

CHAPTER 29

The First World War

TIME LINE

- 1914 World War I breaks out in Europe
The Germans fail to take Paris; trench warfare begins in France
The Germans defeat a Russian offensive in East Prussia
The Ottoman Empire enters the war on the side of the Central Powers
- 1915 Italy enters the war on the Allied side
The British launch the Gallipoli campaign
Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare results in the sinking of the **Lusitania**
- 1916 The German offensive at Verdun and the Allied offensive on the Somme fail to produce breakthroughs
The British and German **fleets** fight the Battle of Jutland
David Lloyd George takes office as Great Britain's prime minister
- 1917 The United States enters the war on the Allied side
Georges Clemenceau becomes premier of France
- 1918 President Woodrow Wilson announces the Fourteen Points
Soviet Russia signs the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
Germany agrees to an armistice
- 1919 The Paris Peace Conference begins its deliberations
The Germans sign the Treaty of Versailles

Despite its name, World War I was primarily a European conflict, fought over European issues.

The Allies of World War I included, first, the nations of the Triple Entente: France, Russia, and Great Britain. Serbia was also numbered among the Allies. Italy, Rumania, and Greece ultimately supported the Allied cause, as did the United States and Japan. Although the Japanese had no interests at stake in Europe, they hoped to acquire

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Germany's concessions in China, as well as the German-held islands in the North Pacific.

The Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, won the support of Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

On the western front, the fighting in France quickly became stalemated between the invading Germans and the French and British defenders. On the eastern front, the Russians did relatively well against the armies of the Austro-Hungarian empire. By the end of 1916, however, the Germans had effectively ended Russia's ability to resist, although the Russians did not conclude a formal peace treaty with the Central Powers until March 1918.

Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare against Great Britain brought the United States into the war on the Allied side in April 1917. American participation in the war provided the French and British with what they most needed: manpower. In the summer of 1918, Allied offensives broke the stalemate in France. The Germans were forced to retreat, and the fighting ended with the signing of an armistice in November 1918.

The task of making the final peace settlement was in the hands of the Paris Peace Conference, which met in 1919-1920.

The War in the West, 1914-1917

On August 4, 1914, during the first week of the war, the Germans invaded Belgium. As the Germans advanced, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was sent to France.

Battle of the Marne

At the end of August, the Battle of the Frontiers resulted in a major German defeat of the French. A few days later, on September 5, 1914, the Germans crossed the Marne River at a point about twelve miles from Paris, but they lacked the strength to push on and take the French capital. The Battle of the Marne ended with the French turning back the German threat to Paris.

Stalemate on the Western Front

The front in France became stalemated, with the Germans controlling most of Belgium and a large section of northern France. The two sides dug trenches, which they protected with barbed wire and concrete pillboxes. Trench warfare continued in France for the better part of four years. Each side launched offensives, but the machine guns of the defenders mowed down the advancing infantrymen. In an attempt to achieve a breakthrough, both sides used heavy artillery. The Germans used chlorine gas for the first time at Ypres in April 1915. But neither artillery nor poison gas proved decisive.

Battle of Verdun

In February 1916, the Germans massed their armies and artillery in an assault on the French stronghold at Verdun. Failing to take Verdun, the Germans moved to the defensive in July, and the battle continued until December. By that point, the French had stabilized the front much as it had been at the beginning of the year. At Verdun, the French suffered some 540,000 casualties, while German losses exceeded 430,000.

Battle of the Somme

In July 1916, the British and French launched a great offensive on the Somme River. Along the thirty-mile Somme front, the Allies achieved a maximum advance of only seven miles. By the time the battle ended in November, British casualties totaled 400,000, while the French suffered 200,000 casualties. German casualties have been estimated at 650,000. During the battle, the British used tanks for the first time. But like heavy artillery and gas, tanks failed to produce a decisive breakthrough.

The Western Front in 1917

The war-weariness of the French required the British to assume greater responsibility for the front in France. During 1917, British offensives at Passchendaele in the Ypres sector and at Cambrai in Flanders proved both indecisive and costly.

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After more than three years of fighting, neither the Allied nor the German armies had made any real gains and both sides had suffered tremendous casualties.

Changes in Political Leadership

In December 1916, British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith (1852-1928) stepped aside, giving way to a war cabinet headed by his fellow Liberal, David Lloyd George (1863-1943, the popular “Welsh Wizard.” In November 1917, Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929), the old “Tiger” of French politics, became premier, providing France with determined leadership.



The Eastern Front, 1914-1917

German Victories in East Prussia

When the war began in the summer of 1914, the Russians succeeded in mobilizing more rapidly than the Germans expected. Two Russian armies invaded East Prussia. The Germans inflicted crushing defeats on the Russians in the Battle of Tannenberg at the

end of August and the Battle of the Masurian Lakes in early September.

The War in the East, 1914-1916

While the Germans were smashing the Russian invaders of East Prussia, the Russians scored some successes at the expense of Austria-Hungary. In order to relieve the pressure on their allies, the Germans pushed toward Warsaw in eastern Poland. By the end of 1914, the Russians held almost all of Galicia (Austrian Poland), while the Germans occupied about one-quarter of Russian Poland. Russia's industry was inadequate to meet the country's needs, and ammunition and military equipment were in short supply.

The German advance against Russia continued during 1915. By the end of the year, the Germans occupied most of Russian Poland and Lithuania. While the Russian offensives against the Austrians in Galicia achieved some success during 1915, they remained indecisive. In September 1915, Tsar Nicholas II took over the supreme command of the Russian army.

In June 1916, the Russians began a great offensive against the Austrians in Galicia. The Germans rushed in fifteen divisions and halted the Russian advance.

Prior to the Russian setback, Rumania entered the war on Russia's side in August, hoping to acquire the province of Transylvania from Austria-Hungary. By January 1917, however, Austro-German forces had defeated and occupied Rumania.

Defeat of Russia

By the end of 1916, the Germans had, in effect, defeated Russia, and the revolutions of 1917 ended any possibility that the Russians might continue fighting. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918, ended the war between Russia and the Central Powers (see Chapter 30).

The Italian Front, 1915-1917

Although Italy was still technically allied with Germany and Austria under the terms of the Triple Alliance, Italy remained

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neutral when the war began. In an effort to win Italy's support, the Allies agreed to the secret Treaty of London of 1915, promising the Italians Austrian and Turkish territory, as well as colonies in Africa. In May 1915, Italy entered the war on the Allied side.

Italy was unsuccessful in its war against Austria, and in the fall of 1917, the Austrians inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Italians in the Battle of Caporetto. The British and French had to rush troops in to help the Italians stabilize the front.

The Gallipoli Campaign

In November 1914, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, thereby closing the Turkish Straits to the Allies. The western Allies were thus unable to ship vital war supplies to the faltering Russians.

Winston Churchill (1874-1965), the British first lord of the admiralty, pushed for a campaign to open the straits. In February 1915, the British launched an amphibious invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula at the southern end of the Dardanelles. However, the invasion failed as a result of errors in its planning and execution. In January 1916, the British withdrew.

While the Gallipoli campaign was in progress, Bulgaria entered the war on Germany's side in October 1915. Bulgaria had been at odds with Serbia since the Second Balkan War in 1913 and hoped to square accounts. Bulgarian forces helped Germany and Austria crush Serbia at the end of 1915.

The War in the Middle East

The Allies were able to make substantial gains at Turkish expense elsewhere in the Middle East. In the Caucasus, the Russians succeeded in turning back a Turkish offensive in early 1915. The Turks then began to deport and massacre the Armenians, whom they accused of aiding the Russians.

With the Turkish Straits closed to Allied shipping, the British hoped to open a route to Russia through Turkish-ruled

Mesopotamia. In March 1917, the British seized Baghdad and soon took control of most of Mesopotamia.

Under the leadership of Colonel T.E. Lawrence (1888-1935), known as Lawrence of Arabia, the British succeeded in stirring up revolts among the Arab subjects of the Turks. In 1917, the British invaded Palestine, capturing Jerusalem in December.

The War at Sea

Germany's much-vaunted high-seas fleet had little impact on the Allies during World War I. Their submarines, on the other hand, posed a serious threat.

Battle of Jutland

During the afternoon and evening of May 31, 1916, the British Grand Fleet battled the German fleet at the Battle of Jutland in the North Sea, off the coast of Denmark. The Germans inflicted substantially greater damage on the British than they suffered, but the battle proved indecisive. The Germans failed to break the British blockade, while the British failed to open the Baltic Sea route to Russia. Following the battle, however, the German surface fleet limited its activities to the Baltic and ceased to present any threat to the Allies.

Submarine Warfare

In February 1915, in an effort to starve out the British, the Germans declared a submarine blockade of the British Isles. In May, a German U-boat sank the British passenger liner *Lusitania* off the Irish coast, with the loss of 139 American lives. Vigorous American protests caused the Germans to reduce their submarine campaign.

During 1916, however, many German leaders urged the renewal of a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in an attempt to knock Great Britain out of the war. On February 1, 1917, the campaign began. The Germans were taking a calculated risk, hoping that the British would be forced out of the war before the United States could bring its power to bear in Europe.

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United States Declaration of War

On February 26, the British liner *Laconia* was sunk without warning; two Americans died in the sinking. On March 1, the Zimmermann Telegram was revealed; in it, the Germans proposed an alliance with Mexico, promising to restore Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona to the Mexicans.

The United States declared war on Germany in early April 1917, but American troops were not present in large numbers on the front in France until almost a year later.

The End of World War I

In March 1918, the Germans launched a massive offensive in France in a final effort to win the war.

The Allied Advance

The British rushed in reinforcements, and some 2 million American troops, commanded by General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing (1860-1948), began to arrive in France. In April, the Allies established a unified command, headed by Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929), a French general.

In mid-July 1918, the French, British, and American armies began a counterattack that marked the beginning of the long offensive that ended the war. The Germans began to retreat along a broad front. On August 8, 1918, the Black Day of the German Army, British tanks scored a major breakthrough near Amiens.

Armistice

On September 30, Bulgaria signed an armistice. Turkey capitulated to the Allies on October 30, and Austria gave up on November 3. The armistice with Germany was signed at five A.M. on November 11, 1918, to go into effect at eleven AM. World War I resulted in the loss of some 10 million military and civilian lives. Another 20 million were wounded.

The Paris Peace Conference

In January 1919, the peace conference began its deliberations in

Paris. Delegates representing some thirty-two nations attended. The main decisions, however, were made by the Council of Four: President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) of the United States, Premier Clemenceau of France, Prime Minister Lloyd George of Great Britain, and Premier Vittorio Orlando (1860-1952) of Italy. Neither Germany nor Soviet Russia was represented.

Wilson's Fourteen Points

A year earlier, in January 1918, President Wilson had presented his proposals for a peace based on principles of justice. In the Fourteen Points, he called for open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, free trade, and a reduction of armaments, and he urged self-determination for the subject peoples of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. In the fourteenth point, Wilson endorsed the creation of "a general association of nations." The League of Nations became the central part of Wilson's vision of the postwar world, and the Fourteen Points as a whole put the United States on a collision course with the European Allies.

French, British, and Italian Objectives

While Wilson sought to promote what he had earlier termed a "peace without victory," Clemenceau was determined to gain security for France against a possible future resurgence of German power. In addition, the French premier demanded substantial reparations from Germany to pay for the reconstruction of war-ravaged northern France. Lloyd George hoped to restore a continental balance of power so that Great Britain could devote its attention to its empire, while Orlando's primary objective was to gain as much territory as possible for Italy.

The Treaty of Versailles

The Paris Peace Conference produced five treaties for Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey. The most

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important was the Treaty of Versailles, the peace settlement with Germany.

The Rhineland

In drafting this treaty, a major controversy developed over French demands regarding the German Rhineland. Clemenceau wanted to separate the Rhineland from Germany in order to create a buffer state along the Franco-German border. Wilson objected, citing the principle of national self-determination. A compromise was reached, providing that the Allies would occupy the Rhineland for a period of fifteen years and that the Rhineland would be permanently demilitarized. In addition, in the Pact of Guarantees, the United States and Great Britain promised to come to the defense of France in the event of a future German attack. However, neither Great Britain nor the United States ever ratified this pact.

Alsace and Lorraine; the Saar

The Treaty of Versailles restored the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to France. The treaty provided further that the coal-rich area of the Saar in western Germany would be placed under the control of the League of Nations for fifteen years. During this period, the coal of the Saar would be the absolute property of the French state. This was done to compensate France for the damage done during the war to the coal mines of northern France. At the end of the fifteen-year period, a plebiscite would determine the Saar's future. When the plebiscite was held in 1935, the people of the Saar voted to return to German control.

Poland

Germany suffered small territorial losses to Belgium and Denmark, but the most extensive territorial losses occurred in the east. The newly recreated Poland received a large piece of eastern Germany. In particular, the Polish Corridor was created to give Poland access to the Baltic Sea. The Polish Corridor separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. The Germans greatly resented this as they resented the Allies' decision to make the port city of

Danzig, at the head of the Polish Corridor, into a free city. Although Danzig was largely German in population, it was separated from Germany in order to provide Poland with a seaport that was not under German control.



German Disarmament and Reparations

The disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles also caused resentment among the Germans. The German army was restricted to 100,000 men, to be raised by long-term enlistments, while the navy was reduced to the status of a coastal defense force. Germany was to be allowed no air force, no tanks, and no submarines.

Article 231 of the treaty became known as the war-guilt clause. Under its terms, Germany and its allies accepted the responsibility for causing the war. This provided the justification for requiring Germany to pay reparations to the Allies.

Signing of Treaty

When the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles was completed, a German delegation was summoned to Paris, where the treaty was

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signed in the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles on June 28, 1919.

The Mandate System

Africa

The Treaty of Versailles deprived Germany of its colonies in Africa and the Pacific. The German colonies in Africa were assigned to Great Britain, the Union of South Africa, and France as mandates under the nominal supervision of the League of Nations. The mandate system was designed to protect the indigenous populations and to prepare them for independence, but in practice the system proved little more than disguised annexation.

The Pacific

Germany's islands in the North Pacific went to Japan as mandates, while Australia and New Zealand acquired Germany's island colonies in the South Pacific.

The Middle East

The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in August 1920, deprived Turkey of its Arab lands in the Middle East. France acquired Syria and Lebanon as mandates, while British mandates included Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq.

The League of Nations

For Wilson, the most important issue at the Paris Peace Conference was the creation of the League of Nations, an association of states that would replace traditional power politics with a commitment to use peaceful means in the resolution of international disputes.

The Covenant of the League of Nations provided for the creation of an Assembly, representing all the members of the League; a Council, a smaller body with the major powers as permanent members along with several other members elected by the Assembly; and a Secretariat, which would be the League's administrative body. The Assembly, Council, and Secretariat would

all be headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ) operated under a protocol separate from the Covenant. Popularly known as the World Court, the PCIJ had its headquarters in the Dutch capital of The Hague.

At Wilson's insistence, the Covenant of the League was included as a part of the Treaty of Versailles and the other four peace treaties drafted at Paris. The United States did not join the League of Nations because of opposition in the Senate, which refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles.

Conflict over Italy's Claims

Italy's claims for territory at the expense of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire caused a major conflict at the Paris Peace Conference. Italy demanded and received the Trentino, a former Austrian possession with a large German minority, and Istria, with its seaport of Trieste. This area had also belonged to Austria. Although the population of Trieste was predominantly Italian, Istria itself was overwhelmingly Slovene, and on the basis of national self-determination, it should have been assigned to the new country of Yugoslavia.

Wilson resisted the Italian demand for Fiume, which was to be Yugoslavia's major seaport. The statesmen in Paris never resolved the Fiume question; it was left to be settled by direct negotiations between Italy and Yugoslavia (see Chapter 31). Italy's claims for territory in Africa and Asia Minor were not fulfilled.

Self-Determination in Eastern Europe

Wilson strongly supported the principle of national self-determination, although it proved difficult in practice to draw boundaries in areas where national groups were intermingled, which was generally the case throughout Eastern Europe.

Austria and Hungary

The end of the war brought with it the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Treaty of Saint-Germain, signed in September 1919, reduced Austria to the status of a small German-

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Austrian national state. The Treaty of Trianon, signed in June 1920, made Hungary a national state for the Magyars.

Czechoslovakia

The new country of Czechoslovakia was created entirely from territory taken from Austria and Hungary. Czechoslovakia was awarded the province of the Sudetenland, which had previously been a part of Austria, even though it was inhabited mainly by German-speaking people.

Yugoslavia

To the south, Yugoslavia emerged as the national state of the South Slavs, joining the formerly independent states of Serbia and Montenegro with territory lost by Austria and Hungary.

Rumania

The Treaty of Trianon awarded Rumania the province of Transylvania, which had a large Hungarian minority. In addition, Rumania took advantage of Russia's weakness to annex Bessarabia.

The Baltic Countries

Finland and the three small Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania also profited from Russia's weakness and won their independence.

Poland

In addition to acquiring territory from Germany under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Poland gained Galicia from Austria under the terms of the Treaty of Saint-Germain. In 1920, the Poles waged a successful war against Russia and pushed their frontiers eastward.

Bulgaria

The Treaty of Neuilly, signed in November 1919, deprived Bulgaria of its outlet to the Aegean Sea, which was awarded to Greece. Bulgaria also lost territory to Yugoslavia.

World War I cost millions of lives and did immense physical damage. The war also brought the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires.

The statesmen who met in the Paris Peace Conference faced many problems and produced an imperfect settlement. While the Germans condemned the Treaty of Versailles as unjust, it did not reduce Germany to the rank of a second- or third-rate power, as the history of the next quarter century would demonstrate. France, although victorious, emerged from the war in a seriously weakened state, unable to maintain the peace settlement without British and American support. Italy's failure to acquire the territory it demanded left the Italians in an angry and bitter mood.