

## Chapter 23

# The Course and Conduct of World War I

*How was World War I different from previous wars?*

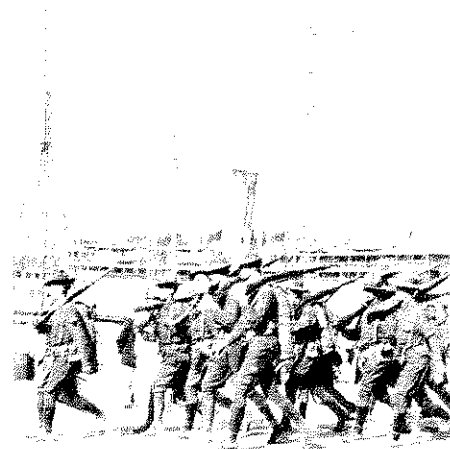
### 23.1 Introduction

In 1917, many Americans viewed the nation's entry into World War I as the commencement of a great adventure. Others saw it as a noble or heroic cause that would give the country a chance to demonstrate its courage. President Woodrow Wilson's call to help make the world safe for democracy appealed to Americans' sense of idealism. Many shared the president's belief that this would be "the war to end all wars."

A young recruit named William Langer enlisted to fight in the war because, as he described it, "Here was our one great chance for excitement and risk. We could not afford to pass it up." Henry Villard felt the same. He eagerly followed incidents on the battlefields of Europe, reading newspapers and discussing events with friends. "There were posters everywhere," he recalled. "'I want you,' . . . 'Join the Marines,' 'Join the Army.' And there was an irresistible feeling that one should do something . . . I said to myself, if there's never going to be another war, this is the only opportunity to see it."

In 1917, Villard got his chance when a Red Cross official visited his college looking for volunteers to drive ambulances in Italy. Many of Villard's friends signed up. Although he knew his family would protest, Villard said, "I couldn't just stand by and let my friends depart." After securing his family's reluctant consent, Villard enlisted and soon headed out for combat duty.

Very soon after arriving in Italy, Villard discovered how little he knew about war. "The first person that I put into my ambulance was a man who had just had a grenade explode in his hands." Bomb fragments had severed both of the soldier's legs. As Villard sped from the front lines to the hospital, the wounded soldier kept asking him to drive more slowly. By the time the ambulance reached the hospital, the young man was dead. "This was a kind of cold water treatment for me, to realize all of a sudden what war was like," explained Villard. "And it changed me—I grew up very quickly . . . It was the real world."



More than 2 million Americans served in Europe during World War I. Eager to promote democracy around the world, many entered the war with great enthusiasm. But their first taste of battle left them more realistic about the horrors of war.



This famous World War I recruiting poster helped entice tens of thousands of young American men to register for the draft in 1917. Once they did, it took weeks of training to prepare them for combat.

## 23.2 A War of Firsts for the United States

For the United States, World War I was a war of firsts. To start, it was the first time the government had agreed to commit large numbers of American soldiers to a distant war across the sea. In fact, when Congress first declared war, many Americans thought the nation would provide money, food, and equipment to the war effort—but not troops. Learning that military officials planned to expand the army, Virginia Senator Thomas Martin cried out in surprise, “Good Lord! You’re not going to send soldiers over there, are you?”

That was indeed Wilson’s plan. Still, with Germany preparing for a final assault, many Americans wondered whether the United States could set up military camps, train large numbers of troops, and transport these soldiers to Europe quickly enough to make a difference.

**The Nation’s First Selective Service System** Prior to American entry into the war, the United States had a volunteer army of about 200,000 soldiers. These forces received low pay and lacked equipment. Few soldiers had ever seen combat. To enter the war, the military would need tens of thousands more soldiers—and quickly. In May 1917, Congress passed the *Selective Service Act*, which created a national draft. The act required all men ages 21 to 30 to register for military service at local polling stations.

To encourage Americans to comply with the draft, the government launched a major propaganda campaign. Secretary of War Newton Baker hoped tens of thousands would register on the assigned day. He urged mayors, governors, and other local leaders to make the day a “festival and [a] patriotic occasion.” These efforts paid off. Nearly 10 million young men registered. Across the nation, many towns and cities held parades and celebrations honoring their draftees.

Within months, officers at camps around the country were training more than 500,000 draftees. While the new soldiers marched and drilled, the Allies grew more anxious. In a message to U.S. officials, British prime minister David Lloyd George stressed the Allies’ urgent need for troops. He asked that American troops “be poured into France as soon as possible.” In his view, “the difference of even a week in the date of arrival may be absolutely vital.”

**The First Americans Reach French Soil** American troops first landed in France in June 1917. Their official name was the *American Expeditionary Force (AEF)*, but they were nicknamed “the doughboys.” The AEF fought under the command of General John J. Pershing, and most were **infantry**—soldiers who fight on foot. Although few in number, the American infantry bolstered the Allies’ morale.

By the time the Americans reached France, the war was going badly for the Allies. Their armies had suffered several major defeats and lost many men. Even victories were deadly. The battle at Passchendaele in November 1917 cost the Allies 300,000 soldiers. For all that bloodshed, the Allied forces had regained control of barely 5 miles of German-held territory.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 added to the Allies’ woes. Until then, Russian troops had kept the Central powers busy with fighting on the eastern

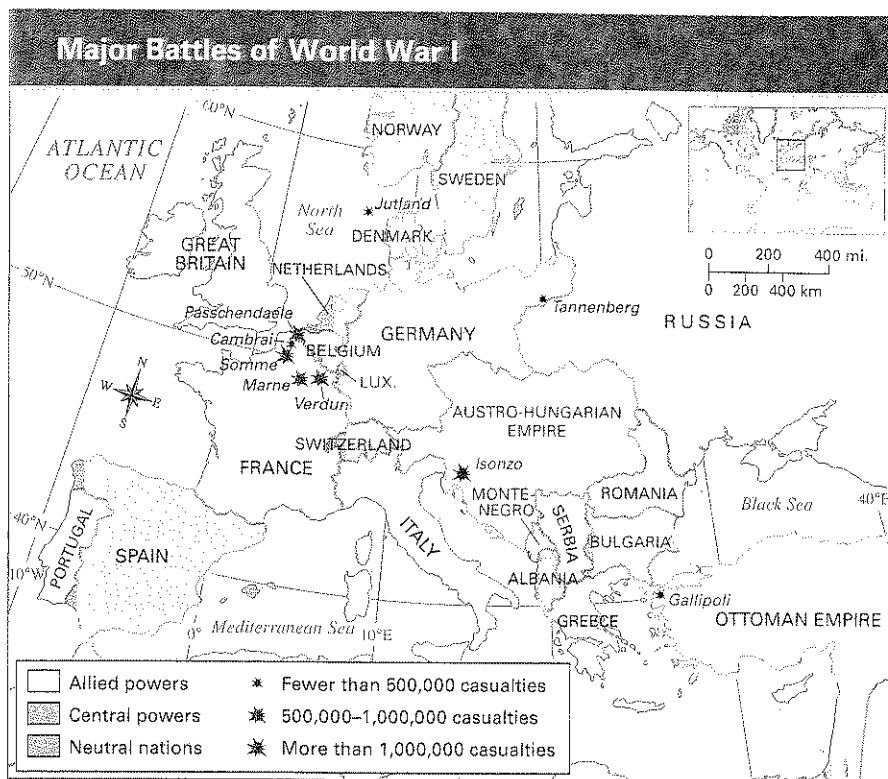
front. As soon as Russia's new revolutionary leaders took control of the government, they began making plans to withdraw Russia from the war.

Early in 1918, Russian peacemakers met with German and Austrian officials to hammer out the treaty of Brest-Litovsk. For Russia, the terms were very harsh. The treaty forced Russia to give up large amounts of territory, including Finland, Poland, Ukraine, as well as the Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Central powers gained not only territory but, more important, an end to the fighting on the eastern front. Germany was free to throw all its troops into the war on the western front.

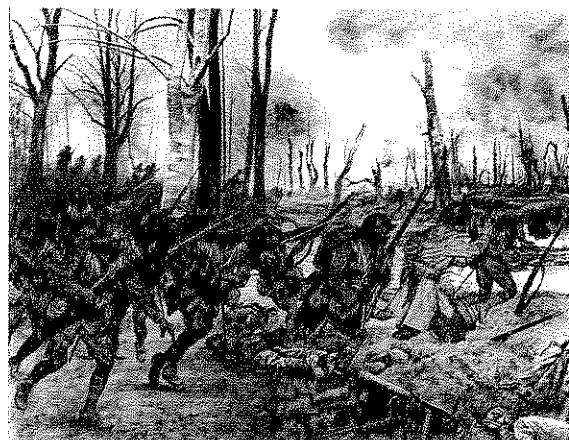
To counter the increase in German troops on the western front, the Allies asked General Pershing to assign American soldiers to Allied units to replace men killed or wounded in action. With Wilson's backing, Pershing resisted this request, insisting that most of his soldiers remain in the AEF. Pershing had two main reasons for doing so. First, he disagreed with Allied military strategy. He did not think the Allies could end the stalemate by fighting a defensive war from the trenches. Instead, he advocated tactics that were more forceful and offensive. Second, both Wilson and Pershing felt that if the AEF did well as a separate army, the United States could demand a greater role in the peacemaking process after the war. Pershing got his way. By war's end, some 2 million Americans had served overseas as part of the AEF.

**The First African American Officer Training Camp** During the course of the war, nearly 400,000 African Americans joined the armed forces. The military strictly segregated black and white troops in training camps and overseas. At first, it did not allow black soldiers to become officers. However, people across the country held mass meetings to push for officer training for African Americans. In 1917, the military set up a separate camp to train black soldiers as officers. Later that year, the camp graduated its first class, including 106 captains, 329 first lieutenants, and 204 second lieutenants.

Most black soldiers served under white officers in labor or supply units in France or the United States. The all-black **369th Regiment** had a different experience. As an exception to Pershing's rule about American soldiers not fighting in Allied units, the 369th operated under French command. They took part in active combat, for which they earned high praise. The soldiers of the 369th fought so fiercely, Germans called them the "Hell Fighters." After the war, France awarded the 369th the country's highest military honors.



World War I began on two main battlefronts. The western front stretched across Belgium and northern France. The eastern front spread across much of present-day Poland. Russia's withdrawal from the war in early 1918 closed down the eastern front.



African American soldiers of the 369th Infantry Regiment came from Harlem and other neighborhoods in New York City. While fighting at Sechault, France, the enemy named these persistent soldiers the "Hell Fighters."

### 23.3 New Technologies Change the Way War Is Fought

World War I proved to be unlike previous wars in many ways. For example, for centuries, opposing forces had conducted combat face-to-face and hand-to-hand. During the American Civil War, **combatants**—those physically fighting the war—had faced off against their enemies with handguns or rifles, supported by cannons. Troops fired only at targets they could see clearly. New technology made World War I a more impersonal war, as well as a far deadlier one.

**Combatants Introduce More Effective Killing Machines** Weapons such as the machine gun, an improved flamethrower, and large cannons known as **howitzers** changed how and where war was fought. Unlike rifles and pistols, the machine gun was a rapid-firing weapon—the first truly automatic gun. A soldier using a machine gun, which spit out 600 bullets per minute, did not have to stop as often to reload. In time, military commanders realized that machine guns could make a greater effect when grouped together. In fact, the Germans created separate machine gun companies to support the infantry.

The invention of the machine gun had a major impact on military strategy. Armies accustomed to taking the offensive and attacking head-on were now at a disadvantage. A group of well-placed machine gunners could stop the advance of a much larger force. German forces learned this lesson quickly, but the British and French did not. Allied armies charged across open fields toward enemy lines, only to be mowed down by machine gun fire, leading to thousands of casualties. In September 1915, British infantry units, each comprising about 10,000 men, charged a well-protected German position. In four hours, more than 8,000 men were killed, almost all by machine gun fire.

At first, machine guns were used mostly for defense, because soldiers found them too heavy and bulky to carry in an offensive attack. Over time, both sides found ways to mount these weapons on aircraft and to use them on warships.

Unlike the machine gun, the flamethrower was an old weapon. In the days of the Roman Empire, soldiers had hurled these tubes filled with burning fuel at one another. During World War I, Germany developed a small, lightweight flamethrower that a single person could carry. It sprayed burning fuel on the victims. This weapon was effective in attacks on nearby trenches but could not be fired long distances.

For long-range bombings, both sides used large, heavy artillery, or “big guns.” Before firing these weapons, gunners loaded them with shells that often contained dozens of small lead balls. Soldiers also used big guns to deliver poison gas. A new type of loading, firing, and recoil mechanism made these guns very useful. Gunners used them to blast through barbed wire, knock out enemy machine gun nests, and lob poison gas shells at enemy trenches.

The best known of these powerful guns were Germany’s Big Berthas. Each weighed about 75 tons and could fire a 2,100-pound shell a distance of more than 9 miles. Big Berthas were the largest mobile guns ever used on the battlefield. At the beginning of the war, Big Berthas helped Germany sweep through Belgium on its drive west toward France. Unable to withstand the assault of these guns, concrete Belgian forts crumbled. In total, heavy artillery inflicted more than half of all battle casualties in World War I.



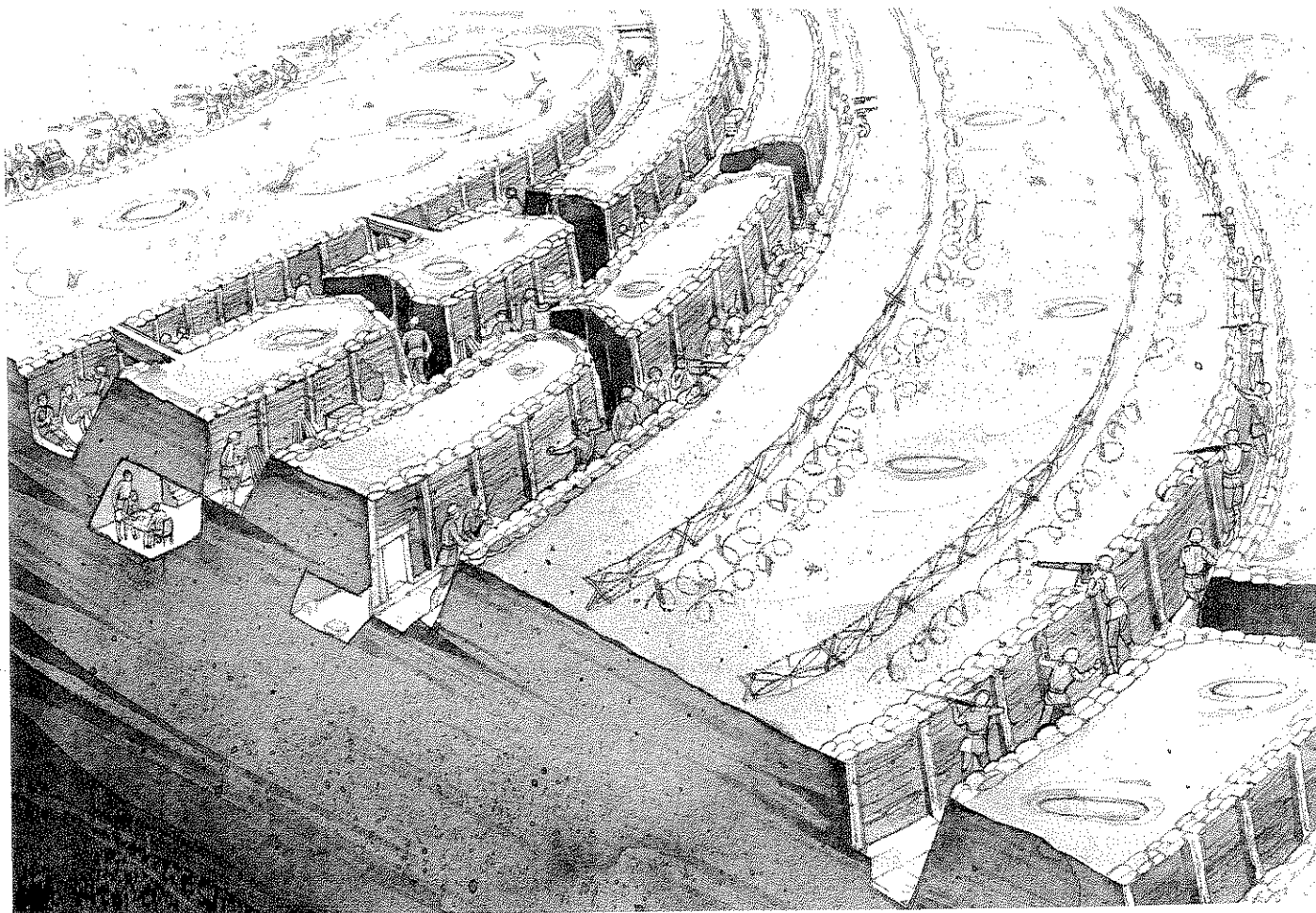
In 1883, American inventor Hiram Maxim developed the first entirely automatic machine gun to become widely used by both the Allies and the Central powers. The new weapon's heavy firepower made mass assaults across open ground suicidal. As a result, both sides retreated into a vast network of trenches to fight a defensive war.

Despite such technological advances, the rifle remained the most widely used weapon on the battlefield. Soldiers found rifles to be lighter and easier to carry than bigger guns when advancing toward the enemy. Soldiers with good aim trained to be sharpshooters, who are specialists at hitting an exact target, or snipers, who fire from a concealed position. Both played a key role in a new type of combat called **trench warfare**.

**Both Armies Seek Safety in Trenches** The introduction of new weapons such as rapid-firing machine guns and powerful, long-range big guns made the old style of ground attack far too dangerous. Soldiers could no longer charge each other across an open field. If they did, they could be killed instantly. Instead, both sides dug trenches in the ground for protection. The result was a new kind of defensive war known as trench warfare.

Each side dug multiple lines of trenches, often in zigzag patterns to make it hard for enemy sharpshooters to hit soldiers. Closest to the enemy's trenches lay the frontline trenches. From opposing frontline trenches, soldiers hurled grenades and fired machine guns at one another. Behind the frontline trenches, soldiers dug a line of supply trenches. These held ammunition, other supplies, and communication equipment. In a third line of reserve trenches, weary soldiers rested before returning to the front lines. In the course of trench duty, soldiers rotated through the frontline, supply, and reserve trenches.

In World War I, typical frontline trenches were six to eight feet deep and wide enough for two people to stand side by side. Short trenches connected the front lines to the others. Each trench system had kitchens, bathrooms, supply rooms, and more. However, living in and doing combat from the trenches was not pleasant. Even when they were not fighting, soldiers had to relax in cramped environments.





Both the Allies and the Central powers developed new weapons in hopes of breaking the deadlock in the trenches. In April 1915, the Germans first released poison gas over Allied lines. The fumes caused vomiting and suffocation. Both sides soon developed gas masks to protect troops from such attacks.

Large barriers of barbed wire circled each side's front line and extended into the open area between the opposing trenches. This area, called no-man's land, was typically about 250 yards wide, but crossing its short distance was usually lethal. Soldiers venturing into no-man's land risked being shot or blown up. In this treeless space, any moving object was an easy target for sharpshooters and machine gunners. Water-filled craters made by bombs and artillery shells soon speckled no-man's land. Because neither side could find a way to get its troops safely across no-man's land, the war ground to a stalemate.

Conditions in the trenches were horrible. The muddy trenches smelled of rotting bodies, sweat, and overflowing latrines. Soldiers often caught fevers or suffered from painful foot infections called trench foot, which resulted from standing in the mud and cold water that pooled in the bottom of the trenches. In addition, lice, frogs, and rats surrounded the men. An Allied soldier recalled:

One got used to many things, but I never overcame my horror of the rats. They abounded in some parts, great loathsome beasts gorged with flesh . . . About the same time every night the dug-out was invaded by swarms of rats. They gnawed holes in our haversacks [backpacks] and devoured our . . . rations.

—Harold Saunders, quoted in *Everyman at War*, 1930

One of the most terrifying threats soldiers faced was the use of **chemical weapons**, which utilize toxic agents such as poison gas to kill or harm many people. Germany was the first to use poison gas in World War I. In time, the British and French did as well. The deadliest chemical used was odorless mustard gas. This caused huge, painful blisters, blindness, and lethal damage to the lungs. Those who survived a mustard gas attack often had lifelong injuries.

Early on, soldiers simply released mustard gas from cylinders and relied on the wind to carry it across no-man's land to the enemy. However, shifting winds often blew the gas back on the sender's trenches. Both sides eventually found ways to put poison gas into the shells they fired at each other. In time, both sides developed gas masks to protect their troops from these attacks.

Another new weapon, the tank, finally helped end the stalemate in the trenches. Soldiers could drive tanks over barbed wire and crush the otherwise treacherous material. They could also steer the tanks up steep embankments and across ditches to attack enemy trenches. Unsure of how effective this weapon would be, Germany was slow to develop tanks of its own. The Allies were more proactive with their use of this new technology. During the final Allied advance in the summer of 1918, tanks rolled across no-man's land ahead of Allied troops, protecting them from enemy gunfire and weakening enemy defenses.

**The Sky Is the New Battlefield** Improvements to airplanes brought war into the sky. The top speed for early airplanes was about 40 miles per hour. But by 1917, powerful motors allowed airplanes to travel more than three times that fast. Planes also became easier to fly and could travel farther than ever before.

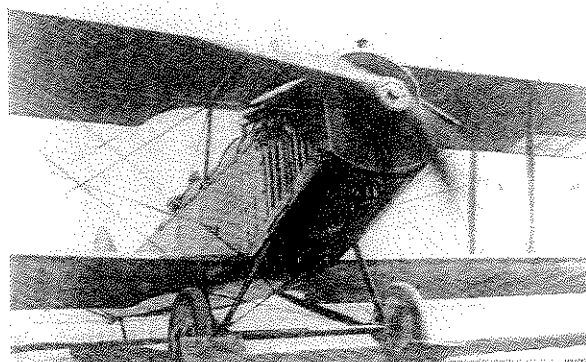
From the start of the war, both sides used airplanes to scout enemy territory. But the war challenged inventors to create airplanes for more specialized uses, such as fighting and bombing. At first, pilots would lean out of the cockpit and shoot at enemy pilots with a pistol or drop bombs by hand over the side



of the plane. Then Dutch inventor Anthony Fokker, working for Germany, built a device that timed the firing of a machine gun with the rotation of a plane's propeller. This allowed a pilot to safely fire a machine gun mounted on the front of his aircraft. Fokker's invention made in-air combat a serious new threat.

The Germans also created high-flying, gas-filled airships called zeppelins. These cigar-shaped aircraft were first used for scouting enemy positions. In 1915, German pilots used zeppelins in bombing raids over London. Although the German airships terrified British civilians and alarmed the Allies, they often missed their targets.

By 1916, the British had found a way to counter the airship threat. They built fighter planes that could fly as high as a zeppelin and developed bullets sharp enough to pierce the airship's outer skin, causing it to explode. The various roles of the airplane in World War I showed its usefulness and versatility. Indeed, it would play an even greater role in later conflicts.

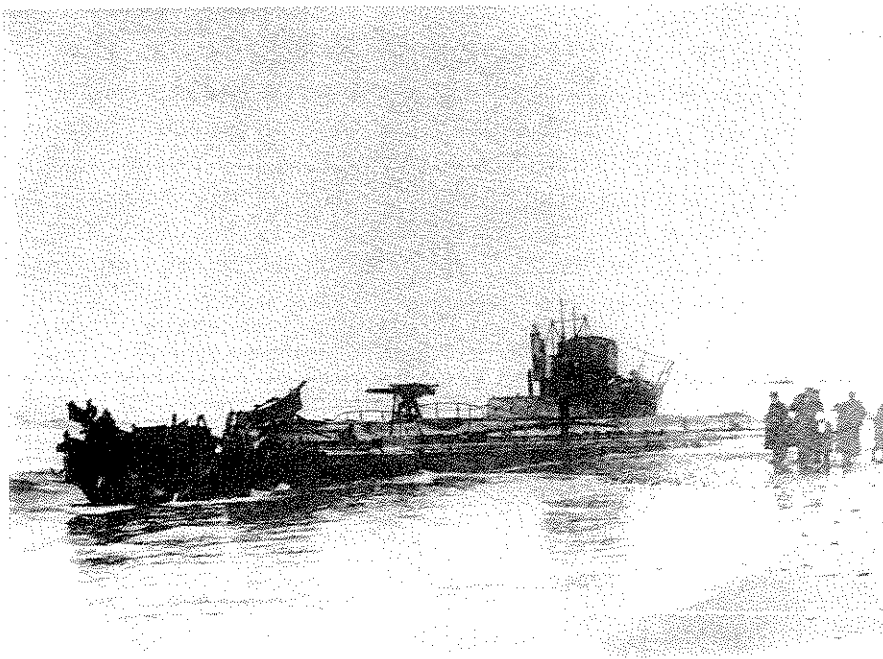


World War I was the first war in which planes were used as weapons. Early in the war, when enemy planes met, pilots exchanged smiles and waves. Soon they were throwing bricks and grenades or shooting pistols at one another. Once guns were mounted on planes, the era of air combat began.

**Waging a Savage War at Sea** When World War I started, most naval experts had already predicted that the greatest sea battles would take place between heavily armed and armored **battleships**. In 1906, Britain had introduced the world's first modern battleship, the HMS *Dreadnought*. It was larger, more powerfully armed, and more heavily armored than earlier warships. Faced with this threat, the major naval powers had scrapped their old fleets and began replacing them with similar battleships. In 1916, the German and British navies fought a major naval battle with their battleships. Each side sank many ships, but neither side won a clear victory.

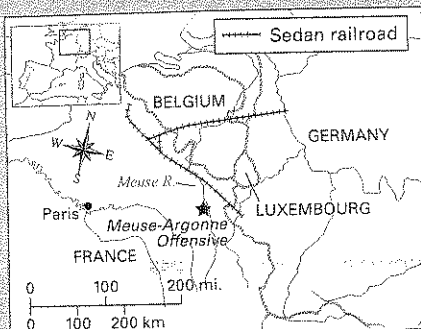
After that battle, Germany changed its approach to naval warfare. Its new strategy resulted from Germany's development of armed submarines, or U-boats. Moving silently under the sea, U-boats went undetected until it was too late to stop their torpedoes from reaching their targets. In the first four months of 1917, German U-boats sank more than 1,000 ships carrying supplies and weapons to Allied ports. British Admiral John Jellicoe warned, "It is impossible to go on with the war if losses like this continue."

The effectiveness of U-boat attacks was greatly reduced by the development of the **convoy** system. Under this system, Allied warships protected merchant ships by escorting groups of them across the Atlantic Ocean. The number of Allied shipping losses quickly decreased. From April 1917 to November of that year, the material lost to U-boat attacks dropped from more than 850,000 tons to just over 200,000 tons. In 1918, the Allies further reduced the submarine menace by laying an underwater barrier of mines across the North Sea and the English Channel.



The U-boat changed naval warfare forever. To combat U-boats, the Allies developed hydrophones. These "underwater ears" helped ships sense the approach of a U-boat and take defensive action.

## Meuse-Argonne Offensive, 1918



The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the last major battle of World War I. More than a million American troops helped the Allies capture the railroad that served as Germany's main supply line to France. With defeat all but certain, Germans demanded an end to the fighting. Kaiser Wilhelm abandoned his throne and fled to the Netherlands as the German government agreed to a truce.

### Estimated World War I Casualties

Country	Total Casualties
<b>Allied Powers</b>	
Russia	9,150,000
France	6,160,800
British Empire	3,190,235
Italy	2,197,000
United States	323,018
Japan	1,210
Other Allied nations	1,040,164

<b>Central Powers</b>	
Germany	7,142,558
Austria-Hungary	7,020,000
Turkey	975,000
Bulgaria	266,919

Source: U.S. Department of Justice.

## 23.4 The War Comes to a Close

As 1918 began, the Allies knew Germany would soon launch a final offensive to end the war in the west. Every day, more troops arrived on the front lines as the Germans raced to defeat the war-weary Allies before the Americans arrived. "We should strike," General Erich Ludendorff told Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor, "before the Americans can throw strong forces into the scale."

**The Meuse-Argonne Offensive Leads to an Armistice** In early spring 1918, the Germans began their final push. Their troops advanced rapidly to within 50 miles of Paris. By this time, however, American forces were arriving in Europe at the rate of 300,000 soldiers per month. This was enough to make a difference in the war's outcome.

Between July 15 and August 5, 1918, American forces joined French and British forces in the Second Battle of the Marne. Soon after the Allied forces counterattacked, the German troops fell back. "August 8 was the black day of the German army," General Ludendorff reported to the Kaiser. "It put the decline of our fighting power beyond all doubt . . . The war must be ended."

In late September, the Allies launched the **Meuse-Argonne Offensive**. The AEF's goal was to break through the German line to reach the Sedan railroad in northern France. This rail line was the German army's main line of supply and communication with Germany. More than 1 million U.S. troops took part in this final assault. After six weeks of hard fighting through the Argonne Forest, the Americans achieved their objective. On November 11, 1918, Germany agreed to an armistice—a truce. By then, the other Central powers had also surrendered. The long war was finally over.

**Counting the Costs and Casualties** For all involved, the costs of the war in human life and suffering were immense. More than 8 million soldiers had died. Another 21 million were injured, and many would never fully recover or be able to work. An English veteran and poet named Siegfried Sassoon wrote bitterly of their sacrifice:

Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .  
For people will always be kind,  
And you need not show that you mind  
When the others come in after hunting  
To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter?—losing your sight? . . .  
There's such splendid work for the blind;  
And people will always be kind,  
As you sit on the terrace remembering  
And turning your face to the light.

—Siegfried Sassoon, "Does It Matter?", 1918

In addition, millions of civilians throughout Europe died from starvation, disease, and other war-related causes. The United States suffered far fewer casualties, with about 116,000 soldiers killed and twice that many wounded or missing.



The war had also caused horrific damage to farms, forests, factories, towns, and homes throughout Europe. An Allied soldier described the villages he saw:

They are utterly destroyed, so that there are not even skeletons of buildings left—nothing but a churned mass of debris, with bricks, stones and . . . bodies pounded to nothing. And forests! There are not even tree trunks left—not a leaf or a twig. All is buried and churned up again and buried again.

—John Raws, letter to a friend, August 4, 1916

The war had also destroyed roads, bridges, railroad lines, and other transportation facilities. Countries already severely burdened by the financial cost of war withered under the weight of these additional losses. For Europe, economic recovery would come very slowly in the years ahead.

Another cost of the war was hard to measure but very real—damage to the human spirit. Many men and women who had eagerly joined the war effort now felt deeply disillusioned by what they had experienced. They questioned long-held beliefs about the glories of Western civilization and the nobility of war. American poet Ezra Pound spoke for war-weary populations in both the United States and Europe when he wrote of the “myriad,” or vast number, who had died “for a botched civilization.”

## Summary

**World War I was the world's first truly modern war. New inventions and technological advances affected how the war was fought and how it ended. The United States provided soldiers, equipment, and finances, which contributed to the Allied victory.**

**Selective Service Act** Before the United States could join the Allies, tens of thousands of troops had to be recruited and trained. As part of this process, Congress passed the Selective Service Act to create a national draft.

**369th Regiment** Hundreds of thousands of African Americans served in segregated military units during World War I. The all-black 369th Regiment received France's highest military honors for its service in Europe.

**American Expeditionary Force** President Woodrow Wilson and General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force, insisted that most American troops fight as a force separate from the Allied army. Two million Americans fought in the AEF during the war.

**The land war** New weapons made land warfare much deadlier than ever before. The result was trench warfare, a new kind of defensive war.

**The air war** Both sides first used airplanes and airships for observation. Technological improvements allowed them to make specialized planes for bombing and fighting.

**The sea war** Early in the war, ocean combat took place between battleships. The Germans then used U-boats to sink large numbers of ships. To protect merchant ships, the Allies developed a convoy system. Later, the Allies laid a mine barrier across the North Sea and English Channel.

**Meuse-Argonne Offensive** In 1918, close to 1 million U.S. soldiers took part in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Their success helped bring about an armistice with Germany.