, etc. British propaganda did a good job of painting the Germans as cruel and aggressive and themselves as weak and helpless victims.

Eventually the United States became involved in the war due to three events and circumstances. Americans were killed on several European passenger ships that were sunk in the German “war zone” around the British isles. Britain began using passenger vessels to transport war supplies, so Germany began to sink passenger vessels. Americans were especially upset over sinking of three ships, the *Lusitania*, *Arabic*, and *Sussex*. The sinking of the *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915 was the most damaging to American and German relations, with 128 Americans among the 1195 others who died when the ship was torpedoed off the coast of Ireland. Americans were not just upset over the loss of life, but also angered by Germany’s violation of a longstanding maritime philosophy held by Britain and the U.S., the belief in “Freedom of the Seas.” This philosophy held that nations should be allowed to trade with any other nation without interference, and Germany was certainly interfering with trade. Another factor that led to war between Germany and the U.S. was the Zimmermann Note. Germany, fearing that the U.S. was close to declaring war, sent a request to the Mexican government in January 1917. The request, sent by German foreign secretary Arthur Zimmermann, asked Mexico to join the war against the U.S. and promised the return of the Southwestern U.S. to Mexico as a reward. The telegram was intercepted by British intelligence and eventually revealed to President Woodrow Wilson, who then revealed the contents to the American public. Three months later the Russians revolted against the tsar and Russia left World War I. Russia’s withdrawal from the war convinced the U.S. that unless they joined, Germany would be able to break the stalemate along the Western Front. President Wilson officially proposed a declaration of war to the U.S. Senate on April 4, 1917 and the Senate voted nearly unanimously for war with Germany on April 6, 1917.