

WWI and U.S. Involvement

European nations competing with each other for control of land, trade and military power led to World War I. When one nation got angry with another, countries began taking sides and forming alliances (agreements between nations to defend and support each other). A Serbian terrorist organization assassinated Franz Ferdinand, the archduke of Austria-Hungary, in June 1914. War soon followed. The main alliances that developed were the Allied Powers, made up of Great Britain, France and Russia, and the Central Powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (part of present-day Turkey).

The United States vowed to stay out of the war, but important events in 1917 made Americans rethink this position. The first was a telegram sent to Mexico from Arthur Zimmermann, the German foreign secretary. The "Zimmermann telegram" asked Mexico to support Germany during the war. In return, Germany would help Mexico get land back from the U.S.

From February to April 1917, German submarines attacked and sank several American trade ships. American sailors lost their lives in these attacks, which angered the United States. Also fresh in Americans' memories was the sinking of the Lusitania, a British passenger and cargo ship. Almost 1,200 people died (including 128 Americans) when the Germans torpedoed the ship in 1915. The Zimmermann telegram and these German submarine attacks convinced U.S. President Woodrow Wilson to ask Congress to declare war on the Central Powers. The U.S. entered the war on April 6, 1917. Italy, Brazil, Japan and other countries also supported the Allies. Bulgaria later joined the Central Powers. It truly was a world at war.

Battles of WWI

Much of the fighting in WWI took place on the smooth, rolling lowlands of Belgium and France. Ground troops had nothing to hide behind, so they dug huge networks of trenches. Soldiers lived in those trenches; they ate, slept and died there. Anyone who ventured out of the trenches into "no man's land" ran the risk of being killed. In all, more than 8 million soldiers died during the war.

First Battle of the Marne (1914)

Soldiers fought this battle along the Marne River near Paris, France. The Allies stopped a German push toward Paris and won an important victory. The Germans retreated, and their plans of quickly winning the war were destroyed.

Battle of the Somme (1916)

The Battle of the Somme lasted from July to November 1916 and was fought north of the Somme River in France. The Allies won about six miles of German-occupied territory in this long battle, which resulted in 420,000 British, 200,000 French and 650,000 German casualties. A casualty is a soldier who is captured, wounded or killed.

Battle of Cambrai (1917)

In November 1917, the British launched an attack on the Germans at Cambrai, France. The battle was one of the first to use large numbers of tanks, heavy artillery (large guns or cannons) and airplanes together in battle. The British surprised the Germans by attacking with 476 tanks. This move surprised

the Germans, and the British gained some ground. However, the Germans later took back much of what the British had gained.

Battle of the Meuse-Argonne (1918)

Soldiers fought the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne between September and November 1918 in the Argonne Forest of France. General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, led more than 1 million Americans into battle. These American soldiers were nicknamed "doughboys." There are different stories behind this nickname, but one comes from the large buttons on their uniforms. Some people thought the buttons looked like popular pastries.

The Battle of the Meuse-Argonne turned out to be one of the bloodiest of the war for the Americans. More than 26,000 doughboys lost their lives in this battle, and almost 96,000 were wounded. German casualties numbered around 100,000. French forces also fought the Germans alongside the Americans. The battle ended in victory for the Allies and led to the final defeat of the Central Powers. The two sides signed an armistice, an agreement to stop fighting, on Nov. 11, 1918.

Treaty of Versailles

In January 1919, the Allied leaders met in Versailles, France, to write a peace treaty. President Woodrow Wilson represented the United States. He wanted to end the war without punishing the Central Powers, particularly Germany, too harshly. He also wanted to form an international organization called the League of Nations. This group would join together to prevent future wars. When the treaty was completed, it punished the Central Powers harshly, against Wilson's wishes. The treaty stated that Germany must pay huge fines, give up some of its territory and have limits on the size of its military. The treaty did create a League of Nations, but the U.S. Senate refused to approve the Treaty of Versailles or join the league. The Senate feared that the League of Nations would force the U.S. into other wars and keep the U.S. involved in problems overseas. They preferred to take care of America's problems and let the rest of the world take care of its own. This policy became known as isolationism. This way of thinking didn't last long, however, as America's involvement in World War II was just around the corner. What at first was known as the "Great War" soon became known as World War I.