

World War I—The Great War

World War I (1914-1918) is known by many names: the Great War, “the war of illusions,” “the war to end all wars.” When the shooting finally ended, an estimated 10 million people were dead and 20 million were wounded. It was the war that introduced the deadly arsenal of modern weaponry to soldier and civilian alike.

The assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary triggered the war in June of 1914. But the real causes of the conflict go deeper. A brand of aggressive nationalism had taken root across all Europe. Germany, France, and England had become imperial powers with economic rivalries around the globe. The interlocking royal families of Europe created far-flung political alliances and pledged to take sides in case of conflict. Add to this the coming revolutionary struggle in Russia, and all the pieces were in place for a catastrophe.

A four-year conflict followed. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (mostly today’s Turkey) fought against the Allies, led by France, England, Russia, Italy and, eventually, America. The bulk of the war pitted adversaries along the Western front in a brutal standoff known as trench warfare. The Italian and Eastern fronts, though bloody, were secondary to the decisive battles consumed the heart of France and Belgium until whole landscapes were devoid of life.

After the Great War, combat would never be the same. The trenches were only one aspect of a conflict that saw the deployment of revolutionary and murderous new technology. The machine gun, the airplane, the armored tank, submarines, and poison gas were used in warfare, most of them for the first time—an arsenal that would dominate military strategy and planning for the century to come.

Though almost all the great battles were fought in Europe—the Marne, the Somme, Verdun, Ypres, Tannenberg—the Great War was a global conflict. Turkey, where the bloody battle of Gallipoli was waged, was a close ally of Germany. Australia and New Zealand entered on the side of the Allies. The United States did not join the Allies until 1917, but played a key role in stopping the final German offensive and bringing the war to an end in November of 1918.

The Great War might have been aptly named had the combatants heeded its warning. But the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, burdening Germany with enormous reparations, was partly responsible for setting in motion the rise of German fascism and the Nazi party. Before the memory of the first great war had dimmed, an even greater threat was on the horizon.