

TIMES PAST
1918

Why World War I Still Matters

Millions of people were killed, mighty empires fell, and the globe was remade during World War I. A hundred years later, we're still dealing with the consequences. BY BRYAN BROWN



British infantrymen
fight from a trench in
France, 1916.

Europe During World War I



In one moment, the world stopped and began again. On November 11, 1918, at exactly 11 a.m. Paris time, bells rang and celebrations broke out all over the globe. After four years and millions of deaths, World War I was over.

The timing had been laid out in an armistice—an agreement to stop the fighting. It was written by the war’s victors, the Allied Powers. France, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and the United States led this group of nations during the war. The Allies had forced their defeated enemy, Germany, to sign the agreement.

The conflict it ended was so massive, people referred to it simply as the Great War. Up to that point in history, it was the bloodiest war ever. About 20 million people—both soldiers and civilians—were killed. France alone lost 1.4 million soldiers in battle, 17 percent of all the country’s fighting-age men.

“It affected countries for generations,” says Doran Cart, senior curator of the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri. “It changed the whole outlay of the globe.”

This November 11, bells will again ring around the world. The celebration will mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. The war continues to influence our world. Here are some essential things to know about it.

1 The war introduced deadly new weapons.

The war began in July 1914 as a struggle for power between two groups of European nations. It pitted the Allied Powers—first led by Russia, France, and the U.K.—against the Central Powers, headed by Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, centered in what is now Turkey (see map above).

Few people could have predicted that so many soldiers would be killed. A main reason for the historic loss of life, say experts, was the introduction of deadly new weapons. Among these were machine guns and artillery that could fire more rapidly than before. Tanks, airplanes, and poison gas were also deployed for the first time in World War I.

For protection, troops on both sides dug long ditches in the ground called trenches. They used these ditches to take cover. Soldiers sometimes stayed in them for weeks or months.

By the end of 1914, the opposing armies had created an almost unbroken battle line of parallel trenches. They stretched from the coast of Belgium to Switzerland. This 450-mile-long line of trenches was called the Western Front.

In letters home, soldiers described the brutal reality of life in the trenches. They talked about the mud up to their knees, rats as large as cats, and the horrible smell of overflowing toilets.

When ordered to attack, soldiers rushed out of their trenches onto open ground. As they charged the opposing trenches, waves of men would be mowed down by enemy fire. Despite the high death count, battles often resulted in little or no gain of territory. Afterward, bodies sometimes remained where they had fallen. There was no safe way to retrieve them.

French soldier Louis Barthas recalled stumbling upon a gruesome scene while searching an abandoned enemy



U.S. troops wear masks to protect themselves against a gas attack, 1917.

trench: “I saw . . . a pile of corpses, almost all of them German, that they had started to bury right in the trench. . . . ‘There’s no one here but the dead!’ I exclaimed.”

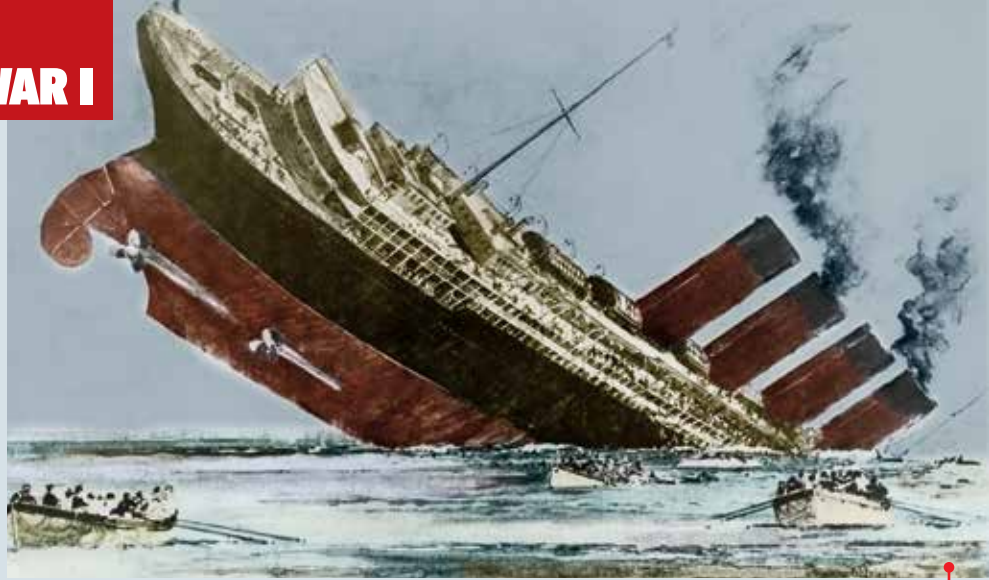
2 The U.S. didn’t want to get involved.

When the war began, President Woodrow Wilson pledged the United States to neutrality. But from the start, many Americans felt the U.S. should fight alongside the U.K. and France because of our strong historical ties to those nations.

Then on May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank a British passenger ship called the *Lusitania* off the southern coast of Ireland. Among the 1,200 crew members and passengers who died, 128 were Americans.

“What the *Lusitania* did was to bring the war home to

Timeline WORLD WAR I



June 1914

Assassination of Ferdinand

A teenage Serbian nationalist kills Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, setting off a chain reaction that leads to World War I. At the time, various European nations were bound by alliances and had sworn to protect each other.

Sept. 1914

The Western Front

Following the outbreak of war in August, the Western Front begins to form. This battle line of trenches stretches 450 miles from the coast of Belgium to Switzerland.

Dec. 1914

Christmas Truce

In a surprising show of solidarity, cease-fires take place all along the Western Front on Christmas morning. Enemy soldiers exchange handshakes and gifts, and help each other bury the dead.

May 1915

Sinking the RMS Lusitania

A German submarine torpedoes the RMS Lusitania, a British ship, killing 1,200 people onboard, including more than 120 Americans. The incident turns U.S. public opinion in favor of entering the war.

Americans,” historian John Cooper has said. Suddenly, that foreign conflict felt like our own.

Still, it took nearly two more years—and the steady worsening of the U.S.-German relationship—for America to enter the fight. On April 2, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war. The Germans were waging “a warfare against mankind,” Wilson said. “The world must be made safe for democracy.”

3 U.S. troops helped save the day.

In June 1917, American soldiers began arriving in Europe. By that time, the people of Britain and France had been devastated by years of fighting. They cheered the young Americans who marched through their streets on the way to the battlefield.

Those fresh U.S. troops helped turn the war around for

WWI & the Middle East

How the war led to much of the region's current turmoil

The Middle East often seems like it's in the throes of one huge conflict after another. The civil war in Syria; the decades-long dispute between Israel and Palestinians; the rise of ISIS and other terrorist groups. How did the region get this way? Historians say much of the present-day strife in the Middle East can be traced back to World War I.

At the war's end, Britain and France divided up the Ottoman Empire between themselves. The secret deal, called the Sykes-Picot Agreement, created Middle Eastern territories with almost no input from the diverse groups of people who had been living there for centuries, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews.



A bombing near Damascus in January

“People found themselves living in boundaries that they had no say in determining,” says historian Eugene Rogan, author of *The Fall of the*

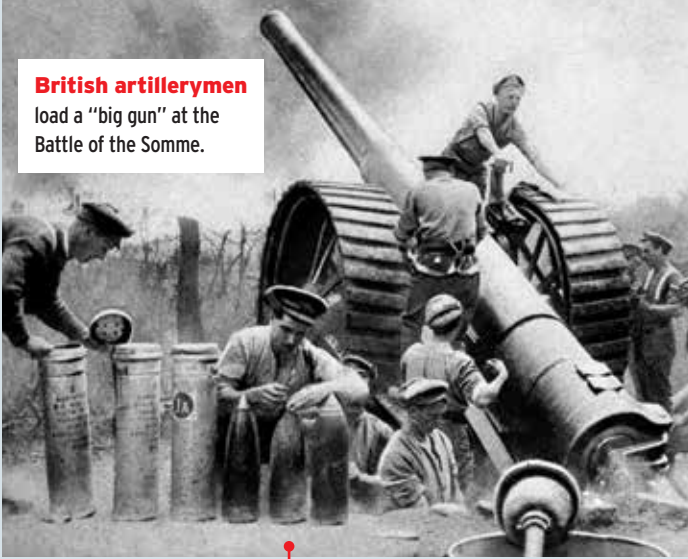
Ottomans. “They saw the boundaries as **illegitimate** because they saw them as imposed on them as an act of European imperialism.”

Today, the areas that were carved out in the post-World War I dealings—Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and what's now Israel—are still being fought over or face political unrest. Rogan thinks this should serve as a warning for future diplomacy in the region.

“We should all come away from the experience of the post-war settlement,” he says, “very wary of great powers taking their pens to Middle Eastern maps.” —Joe Bubar

British artillerymen

load a "big gun" at the Battle of the Somme.



Uncle Sam was first used to help recruit soldiers during World War I.



People in the U.S. celebrate the end of the war.

July 1916

Battle of the Somme

More than a million British, French, and German troops die in the four-month-long Battle of the Somme—and still there's no clear winner. It comes to symbolize the horror of trench warfare.

April 1917

U.S. Enters the War

After learning of a secret attempt by Germany to turn Mexico against the U.S., President Woodrow Wilson asks Congress to declare war.



Jan. 1918

The Fourteen Points

President Wilson delivers an address to Congress known as the Fourteen Points, in which he outlines his vision for stable, long-lasting peace.

Nov. 1918

Armistice

The fighting comes to an end when Allied and German leaders meet in France to sign a peace agreement. Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire have already surrendered.

June 1919

Treaty of Versailles

The Allies meet in Paris to draft the official peace treaty, with little participation by the Germans—sowing the seeds for World War II.

the Allies. In July 1918, U.S. forces joined with British and French troops to push back the Germans at the Second Battle of the Marne, in France. The battle proved to be the last major stand for an exhausted Germany.

Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were fighting the Allies on the war's Eastern Front. By early November, they had surrendered. Then Germany, the last of the Central Powers, reluctantly agreed to a peace settlement.

4 World War I remade the globe.

The war triggered the collapse of four powerful empires: Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire.

"Those dynasties had been there for centuries," says Michael Neiberg of the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania. "Now, in four years, they were gone."

When it was all over, Germany was forced to accept blame for the war, give up about 10 percent of its territory, and sharply reduce its military. The country was also forced to pay the Allied nations about \$33 billion in damages.

These terms enraged Germans. In 1933, that anger helped fuel Adolf Hitler's rise to power. In part seeking revenge for Germany's humiliation in World War I, Hitler would eventually attempt to conquer Europe. His actions plunged the globe into World War II. Says Cart, of

the National World War I Museum and Memorial: "There would have been no World War II without World War I."

5 The U.S. became a global power.

One nation emerged from the war stronger: the U.S. With its industrial might and more than 2 million troops, America proved itself a powerful force. The nation transformed itself into a world leader. "That was the moment when the U.S. began to get involved in foreign affairs almost everywhere," says Neiberg.

Today, however, many Americans question whether the cost of being involved in conflicts around the world is too steep. The Middle East is a prime example of this (see "WWI & the Middle East," facing page). Since 2001, nearly 7,000 Americans have died battling terrorists in Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. has

also been involved in the fighting in the Syrian civil war that began in 2011. Conflicts in all three countries show no signs of ending anytime soon.

Like past presidents, President Trump and his advisers have questioned what to do. What can the U.S. hope to accomplish in foreign wars? Can the world ever truly be made safe for

democracy, as Woodrow Wilson vowed?

"This is a debate that comes directly from World War I," says Neiberg. It's one, he adds, that we may never finish struggling with. •