

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Modern European History Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Unit 6 – Nation-Building and War  
WWI: A Global Conflict

*The war that many thought would be over in a few weeks lasted far longer, resulting in many casualties on both sides. The war widened, and the United States entered the fray in 1917. As World War I escalated, governments took control of their economies, rationing food and supplies and calling on civilians to work and make sacrifices for the war effort.*

**1914 to 1915: Illusions and Stalemate**

Before 1914 many political leaders believed war to be impractical because it involved so many political and economic risks. Others believed that diplomats could easily prevent war. In August 1914 both ideas were shattered. However, the new illusions that replaced them soon proved to be equally foolish.

Government propaganda - ideas that are spread to influence public opinion for or against a cause - had stirred national hatreds before the war. Now, in August 1914, the urgent pleas of European governments for defense against aggressors fell on receptive ears in every nation that was at war. Most people seemed genuinely convinced that their nation's cause was just.

A new set of illusions also fed the enthusiasm for war. In August 1914 almost everyone believed that the war would be over in a few weeks. After all, almost all European wars since 1815 had, in fact, ended in a matter of weeks. The soldiers who boarded the trains for the war front in August 1914 and the jubilant citizens who saw them off believed that the warriors would be home by Christmas.

**The Western Front**

German hopes for a quick end to the war rested on a military gamble. The Schlieffen Plan called for the German army to make a vast encircling movement through Belgium into northern France. However, the German advance was halted a short distance from Paris at the First Battle of the Marne (September 6–10). To stop the Germans, French military leaders loaded 2,000 Parisian taxicabs with fresh troops and sent them to the front line.

The war quickly turned into a stalemate as neither the Germans nor the French could dislodge each other from the trenches they had dug for shelter. Two lines of trenches soon reached from the English Channel to the frontiers of Switzerland. The Western Front had become bogged down in trench warfare. Both sides were kept in virtually the same positions for four years.

**The Eastern Front**

Unlike the Western Front, the war on the Eastern Front was marked by mobility. The cost in lives, however, was equally enormous. At the beginning of the war, the Russian army moved into eastern Germany but was decisively defeated at the Battle of Tannenberg on August 30 and the Battle of Masurian Lakes on September 15. After these defeats, the Russians were no longer a threat to Germany.

Austria-Hungary, Germany's ally, fared less well at first. The Austrians had been defeated by the Russians in Galicia and thrown out of Serbia as well. To make matters worse, the Italians betrayed their German and Austrian allies in the Triple Alliance by attacking Austria in May 1915. Italy thus joined France, Great Britain, and Russia, who had previously been known as the Triple Entente, but now were called the Allied Powers, or Allies.

By this time, the Germans had come to the aid of the Austrians. A German-Austrian army defeated the Russian army in Galicia and pushed the Russians far back into their own territory. Russian casualties stood at 2.5 million killed, captured, or wounded. The Russians were almost knocked out of the war. Encouraged by their success against Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary, joined by Bulgaria in September 1915, attacked and eliminated Serbia from the war. Their successes in the east would enable the German troops to move back to the offensive in the west.

### **Trench and Air Warfare**

On the Western Front, the trenches dug in 1914 had by 1916 become elaborate systems of defense. The Germans and the French each had hundreds of miles of trenches, which were protected by barbed-wire entanglements up to 5 feet (about 1.5 m) high and 30 yards (about 27 m) wide. Concrete machine-gun nests and other gun batteries, supported further back by heavy artillery, protected the trenches. Troops lived in holes in the ground, separated from each other by a strip of territory known as no-man's-land.

Trench warfare baffled military leaders who had been trained to fight wars of movement and maneuver. At times, the high command on either side would order an offensive that would begin with an artillery barrage to flatten the enemy's barbed wire and leave them in a state of shock. After "softening up" the enemy in this fashion, a mass of soldiers would climb out of their trenches with fixed bayonets and hope to work their way toward the enemy trenches.

The attacks rarely worked because men advancing unprotected across open fields could be fired at by the enemy's machine guns. In 1916 and 1917, millions of young men died in the search for the elusive breakthrough. In just 10 months at Verdun, France, 700,000 men lost their lives over a few miles of land. World War I had turned into a war of attrition, a war based on wearing down the other side with constant attacks and heavy losses.

By the end of 1915, airplanes appeared on the battlefield for the first time in history. Planes were first used to spot the enemy's position. Soon, planes also began to attack ground targets, especially enemy communications. Fights for control of the air space occurred, and then increased over time. At first, pilots fired at each other with handheld pistols. Later, machine guns were mounted on the noses of planes, which made the skies considerably more dangerous.

The Germans also used their giant airships - zeppelins - to bomb London and eastern England. This caused little damage but frightened many people. Germany's enemies, however, soon found that zeppelins, which were filled with hydrogen gas, quickly became raging infernos when hit by anti-aircraft guns.

### **Widening of the War**

As the war dragged on, the main combatants looked beyond Europe for a way to end the stalemate. However, none of the alliances they formed or new battlefronts they opened did much to end the slow and grinding conflict.

### **The Gallipoli Campaign**

A promising strategy for the Allies seemed to be to attack a region in the Ottoman Empire known as the Dardanelles. This narrow sea strait was the gateway to the Ottoman capital, Constantinople. By securing the Dardanelles, the Allies believed that they could take Constantinople, defeat the Turks, and establish a supply line to Russia.



The effort to take the Dardanelles strait began in February 1915. It was known as the Gallipoli campaign. British, Australian, New Zealand, and French troops made repeated assaults on the Gallipoli Peninsula on the western side of the strait. Turkish troops, some commanded by German officers, vigorously defended the region. By May, Gallipoli had turned into another bloody stalemate. Both sides dug trenches, from which they battled for the rest of the year. In December, the Allies gave up the campaign and began to evacuate. They had suffered about 250,000 casualties.

### **Battles in Africa and Asia**

In various parts of Asia and Africa, Germany's colonial possessions came under assault. The Japanese quickly overran German outposts in China. They also captured Germany's Pacific island colonies. English and French troops attacked Germany's four African possessions. They seized control of three.

Elsewhere in Asia and Africa, the British and French recruited subjects in their colonies for the struggle. Fighting troops as well as laborers came from India, South Africa, Senegal, Egypt, Algeria, and Indochina. Many fought and died on the battlefield. Others worked to keep the front lines supplied. To be sure, some colonial subjects wanted nothing to do with their European rulers' conflicts. Others volunteered in the hope that service would lead to their independence. This was the view of Indian political leader Mohandas Gandhi, who supported Indian participation in the war. "If we would improve our status through the help and cooperation of the British," he wrote, "it was our duty to win their help by standing by them in their hour of need."

## America Joins the Fight

In 1917, the focus of the war shifted to the high seas. That year, the Germans intensified the submarine warfare that had raged in the Atlantic Ocean since shortly after the war began. In January 1917, the Germans announced that their submarines would sink without warning any ship in the waters around Britain. This policy was called unrestricted submarine warfare.



The Germans had tried this policy before. On May 7, 1915, a German submarine, or U-boat, had sunk the British passenger ship *Lusitania*. The attack left 1,198 people dead, including 128 U.S. citizens. Germany claimed that the ship had been carrying ammunition, which turned out to be true. Nevertheless, the American public was outraged. President Woodrow Wilson sent a

strong protest to Germany. After two further attacks, the Germans finally agreed to stop attacking neutral and passenger ships.

Desperate for an advantage over the Allies, however, the Germans returned to unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917. They knew it might lead to war with the United States. They gambled that their naval blockade would starve Britain into defeat before the United States could mobilize. Ignoring warnings by President Wilson, German U-boats sank three American ships.

In February 1917, another German action pushed the United States closer to war. Officials intercepted a telegram written by Germany's foreign secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, stating that Germany would help Mexico "reconquer" the land it had lost to the United States if Mexico would ally itself with Germany.

The Zimmermann note simply proved to be the last straw. A large part of the American population already favored the Allies. In particular, America felt a bond with England. The two nations shared a common ancestry and language, as well as similar democratic institutions and legal systems. More important, America's economic ties with the Allies



were far stronger than those with the Central Powers. On April 2, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany. The United States entered the war on the side of the Allies.

## War Affects the Home Front

By the time the United States joined the Allies, the war had been raging for nearly three years. In those three years, Europe had lost more men in battle than in all the wars of the previous three centuries. The war had claimed the lives of millions and had changed countless lives forever. The war affected everyone, touching not only the soldiers in the trenches but civilians as well.

### **Governments Wage Total War**

World War I soon became a total war. This meant that countries devoted all their resources to the war effort. In Britain, Germany, Austria, Russia, and France, the entire force of government was dedicated to winning the conflict. In each country, the wartime government took control of the economy. Governments told factories what to produce and how much. Numerous facilities were converted to munitions factories. Nearly every able-bodied civilian was put to work and unemployment in many European countries all but disappeared.

So many goods were in short supply that governments turned to rationing. Under this system, people could buy only small amounts of those items that were also needed for the war effort. Eventually, rationing covered a wide range of goods, from butter to shoe leather.

### **Manipulation of Public Opinion**

Governments used propaganda to keep up morale and support for the war. But as the war continued and casualties worsened, the patriotic enthusiasm that marked the early stages of the war began to wane. By 1916 signs indicated that civilian morale was beginning to crack. War governments, however, fought back against growing opposition to the war.

Authoritarian regimes, such as those of Germany, Russia, and Austria- Hungary, relied on force to subdue their populations. Governments suppressed antiwar activity, sometimes forcibly, and censored news about the war (many leaders feared that honest reporting of the war would turn people against it). With the pressures of the war even democratic states expanded their police powers to stop internal dissent. The British Parliament, for example, passed the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). It allowed the government to arrest protesters as traitors. Newspapers were censored, and sometimes publication was suspended.

### **Women and the War**

Total war also had a significant impact on European society as governments turned to help from women as never before. Because so many men left to fight at the front, women were asked to take over jobs that were not available to them before. Women found themselves employed in jobs that once were considered beyond their capacity. These jobs included



civilian occupations such as chimney sweeps, truck drivers, farm laborers. Women plowed fields, paved streets, and ran hospitals, keeping troops supplied with food, clothing, and weapons. They also became

factory workers in heavy industry built tanks and munitions, building tanks and munitions; 38 percent of the workers in the Krupp Armaments works in Germany in 1918 were women.

Women also saw the horrors of war firsthand working on or near the front lines as nurses. American nurse Shirley Millard describes her experience with a soldier who had lost both eyes and feet:

*He moaned through the bandages that his head was splitting with pain. I gave him morphine. Suddenly aware of the fact that he had [numerous] wounds, he asked: "Sa-ay! What's the matter with my legs?" Reaching down to feel his legs before I could stop him, he uttered a heartbreaking scream. I held his hands firmly until the drug I had given him took effect.*

~Shirley Millard, I Saw Them Die~

The place of women in the workforce was far from secure, however. Both men and women seemed to expect that many of the new jobs for women were only temporary. At the end of the war, as men returned to the job market, governments quickly removed women from the jobs they were encouraged to take earlier. By 1919, 650,000 women in Great Britain were unemployed. Wages for the women who were still employed were lowered.

Although most women left the work force when the war ended, they changed many people's views of what women were capable of doing. In some countries the role women played in wartime economies had a positive impact on the women's movement for social and political emancipation. The most obvious gain was the right to vote, which was given to women in Germany, Austria, and the United States immediately after the war. British women over the age of 30 gained the right to vote, together with the right to stand for Parliament, in 1918.

Many upper- and middle-class women also gained new freedoms. In ever-increasing numbers, young women from these groups took jobs, lived in their own apartments, and relished their new independence.

### **Russia Withdraws**

In March 1917, civil unrest in Russia - due in large part to war-related shortages of food and fuel - forced Czar Nicholas to step down. In his place a provisional government was established. The new government pledged to continue fighting the war. However, by 1917, nearly 5.5 million Russian soldiers had been wounded, killed, or taken prisoner. As a result, the war-weary Russian army refused to fight any longer.

Eight months after the new government took over, a revolution shook Russia. In November 1917, Communist leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin seized power. Lenin insisted on ending his country's involvement in the war. One of his first acts was to offer Germany a truce. In March 1918, Germany and Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which ended the war between them.

## The Influenza Epidemic

In the spring of 1918, a powerful new enemy emerged, threatening nations on each side of World War I. This “enemy” was a deadly strain of influenza. The Spanish flu, as it was popularly known, hit England and India in May. By the fall, it had spread through Europe, Russia, Asia, and to the United States, probably spread by soldiers returning from the front. In India, at least 12 million people died of influenza. In Berlin, on a single day in October, 1,500 people died. In the end, this global epidemic was more destructive than the war itself, killing 20 million people worldwide.

Medscape				
Country	Pandemic period		Cumulative excess deaths n (%) <sup>*</sup>	Expected mortality
	Start	End		
Finland	1/1918	6/1919**	24771 (+33)	74667
England and Wales	10/1918	4/1919	153152 (+55)	280507
Scotland	10/1918	4/1919	20879 (+57)	36699
Denmark	10/1918	4/1919**	30650 (+58)	18465
Norway	9/1918	5/1919	14465 (+65)	22091
France	8/1918	4/1919	237509 (+66)	360686
Switzerland	7/1918	6/1919**	29995 (+69)	43536
Germany	3/1918	1/1919**	426574 (+73)	581243
Sweden	9/1918	5/1919	38453 (+74)	51849
The Netherlands	10/1918	5/1919	41337 (+84)	49066
Spain	6/1918	2/1919**	252121 (+87)	290531
Portugal	3/1918	6/1919	135600 (+102)	133039
Bulgaria	3/1918	1/1919	51156 (+102)	50015
Italy	8/1918	2/1919	544288 (+172%)	317350
Total 14 countries			1950950 (+86%)	2309744

<sup>\*</sup>Represents the excess mortality calculated, based on expected baseline mortality.  
<sup>\*\*</sup>Existence of a later peak in April 1920 (not taken into account to calculate excess deaths throughout the pandemic period).

Source: Influenza Other Respir Viruses © 2009 Blackwell Publishing Ltd

## The Central Powers Collapse

Russia’s withdrawal from the war at last allowed Germany to send nearly all its forces to the Western Front. In March 1918, the Germans mounted one final, massive attack on the Allies in France. As in the opening weeks of the war, the German forces crushed everything in their path. By late May 1918, the Germans had again reached the Marne River. Paris was less than 40 miles away. Victory seemed within reach.

By this time, however, the German military had weakened. The effort to reach the Marne had exhausted men and supplies alike. Sensing this weakness, the Allies - with the aid of nearly 140,000 fresh U.S. troops - launched a counterattack. In July 1918, the Allies and Germans clashed at the Second Battle of the Marne. Leading the Allied attack were some 350 tanks that rumbled slowly forward, smashing through the German lines. With the arrival of 2 million more American troops, the Allied forces began to advance steadily toward Germany.

Soon, the Central Powers began to crumble. First the Bulgarians and then the Ottoman Turks surrendered. In October, revolution swept through Austria-Hungary. In Germany, soldiers mutinied, and the public turned on the kaiser.

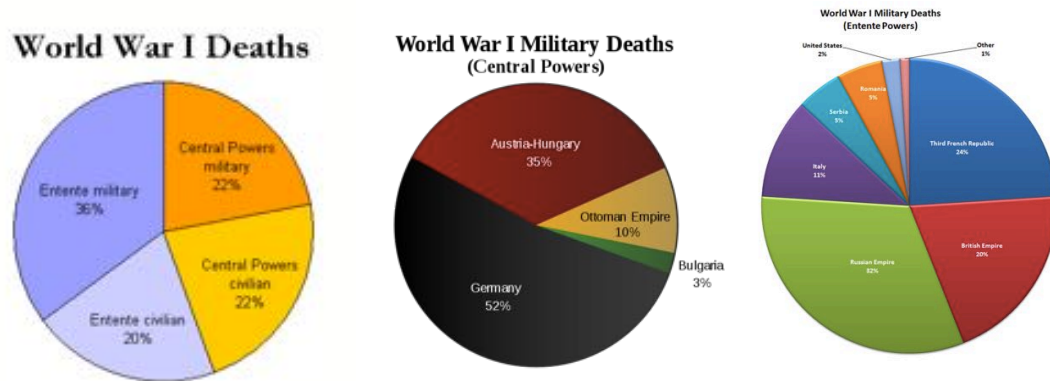
On November 9, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II stepped down. Germany declared itself a republic. A representative of the new German government met with French Commander Marshal Foch in a railway

car near Paris. The two signed an armistice, or an agreement to stop fighting. On November 11, World War I came to an end.

### The Legacy of the War

World War I was, in many ways, a new kind of war. It involved the use of new technologies. It ushered in the notion of war on a grand and global scale. It also left behind a landscape of death and destruction such as was never before seen.

Both sides in World War I paid a tremendous price in terms of human life. About 8.5 million soldiers died as a result of the war. Another 21 million were wounded. In addition, the war led to the death of countless civilians by way of starvation, disease, and slaughter. Taken together, these figures spelled tragedy - an entire generation of Europeans wiped out.



The war also had a devastating economic impact on Europe. The great conflict drained the treasuries of European countries. One account put the total cost of the war at \$338 billion, a staggering amount for that time. The war also destroyed acres of farmland, as well as homes, villages, and towns.

The enormous suffering that resulted from the Great War left a deep mark on Western society as well. A sense of disillusionment settled over the survivors. The insecurity and despair that many people experienced are reflected in the art and literature of the time.

Another significant legacy of the war lay in its peace agreement. The treaties to end World War I were forged after great debate and compromise. And while they sought to bring a new sense of security and peace to the world, they prompted mainly anger and resentment.