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## LESSON 9

# THE 20TH CENTURY: THE AGE OF TOTAL WAR (I)-- THE CHARACTER OF WORLD WAR I

*Losses sustained in the war were unprecedented. In approximate figures of military battle deaths, Germany lost more than 1.8 million, Russia 1.7 million, France 1.3 million, Austria-Hungary 922,000, Italy 460,000, the United States 50,000, Bulgaria 75,000. Statistics for the British Empire included Britain 888,000, Canada 65,000, Australia 62,000, New Zealand 18,000, India, 72,000, and South Africa 9,300. Except for India and South Africa, these figures were approximately 50% greater than for the Second World War, and in Britain's case 230 per cent greater.... Numbers of wounded always exceeded those of dead by between two and four to one.*

--Philip J. Haythornthwaite  
*The World War One Source Book* (1992)

## Introduction

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<b>Purpose</b>	This lesson introduces you to the causes, character, and outcome of World War I.
<b>Why Study WW I?</b>	You need to study World War I because few modern conflicts have had the far reaching impact on nation-states and post-war events than has World War I.
<b>Relationship to Other Instruction</b>	This lesson <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Focuses on matters central to the evolution of modern warfare in the early part of the 20th century</li><li>• Sets the stage for lesson 10, "The 20th Century: The Age of Total War (II)--The Character of World War II"</li></ul>
<b>Study Time</b>	This lesson, including the issues for consideration, will require 2.5 hours of study.

## Educational Objective

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**World War I**      Comprehend the causes, character, and outcome of World War I, the first of the great world struggles of the 20th century. [JPME Areas 3d, e3, and 5a]

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**JPME Areas/**      3/d/0.5  
**Objectives/Hours** 3/e/0.5  
**(accounting data)** 5/a/0.5

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# Historical Background

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## Overview

The First World War was the first major conflict in Europe since the Napoleonic Wars, nearly a century earlier. This war shattered the century-long period of relative peace between the major European powers established by the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The war turned out to be far more costly, both in terms of lives (as seen in the quote on the first page of this lesson) and national treasure, than any of the combatant nations ever could have imagined.

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## Causes of World War I

There were a variety of factors that led to the advent of the First World War: rising nationalism, economic competition, disputes regarding the colonial empires of the major European powers, a military “arms race” (reflected best in the race to build *dreadnaughts*, or battleships), and a complex system of treaties and alliances that were designed to ensure that a **balance of power**--the one that had been maintained for nearly a century--continued to exist on the European continent.

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## System of Alliances

War broke out in Europe in 1914, when coupled with the increased lethality of the mass of weapons and munitions that could be produced by fully-industrialized nations, it was the very effectiveness of this balance of power system - pitting two European alliances of roughly equal military strength and national resources - that contributed significantly to both the length of the war and the immense carnage that it wrought. The two alliances were the Triple Entente (Britain, France, and Russia) and the Triple Alliance (Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire).

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## World War I Fronts

The war began with movement. The governments and their General Staffs of all the major warring continental powers executed pre-war mobilization and operational plans. Later it became a war of stalemates--characterized by trench warfare--on the Western and Italian fronts and one of continuing movement on the Eastern front.

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## Historical Background, Continued

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### **Expanding Government Controls: Propaganda**

In ways that would have surprised Clausewitz, traditional governments increased centralized control over their societies, economies, and cultures to a degree that would have been thought impossible in the years just before the conflict. War aims expanded in ways that ultimately prevented a settlement.

- Foes became dehumanized and were given stereotyped images for popular consumption. Huns, the destroyers of culture, was one of many derogatory terms applied to the Germans.
- On the other hand, the Allied Victory Medal was awarded to all soldiers of the victorious powers with the words: *The Great War for Civilization*.

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### **Governments and the Economy**

To support the massive logistical requirements of the warring armies, European governments--those of the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance--took steps to effect much greater control over their economies.

Especially on the Western front, the national economies of the warring sides were hard pressed to manufacture and deliver enough artillery shells; their armies used them up more quickly in enormous artillery barrages than they could be made.

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### **Results of the War**

When the U.S. and the Triple Entente eventually won this most bloody and terrible war, it imposed a harsh peace on the losing side (especially Germany) at the Treaty of Versailles. Germany lost its colonies and some of its territory, while the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were dismantled in their entirety.

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## Required Readings

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*European Armies and the Conduct of War* Strachan, Hew. "First World War." *European Armies and the Conduct of War*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1983, pp. 130 to 149. (Note: Reading total includes three full page maps.) This chapter is a detailed, in-depth analysis of World War I tactical problems leading up to the first great battles of attrition which eventually destroyed Germany.

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*Makers of Modern Strategy* Howard, Michael. "Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914," *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, edited by Peter Paret. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 510 to 526. With the increased lethality of weapons, military experts debated the relative changing human costs of the offense and defense in terms of lives, and also, morale. Find out how this debate was resolved by General Joffre, Chief of the French General Staff.

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## For Further Study

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### Supplemental Readings

The readings listed are **not** required. They are provided as recommended sources of additional information about topics in this lesson that may interest you. They will increase your knowledge and augment your understanding of this lesson.

- Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York: Touchstone (1994). Read the following:
  - Chapter 2, "The Hinge: Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson," pp. 29 to 55.
  - Chapter 8, "Into the Vortex: The Military Doomsday Machine," pp. 201 to 217.
  - Moran, Daniel. *The Fog of Peace: The Military Dimensions of the Concert of Europe*. Carlisle, PA: U. S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1995.
  - Turner, L. C. F. "The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan." *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914*, edited by Paul Kennedy. London: Allen & Unwin, 1979.
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## Issues for Consideration

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**Conditions for WWI**      What were the conditions leading up to World War I?

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**Causes**      What were the causes of World War I?

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**Continuation of the War**      At the political level, why did the powers continue to engage in this costly conflict?

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**Evolution**      Once the war started, how could the leaders of the European powers have prevented it from evolving into a self-destructive bloodbath? Who finally won the way?

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