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WORLD WAR I

I N C O L O R

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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THE GLOBAL WAR

Although the bloodiest fighting occurred in and around Europe, World War I reached every corner of the world. This brief outline describes the conflict beyond the eastern and western fronts.

Africa

Throughout the war, the European powers relied on their African territories not only for rubber, cotton, and other raw materials, but also for manpower. Africans dug trenches, loaded and unloaded cargo, and repaired roads. France even formed African battalions and sent them into the trenches to fight; Germany used local troops in Africa but did not send them to Europe.

Africa had strategic importance as well. Germany operated radio towers in Togoland (now Togo) and German South West Africa (modern-day Namibia), crucial for shipping and naval communications in the south Atlantic. However, the Allies stripped the Germans of their African resources relatively fast. Separate offensives took Togoland in 1914, German South West Africa in 1915, and Cameroon in 1916.

German East Africa (comprising present-day Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania) proved more stubborn. Under command of the brilliant Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, German-trained African forces conducted raids into British East Africa (Kenya) and pestered the Royal Navy offshore. They crushed an attempted invasion by a large force of British-led Indian troops at the port of Tanga in 1914. After two years of fighting, the war in East Africa turned particularly brutal and destructive.



Suffering from hunger and disease, both sides plundered villages and burned fields to deprive the enemy of food. The Allies eventually got reinforcements from India and other parts of Africa and managed to drive Lettow-Vorbeck into Zambia. He surrendered two weeks after the European Armistice.

Middle East

During WWI, oil became a strategic resource for the first time in history. Tanks, trucks, and other internal-combustion machines were replacing horses. Britain had also begun to upgrade its coal-powered fleet with speedier, oil-fueled ships. This need for oil—plus fear of uprisings among Muslim populations in European colonies, incited by the Ottoman Empire—made the Middle East a hot spot.



Early in the war, British and Indian troops successfully defended the Suez Canal and made significant advances into Mesopotamia, driving up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from the port of Basra. Sickness and lack of supplies eventually forced them to withdraw to the southern town of Kut, where they succumbed to an Ottoman siege in the spring of 1916. More than 10,000 soldiers were captured—the largest surrender of British forces in history up to that time. Meanwhile, an attempted Ottoman invasion of the Russian Caucasus during winter failed spectacularly; in the aftermath, frustrated Ottomans massacred thousands of ethnic Armenians in the southern Caucasus and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Recovering from the disaster at Kut, British and Indian forces captured Baghdad in March 1917 and advanced just short of the northern oil fields. To the west, the Brits under Gen. Edmund Allenby pushed into Palestine from Egypt, aided by Arab cavalry and camelry. In the final weeks of the war, they captured the Syrian capital of Damascus. On the Arabian Peninsula, Arab troops with hopes of independence fought against the Turks; they were supplied with British equipment and advised by officers such as T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia).

Asia and the Pacific

At the onset of the war, Germany controlled a few ports along the Chinese coast and maintained territories among the Pacific Islands, most notably German New Guinea and Western Samoa—significant holdings, but not nearly as extensive or strategically important as its African colonies. Japan, however, coveted Germany's Chinese ports. Fresh from its victory in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), Japan saw WWI as an opportunity to further expand its power in the region and joined the Allies in late August 1914.



The Imperial Japanese Navy quickly overwhelmed Germany's fleet at Tsingtao in November 1914, but the German commander had already sent his cruisers to sea. One German ship harassed shipping in the Indian Ocean and attacked Madras (now Chennai) before the Australians sank it. Meanwhile, Australian forces took German New Guinea, New Zealanders secured Western Samoa, and the Japanese invaded Palau and the Caroline, Marshall, and Mariana Islands.

Wracked by political upheaval and a revolution, China stayed out of the war until 1917, when it joined the Allied side. Britain and France desperately wanted Chinese labor to free up more of their troops for fighting. For its part, China wanted a place at the peace settlement in the hopes of curbing the territorial ambitions of its rival, Japan.

The Americas

At the onset of the war, most Latin American nations followed the lead of the United States and remained neutral. The war came to them nevertheless. Fleeing from the Japanese navy at Tsingtao, German admiral Maximilian Graf von Spee and several cruisers crossed the Pacific to the Chilean coast. There they engaged British warships, sinking two and inflicting the British navy's first defeat since the Napoleonic wars. Spee then rounded Cape Horn and headed for the Falklands, but a superior British fleet routed all but one ship, which was eventually captured off Chile in 1915.

In early 1917, Germany attempted to break Pan-American solidarity and persuade Mexico to attack the United States, proffering former Mexican territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. Although Mexico didn't bite, when the proposal became public, it outraged the American public and helped push the United States into the war. Mexico, however, persisted in its neutrality, along with much of Central and South America. Only Brazil, Cuba, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama, and Nicaragua formally threw in with the Allies.

Nonetheless, German U-boats patrolled North and South American waters throughout the conflict. In 1918, one even snuck into the Chesapeake Bay, laid mines off Delaware, and sank several ships along the East Coast before returning to Germany.

WOMEN AT WAR

In 1914, a popular poster posed this question to British women: "Is your best boy wearing khaki? . . . If your young man neglects his duty to King and Country, the time may come when he will neglect *you*." In response to such appeals, girls commonly presented white feathers—symbols of cowardice—to boys not in uniform. But as the war dragged on, women did far more than goad their men into service. Both at home and on the front, they contributed their sweat and blood to the conflict.

Women served most traditionally as nurses. Over 15,000 volunteered for the American Expeditionary Forces and the Red Cross, tending the wounded and dying under often deplorable conditions. By the war's end, 235 American nurses had died serving in Europe; 200 more had earned decorations for bravery. And they didn't serve alone: British forces included 38,000 female nurses and nurse's aides; France had 63,000; and in Germany, they numbered more than 90,000.



As casualties mounted and manpower diminished, the military turned to women to fill nontraditional roles. In 1917, Britain formed the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, in which volunteers not only served as clerks and typists, but also drove trucks, worked as mechanics, and maintained supply lines. The U.S. Navy began conferring military rank on female enlistees in 1917, and the marines accepted hundreds of female volunteers. But only the Russian troops saw combat against the Germans. During the Kerensky Offensive of July 1917, hundreds of female soldiers fought in the Battalion of Death—so named because its members carried cyanide capsules to swallow if they were captured.

Faced with a shortage of men on the home front, women made the biggest impact in the wartime labor force. Although generally paid less than men, they became the primary manufacturers of munitions in Europe. In France alone, women employed at munitions factories increased more than 40 fold from 1915 to 1917.

Many women entered the workforce out of patriotic duty. By 1918, 240,000 middle- and upper-class British women had joined the Women's Land Army, running farms and growing crops after German U-boats choked off food imports. For women lower on the socioeconomic scale, working in factories or on farms became a matter of survival. Those women who had formerly eked out a living as seamstresses and like menial tasks saw their jobs disappear during the war. Nearly 40 percent of women in the German textile industry at the start of the war ultimately transferred to positions in war-related industries.

The war brought enormous suffering to women on both sides, leaving millions widowed and impoverished. However, their wartime service and sacrifice also brought rewards. In 1918, Britain extended voting rights to women over 30 who owned property or held a university degree. (Ironically, in the immediate aftermath of the war, Parliament removed restrictions on women holding elective office while still denying many the right to vote.) British women had to wait until 1928 for voting rights equal to men's. On the other side of the Atlantic, Congress passed the 19th Amendment at President Wilson's urging less than a year after the Armistice. It became part of the Constitution in 1920, when the Tennessee legislature ratified it by a margin of one vote.

REVOLUTIONARY WEAPONRY

Besides massive machines like tanks, aircraft carriers, submarines, and fixed-wing fighter planes and bombers, other technology came of age in WWI and changed the nature of warfare forever. Barbed wire—originally developed for cattle ranches in the American West—slowed or stopped infantry offensives. Sophisticated rifles such as the German Mauser and the British Enfield were lighter, more powerful, and more accurate at longer range than previous eras could have imagined. And heavy, recoilless artillery could fire explosive shells repeatedly with no need for repositioning—raining death from greater distances with greater precision than ever before. Here are some of the smaller high-tech weapons and equipment that debuted in WWI.

Flamethrowers: “There was a sudden hissing sound, and a bright crimson glare over the crater turned the whole scene red. As I looked I saw three or four distinct jets of flame . . . [T]he effect was so stupefying that I was utterly unable for some moments to think correctly . . . Those who faced the flame attack were never seen again.” That’s how British Lt. G.V. Carey later described a skirmish at Hooge, Belgium, in July 1915—one of the first uses of flamethrowers by German troops.

Designed by German engineer Richard Fiedler in the early 1900s, the first flamethrowers shot oil through a thick rubber tube. Compressed gas provided the pressure, and a firing device ignited the oil stream at the nozzle. In large models, fat steel cylinders about half as tall as a man held enough fuel for less than a minute of continuous firing; they had a range of about 40 yards. Smaller, backpack-style units could shoot about 20 yards. Though fearsome, early flamethrowers were cumbersome and risky. A well-aimed bullet could pierce the tanks and engulf the operators in a fireball. The weapons’ short range also limited their usefulness in trench warfare.

Gas: The idea of using gas in warfare predated WWI by more than 60 years. During the Crimean War, the British considered dislodging Russian defenders at Sevastopol with sulfur fumes, but dismissed the tactic because “the effects were so horrible that no honorable combatant” could use such means. The 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions codified such objections in international law.

Nevertheless, fearing the Allies would use gas, the Germans developed artillery shells containing liquid chemicals that would disperse and gasify on impact. They first deployed xylyl bromide (a kind of tear gas) at Bolimów, Poland, on the eastern front in January 1915, but freezing temperatures rendered it ineffective and Russian troops hardly noticed. In April, they used chlorine gas on the western front against Allied troops at the second battle of Ypres.

Eventually, both sides resorted to the weapon, which evolved as the war went on. Phosgene replaced chlorine and was in turn replaced by mustard. Exposure formed blisters on the skin and caused the lungs to fill with fluid, leading to pneumonia-like suffocation. Countermeasures evolved too, from simple wet cloths held over the nose and mouth to fully protective helmets with respirators.

Gas proved tricky; a sudden wind shift could blow it back on its users. During WWI, the Germans used about 68,000 tons of gas-producing chemicals; the British and French, about 51,000 tons. Well over a million soldiers on both sides suffered exposure, with the Russian army incurring the most fatalities.

Electronic Communication: For the first time in history, electronics played a key role in combat during WWI. Although the British, U.S., and Japanese armies had used telephones during the latter part of the 19th century, the technology really came into its own by 1914. Both sides laid hundreds of miles of lines—either buried or strung on wooden poles—to

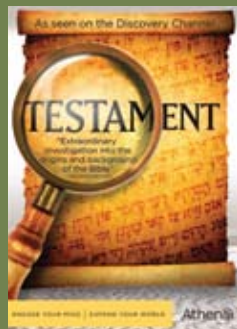
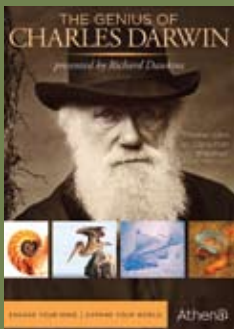
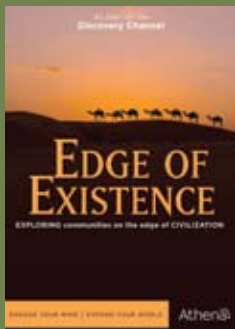
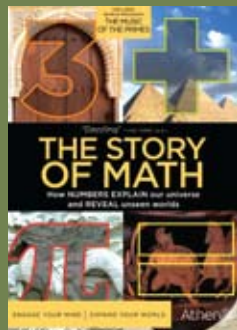
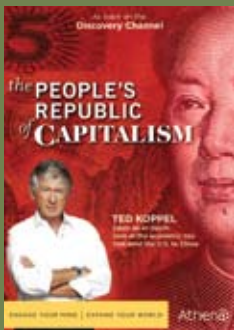
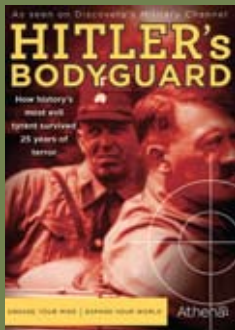
connect battalions at the front with their commanders by either voice or Morse code. Furious artillery barrages could decimate communications, however, and the military relied on runners, motorcyclists, trained dogs, and carrier pigeons as backups.

Radio communication for the infantry developed rapidly and became increasingly important as the war progressed. Early field radios were bulky and needed tall aerials, which made the operators easy targets for enemy fire. By 1917, wireless radio technology had improved enough to be installed on military aircraft. Still, radio transmissions were vulnerable to intercepts and required elaborate, time-consuming encoding and decoding.

Machine Guns: Hiram Maxim—an American inventor who emigrated to England—created the first truly successful machine gun in 1884. He hit on the idea of using the gun’s recoil and the powder’s gas discharge to eject spent cartridges and reload the empty chamber with fresh ammo fed on a belt. British forces first employed these heavy contraptions in Africa and Afghanistan during the 1890s, but they came into widespread use by both sides during WWI.

Capable of firing up to 600 rounds per minute for as long as operators kept feeding in ammo belts, Maxim-style machine guns could mow down attackers for hours on end and became ideal defensive weapons. But their weight (over 100 pounds) and two-man operation limited their use on the attack. By 1915, arms makers had developed lighter, handheld machine guns, such as the Lewis gun favored by the Brits. Weighing as little as 15 pounds, these weapons replaced cumbersome belts with easy-to-carry magazine clips for continuous firing.

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