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 in a pretty small place. I don’t just mean Bosnia, this little province of the Austro- Hungarian Empire in the Balkan Peninsula, where an assassination occurred. No, I mean Europe, a continent so small that it would take three Europes to reach the size of Africa, and four to be as vast as Asia. The initial fight among European states was indeed a small place for the start of a war so big.

But from the very beginning of the conflict, in August 1914, the First World War was much bigger than just a European conflict. In the years that followed, it grew even larger. By 1918, most of the world’s population was officially at war, and even the neutral countries were frequently involved in one way or the other. Let’s explore the global dimensions with three questions: Who fought? Why did they fight? Where did they fight?

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: France, Russia, and a group of smaller allies

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

including Portugal, Belgium, and Serbia. They were soon joined by Italy and then Britain.

numbers of citizens of that country

Technically, all of these were European states. But since many of the territories controlled by these states were not in Europe, it certainly didn't look that way. Their empires covered large portions of the globe and huge populations. The British Empire was the largest in the world. It ruled over vast regions in North America (Canada), the Caribbean, the entire landmass of Australia, and much of South Asia and Africa.

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

The British Empire's population in 1914 stood at 412 million people, but over 80% of those people were actually Indian—*and in India*. Another 36 million subjects lived in other British **colonies**. There were only 44 million British citizens in its own massive empire. France also had a large overseas 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, in its vastness, extended all the way from the eastern edge of Europe to the Pacific Coast of Asia, although much of this territory had very few inhabitants.

The war was already global in 1914 due to the reach of the empires. But then, other states around the world joined the Entente powers: Japan in Asia, the United States in North America, and Brazil in South America, to name an important few. The biggest neutral country was China, but even they provided aid and laborers to the Entente. And 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. But let's look at the actual troops who marched into battle. At the beginning of the war, most of the soldiers were Europeans. But soon, the European empires began to call upon colonial soldiers to help them. The British Empire enlisted more than 1.2 million Indian soldiers, accounting for more than a quarter of England's total troops. Other colonies also contributed. Nigeria deployed 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, plus lots of laborers. 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 neutral China and, eventually, by almost 2,000,000 American soldiers. The victory of the Entente was truly a global effort.

Why did they fight? Homegrown hostilities, global ambitions

The fighting was certainly global, but many of the causes of the First World War had to do with problems within Europe. Specifically, there were tensions in the Balkan Peninsula, as well as ongoing disputes over who controlled the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine between France and Germany. But other motivations were more global. Britain and France both hoped to gain Ottoman territories along the Mediterranean Sea.

Russia, too, hoped to gain control of the Dardanelles Strait from the Ottomans so they could gain access to the Mediterranean. Japan aspired to control German colonies in the Pacific Ocean. Later, when Russia left the side of the Entente powers, troops from Britain, France, Japan, and the United States **campaigned** against the Russians as well.

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

Perhaps most importantly, Britain was watching the growing German Navy the way a grizzly bear might watch you coming for her cubs. Britain was wealthy only because of its control over a vast empire and its trade, and it was Britain's large navy that protected their control over this trade. The fear that a rival navy might grow large enough to cut Britain off from its colonies was more than enough reason to fight Germany.

In other words, the various motives of the conflict were based both on European issues as well as global ambitions.

Where did they fight? Global violence over land and sea

Most of the combat in the First World War took place in Europe, along three fronts: 1) the Italian border with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Balkans in the south, 2) the Eastern Front along the Russian border in the east, and 3) the Western Front in France and Belgium. But a lot of fighting took place outside of Europe. There were naval

engagements all over the world's waters. Many of these were small-scale, and some were fought in seas as far from Europe as East Africa and in Hawaii.



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

On land, as well, there were battles and long campaigns in many parts of the world. Entente forces quickly attacked German colonies in Africa, taking most by 1915. German African troops in East Africa, however, managed to hold out until the end of the war. Japanese sailors and soldiers, often assisted by American, British, and French forces, captured German colonies in the Pacific Ocean. A large campaign in Arabia pitted British-supported Arab rebels against Ottoman troops, and there were battles in many other parts of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans and Germans tried to stir up Britain's Muslim colonial subjects in many colonies. In particular, they worked with Muslims who were unhappy with colonialism in British India. German agents actually did manage to provoke a rebellion in the colony of Singapore, which was only put down by a combined force from several Entente navies and armies.

Conclusion

The war ended with the surrender of the Central Powers in 1918 and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The end of the conflict had major implications for Europe. In particular, it tore the Austro-Hungarian Empire into many smaller states and, 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 vast implications. The destruction of the Ottoman Empire made a particularly big mess, and deserves special mention here. Britain needed *a lot* of help to bring down this massive 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. But after the war, Britain took control of Palestine and neighboring territories for itself. Unkept promises, and the lack of a resolution, would pave the way for decades of distrust and warfare which continue to the present day.

About the author

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