

World War I

"The Great War"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. The efficient and creative technologies of the Industrial Revolution changed the way that people lived in the twentieth century. This was supposed to be the age of change, opportunity and prosperity! Few imagined that these same technologies would also change the way that people died. Few people expected World War I, but by the end of it, 10 million people—mostly young men—would be dead. Suddenly, the twentieth century didn't look quite so promising.

During its time, people called World War I the "Great War." It was the largest and most violent war the world had ever seen. Great refers to size here, not the meaning "very good." And why did people not just say, "World War I"? The answer is simple; there hadn't been a World War II yet. The war came to be called World War I only after people needed to distinguish it from World War II. World War I lasted from 1914 to 1918 and involved the entire continent of Europe as well as many other countries from around the world.

2. European countries were not just competing for colonies, but for military power, too. Many countries—especially Germany—believed that they needed to build up their navies. They did so mainly because they wanted to prevent other countries from attacking them, not because they actually wanted to fight.

Even though the leaders of these countries were busy strengthening their militaries, they knew they needed some friends. So they turned to some of their neighboring countries and made military alliances, or agreements, that if another country attacked their friends, they would back their friends and help them fight.

There were two major alliances in Europe. France, Britain and Russia were known as the Allied Powers. Other countries that supported the Allied Powers during the war included Serbia, Belgium, Italy, Japan, Greece and Romania. Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy were known as the Central Powers during the war, though Italy actually ended up joining the other side. Other countries that supported the Central Powers included the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Bulgaria.

Notes

Notes

3. The combination of imperialism, nationalism, militarism and alliances made Europe ready to explode with one little spark--the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on June 28, 1914. Ferdinand was the archduke, or leader, of Austria-Hungary. While visiting Sarajevo, he and his wife were killed by an assassin from Serbia, a country directly east of Austria-Hungary. Because of the assassination, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

But it isn't fair to blame the entire war on the assassination of one fairly unimportant leader. Because Serbia was part of the Allied Powers, Russia stepped in to support Serbia against Austria-Hungary. And Germany wanted to help Austria-Hungary, so it declared war on Russia and France. Then Germany invaded Belgium. England and Japan couldn't stand by while Germany attacked their Russian and French allies, so they declared war on Germany. Driven by nationalism and alliances, and fueled by newly built-up weapons supplies, everyone was ready and able to fight. By the end of the year, the entire continent was at war.

4.



Australian infantry in the trenches

World War I brought a new style of warfare. In earlier wars, waves of army troops marched in lines, shooting at the enemy, while generals on horseback urged them onward. In contrast, during World War 1, rifles were being replaced with a new weapon: the machine gun. Although they were more powerful, they weren't very portable because of their weight. Soldiers dug trenches and waited,

ready to shoot at any enemy that came near. This new defensive style of warfare was called trench warfare. Life in the trenches was terrible for soldiers. They fought at all hours of the day and lived in constant fear of being shot. Even death brought no escape from the trenches. Leaving the trench to bury the dead proved too dangerous, so soldiers often fought surrounded by the corpses of their friends and brothers. For those who were lucky enough to survive, life in the trenches continued on for years.

5. World War I was an example of total war: when a war affects an entire country and all citizens must fight to help win the war. Even though people back at home were not suffering in trenches, the Great War deeply affected their lives. Governments on both sides of the war used propaganda to persuade their citizens that the fighting was necessary. They recruited everyone to help with the war effort. Women who had never been allowed to get jobs now worked in factories, making weapons. Families were allotted specific rations, or certain amounts of food and home goods, so that there would be enough food and materials to send to the boys at war. And finally, with so many dead young soldiers, everyone was grieving for their lost brothers, sons, husbands and friends.

Notes

Notes

Notes

6. US Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman put it best when he said, "War is hell." But new technology like machine guns, tanks and poison gas made the terror of war even more violent. During World War I, armies used planes and submarines as weapons for the first time. Perhaps even more violent was the development and use of new chemical weapons, leading World War I to be called the "chemist's war." Most of these were poisonous gases shot via large artillery shells that weren't designed to kill the enemy, but to make him sick and unable to fight. Probably the most famous gas of World War I was mustard gas, which the Germans invented. When a person came in contact with this gas, their eyes would become very sore. Then they'd vomit. Then they'd bleed internally and externally. Then they'd hardly be able to breathe.

Notes

7. Up until 1917, the United States was neutral in the war. This meant that they hadn't taken a side and were not fighting. In fact, the Americans actually had been making a lot of money selling weapons to both sides. In 1917, though, the German U-boats sank several American ships in hopes of cutting off supplies to the British and French. This decision went very wrong for the Germans. The United States declared war on Germany in April 1917. With support from American troops and supplies, the tide began to turn, and the Allied Powers began to win the war.

Notes

8. By the fall of 1918, the Central Powers knew that they could not win. On November 11, 1918, the two sides reached an armistice, which means that they agreed to stop fighting. Even though the fighting stopped on November 11, the war did not technically end until the Allied Powers and Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The treaty changed the map of Europe: Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were broken apart into the new countries of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Poland and others.

Notes

The most dramatic part of the treaty related to Germany. Even though there were many causes of the war, Germany was forced to take complete responsibility for all of the destruction and casualties -- all 10 million deaths of soldiers and 10 million deaths of civilians. Some of Germany's land was given to neighboring countries, and the Germans were made to pay an extremely large debt (about \$442 billion in modern dollars). Some historians argue that the harshness of the treaty crippled Germany and ultimately helped cause the conditions that allowed Hitler to rise to power.