

Conducting World War I

*If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

—Wilfred Owen, from “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1920)

Essential Question: What were some of the methods governments used to fight World War I?

British poet Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” is one of the most famous war poems of the 20th century. Most of the poem describes the horrors of modern warfare, and the final lines of the excerpt, translated as “It is sweet and noble to die for one’s country,” he labels “The old Lie.” No previous war had involved as many nations from different parts of the world and none had killed as many soldiers and civilians.

At the outbreak of World War I, Britain was the only major power going into the war without universal **conscription**, compulsory enlistment in the armed forces. Realizing that patriotism could be contagious, the British Army began to recruit “Pals Battalions” made up of men who already knew each other. The first of these was made up of a group of stockbrokers from the City of London. Other Pals Battalions were recruited in cities throughout Britain, such as Liverpool and Manchester. Because the men who volunteered were friends or associates, these battalions were especially close knit. By the end of the war, one out of four British men had served in the military.

Changes in Warfare

Many modern films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, set during World War II, and *Platoon*, set during the Vietnam War, show that war is *not* a glorious experience, but most Europeans saw warfare differently during the first few months of World War I. “Everybody said, ‘It’ll be over by Christmas,’” a British soldier named Bill Haine recalled. The war began in June 1914. Hundreds of

thousands of teenage boys enthusiastically enlisted in the military, dreaming of heroism. Wartime assemblies sounded more like high school pep rallies, in which speakers naively predicted swift and easy victories in battles against supposedly inferior enemies. Leaders of some of the socialist parties were among the few Europeans who spoke out against the war. Even socialists were divided on the issue, however, as many supported the war efforts of their nation.

At the time, few people actually understood how brutal 20th-century warfare could be. As the war dragged on, the world became aware of the horrific effects of new advances in war technology and tactics, such as trench warfare, poison gas, machine guns, submarines, airplanes, and tanks.

- The defining experience for most soldiers in this war was the time spent in the trenches, long ditches dug in the ground with the excavated earth banked in front in order to defend against enemy fire. **Trench warfare** was not a glorious way to fight a war. Combatant nations dug hundreds of miles of trenches facing one another, and soldiers slept, ate, and fought in the trenches for months at a time. Trenches were often cold, muddy, and rat-infested. Many soldiers died from diseases caused by unhygienic conditions. Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and the 1930 film based on it give a vivid sense of a soldier's life in the trenches. Remarque was a young German soldier during World War I.
- **Poison gas** was one of the most insidious weapons of the new style of warfare. Chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas were used during World War I. Soldiers were soon equipped with gas masks, which were effective when used immediately. Although fatalities were limited, the effects of a gas attack could be extremely painful and long lasting. Many veterans suffered permanent damage to their lungs. After the war, international treaties outlawed the use of poison gas.
- Developed in the late 1800s, **machine guns** could fire more than 500 rounds of ammunition per minute, increasing the deadly impact of warfare. The weapon made it difficult for either side in a battle to gain new territory.
- Although primitive **submarines** had been used briefly in the American Civil War, they played a much larger part in World War I, wreaking havoc on the shipping lanes of the Atlantic Ocean.
- **Airplanes** in 1914 were still light, small, and unable to carry many weapons. Therefore, they did not present much of a threat to troops, vehicles, or ships. At first, airplanes were used mainly to carry on reconnaissance (observation) of enemy lines. By 1915 they were being fitted with machine guns and aerial combat began. Individual "air aces" would engage in "dog fights" with enemy aircraft.
- The British developed **tanks** to protect troops as they moved across vast areas of difficult terrain, even over trenches, with the ability to fire

at the enemy. They were developed by the Royal Navy, and originally referred to as *landships*. They got their name from the fact that during their development, they were disguised as water tanks.

With both the Central Powers and the Allies using brutal weapons and tactics, neither side could defeat the other. The result was a bloody four-year **stalemate** in which the death toll and suffering rose ever higher.

The United States Enters the War

Economic ties between the United States and the Allies were one underlying reason for U.S. entry into the war in 1917. In addition, many Americans believed that the Allied nations were more democratic than the Central Powers were. A third reason was growing resentment against the Germans, especially for **U-boat** (submarine) attacks on ships carrying civilians, including Americans. On May 7, 1915, a German submarine attacked and sank the *Lusitania*, an ocean liner carrying more than 100 U.S. citizens among its passengers.

The event that finally pushed the United States into the war was the interception of the **Zimmermann Telegram** in January 1917. In this document, the German government offered to help Mexico reclaim territory it had lost to the United States in 1848 if Mexico allied itself with Germany in the war.

Total War

Combatant nations intensified the conflict in World War I by committing all their resources to the war effort. This strategy, known as **total war**, meant that a nation's domestic population, in addition to its military, was committed to winning the war. Thus, millions of civilians, including women, worked in factories producing war materials. Workers imported from China helped make up for labor shortages in Britain, France, and Russia. Entire economies were centered on winning the war. Governments set up planning boards that set production quotas, price and wage controls, and the rationing of food and other supplies. They censored the media and imprisoned many who spoke out against the war effort.

Propaganda was another component of total war. **Propaganda** is communication meant to influence the attitudes and opinions of a community around a particular subject by spreading inaccurate or slanted information. Governments invested heavily in army and navy recruitment campaigns and other wartime propaganda. Posters and articles in newspapers and magazines often depicted the enemy crudely or misrepresented the facts of the war completely. For example, American and British propaganda demonized the German army, exaggerating reports of atrocities against civilians. Likewise, German propaganda demonized the Americans and the British.

The use of highly emotional and often misleading information fomented hatred and bitterness across borders, among civilians as well as soldiers. Other propaganda was more subtle. For example, the U.S. government sent artists to the front lines in Europe to illustrate scenes of battle and glorify Allied soldiers.



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Posters recruiting sailors and soldiers for World War I in the United States and Great Britain reflected how governments used art and media to appeal to nationalist feelings in the early 20th century.

A Global War

World War I was fought in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Not since the Seven Years' War of the late 18th century had there been such a **global war**. Most of the major combatants in World War I ruled colonies in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific. Competition for these colonies was one major reason for war. Imperialism extended the boundaries of the war, and major battles were fought in North Africa and the Middle East. Japan entered the war on the side of the Allies so that it could take control of German colonies in the Pacific—the Marshall Islands, the Mariana Islands, Palau, and the Carolines. Japan also occupied Tsingtao (Qingdao), a German-held port in China.

The British seized most of Germany's colonies in Africa. However, the Germans held on to German East Africa, later called Tanzania. The British also defended the Suez Canal from an attack by the Ottoman Empire.

Colonial troops reinforced their home countries' forces in several battles. About half a million Australians and New Zealanders enlisted to fight the war. These troops formed a special corps known as **ANZAC** and fought in a bloody year-long campaign at **Gallipoli**, a peninsula in northwestern Turkey, that resulted in heavy Allied losses with little to show for the effort. Canadian troops fought in several European battles. Britain drafted Africans and Indians for combat roles in Europe. Some 90,000 Gurkha soldiers from Nepal fought in the Indian Army. Approximately 1.3 million soldiers served in the Indian Army



during the war, in Europe and Southwest Asia. The French Army included 450,000 Africans, mostly from West Africa and Algeria, as well as another 110,000 Europeans from North Africa. Some 44,000 Indochinese soldiers fought in the French army, with nearly 50,000 more working in support roles behind the lines. Some colonial troops fought in hopes that their efforts would gain them recognition from their colonizers, who often promised the colonies self-rule after the war ended.

Arabs, long under the rule of the Turkish-led Ottoman Empire, fought with the Allies because the British promised self-rule after the war if they were victorious. Arab troops attacked Ottoman forts in Arabia and present-day Israel and helped the British take over the cities of Baghdad, Damascus, and Jerusalem.



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World War I armies included soldiers from Senegal in West Africa (upper left), France in Western Europe (upper right), India in South Asia (lower left), and Japan in Eastern Asia (lower right).

Women and the War In the early 20th century, most countries did not allow women to vote or to be soldiers. However, the sheer numbers of men enlisting meant that women's lives changed significantly. They began replacing those men on farms and in factories. Thousands of women served on the front lines as nurses, ambulance drivers, and switchboard operators.

Most countries forbade women from serving in combat, but Russia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria allowed it. In 1917, the Russian government created an all-female battalion (military unit) as propaganda to shame men into continuing to fight. The commander Maria Bochkareva led the First Russian Women's Battalion of Death.

The Paris Peace Conference

The war itself greatly damaged Europe. However, the peace conference held in its wake would have even more profound effects on the entire world. The leaders of the victorious countries at the **Paris Peace Conference** became known as the **Big Four: Woodrow Wilson** (United States), **David Lloyd George** (Great Britain), **Georges Clemenceau** (France), and **Vittorio Orlando** (Italy). The Italians walked out of the peace conference in a rage because Italy would not get Dalmatia and other territories that they had been promised for joining the Allies, including the city of Fiume on the Adriatic Sea. Russia was not invited to the conference because it had undergone a communist revolution. Russia's Bolshevik leaders refused to honor Russia's financial debts to the Allies, who in return refused to recognize the Bolshevik government.

The Big Four had different visions of how to settle the peace. President Wilson's pledge to establish "peace without victory" reflected his belief that no one country should be severely punished or greatly rewarded. France's Clemenceau rejected this view. He believed that France, out of all the Allies represented at the conference, had suffered the most and thus deserved special considerations to be protected from Germany. He also argued that the victorious powers should seek some sort of revenge on the Central Powers for starting the war. Clemenceau complained that Wilson was an unrealistic idealist who was naive about European relations, even though Wilson had a Ph.D. in history. David Lloyd George tended to support Clemenceau's ideas, but he often acted as an intermediary between the two differing points of view.

Fourteen Points Despite Clemenceau's protests, Wilson pushed for his principles, which he outlined in a document called the **Fourteen Points**. He particularly wanted to create a **League of Nations**, an organization in which all nations of the world would convene to discuss conflicts openly, as a way to avoid the simmering tensions that had caused World War I. Although the other nations agreed to establish the League, the U.S. Senate voted against joining it and against ratifying the **Treaty of Versailles**, the 1919 peace treaty with Germany.



Wilson also believed that conquered peoples under the defeated Central Powers deserved the right to **self-determination**, to decide their own political futures. Instead of the colonies and territories of the Central Powers being snatched up by the Allies, conquered peoples should have the right to decide their own political fate. A number of new nations were created or resurrected in Europe as the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires were broken up: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia. The last three of these were home to Slavic peoples.

The Treaty of Versailles Because Wilson failed to convince France and Britain not to punish Germany, the Treaty of Versailles treated Germany harshly. Most notably, Germany had to pay billions of dollars in **reparations** for damage caused by the war, give up all of its colonies, and restrict the size of its armed forces. Germans took the entire blame for the war. Signing the treaty was humiliating for German leaders. Moreover, the terms of the treaty caused tremendous hardship to the nation during the decade following World War I. The German economy suffered from sky-high inflation, partly due to the reparations the country was forced to pay. The German people were bitter in the immediate aftermath of the Paris Peace Conference. Resentment toward the **Weimar Republic**, which had agreed to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, set the stage for an extreme and militaristic political party known as the Nazis to take power barely 15 years later. (Connect: Compare the forces that led to creation of the Treaty of Versailles and the Peace of Westphalia. See Topic 3.3.)

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p>GOVERNMENT: Policies conscription stalemate propaganda global war self-determination reparations</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Wars and Rebellions <i>Lusitania</i> Zimmermann Telegram total war ANZAC Gallipoli Paris Peace Conference</p>	<p>GOVERNMENT: Leaders Big Four Woodrow Wilson David Lloyd George Georges Clemenceau Vittorio Orlando</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Treaties Fourteen Points League of Nations Treaty of Versailles</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Countries Weimar Republic</p>	<p>TECHNOLOGY: Warfare trench warfare poison gas machine guns submarines airplanes tanks U-boat</p> <p>CULTURE: Popular <i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i></p>