

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRENCHES:

WORLD WAR I FROM THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Most teachers know—and love telling—the stories that start and end World War I: Gavrilo Princip somehow succeeds in assassinating Archduke Franz Ferdinand despite a terribly botched plan; Germany gets buried under the demands of the Treaty of Versailles; and the stage is set for World War II. The battles are mostly the same tune: lots of men go over the top; few come back. Humans blast each other with artillery. The Western Front stays put. Russia drops out. The United States comes in. The war ends. Some teachers show pictures of trench foot, depending on how close to lunch the class meets.

While it can be hard to find a unique approach to the European war, this material has a number of layers that allow for fresh approaches to the subject matter to keep students engaged, and not just on the Allied side. Germany and Austria-Hungary often get treated as an enemy that remains faceless (save German Kaiser Wilhelm II's ranting). The geography of the continent, the relationships between people and countries at war and at home, and even the belligerent countries' attempts to create subversion in their enemies' camps all offer fascinating sidelights that allow a teacher to add depth to what can be a straightforward subject.

With the current emphasis on skill-based assessments, one can find a great deal of material in the background of the war. The naval arms race between Great Britain and Germany has great statistics to study. Germany's Schlieffen Plan and France's Plan XVII allow for compelling analysis of how to conquer an enemy. It is a real-life game of Risk that facilitates geography lessons: Where is the best place to invade? Why? What problems would the army face under your plan? Lessons involving preparedness allow students to analyze data and can lead to discussion about the fact that sometimes having the biggest army does not mean having the best army. Just ask Russia in 1914.

A teacher can highlight feelings of extreme nationalism or preexisting tensions between Germany and France, or Serbia and Austria-Hungary, or Russia and the Ottoman Empire, explaining how geopolitical events of the last century all created storm fronts that collided in 1914. These guys had been sharing a pretty small continent for centuries, and they were getting awfully tired of each other.

At the conflict's start, many key European figures shared complicated relationships with each other. Nothing proves this more than the Willy-Nicky telegrams, the

communications between German Kaiser Wilhelm II and Russian Tsar Nicholas II that started out as very cordial and pleading messages between cousins and ended in short, curt tones of warning. Just as intriguing were the people who assumed positions of power during the war: Prince Max of Baden, Emperor Karl of Austria, Alexander Kerensky, and Vladimir Lenin were all politicians who had a large impact on the conflict and its conclusion. The political maneuvering toward the war's end was as consequential in its own way as the initial flurry of political activity at the start of the war.

Some generals also offer a fascinating study. The German High Command's dynamics—from Erich von Falkenhayn's brutal plan to “bleed the French white” to Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff's final offensive—can make for an interesting study in leadership and planning. Further, French generals varied

in strategies, from Robert Nivelle's costly attacks to Henri Petain's measured fighting at Verdun (“firepower kills”). To understand the mentality of many of the era's commanders, one needs only to look at Field Marshal Douglas Haig, who argued in 1915 that soldiers could capture machine guns with a combination of “grit, determination, and the qualities of a stalker.” More than one general in this war had the nickname “Butcher.”

Leaders were not the only individuals who rose to prominence. Some of the most revealing accounts of soldiers' experiences and changing moods during the fighting come from poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, and Rupert Brooke. Vera Brittain represents an important case study of the tragedies an individual could face both as a nurse and as a family member of soldiers in the trenches. Works by these writers are great primary sources. Teachers might



American soldiers place a gas mask on a mule. (Image courtesy of the National World War I Museum)

create an assignment requiring students to develop a fictional dialogue between figures from all aspects of the war to integrate a variety of different experiences and perspectives.

Additionally, time and curriculum constraints can sometimes force us to look past an intriguing aspect of World War I. The map of Europe in 1871 was simpler than at any other time in history, and only a few changes in the Balkans took place between that time and 1914. As a result, many frustrated minorities stewed under the rule of empires. It was these groups that piqued the interest of leaders on both sides of the conflict, and the relationships and communications between them have the potential to hold students' attention and continue the narrative of nationalist groups' battles against ruling powers.

The Germans made several overtures to minorities or revolutionary groups in Europe. Germany sent Vladimir Lenin on a sealed train into Russia to spark a Bolshevik revolution. But Germany also made overtures to Ukrainians and Poles, in an attempt to subvert an increasingly fragile Russia. They even sent famous diplomat Roger Casement—one of the heroes in exposing the horrors of the Belgian Congo—into Ireland via submarine in a bid to spark an Irish Rebellion. The Allies were no less meddling, encouraging Slavs in Austria-Hungary to rise against the empire and also inciting uprisings in the Middle East. This worldwide chess match offers a way to align the studies of minorities and their goals that students learned about in earlier units with the Great War, giving teachers an easy method for connections across time.

At the Treaty of Versailles, many of these minorities, and even some Allied nations, were overlooked. Japan and China did not receive much of what they desired, and a Vietnamese delegation was virtually ignored. And most agreements with the Middle East were sacrificed in favor of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, a secret pact that partitioned the Ottoman Empire between Great Britain and France. The long-term effects of

this treatment would play out across the rest of the twentieth century.

Finally, the home fronts offer topics rich in potential for independent learning, or for engaging direct instruction. Great Britain and France blockaded Germany from the conflict's very beginning. Germany was not only racing the Allies, but also racing the clock in terms of food and supplies. France lost a staggering number of men at Verdun, and the British suffered equally horrifying losses at the Somme. What similarities in terms of sacrifice and loss existed between these folks and those on the home front in the United States? What did a planned economy, like the German War Materials Board under Walter Rathenau, have in common with the United States' voluntary efforts? How do letters home from the front on both sides look when placed side by side? Were the Central Powers soldiers seeing the war the same way as the Allies?

Ultimately, World War I from the European view offers a wide range of areas to explore, both in the classroom and for NHD projects. While teachers can instruct students about the big ideas of the war and some key details, there are several off-ramps to great topics that allow students to pursue interests in not only military, but also political, economic, social, and intellectual history. They can explore those topics in a wide range of differentiated ways, which means each student has the chance to make his own adventure in one of history's most important eras.

Editor's note: You can find two of Brian Weaver's lessons on World War I, focusing on technology and the life of an American infantryman, at <http://www.nhd.org/WWI.htm>.

Scan for additional resources (including links to the documents and materials) or visit <http://www.nhd.org/WWI.htm>.

