The First World War as a Global War

By Trevor Getz

What makes a war 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 with an assassination in Bosnia, a small place in the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Europe’s Balkan Peninsula. The fight it set off among European states may seem small for the start of a war so big. So how did it happen?

The truth is, the First World War was much bigger than just a European conflict. That was true from the very beginning, in August 1914. In the years that followed, it grew even larger. By 1918, most of the world’s population was officially at war, and even the countries that tried not to take sides were getting involved in some way. Let’s look closer at who was fighting, why they were fighting, and where they were fighting.

Who fought? Empire vs. empire

In August 1914, two large **alliances** faced off against each other. On one side were Germany and Austro-Hungary, 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 including 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

All of these were European states. Many of the territories controlled by these states were not in Europe, though. Their empires covered large parts of the globe and huge populations. 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.

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

France also had a large empire, mostly in the Caribbean, the Pacific Ocean, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The Ottoman Empire stretched into Arabia. Italy, Portugal, and Belgium all had African **colonies**. Russia extended all the way from the eastern edge of Europe to the Pacific Coast of Asia.

The war was already worldwide in 1914 due to the reach of the empires. Then other states around the world joined the Entente powers. These included Japan in Asia, the United States in North America, and Brazil in South America. In August 1917, the Chinese government officially declared war on the Central Powers. By late 1917, most of the world was at war.



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

Asking “who fought?” is one thing when you talk about states, alliances, and empires. Let’s look at the real people who marched into battle as troops, though. At the beginning of the war, most of the soldiers were Europeans. Soon though, the European empires began to call upon colonial soldiers to help them. The British Empire brought in more than 1.2 million Indian soldiers. Nigeria sent 17,000 soldiers and 37,000 laborers. From Canada, 332,000 soldiers came to fight, and another 444,000 from New Zealand and Australia. France relied on 335,000 African troops and more than 50,000 armed men from Vietnam and neighboring regions. Russia drew heavily on troops from Siberia and Central Asia. By 1916, Entente soldiers were joined in the trenches by more than 120,000 laborers from China. Almost 2,000,000 American soldiers then joined the Entente forces. The victory of the Entente was truly a worldwide effort.

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 tensions in the Balkan Peninsula. There were ongoing disputes over who controlled the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine between France and Germany. Other motivations had to do with places outside Europe. Britain and France both hoped to gain Ottoman territories along the Mediterranean Sea. Japan wanted to control German colonies in the Pacific Ocean.



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

Perhaps most importantly, Britain was worried about the growing German Navy. Britain was rich only because of its control over a vast empire and its trade. It was Britain's large navy that protected its control over this trade. Britain feared that another navy might grow large enough to cut 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 in the First World War took place in Europe. A lot of fighting took place outside of Europe as well. There were battles at sea all over the world. Some were fought in seas as far from Europe 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, taking most by 1915. Japanese sailors and soldiers captured 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 surrendered in 1918. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The end of the conflict had major effects on Europe's future. In particular, it tore the Austro-Hungarian Empire into many smaller states. By punishing Germany badly, the Treaty of Versailles helped set the stage for the Second World War.

Outside of Europe as well, the resolution of the war had major effects. Taking apart the Ottoman Empire made a particularly big mess. Britain needed *a lot* of help to bring down this huge power. They gathered allies by making promises about what would happen after the Ottoman Empire was defeated. These included promises to both the Jewish and Arab communities about who would control the territory of Palestine. After the war, though, Britain took control of Palestine and neighboring territories for itself. Unkept promises, and the lack of a resolution, led to continued warfare and a lack of trust between nations. The results continue into the present day.

About the author

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