

A 1917 cartoon shows the German leader William II considering the U.S. flag looming on the horizon. ►



WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

To Fight or Not to Fight?

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, the United States decided to stay neutral. However, incidents like the senseless destruction of Louvain, a medieval university town in Belgium, by German troops turned American opinion against Germany.

“For two hours on Thursday night I was in what for six hundred years had been the city of Louvain. The Germans were burning it . . . the story . . . was told to us by German soldiers incoherent with excesses; and we could read it in the faces of the women and children being led to concentration camps and of the citizens on their way to be shot.”

—American journalist Richard Harding Davis, August 1914

From Neutrality to War

Objectives

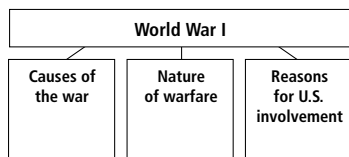
- Identify the causes of World War I.
- Describe the course and character of the war.
- Explain why the United States entered the conflict on the side of the Allies.

Terms and People

Alsace-Lorraine	casualty
militarism	contraband
Francis Ferdinand	U-boat
William II	<i>Lusitania</i>
Western Front	Zimmermann note

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Causes As you read, identify the causes of World War I, the conditions facing soldiers, and the reasons for U.S. involvement.



Why It Matters In 1914, nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and entangling alliances combined with other factors to lead the nations of Europe into a brutal war. The war quickly stretched around the globe. The United States remained neutral at first but ended up abandoning its long tradition of staying out of European conflicts. **Section Focus Question:** What caused World War I, and why did the United States enter the war?

What Caused World War I?

Until 1914, there had not been a large-scale European conflict for nearly one hundred years. However, bitter, deep-rooted problems simmered beneath the surface of polite diplomacy. Europe was sitting on a powder keg of nationalism, regional tensions, economic rivalries, imperial ambitions, and militarism.

Nationalism and Competition Heighten Tension Nationalism, or devotion to one's nation, kick-started international and domestic tension. In the late 1800s, many Europeans began to reject the earlier idea of a nation as a collection of different ethnic groups. Instead, they believed that a nation should express the nationalism of a single ethnic group. This belief evolved into an intense form of nationalism that heightened international rivalries. For example, France longed to avenge its humiliating defeat by a collection of German states in 1871 and regain **Alsace-Lorraine**, the territory it lost during that conflict. Nationalism also threatened minority groups within nation-states. If a country existed as the expression of “its people,” the majority ethnic group, where did ethnic minorities fit in?

The spread of the theory of Social Darwinism did not help soothe the competitive instinct. Social Darwinism applied biologist Charles Darwin's ideas of natural selection and "survival of the fittest" to human society. Social Darwinists believed that the best nation would come out ahead in the constant competition among countries.

Nationalism also destabilized old multinational empires such as Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. This was particularly true in the Balkan region of southeastern Europe. For example, when Serbia emerged as an independent nation in 1878, it challenged the nearby empire of Austria-Hungary in two ways: by trying to gain territory controlled by the empire, where Serbs lived, and by the example it offered to Austria-Hungary's diverse peoples.

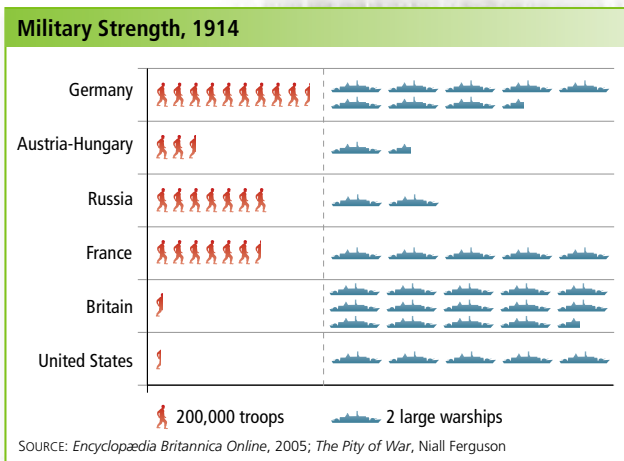
The nationalist sentiments of the period sometimes spilled over into the economic goals of each nation. Industrial output, trade, and the possession of an overseas empire were the yardsticks of wealth and greatness. The leading industrial nations competed for lands rich in raw materials as well as for places to build military bases to protect their empires. Britain already had a large empire, and France commanded a smaller one. But Germany, Italy, Belgium, Japan, and the United States also rushed to join the imperial race. Together, industrialized nations jostled among themselves as they carved colonies out of Africa, claimed islands in the Pacific, and began to nibble away at China.

Militarism Produces an Arms Race For some European leaders, the question was not so much *if* a great war would start but *when*. To prepare, leaders increased the size of their armies and stockpiles of weapons. No nation readied its war machinery more than Germany. By 1914, it had a huge standing army and the largest, deadliest collection of guns in the world. It also built up its navy enough to rival Britain's, the world's strongest at that time. To keep up, Britain, too, increased the size of its navy. A spirit of **militarism**, or glorification of the military, grew in the competing countries and fueled this arms race even more.

The contest between Germany and Britain at sea and between Germany, France, and Russia on land guaranteed one important thing: The next major war would involve more troops and more technologically advanced weapons than ever before. Machine guns, mobile artillery, tanks, submarines, and airplanes would change the nature of warfare.

Building the War Machine

In the early 1900s, European countries raced to keep up with one another's military might. Below, workers build artillery in Essen, a German city, in 1904. *According to the chart, which country had the largest army in 1914? Which had the largest navy?*



World War I, 1914–1917



Map Skills The war on most fronts was a stalemate by 1916.

- 1. Locate:** (a) Belgium, (b) Western Front, (c) Battle of Verdun
- 2. Location** What challenge did Germany's location present to its pursuit of victory in the war?
- 3. Synthesize Information** Describe the movement of the opposing lines of the Western Front between 1914 and 1917.

Vocabulary Builder

ally—(AL ī) *n.* person, nation, or group joined with another for a common purpose

Alliances Make Nations Overconfident and Reckless European leaders also prepared for war by forming alliances. Before 1914, two major ones emerged. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy joined together in the Triple Alliance (although Italy never fought with it). Opposed to the Triple Alliance was the Triple Entente, made up of France, Russia, and Great Britain. Alliances emboldened leaders to act recklessly. They knew that if they did declare war, powerful allies were obligated to fight along with them. No country wanted to be seen as an unreliable partner. As years passed, European leaders thought less of the advantages of peace and more of the possible benefits of war. Some also hoped that a foreign war would help to smooth over domestic problems.

Assassination Hurtles Europe Toward World War On June 28, 1914, Archduke **Francis Ferdinand**, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife Sophie left for what they thought would be a routine visit to Sarajevo (sar uh YAY voh), the capital city of the Austro-Hungarian province of Bosnia. But a handful of young Bosnians had other plans for the archduke and his wife. These men were ethnic Serbs who believed that Bosnia rightfully belonged to Serbia, and they saw Francis Ferdinand as a tyrant. After the archduke's driver made a wrong turn, Gavrilo Princip, one of the conspirators, noticed the couple in the car, pulled a pistol from his pocket, and fired it twice. First Sophie and then Francis Ferdinand died. People around the world were shocked by the senseless murders. But no one expected that they would lead to a great world war.

Checkpoint How did nationalism and militarism both work to push Europe toward war?

The Fighting Begins

Everything was in place for a great conflict—nationalist ambitions, large armies, stockpiles of weapons, alliances, and military plans. The nations of Europe were hurtling like giant trains toward a great collision. Archduke Francis Ferdinand's assassination was the incident that triggered this conflict.

Alliances Cause a Chain Reaction Soon after the assassination, Kaiser **William II**, the German emperor, assured Austria-Hungary that Germany would stand by its ally if war came. Confident in Germany's support, Austria-Hungary then sent a harsh ultimatum to Serbia demanding Serbia's total cooperation in an investigation into the assassination. When Serbia did not agree to all of the demands, Austria-Hungary declared war on July 28, 1914.

Because of the alliance system, what otherwise might have been a localized quarrel quickly spread. In early August, Russia mobilized for war to help its ally Serbia against Austria. This caused Germany to declare war against Russia. France, Russia's ally, promptly declared war against Germany. The very next day, Germany declared war against neutral Belgium, so that it could launch an invasion of France through that small country. Great Britain, which had treaties with France and Belgium, immediately declared war against Germany. In less than one week, the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary were at war against the Allied Powers of Britain, France, Russia, and Serbia. The Ottoman Empire later joined the Central Powers.

German soldiers fought through Belgium and moved southwest into France, toward Paris. Then in September, with the German advance only 30 miles from Paris, the French and the British counterattacked and stopped the German forces near the Marne River.

Deadly Technology Leads to Stalemate After the Battle of the Marne, the Germans settled onto high ground, dug trenches, and fortified their position. When the French and British attacked, the German troops used machine guns and artillery to kill thousands of them. The French and British then dug their own trenches and used the same weapons to kill thousands of counterattacking Germans. Soon, 450 miles of trenches stretched like a huge scar from the coast of Belgium to the border of Switzerland. Although fighting went on in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and in other parts of the world, this **Western Front** in France became the critical battle front. The side that won there would win the war.

The war dragged on for years, and it was hideously deadly—much more so than anyone had expected. The primary reason for the length of the war and its deadly nature was the simple fact that the defensive weapons of the time were better and more devastating than the offensive ones. Generals on each side threw their soldiers into assaults against the enemy without fully considering the new technology. Charging toward trenches that were defended by artillery, machine guns, and rifles was futile. In virtually every battle on the Western Front, the attacking force suffered terribly. Even the use of poison gas did nothing to benefit the offense, despite its horrifying effects. Ineffective offensives and effective defenses produced only a deadly stalemate.

War in the Trenches

German soldiers hunker down in a shallow trench that stretches into the distance to protect themselves from enemy fire. *How did new technology make defenses such as trenches necessary?*



The Reality of Trench Warfare The stalemate led to gruesome conditions for the men in the trenches of the Western Front. The soldiers battled the harsh conditions of life often as fiercely as they attacked the enemy. They developed “trench foot” from standing for hours in wet, muddy trenches. They contracted lice from the millions of rats that infested the trenches. Dug into the ground, the soldiers lived in constant fear, afraid to pop their heads out of their holes and always aware that the next offensive might be their last.

Even on a quiet day, soldiers could be killed by snipers or a surprise gas attack, like the one described by French officer Paul Truffaut at Verdun:

Primary Source

“The special shells the men call “shells on wheels” [shells filled with poison gas] are whizzing by continuously. They explode silently and have no smell but can be deadly. They killed several men yesterday. One of my men refused to put his mask on because he couldn’t smell anything. All of a sudden, he was dizzy, foaming at the mouth and his skin went black, then he went rigid and died.”

—Paul Truffaut, March 5, 1917

In between enemy lines was an area known as “no man’s land.” Artillery barrages had blasted no man’s land until any fields, trees, or homes, that had once existed there, were charred beyond recognition. Soldiers went “over the top” of their trenches into this muddy, nearly impassable wasteland when they attempted to attack the entrenched enemy.

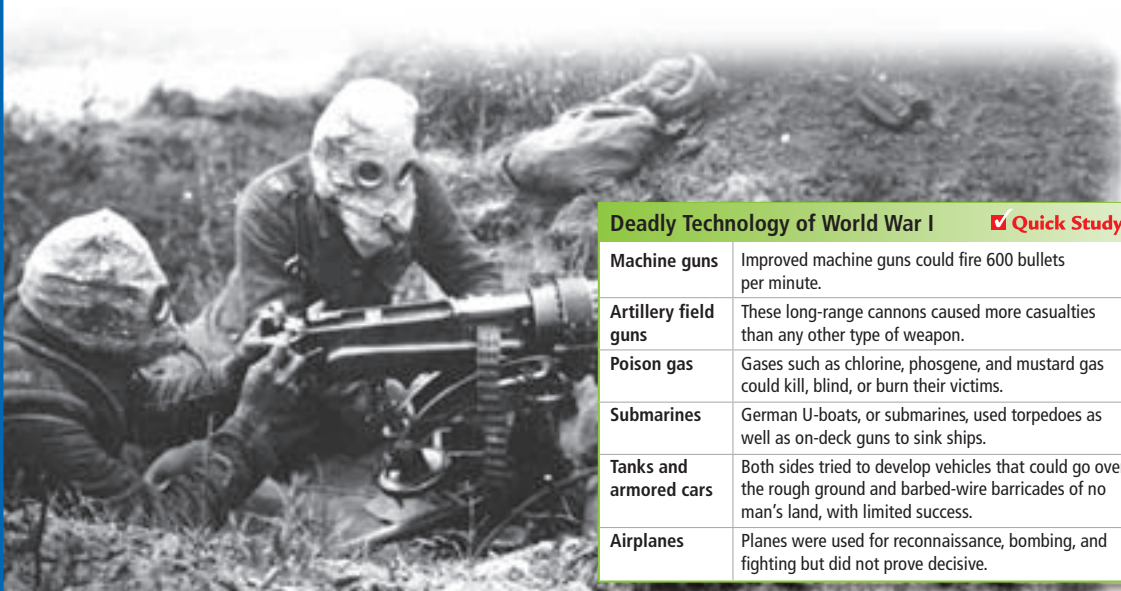
Casualties—or soldiers killed, wounded, and missing—mounted first in thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and finally in millions. Almost one million French soldiers were killed or wounded in just the first three months of the war. The Germans lost only slightly fewer. In two battles in 1916—Verdun (ver DUHN) and the Somme (suhm)—the British, French, and Germans sustained more than 2 million casualties. The British suffered 60,000 casualties on the first day alone at the Somme and achieved virtually nothing. And still the stalemate dragged on.

Horror of Modern Warfare

Although gas masks were soon developed to counter poison gas, gas attacks were still particularly horrifying to soldiers. *According to the chart, which type of weapon caused the most casualties?*



Checkpoint Why did both sides embrace trench warfare as a strategy to win the war?



Deadly Technology of World War I



Machine guns	Improved machine guns could fire 600 bullets per minute.
Artillery field guns	These long-range cannons caused more casualties than any other type of weapon.
Poison gas	Gases such as chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas could kill, blind, or burn their victims.
Submarines	German U-boats, or submarines, used torpedoes as well as on-deck guns to sink ships.
Tanks and armored cars	Both sides tried to develop vehicles that could go over the rough ground and barbed-wire barricades of no man’s land, with limited success.
Airplanes	Planes were used for reconnaissance, bombing, and fighting but did not prove decisive.

Wilson Urges Neutrality

As the war spread in Europe, President Woodrow Wilson called for Americans to be “impartial in thought as well as action.” In a “melting pot” nation that tried to make Americans of peoples from diverse origins, Wilson did not want to see the war set Americans against one another. At first, most Americans viewed the conflict as a distant European quarrel for land and influence. Unless the nation’s interests were directly threatened, Americans wanted no part of it. They preferred to maintain what they viewed as traditional American isolation from European disputes. Still, many Americans felt the war’s effects and few were truly impartial in thought. Most held a preference for one or another combatant, and many businesses benefited from the increased demand by warring nations for American goods.

Americans Have Divided Loyalties In 1914, one third of Americans were foreign-born. Many still thought of themselves in terms of their former homelands—as German Americans, Irish Americans, Polish Americans, and so on. With relatives in Europe, many people supported the nation in which they were born.

Some German Americans in the Midwest and some Irish Americans along the East Coast felt strongly that the Central Powers were justified in their actions. Many Americans had emigrated from Germany or Austria-Hungary. Millions of Irish Americans harbored intense grudges over the centuries of Great Britain’s domination of their homeland. They hoped that Ireland would gain its independence as Britain became entangled in the war. Many Jewish Americans who had fled Russia to escape the Czarist regimes’ murderous pogroms against Jews hoped for Russia’s defeat.

Most Americans, however, sided with Britain and France, both of which had strong historic ties with the United States. America’s national language was English, its cultural heritage was largely British, and its leading trading partner was Britain. France had aided the American cause during the Revolutionary War.

American Opinion Crystallizes No event at the beginning of the war swayed American opinion more than the vicious German invasion of neutral Belgium. German soldiers marching through Belgium committed numerous atrocities, killing unarmed civilians and destroying entire towns. British journalists and propagandists stressed, and sometimes exaggerated, the brutality of the Germans’ actions. Americans might have only dimly understood the causes of the war, but they clearly perceived the human cost of the war for Belgium.


Eventually, three distinct positions on the war crystallized among Americans. One group, the isolationists, believed that the war was none of America’s business and that the nation should isolate itself from the hostilities. A second group, the interventionists, felt that the war did affect American interests and that the United States should intervene in the conflict on the side of the Allies. A third group, the internationalists, occupied the middle ground. Internationalists believed that the United States should play an active role in world affairs and work toward achieving a just peace but not enter the war.



Analyzing Political Cartoons

The Question of Neutrality In this 1916 cartoon, President Wilson tries to neutralize German Kaiser William II’s bloody sword (representing Germany’s policy of unrestricted submarine warfare) by pointing it toward the ground.

1. How does the cartoonist portray Kaiser William II?
2. What position do you think the cartoonist holds on American involvement in the war?

 **Checkpoint** Why did President Wilson fear that the war would set Americans against one another?

Neutrality Gives Way to War

An internationalist, President Wilson sincerely desired peace in his country and around the world. Between the start of the war in 1914 and America's entry into it in 1917, Wilson attempted to use his influence to end the conflict among the warring countries. He failed in this great effort. Ultimately, he also failed to keep the United States out of the war.

Britain Blockades Germany Early in the war, British leaders decided to use their navy to blockade Germany to keep essential goods from reaching the other country. International law generally allowed **contraband** goods, usually defined as weapons and other articles used to fight a war, to be confiscated legally by any belligerent nation. Noncontraband goods, such as food, medical supplies, and other nonmilitary items, could not be confiscated. Britain, however, contested the definition of noncontraband articles. As the war continued, Britain expanded its definition of contraband until it encompassed virtually every product, including gasoline, cotton, and even food—in spite of international law.

German Submarines Violate Neutral Rights Germany responded by attempting to blockade Britain—even though it lacked the conventional naval forces to do so. Instead, in February 1915, Germany began sinking Allied ships using its **U-boats**, or submarines. The reality of the German blockade struck America on May 7, 1915, when a German U-boat sank the British passenger liner *Lusitania* off the coast of Ireland. German officials correctly claimed that



Ships Sunk by U-boats, May 1917–Jan. 1918



During World War I, German U-boats, like the *U-166* shown below, destroyed more than 11 million tons of Allied shipping and killed nearly 14,000 people.

U-Boats Sink American Neutrality

On May 7, 1915, the British passenger ship *Lusitania* cruised off the coast of Ireland. The German submarine *U-20*, lurking underwater, sighted the ship and fired a torpedo into its starboard side. It sank within 20 minutes, killing nearly 1,200 passengers. Among the dead were 128 Americans.

The sinking of the *Lusitania* was part of Germany's submarine blockade of Britain. The sinking of passenger ships carrying American neutrals angered the United States when it occurred in 1915 and again in 1916. Nonetheless, in early 1917, desperate German leaders declared unrestricted submarine warfare—causing the United States to enter the war.



the ship was carrying ammunition and other contraband. Americans protested that an unarmed and unresisting ship should not first be sunk without first being warned and provided with safety for its passengers. President Wilson was stunned but still wanted peace. "There is such a thing as a man being too proud to fight," he told his fellow citizens. "There is such a thing as a nation being so right that it does not need to convince others by force that it is right."

Germany helped to keep the United States out of the war by eventually promising not to sink any more passenger ships. But in 1916, Germany violated that promise by sinking the unarmed French passenger ship *Sussex*. Another storm of protest erupted in America. Again, Germany pledged not to sink unarmed ships. This promise, called the Sussex Pledge, would not last long.

Wilson Prepares for War President Wilson wanted to remain at peace, but even he must have realized the futility of that hope. At the end of 1915, Wilson began to prepare the nation for war. Many believed that "preparedness" was a dangerous course that could actually provoke war. Even so, Congress passed two pieces of legislation in 1916 to prepare for the possibility of U.S. involvement. The National Defense Act expanded the size of the army, and the Naval Construction Act ordered the building of more warships.

Still, Wilson hoped to avoid the conflict. In 1916, he ran for reelection with the slogan, "He kept us out of war." It was a close election, but Wilson won a narrow victory over Republican Charles Evans Hughes.



▲ Dramatic newspaper illustrations of the sinking of the *Lusitania* contributed to public fury in the United States. The sinking of an unarmed and unresisting ship violated international law.



An American poster condemning U-boat warfare ▶



Thinking Critically

- 1. Timeline Skills** How did Germany try to pacify the United States after the sinking of the *Lusitania*?
- 2. Recognize Effects** What effect did Germany's U-boat campaign have on Allied shipping?

America Enters the War Wilson did not have much time to enjoy his victory. In early 1917, two events occurred that helped to push the United States into the war. American trade with the Allies had sustained Britain and France in the war, while the British blockade of Germany had stopped the flow of American goods to the Central Powers. As far as Germany was concerned, desperate times demanded desperate measures.

In January 1917, suffering severe supply shortages due to the blockade, Germany took action. First, German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann sent a telegram to Mexico. The **Zimmermann note** proposed an alliance with Mexico, stating that if the United States declared war on Germany, Mexico should declare war on the United States. In return, after a German victory, Mexico would get back the states of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, which it had lost in 1848 after its defeat in the Mexican-American War. The telegram was intercepted by the British, who gave it to American authorities. Next, Germany once again announced unrestricted submarine warfare against Britain.

Although most leaders knew Mexico had no intention of attacking the United States, Americans were shocked by the publication of the Zimmermann note. Even Wilson no longer called for peace. On April 2, 1917, he asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany:

Primary Source “The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. . . . We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them.”

—Woodrow Wilson, April 2, 1917

Congress responded on April 6, 1917, with a declaration of war. Wilson’s long struggle to keep America at peace was over.

Checkpoint What German actions led the United States to enter World War I?

HISTORY MAKERS

Jeannette Rankin (1880–1973)

In 1916, Jeannette Rankin became the first woman elected to Congress.

Committed to women’s rights, she was also a dedicated pacifist. She and 49 other members of Congress voted against declaring war on Germany in 1917.

Twenty-four years later, in 1941, she was the only member of Congress to vote against the declaration of war against Japan. “As a woman,” Rankin said, “I can’t go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else.” She lost her bid for reelection in the election years that followed both votes.



SECTION 1 Assessment

Progress Monitoring Online

For: Self-test with vocabulary practice

Web Code: nea-0603

Comprehension

1. Terms and People For each item below, write a sentence explaining its significance to the outbreak and course of World War I.

- militarism
- Francis Ferdinand
- William II
- casualty
- U-boat
- *Lusitania*

2. NoteTaking Reading Skill:

Identify Causes Use your chart to answer the Section Focus Question: What caused World War I, and why did the United States enter the war?

Writing About History

3. Quick Write: Identify Causes List each cause of U.S. entry into World War I, and then organize them in order of importance. Finally, turn your list into a paragraph describing the causes of U.S. involvement in the war.

Critical Thinking

4. Draw Conclusions Why did a stalemate develop on the Western Front?

5. Compare Points of View Compare the three positions Americans took on the issue of whether or not the United States should enter the war.

6. Synthesize Information Why did the United States decide to enter the war and fight on the side of the Allies?