

## World War I -- A Tragic Warfare Never Seen Before

Depending on your history books, most will say that World War I started with the assassination of Austrian-Hungarian heir Archduke Franz Ferdinand in July 1914. Let's just say that was the match that lit the powder keg that was Europe in the very early years of the 20th century.

Again, politics played a key role in starting modern warfare (sadly) as we know it. The German Empire was in bed (so to speak) with two other huge empires (the Austrian-Hungarian and the Ottoman), promising to back Austria-Hungary when it decided to invade the little country of Serbia. Germany decided on its own to invade Belgium, France, and Luxembourg.

At the end of the war the Allied Powers (France, the British Empire, Russia, the United States, Greece, etc) placed blame squarely on Germany, forcing the country to pay the equivalent of 442 billion dollars (in today's money) in reparations (much of which it borrowed from the United States).

The reparations Germany was forced to pay killed the country's economy, a factor that helped contribute to the [Third Reich](#) coming to power in the early 1930's.

It finally finished paying in October 2010, which it did so again after the Nazi Regime was ousted from power.

I'm sorry, I'm jumping the gun. There was a lot of politicking going on at time, as I said. But, as with most historians and history books they talk about the battles and those same politics. They don't usually talk about the cultural and human side of the conflict.

The Great War, as it was called prior to [World War II](#), was a new kind of conflict the world had never seen before. It was fought on the European, African, and Pacific stage on the land, on the sea, and for the first time the air.

World War I gave us probably the most famous name to come from this large-scale world conflict, the Red Baron. Whether Manfred Albrecht Freiherr von Richthofen was man or myth, his fight for the German Empire was legendary.

He was one of the most decorated pilots of all time, receiving the First and Second Class Iron Cross, as well as the Knights Cross, and the Red Eagle (that's not even the half of it). He shot down more than 80 aircraft, no small feat considering fixed-wing aircrafts and aerial battle were in its infancy.

FYI — he was buried with full military honors by his "enemies" in France, then moved with fanfare to a military cemetery in [Berlin](#); and moved yet again to be buried with his family in [Wiesbaden](#). Parts of his aircraft are on display in London and Australia.

This war was also the start of using submarines (in Germany they were called *U-Boote*) to sink military and other ships. The United States remained neutral until a U-boat sunk a passenger ship, killing 128 Americans onboard.

Submarines and red bi-planes weren't the only way things changed when millions of men went off to fight on foreign lands. Tanks and armored cars were used; and both sides employed the use of machine guns (leading to the creation of steel helmets) and chemical warfare ([Adolf Hitler](#) was wounded in a Mustard Gas attack while fighting in the war and caused the necessity for the gas mask). Trench warfare and the use of barbed wire was also another tactic used for fighting and defense.

Once the United States entered the war in 1917, it had a military strength of almost three million men, which was sending 10,000 troops to France daily. Germany realizing it was going to lose; did its best to save itself.

Not much was gained by this war for Germany, which lasted until November 11, 1918 — known as Armistice Day. But, the effects of this clash were felt for years. It also led to many changes in modern day culture; and the dissolution of four of the world's largest empires.

The biggest blow to the German Empire came with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. This simple piece of paper forever cemented Germany's role, humiliating this proud country in the process.

One stipulation of the Treaty was the cutting of Germany's military strength. They were never again to have more than 100,000 troops, nor was it to import or export weapons, have any submarines or armored vehicles of any kind.

Another stipulation was that Wilhelm II was to be tried as a war criminal; and the [Rhineland](#) was to be an occupied area for almost two decades. It also lost territory in northern Schleswig, the city of [Frankfurt](#), and its colonies.

With Germany's loss, the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburgs lost their empires. And thanks in part to the Russian Revolution (in 1917) the Romanovs lost their as well. The Ottoman Empire was gone, too.

With the fall of these giants, countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, and Finland became autonomous once again. It is believed that Victorian England ended with the Great War, and women (having entered the workforce with all the men gone to war) decided they wanted equality.

Men who were lucky enough to return home to their families suffered from "shell-shock," a term now called post traumatic stress disorder. Some 20 million men were injured in the four years of the war; and more than 5 million men (on both sides) suffered terribly in POW camps (2.5 million

were held by the Germans, almost 3 million held by the Russians, with the rest held by the British, French, and US troops).

Call it whatever you want, World War I was one of the most tragic loss of human life in history. Almost 10 million souls were lost to fighting (Germany lost more than 10 percent of its male population), not including the millions lost to the Flu pandemic in 1918 (killing 50 million people worldwide) and a Typhus outbreak (killing countless others).

Sadly, this “Great” War wasn’t the end of such a global conflict; nor did it stop ethnic cleansing programs like the Ottomans did to the Christians during the war. The next biggest world war became World War II; however, some believe it was just a continuation of the First World War.

I’m no historian or military expert, so I’ll leave it up to you and them to ponder that issue.