

# The Great War

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**Y**ou've probably seen them before: volunteers standing in front of stores selling small red paper flowers for Memorial Day or Veterans' Day. In exchange for any donation, you'll receive one of these red poppies from the American Legion, which uses the proceeds to help U.S. veterans and active duty personnel.

But why poppies? Many Americans are probably unfamiliar with the story behind the symbol.

Poppies grew on the battlefields of Belgium during the First World War, one hundred years ago, a striking sign of life amidst death. Many nations that fought in that war, including the United States, later adopted the poppy to honor military veterans of that conflict and others. The American Legion, founded after the war in 1919, carries on that tradition today.



▲ President Wilson before Congress, announcing the break in official relations with Germany on February 3, 1917. President Wilson would ask Congress to send U.S. troops into battle against Germany on April 2, 1917. Congress obliged on April 6, 1917. Public Domain

This year the United States commemorates the 100th anniversary of its entry into the First World War. The country had remained neutral when the European war began in late summer 1914, but by spring 1917 things had changed. President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, and Congress obliged on April 6, 1917. The U.S. would now join the European states in the conflict until the armistice of November 11, 1918, and through the peace negotiations of 1919.



◀ Poppy wreaths laid at a memorial in Tyne Cot Cemetery, a British war cemetery at the site of the Battle of Passchendaele (also known as the Third Battle of Ypres) in Belgium. Photo courtesy of Rebecca Matzke, taken in March 2011.

A poppy cross placed by one of the restored trenches at Vimy Ridge in France, site of the Canadian National Vimy Memorial (Canada's principal WWI memorial on the Western Front). The cross, approximately six inches tall, is not an official part of the memorial or preserved battlefield. Photo courtesy of Rebecca Matzke, taken in March 2011.

It's not surprising that the war behind the poppies seems very distant from us. The American Expeditionary Force<sup>1</sup> only fought in Europe for about six months, and none of those veterans are left to tell their own stories. Moreover, a second, even more intense World War often takes attention away from the first.

So why should we still care about the Great War—its common name before anyone knew there would be a second one?

The conflict had begun in late July 1914 with the Austro-Hungarian Empire's declaration of war on its neighbor Serbia. A local war became a continental war when a cascade of mobilizations and declarations of war followed: Germany joining its ally Austria-Hungary; and Russia, France, and Britain entering on the side of Serbia. These governments saw themselves as acting to defend their own countries, even if it meant attacking another country first. Others would join later, including the Ottoman Empire for the Central Powers and Italy and the U.S. for the Allies.

The continental war became a world war because the Europeans had empires: they fought in Africa and the Middle East, the Pacific Ocean and the Mediterranean, and they relied on resources from their colonies to keep going.

World War I changed how war was conducted. It was fought with the latest technology, like machine guns,

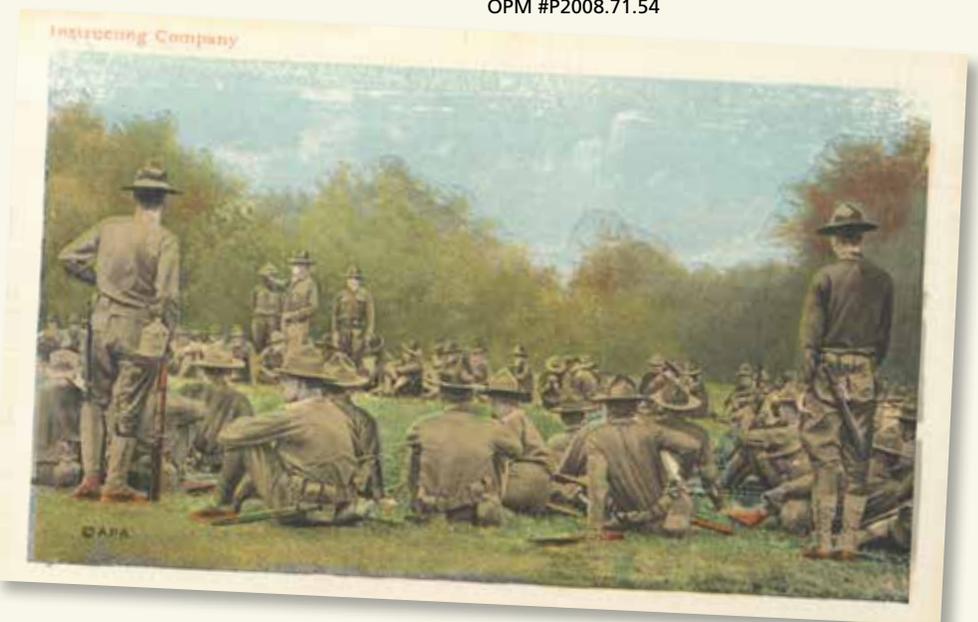
heavy artillery, flamethrowers, and poison gas. It was fought not by professional soldiers or mercenaries, as earlier wars had often been, but by mass armies of draftees and volunteers fighting for their nations. In battle, armies that relied on offensives met with defensive firepower from trenches that they could not overcome until tactics changed late in the war. Soldiers faced what one historian has called "mass industrial death," often killed by machines without ever seeing the enemy.

This new conduct meant that the war most Europeans had expected to be short would instead continue four long years. Failed offensives by Germany on the one side and France and Britain on the other created a 300-mile long entrenched front in France and Belgium. Thousands of men died in the war's first four months. France alone suffered 800,000 casualties. But all continued to fight.

The Great War changed the world because it was so long and involved every citizen. As it dragged on with no breakthroughs, strategy turned to attrition, each side trying to outlast the other. That meant the "home front"—a new term coined in this war—was vital to keeping the war going. Whole societies changed as a result.

Governments intruded more in their people's lives, rationing food, creating income taxes, directing industrial production, and blanketing their countries with propaganda. As millions of men went to the front, women moved into factories and ran farms. Races mixed in new ways as Britain and France brought nearly 2.5 million Africans and Asians from their colonies to fight and work.

▼ "Shelter Tent Inspection," illustrated color postcard showing a group of soldiers, c1918. OPM #P2008.71.54



► A World War I aerial warfare is depicted in this print titled "The Thrilling Exploit of an Aerial Gunner." The work is signed bottom left "H. Farre 1916" and printed in the margin below this "Painted by Lieutenant Henri Farre." OPM #113.3.1.1C



▲ Print depicts the ghostly figures of three soldiers, one of whom holds a sword, rising from the field of poppies studded with crosses. The poem "We Shall Not Sleep" by Colonel John McCrae is printed on the right, courtesy of A.P. Putnam and Sons. Below the bottom left margin is printed "Contributed Toward Winning of the War by." OPM #113.3.1.1YY

Since civilians were now war assets, they were also targets. The British naval blockade tried to starve out the Germans at home. Germany's submarines sank civilian ships, and its zeppelins dropped bombs on Paris and London. The Ottoman Empire massacred Armenian civilians it suspected of helping its enemy Russia. Everyone suffered food shortages and inflation, which sometimes—as in Russia—sparked political revolution.

Casualties and destruction were horrific and affected European nations for years after the war. At least ten million people died. Another 20 million were wounded, nearly half of them permanently disabled. Families mourned and governments faced massive debts.

Around 116,000 Americans died, though half of those deaths came from the 1918 influenza epidemic rather than battle. But that toll paled in comparison to the nearly three-quarters of a million dead in Britain, 1.4 million in France, and 1.8 million in Germany. The costs of the Great War affected both domestic and foreign policy for decades, whether in the German government's choice to allow

hyperinflation in the 1920s or the Allies' decision for "appeasement"<sup>2</sup> in the 1930s.

The war also led to the rise of both communism and fascism. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution took Russia out of the Great War and into civil war, resulting in the creation of the Soviet Union, the world's first communist state. Fascist movements arose among people disillusioned with their governments but embracing ultra-nationalism, war, and the primacy of the state over individual rights. Italy's fascists took power in 1922 and Germany's more racist version, the Nazis, gained control in 1933 thanks to the Great Depression.

For the United States, the Great War marked the nation's first real involvement in Great Power affairs outside the Western Hemisphere. Its initial neutrality had made sense. Although Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare was condemned, the Europeans' war did not threaten the U.S. homeland. The multiple immigrant groups in America—including many Germans—made fighting on one side or another politically problematic at home.

When Wilson finally did ask for a declaration of war, he did it with the idea that the U.S. would sort out the Old World's mess. He wanted to use America's special moral position to help mold the peace: to stop militarism, create a new world order, and make the world "safe for democracy." After the war a hostile Congress took the U.S. into an isolationist policy, but Wilson's idea that America should play an active role as a force for good in the world has remained strong in the century since the war.

The war changed the very map of the world in which the U.S. would act. The peace process destroyed European empires—Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia—and created new nations in their place: Poland, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia, among others. Not all nationalities got their own states, and many of the new states were politically fractured and economically weak. The Allies also partitioned the Ottoman

Empire, creating nations in the Middle East that had never existed: Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq to be run by Britain; Syria and Lebanon for France. Their borders were artificial, bringing together multiple peoples who did not share any national identity—for example, Kurds, Shia Muslim Arabs, and Sunni Muslim Arabs in Iraq. In Palestine, the British had promised during the war to help build a Jewish national home, a goal opposed by Arabs living there. Conflicts in the region continue to this day.

World War I also started the decline of European overseas empires. Many Africans and Indians had gained self-confidence from their wartime service, and when they met continued racism and denial of their rights by their European rulers, they began to work for independence. Their efforts would culminate following the next world war with the break-up of empires into the modern nations of today.

One hundred years later, why should we care about the Great War? Because it created the world we live in today. Remembrance of the war in the United States has often been half-hearted, but this year's centennial offers a chance to pay it some much-deserved attention. For this anniversary, we can honor the millions who lost their lives in the conflict and consider its lasting impact. 

<sup>1</sup> The American Expeditionary Force is the name given to the U.S. Armed Forces sent to Europe in 1917-1918.

<sup>2</sup> Yielding to a belligerent's demands in a conciliatory way.



◀ Moina Belle Michael was an American professor and humanitarian who conceived the idea of using poppies as a symbol of remembrance for those who served in World War I. Public Domain