A hundred years ago, at the dawn of what promised to be an age of cultural and political enlightenment, Europe erupted into the deadliest and most wasteful military conflict the world had ever known. By the war's end in 1918, more than ten million combatants would die on the battlefield, another twenty million from disease. For many of the survivors, including the millions with permanent disabilities, World War I marked a loss of faith in civilization and technological progress. Ernest Hemingway, who drove ambulances in Italy, called it “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery that has ever taken place on earth.” Others saw the conflict as an omen for a new future of mechanized slaughter—a time, in novelist John Dos Passos’ words, when soldiers were reduced to “cogs in the great slow-moving Juggernaut of armies.”

Until recently, U.S. memories of the twentieth century’s first world war have been obscured by nostalgia for “The Good War,” Studs Terkel’s ironic nickname for World War II. For those raised on the cinema spectacles of Audie Murphy and John Wayne, where battles are bloodless and the “good guys” always win, World War I appears ugly and confusing—it’s results too fleeting, its casualties too shocking, its battles too brutal to merit easy commemoration.
Even the war’s name was—and remains—contested. In September 1914, German philosopher Ernst Haeckl deemed the conflict the “First World War,” a reference to his belief that no previous war could match its global scope. “The Great War,” a label especially popular in Britain, appeared in print a month later, while “World War I” did not gain popularity until after 1939, when it came to be used as a corollary to World War II. In his April 1917 war declaration, Woodrow Wilson described the conflict as a war to make the world “safe for democracy,” a phrase that would be mocked throughout the postwar period, as would the even more utopian formulation, the “war to end all wars.” Most combatants simply preferred “the war”—a term as nondescript and unromantic as the battlefield itself.

Empire, Alliance, Assassination—War!

Even today, unraveling the spiderweb of treaties and national ambitions that led to World War I is daunting. At its heart, World War I was an imperial conflict, the product of Europeans’ decades-long contest for wealth, territory, and colonial power. Yet, to the untrained eye, the chronology of the Great War’s origins appears little more than a random list of national resentments and strategic alliances (Austria-Hungary and Germany; France and Russia; Great Britain and Belgium). Standard accounts of World War I often begin on June 28, 1914, when radical Serbian nationalists assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, on the streets of Sarajevo. Within little more than two months, the repercussions of Ferdinand’s death would set much of Europe aflame. Eager to consolidate control over the Balkans, Austria-Hungary sent Serbia a ten-point ultimatum effectively blaming the royal government for the crime. Although the Serbian response conceded nearly all of Austria-Hungary’s demands, the Empire—egged on by their German allies—declared war on Serbia on July 28.

The dominoes quickly began to fall as more and more nations were pulled into the conflict. The first was Serbia’s ally, Czarist Russia, which began to mobilize its defensive forces in anticipation of future attack. Looking for an excuse to expand its military influence, Germany interpreted the Russian maneuvers as a casus belli (“justification for war”). On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia; two days later, it declared war on France, which was obligated by treaty to come to Russia’s defense. On August 4, Britain along with its colonies and dominions abroad (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India) entered the fray, bound to support neutral Belgium, which had been invaded by Germany. Other nations followed. In late August, Japan joined the war on the side of Great Britain. Two months after that, the Ottoman Empire, under pressure by Germany and eager to regain recent territorial losses, suddenly attacked Russian ships in the Black Sea. Meanwhile, Italy—which had declared a Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1881—managed to sit on the sidelines until May 1915, when it signed a secret treaty with the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France, and Russia.

From their vantage point an ocean away, Americans watched the fighting unfold with a mixture of shock and incomprehension. None of it made sense. The era of “great wars” was supposed to be over (in 1911, historian G. P. Gooch predicted that war between “civilized nations” would soon be “as antiquated as a duel”), and few Americans could comprehend how the death of an obscure central European monarch—singled out as the primary catalyst for the conflict—justified the annihilation of European youth. Woodrow Wilson, upon hearing of the German invasion of Belgium, cautioned American citizens to stay neutral. In his words, the Great War was “a distant event, terrible and tragic, but one which does not concern us closely.”

Home by Christmas

In August 1914, when the Great War began, many in Europe predicted that fighting would be over by Christmas. At a combined strength of more than six million men, both the Allies (Great Britain, France, Italy, Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire) were confident of rapid victory. Germany’s ambitious offensive strategy was to avoid a prolonged, two-front war by defeating the French forces within six weeks, thus freeing its troops for an all-out assault on Russia. If everything went to plan, boasted Kaiser Wilhelm, the Germans would have “Paris for lunch, Saint Petersburg for dinner.” And, at first, Wilhelm and his military cohorts had reason for optimism.

With devastating efficiency, German armies swept through...
the boggy fields of southwestern Belgium, waging ferocious battles against French and Belgian armies before smashing through British defenses at the Battle of Mons near the French border. However, Germany's timetable quickly fell apart. In early September, advancing German troops were halted by Franco-British forces near the Marne River, twenty-five miles outside of Paris. Over the next month and a half, German and Franco-British armies maneuvered northwest, toward the English Channel, as both sides struggled to outflank the other and win a strategic advantage.

In a move of desperation, German forces tried to restart their offensive near the Belgian town of Ypres, where tens of thousands of reservists and young volunteers (many of whom were enthusiastic students just a few months earlier) were cut down by the British line of fire. Known in Germany as the Kindermord bei Ypern (“Massacre of the Innocents at Ypres”), the First Battle of Ypres signaled the end of mobile warfare. As winter approached, both sides began to dig in along the Western Front, gouging out a 475-mile-long network of trenches, barbed wire, and redoubts stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss Alps. For three years, both sides tried—and failed—to gain advantage. If the definition of insanity, to paraphrase the old cliché, is to do the same thing over and over and expect a different result, World War I elevated mass lunacy to a global scale. Throughout 1915, 1916, and 1917, German forces flung themselves at Allied dugouts, only to be beaten back by a hail of fire and metal. Then the Allies would have their turn—and the cycle would start again. Winston Churchill, who served as an officer on the Western Front, lamented, “The War was decided in the first twenty days of fighting, and all that happened afterwards consisted in battles which, however formidable and devastating, were but desperate and vain appeals against the decision of Fate.”

As the war dragged on, both sides sought technological solutions to break the impasse. Initially used for reconnaissance, airplanes became powerful weapons in their own right. World War I introduced the aerial “dogfight” to modern warfare—and along with it the romantic image of the combat fighter ace (the proverbial “knight of the sky,” whose thrilling duels were celebrated as the last vestiges of martial chivalry). At the same time, World War I spawned the bluntest of military instruments, the tank—a multi-ton armored vehicle designed to traverse the muddy terrain of No Man's Land on caterpillar tracks. To the disappointment of military strategists, tanks failed to transform the conflict into a war of mobility (many became stuck in the mud and crews frequently suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning). Still, they confirmed one of modern war's fundamental truths: that human flesh is feeble armor against the explosive power of machines.

If the warring parties retained any pretense about “civilized” fighting, all of that went out the window with the introduction of poison gas. On April 22, 1915, German forces released a greenish-yellow cloud of chlorine vapor against French Caribbean troops stationed near Ypres. (In the earliest attacks, Germans discharged gas from cylinders installed in the trenches, relying upon favorable winds to disperse the fumes; yet both sides quickly turned to trench mortars and high-explosive shells as a more effective means of delivery.) Victims of chlorine gas attacks fell into fits of violent coughing and nausea; gasping for breath, some died within minutes while others suffered for days before asphyxiating. Introduced in late 1915, phosgene was deadlier still, often killing those exposed to the gas within forty-eight hours. Most feared of all was mustard gas, an oily liquid named for its noxious odor. Dispersed by bursting shells, mustard gas blistered men's skin and eyes and, when inhaled, left casualties susceptible to tuberculosis and fatal infections.

Despite such technological “advances,” the strategy behind most World War I battles would have been familiar to generals a hundred years earlier: a sustained artillery barrage followed by waves of men and gunfire. In the summer of 1916, British and French armies spearheaded what they predicted would be the break-through battle of the war—a massive infantry assault near the River Somme in northern France. For eight days, British artillery bombarded the German front lines to clear a path for the offensive. On the morning of July 1, 1916, more than 100,000 British soldiers stumbled over their parapets and began a slow
march toward the German trenches. Within seconds the fatal flaw of the British plan was apparent. Secure in their concrete-fortified bunkers, German forces had survived the shelling and unleashed a torrent of bullets on the approaching “Tommies” (slang for British soldiers). It was a massacre. Roughly 60,000 British troops were killed or wounded on the first day, many within the opening minutes of the attack. In some cases, German machine gunners were so disgusted by the carnage that they stopped firing altogether. Four and a half months later, when the Battle of the Somme was finally over, the combined British, French, and German casualties numbered more than 1.2 million.

Other campaigns produced similar results. In the ten-month Battle of Verdun in northeastern France (February-December 1916), the combined German and French casualties exceeded those of the entire American Civil War. During the Battle of Passchendaele in Flemish Belgium (July-November 1917), British, Canadian, and other Allied forces waged a three-month campaign to capture a strategically-located ridge from German forces. At the battle’s end, hundreds of thousands were dead and the ancient city of Ypres lay in ruins—all to win a few miles of territory. It was the third major battle over the same terrain in three years.

Overture to “Over There”

All the while, the Great War’s escalating violence crept ever closer to U.S. shores. Beginning in 1914, both Great Britain and Germany launched a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare designed to blockade the North Atlantic and cut off much-needed supplies. All enemy vessels were fair game for attack; even ships from “neutral” countries could not necessarily expect safe passage. (Very often, the fog of war—quite literally—made it tough to distinguish friend from foe.) In May 1915, a German U-boat torpedoed the Cunard ocean liner Lusitania off the coast of Ireland. Overburdened with tons of undeclared munitions, the ship exploded upon impact, sinking in only a matter of minutes. Nearly 1,200 passengers and crew members drowned, among them 128 Americans. These were not the first U.S. casualties in the Great War (American volunteers had been serving under British, French, and Canadian command from the very start). Still, many Americans expressed outrage at what they considered a threat to U.S. sovereignty and a gross violation of maritime law. Although Germany imposed some limitations on its submarine policy, super-nationalists such as former president Theodore Roosevelt saw the Lusitania attack as a harbinger of coming bloodshed—and a reason why Americans should ready themselves to fight.

Despite such warnings, the vast majority of Americans wanted no part in the Great War. The killing fields of the Civil War were still in living memory, and isolationist roots ran deep, particularly in the South and Midwest where farmers and old-guard populists rankled at the thought of fighting on European soil. Pacifists argued that no cause justified the indiscriminate bloodletting of modern warfare, while socialists—at the time, a potent force in American politics—saw the war as a grand scheme to sell arms and drain the blood of the working class. Feminists worried that hyper-masculine “war fever” would sap public support for their suffrage campaigns. For many recent immigrants, Europe’s so-called “war for civilization” was another reminder of what they had fled the Old World to escape. In 1915, the antiwar song “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” was a national hit and Woodrow Wilson was reelected the following year on the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War.”

Such sentiments never disappeared entirely. By early 1917, however, U.S. intervention seemed increasingly inevitable. After a lengthy congressional debate, the United States officially entered

For all the waste of life, fighting in Europe remained a virtual stalemate, where progress was measured in yards—and body counts.
the war on April 6. Was the nation prepared to fight? The short answer was no. At 5,791 officers, 121,797 enlisted men, and 167,768 National Guardsmen, the military was undermanned and ill-equipped to fight a modern war an ocean away, much less come together as a cohesive force. Some troops were stationed along the Mexican border, the scene of a failed expedition to capture outlaw-revolutionary Pancho Villa. The National Guard was spread out across the country with disorganized units still under state jurisdiction.

The federal government had not attempted a national draft since the Civil War. Critics warned that reintroducing one now would be a stain on the United States’ democratic ideals. Even so, Woodrow Wilson believed that only a conscripted army could provide the manpower needed for the long fight ahead, and on May 18, 1917, he signed the Selective Service Act into law. More than nine million American men between the ages of 21 and 31 registered for the draft on the first day. After years of urging a hands-off policy, Wilson quickly set to work bolstering public support and congressional funding for the war effort. Eager to put muscle behind the war message, he established the Committee on Public Information, a federal agency devoted to spreading “affirmative propaganda” and censoring anything deemed a threat to public morale. Wilson also pushed for passage of the Espionage (1917) and Sedition Acts (1918) to stifle political dissent. By November 1918, four million Americans were in uniform, half of them serving overseas.

Beyond the daunting task of mobilizing, housing, equipping, and training an army in wartime, U.S. war planners faced an additional challenge: the poor health of recruits. Nearly a third of the men were rejected as unfit for service, and those who made the final cut were hardly the barrel-chested farm boys that recruiters were hoping for. The average American soldier stood only five feet seven inches tall and weighed in at a meager 142 pounds. Over half of the men enlisted with some form of “physical defect,” and some 324,000 soldiers were discharged for health reasons early in their training.

“The Yanks Are Coming”

Although advance units of recruits began arriving in France as early as June 1917, it would be nearly a year before the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was ready for battle. Allied commanders complained that the United States was intentionally dragging its feet, but the AEF’s new leader, John J. “Black Jack” Pershing—a decorated veteran of the Spanish-American War—resisted Allied calls for fresh cannon fodder. Upon arrival, most “doughboys”—the nickname given to U.S. soldiers—were raw and undisciplined (some had yet to fire a weapon with live ammunition). The typical enlistee spent his first few months training under British and French command. Later on, his unit would transfer to a “quiet” sector where it could slowly acclimate to wartime life. By January 1918, some 175,000 Americans were serving overseas; over the next four months, nearly a million more would disembark for European shores.

The United States’ role in active combat began in the late spring of 1918, when the German army launched a massive offensive to crush the war-weary Allies, capture Paris, and end the war. American forces were expected to help repulse the German assault and fill gaps in the front line, already stretched thin because of sickness, mutiny, and attrition. On May 28, American troops won an early (albeit largely symbolic) victory by recapturing the German-held village of Cantigny in northern France. A few days later, U.S. Marines assaulted German positions at Belleau Wood, a nearly impenetrable thicket of trees, boulders, and undergrowth bordered by fields of red poppies and wheat. Little more than a square mile in area, the former hunting reserve held three lines of German trenches, along with machine-gun nests, mines, and dense belts of barbed wire.

Newspapers at home reported a quick victory, but for three weeks, wave upon wave of untested Marines poured into the forest, only to be cut down in a spray of bullets. Nearby hospitals were swamped with injured troops. In one five-day period, Evacuation Hospital No. 6 at Juilly, which was meant to house only 250 beds, received over 2,000 fresh casualties. At one point, the fighting was so bloody that withdrawing French armies urged the Americans to pull back. U.S. Captain Lloyd Williams’ response would go down in Marine Corps legend: “Retreat? Hell, we just got here.” For the Marines, clearing Belleau Wood was more than a military assignment; it was a chance to prove their martial valor to the Allies and Germans alike. Their triumph came at a steep price. By the battle’s end, more than 9,500 Marines were wounded, killed, or missing in action.

Having thwarted the German threat to the French capital in mid-July, Allied forces, including more than 310,000 Americans serving under French command, countered with an offensive of their own. The Second Battle of the Marne is often viewed as the turning point of the war, after which the Central Powers remained on the defensive. According to historian Robert H. Zieger, by the summer of 1918, “more than 30,000 American soldiers, most of
them in infantry and machine gun battalions, were debarking daily at the French ports, sowing defeatism among the enemy as much by their sheer numbers as by the battlefield prowess they might display.” On September 12-16, the first all-American field army—finally unified under Pershing’s command—led a successful campaign to flatten the German salient at Saint-Mihiel. Flushed with victory, Pershing and other American generals believed that well-entrenched German troops were no match for the battle-hungry Americans.

Nevertheless, in the rugged wilderness of northeastern France, U.S. forces once again learned a hard lesson about the advantages that nature and modern weaponry lend to the defense. The Meuse-Argonne campaign (September 26-November 11, 1918) was the largest American operation of the war and the most dangerous to U.S. doughboys. Quickly bogged down by torrential rains, dislodged trees, and a band of man-made defenses thirteen miles deep, the AEF won as little as a few hundred yards per day.

**Life in the Trenches**

Even in quiet sectors, life in the trenches was a special kind of hell. Rain fell in torrents, and soldiers ate, slept, fought, and died amidst a sea of stinking mud. James Norman Hall, author of the best-selling memoir *Kitchener’s Mob: The Adventures of an American in the British Army* (1916), wrote:

> [W]e could not get away from the sight of the mangled bodies of our comrades. Arms and legs stuck out of the wreckage, and on every side we saw distorted human faces, the faces of men we had known, with whom we had lived and shared hardships and dangers for months past…. One thinks of the human body as inviolate, a beautiful and sacred thing. The sight of it dismembered or disemboweled, trampled in the bottom of a trench, smeared with blood and filth, is so revolting as to be hardly endurable.

Body lice infested soldiers’ clothes and hair, and black rats swarmed the trenches by the millions, contaminating food supplies and biting men while they slept. Fertilized by decaying bodies, the soil oozed with gas-forming anaerobic bacteria, which easily entered traumatized tissue in the wounded, producing a deadly infection known as gas gangrene. Hemmed in by barbed wire, sometimes miles thick, soldiers’ lives vacillated between tedium and terror. Night patrols crept out into No Man’s Land, the nightmare landscape between opposing trenches, but most days were spent hunkered down trying to stave off boredom and disease.

Worst of all was the constant threat of immediate and impersonal death. Snipers, sometimes concealed in artificial trees, picked off soldiers at random. Artillery barrages went on for days on end, some designed to do little more than rattle the enemy’s psyches. Historian John Ellis calculates that British forces fired off more than 170 million shells over the course of the war, including a million during a single day in September 1917. The noise, recalled one French infantry sergeant, was like a body blow.

> It is as if one were tied tight to a post and threatened by a fellow swinging a sledgehammer. Now the hammer is swung back for the blow; now it whirls forward, till, just missing your skull, it sends the splinters flying from the post once more. This is exactly what it feels like to be exposed to heavy shelling.

Eventually, all soldiers on the Western Front began to break down from the strain. Identified at the time as “shell shock,” psychiatric casualties were epidemic on all sides. Men who had behaved courageously under fire began to twitch uncontrollably, whimper nonsense, or scream in terror. Journalist Philip Gibbs described one traumatized boy standing outside a dugout.

> His steel hat was at the back of his head, and his mouth slobbered, and two comrades could not hold him still. These badly shell-shocked boys clawed their mouths ceaselessly. It was a common, dreadful action. Others sat in the field hospitals in a state of coma, dazed, as though deaf, and actually dumb.

**Beyond the Western Front**

Despite its name, the popular image of World War I is surprisingly selective. Media representations of the conflict—from *All Quiet on the Western Front* to Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* cartoons (Snoopy’s alter-ego as the WWI Flying Ace was introduced in 1965 to do battle with the Red Baron)—tend to focus on the Western Front. Yet World War I truly lived up to its global moniker. Fighting extended to East Asia, the South Pacific, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula, the setting of the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia*. Along the Eastern Front, which ran between the Baltic Sea in the north and the Black Sea in the south, German, Austro-Hungarian, and Bulgarian forces fought pitched battles against Russian imperial armies until early 1918, when the newly-formed Bolshevik government signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers. Elsewhere, over a million colonial troops from France and Great Britain saw active combat, and thousands of others took up arms in the name of national liberation.

One of the Great War’s most important campaigns took place in the Dardanelles, a narrow strait in northwestern Turkey that connected the Mediterranean to the Russian Empire. In February 1915, British and French naval forces attempted to break the Ottoman blockade of the strait but failed because of artillery and mines. On April 25, an amphibious force of British, French colonial, and Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) troops landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula on the northern bank of the Dardanelles. Two thousand Australians were killed...
or wounded on the first day alone. Over the next eight and a half months, Allied forces were pushed back repeatedly—with mounting casualties on both sides. By the time the Allies evacuated in January 1916, more than 100,000 men were dead, including some 56,000 Ottoman troops and 11,400 Anzacs.

Known in Turkey as the Battle of Çanakkale, the victory at Gallipoli was a defining moment in Turkish nationalism. Likewise, in the minds of many modern Australians and New Zealanders, Gallipoli was World War I. In both countries, April 25, Anzac Day, remains the most celebrated military holiday of the year. To this day, generations of children are taught—through public rituals, parades, and the consumption of Anzac biscuits—to commemorate those who died on Turkish shores.

The Long Shadow of the Great War

On November 1, 1918, U.S. forces, using a combination of artillery bombardments, gas attacks, and aerial bombing, renewed their offensive with some success, but they would not get a chance to follow up on their achievements. More than four years after invading Belgium, the German army lacked the supplies and fresh men to sustain its war effort. Amidst political upheaval at home, the German government agreed to a ceasefire, which commenced on November 11. In five and a half months of sustained action, 1.3 million American soldiers, Marines, airmen, and sailors had served in the combat zone; at the war’s end, roughly a quarter of these men were missing, captured, wounded, or dead.

A century later, World War I appears little more than a four-year bloodbath. It was not a war to make the world safe for democracy, nor was it a war to end all war. The Ottoman Empire was devastated; but within a generation, most of the conflict’s major players—Germany, Britain, France, Italy, the United States—were back to fight all over again, this time with even more disastrous results.

The consequences of the Great War resonate to this day. The war sparked revolutions across the globe and redrew the political map from Eastern Europe to the Pacific. Much of the contemporary political discord in the Middle East, including the ongoing conflicts in Palestine and Iraq, stems directly from false promises made at the end of World War I. Europe, once the undisputed seat of global power, never fully recovered its previous stature after the Great War, though it would take another global conflict to fully knock it from its imperial pedestal. The United States suffered its own traumas: more than 116,000 dead (more than half from disease); 224,000 wounded; and countless more suffering the lingering effects of shell shock and battlefield collapse. Still, compared to their European counterparts—with their bombarded landscapes, ruined cities, shattered economies, and millions dead—Americans emerged from the Great War relatively unscathed. And, over the next half century, the United States began to fill the power vacuum left behind by World War I and cement its position as one of the world’s reigning superpowers.

Ultimately, the Great War stands as a further reminder—as if another were needed—of modern nations’ willingness to abandon all sense of rationality and moderation on the battlefield. Having perfected the techniques of mass slaughter in the colonies, Europeans turned the arsenal of genocide—automatic weaponry, aerial bombing, poison gas—on themselves, rendering their claims of civilization tenuous at best. The mechanization of death in World War I sowed the seeds for future killing programs on an even more horrific scale—from the extermination camps of the Holocaust to the “strategic bombings” of Tokyo and Dresden in World War II.

In these and many other ways, the Great War created the world in which we live—and reflected how easily that world might end.

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EXTRA! READ | THINK | TALK | LINK

➤ The Great War, PBS. Companion website for the documentary series “The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century.” Includes WWI history, scholar commentaries, maps, timelines, and audio clips. pbs.org/greatwar

➤ Europe Plunges into War, The Map as History. Short audio and animated map illustrate the history, nations, and locations of events that led to world war. the-map-as-history.com (scroll down the home page and click on World War I, then select Europe Plunges into War)

➤ Digital History, University of Houston. History of WWI and America’s involvement, including period documents and speeches, popular music, film trailers, images, and links to other resources. digitalhistory.uh.edu

Next up: L-O-V-E | Winter 2015

With Valentine’s Day and romance in the air, we’ll look at match-making, romance novels, the history of valentines, women’s love poetry, what the movies tell us about kissing, and sports! Just some of the things that stir our passions.