The First World War as a Global War

By Trevor Getz

What makes a war a “world” war?

The First World War began with an assassination. It happened in Bosnia. It was a little part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Europe. How did this small part of Europe set off a world war?



An Indian soldier serving with the British Army is stretchered to hospital during World War I, circa 1916.

The First World War began in August 1914. Right away, it was much bigger than just a European fight. One reason is that European nations controlled lots of other countries

around the world. Let's look closer at how it happened.

Who fought? Empire vs. empire

Before the war began, many European countries had teamed up in groups called **alliances**. In August 1914, two large alliances faced off against each other. On one side were Germany and Austro-Hungary. They were soon joined by the Ottoman Empire. These were the Central Powers. On the other side were the Entente powers. These were France, Russia, and a group of smaller allies. They included Portugal, Belgium, and Serbia. They were soon joined by Italy and Britain.

Alliance: a mutually beneficial relationship between two nations forged to further common interests or prevent attack from common enemies

Colony: a territory governed by a distant country, often occupied by numbers of citizens of that country

These were European states. Many of the countries controlled by these states were not in Europe, though. Their empires covered large parts of the world. The British Empire was the largest in the world. It ruled over Canada, the Caribbean, Australia, and much of Africa and South Asia, including India. France also had a large empire. It mostly covered the Caribbean, the Pacific Ocean, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The Ottoman Empire went into Arabia. Italy, Portugal, and Belgium all had African **colonies**.

> **"As empires went to war, they dragged their colonies into the conflict**

The war was already worldwide in 1914 because of these empires. Then other states around the world joined the Entente powers. These included Japan in Asia and the United States in North America. In August 1917, the Chinese government declared war on the Central Powers. Most of the world was then at war.

Talking about states, alliances, and empires is one thing. Talking about real people is another. Let's look at the troops who were fighting on the ground. At the beginning of the war, most of the soldiers were Europeans. That changed quickly. The European empires began to call upon soldiers from countries they controlled. The British Empire brought in more than 1.2 million Indian soldiers. The African nation Nigeria sent 17,000 soldiers. From Canada, 332,000 soldiers came to fight. France brought 335,000 African troops. Russia drew heavily on troops from Siberia and Central Asia.



African soldiers of the French Empire marching to battle, 1917.

Why did they fight? Homegrown hostilities, global ambitions

The fighting happened around the world. Many of the causes of the First World War had to do with problems in Europe, though. There were problems in Europe's Balkan Peninsula. France and Germany disagreed about who controlled the land between them. Other reasons had to do with places outside Europe. Britain and France both hoped to take Ottoman land along the Mediterranean Sea. Japan wanted to take over German colonies in the Pacific Ocean.



German "askaris", African soldiers who fought successfully in German East Africa throughout the First World War.

Maybe most importantly, Britain was worried. The German Navy was growing. Britain was rich only because of its large empire and its trade. It was Britain's large navy that protected this trade. Britain feared another navy cutting it off from its colonies. That was more than enough reason to fight Germany.

Where did they fight? Global violence over land and sea

Most of the fighting took place in Europe. A lot of it took place outside of Europe, though. There were battles at sea all over the world. Some were fought in seas as far as East Africa and Hawaii.

On land, as well, there were battles and **campaigns** in many parts of the world. Entente forces quickly attacked German colonies in Africa. Japanese sailors and soldiers took over German colonies in the Pacific Ocean. The British supported Arab rebels fighting Ottoman soldiers. Members of the Central Powers tried to stir up resistance among Muslims who were unhappy with British rule in India.

Campaign: a systematic, concerted set of activities undertaken for a particular purpose

Conclusion

The Central Powers gave up in 1918. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The end of the war was a big deal. It changed Europe's future in many ways. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was split into many smaller states. Germany was punished badly. For that reason, the Treaty of Versailles contributed to the Second World War.

The resolution of the war had major effects outside of Europe too. Britain made a lot of promises. They told many groups they could take over Ottoman land when the empire was defeated. These included promises to both the Jewish and Arab communities about who would control the territory of Palestine. Britain did not keep its promises, though. It took control of Palestine and neighboring lands for itself. Unkept promises led to continued warfare. They led to nations not trusting each other. The results continue into the present day.

About the author

Trevor Getz The author of this article is Trevor Getz. He is Professor of African History at San Francisco State University. He has written eleven books on African and world history,

including *Abina and the Important Men*. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits

 This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0 except for the following:

An Indian soldier serving with the British Army is stretchered to hospital during World War I, circa 1916. © FPG/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

African soldiers of the French Empire marching to battle, 1917. By Michel Royon, CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fr%C3%A9jus_Tirailleurs_s%C3%A9n%C3%A9galais_1918.jpg

German "askaris", African soldiers who fought successfully in German East Africa throughout the First World War. By Walther Dobbertin, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_105-DOA5042,_Deutsch-Ostafrika,_Askaris_mit_MG.jpg

---

newsela

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.

LEXILE The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework

determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.