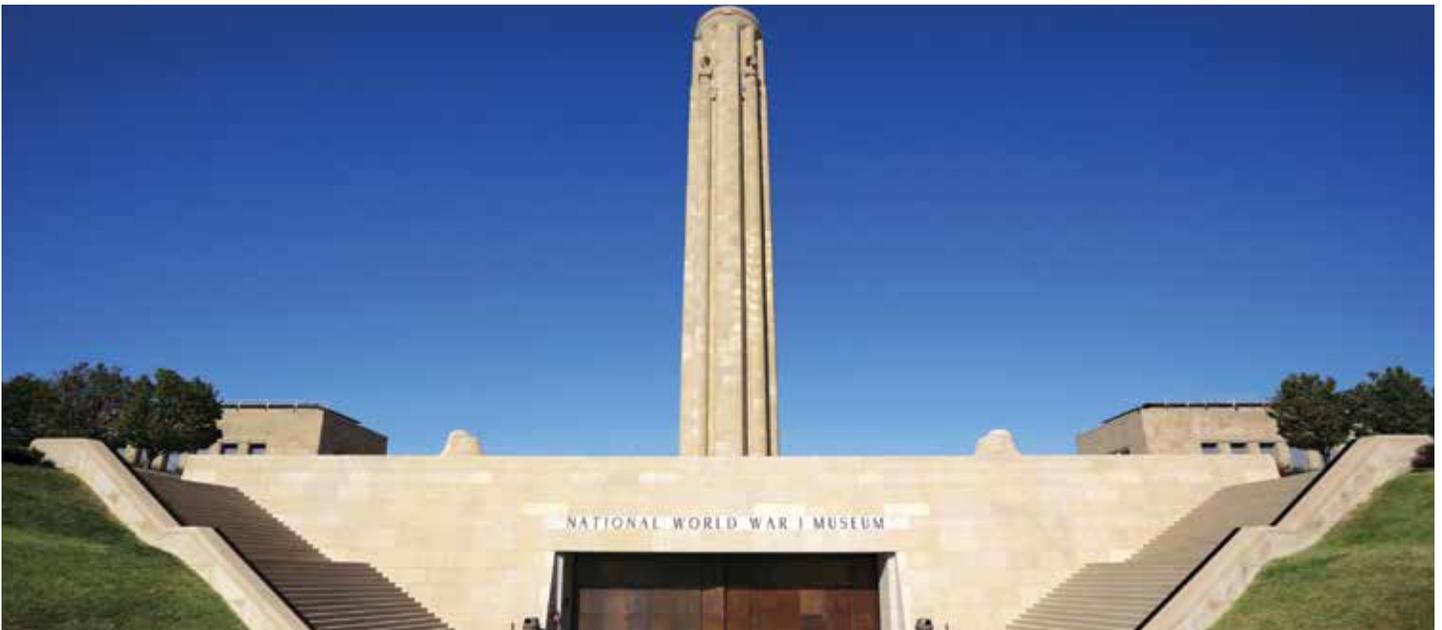


WE WANT YOU:

TEACHING WORLD WAR I IN THE CLASSROOM

Lora Vogt, Curator of Education, National World War I Museum



The National World War I Museum is the only American museum dedicated solely to preserving the objects, history and personal experiences of World War I and has the most diverse collection of Great War artifacts in the world.

At the National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial, America’s leading museum dedicated to remembering, interpreting, and understanding the Great War, we have heard —and ask ourselves— seemingly simple questions that, in reality, have no easy answers:

- Why did World War I begin?
- How many countries were involved?
- Why didn’t the “War to End All Wars” actually end all wars?

Possibly the single greatest catalyst for change on a global scale, World War I is complicated. As one of the

most transformative events of the twentieth century, this global conflict set the stage for twenty-first century’s prosperity and poverty, peace and hostilities. Rich with dynamic primary sources, it can be a powerful tool for teaching critical thinking.

Most Popular Question and Lagging (American) Popular Knowledge:

The National World War I Museum holds the most diverse collection of World War I material culture holdings in the world, yet the most popular question asked is “Why is the nation’s museum and memorial to World War I in Missouri?” The answer is simple: “Because of Kansas City citizens.” Soon after the

Armistice, city residents raised more than \$2.5 million in only 10 days (over \$34 million in terms of today's money) to construct a memorial for those who served during the World's War. On November 11, 1926, when the doors opened to this beautiful complex, with its art nouveau structures, soaring tower, low-bas relief frieze and gardens, President Calvin Coolidge spoke to the largest crowd ever addressed by a U.S. president to that day, saying:

“ It [The Liberty Memorial] has not been raised to commemorate war and victory, but rather the results of war and victory which are embodied in peace and liberty....Today I return in order that I may place the official sanction of the national government upon one of the most elaborate and impressive memorials that adorn our country. The magnitude of this memorial, and the broad base of popular support on which it rests, can scarcely fail to excite national wonder and admiration.”

Coolidge's speech reflected popular sentiment in his era, but today, when broad-based public knowledge of World War I is meager, his words seem almost quaint. How can that be? Based on the evidence we see from daily interaction with a public in awe of the legacies of those who lived through World War I, the conflict is assuredly not because modern-day citizens are impervious or unconcerned about a cataclysmic event that resulted in 37 million casualties round the globe. So why don't we know more about World War I in the United States?

Admittedly, Coolidge spoke many years before Stephen Spielberg's movie *War Horse*, but there is more to cognizance than pop culture. Americans do not share a common modern memory of this globe-altering event. The war no longer has an oral tradition because its veterans have passed away. Protected from the physical effects of the conflict by two oceans, we do not routinely pass by geographic reminders, like the craters left behind on Western European battlefields. Unlike



Two Interactive Study Stations engage people of all ages with compelling information from World War I.

in most Allied nations, there is no national tradition of silence on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, when the guns were silenced on Armistice Day.

Some testing and standards systems may not encourage profound competence on World War I. Prior to becoming a National World War I Museum curator, I was a classroom teacher who created and used a lesson plan called “World War I in One Day” in a World History course that covered the beginning of time to the Gulf Wars. It is an extreme challenge to address the content required.

Small Commitments for Big Impact:

At the National World War I Museum, our mission is to inspire thought, dialogue, and learning to make the experiences of the World War I era meaningful and relevant for present and future generations. It is important to recognize the meaning that conflict has in the modern world. In order for members of the present generation to recognize the relevance of World War I in their future decisions—for example in foreign policy choices within the Middle East—we must inspire thought and dialogue on the Great War in classrooms and communities today.

Learn More

There is never enough time as a teacher, but commit to learning more. There is abundant new scholarship on the conflict, with some books topping *The New*



The Chronology of the War covers the 1914 origins of the conflict and its month-by-month escalation up to the 1918 armistice and the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919.

York Times bestseller lists. At the National World War I Museum, we are rolling out new information, exhibitions and resources online. Place “World War I” or “First World War” as a Google Alert to keep up with international articles being published and a wide variety of events. Look for professional development opportunities offered by National History Day, the National World War I Museum, Gilder Lehrman Institute and others. Audiobooks (Margaret MacMillan’s

lecture “6 Months that Changed the World”), podcasts, documentaries, and online video content (including the lectures hosted at the museum) make learning in a tight timeframe more accessible.

Use Primary Sources

Examining primary sources creates quality learning opportunities. Visit the Online Collections Database at the National World War I Museum and use analysis with Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) on photographs of the era. Newspaper articles are the 1917 equivalent of blogging. Engage students in analyzing the editorial opinions of thinkers like Teddy Roosevelt, noted as saying after the Zimmermann Telegram, “If Wilson does not declare war now, I will go to the White House and skin him alive.” World War I is full of fascinating sidelights. Engage both visual and auditory learners by using sheet music lyrics and cover art to more fully understand and humanize the American experience during the war.



Thousands of guests come from around the world every year to see America’s only museum dedicated to the Great War. The Museum is an exceptional experience to spark conversations between generations.



Visitors cross the Paul Sunderland Glass Bridge from the Museum lobby to the main exhibit hall, passing over a field of 9,000 red poppies, each representing 1,000 combatant fatalities from the Great War.

Commemorate

Every community was touched by the war, and there are plenty of stories of courage, honor, patriotism, and sacrifice that deserve to be told. Beginning in 1917, the U.S. military went from a standing army of 127,500 to more than four million men and women who had served by 1919. As the centennial approaches, take part in the international coalition for commemoration. Find ways to honor the legacy of veterans in your own community. Support a poppy drive; encourage your school to pause for a moment of silence on Armistice Day, now known as Veteran's Day in the U.S. Empower your students to create a commemoration that will be uniquely meaningful to their generation.

Spend More Time for Critical Lessons...

Avoid relegating World War I to just one history unit. In the United States, we tend to focus on the conflict's cause and immediate consequences. This means that many times we boil the conflict down to: "Acronym"

(MAIN or MANIAC) + Franz Ferdinand Assassination = useless death and prologue to World War II.

There is never enough time in a school year, but oversimplifying can lead to miseducation. Explore the lessons, legacies, and enduring events. Anchor events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries back to their origins in WWI. Note this can be a dangerous thing, as it seems that shaky analogies are made in the media every year.

Instead, ask open-ended questions:

- Is there a moral imperative to aid those who fight for freedom and democracy?
- How do results of diplomacy meet local expectations?
- Victory ends war. How is peace achieved?

...but Not Necessarily Just “Your” Time

Work toward having the study of World War I seep into and influence the curriculum of other departments—music, art, literature, and science. There is cross-curricular and Common Core gold in the study of the World’s War.

- Ask middle school art teachers to teach camouflage painting, a life-saving innovation of World War I.
- Study modernism in historic context with images by German artist Otto Dix (<http://www.moma.org/explore/collection/ge/>) or approach Marsden Hartley’s *Himmel* (http://www.nelson-atkins.org/studio33/listen_cfm?id=23315&object=149&col=American) with a conversation on LGBT perspectives.
- Explore the technology and inventors of World War I and look at the larger question of how war spurs innovations that benefit society. Have students trace their cell phones back to the invention of radio technology and wireless communication.
- Look at engineering principles by studying trenches and examine the differences in construction between trenches in Germany and France.
- Take a historic approach to math by calculating artillery gun targets (<http://theworldwar.org/learn/kids-families/interactive-photo>).
- Discuss the profound environmental impact of the war, including the desolation of geographic locations.

Teach Students to Question, Think, and Articulate

Many of the early decision makers in the Great War used nineteenth century ideology to face twentieth century technology. Engage students in the difficult task of learning how to ask good questions, research for reliable information and clearly communicate and

advocate their critical thoughts, especially in scenarios when there is no clear answer. We do not need to teach “the right answers” in history. The present is complex—that is why teaching World War I in all its ambiguous beauty is imperative.

World War I and its aftermath defined the cultural, political, and technological landscapes of the twentieth & twenty-first centuries. One of the most pertinent questions we hear at the National World War Museum is: Why didn’t the “War to End All Wars” actually end all wars? Many times this question is asked in an accusatorial tone, looking back at the “them” of that era. But it really can only be answered by us, today’s citizens, with the benefit of education and hindsight. French Marshal Ferdinand Foch said, “The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul set on fire.” The lives, lessons, and legacies of World War I are the matches.

For lessons, lectures, and other ideas, visit <http://www.theworldwar.org>.



Trench watch. (Image courtesy of the National World War I Museum)