



WWI: THE WAR THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

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As an historian, I'm often asked if I could stop one event in modern history from happening, what would it be? My answer is World War I. If there had been no World War I, there would have been no Russian Revolution, no World War II, no Holocaust, no Cold War. And that doesn't even consider the millions who died in the war itself.

Following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Europe experienced an unprecedented period of economic growth. Brought about by the Industrial Revolution, this new prosperity spawned rapid developments in science, medicine, art, and political philosophy. The future of civilization never looked brighter. And then, suddenly, it all went up in flames.

The fuse was lit in June 1914, in a street in Sarajevo, Bosnia. It was there that Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist. It should have been no more than a sad footnote in history. Instead, it changed history.

Austria-Hungary, seeking to avenge the Archduke's murder, declared war on Serbia. But before taking this drastic step, it asked for—and received—a blessing from its powerful ally, Germany. Serbia, knowing that it had no chance against Austria-Hungary, called on *its* ally, Russia, to defend it. Russia agreed. To strengthen its hand, Russia solicited French support should war break out. France, ever suspicious of German intentions, assented.

Germany then made a pre-emptive move to take France out of the war. The German command, having long planned this war, invaded France through neutral Belgium. This prompted Britain to join France against Germany. Suddenly, the entire continent was engulfed in war.

No one thought the war would last four years. Very few thought it would last four *months*. Most, especially the young men of these nations, thought it would be a great adventure—a way to prove themselves. This explains why so many enlisted so enthusiastically. No one wanted to miss the excitement.

No one, it turns out, did.

The key player was Germany. Their strategy was to punch through Belgium and France and capture Paris before the French had time to react. This was the so-called Schlieffen Plan, named after the German general who conceived it. With France conquered, they would turn their attention to Russia.

That Germany thought it would actually work comes down to one man, Germany's leader,

Kaiser Wilhelm II. The Emperor of Germany from 1888 until his forced abdication in 1918, Wilhelm was a profoundly unpleasant, unstable and vicious personality, who suggested that Jews could be dealt with by gas. By 1914, he believed that Germany should not only dominate Europe, but the entire world.

Had the Schlieffen Plan worked, Germany most certainly would have. But it didn't work. The British and the French put up stiff resistance in the west. Russia did the same in the east. The losses incurred by all sides were immediate—and appalling.

The widespread use, for the first time, of barbed wire, machine guns, tanks, and, worst of all, poison gas turned the fields of France and the steppes of Russia into vast cemeteries. By 1917, the war was at a stalemate.

Who knows how long it would have stayed that way if the United States had not been drawn in? Ironically, President Woodrow Wilson had been elected largely because he promised to keep America out of “Europe’s War.” His attitude changed when Germany attacked American merchant ships in the Atlantic.

The final straw was the infamous Zimmerman Telegram in which Germany promised to give Mexico, in exchange for its military support, much of the American southwest, including Texas.

The infusion of American manpower and weaponry allowed the Allies to take the initiative. The war finally ended in November of 1918. Sixteen million people—soldiers and civilians—were dead.

Three million Russians.
2.5 million Germans.
1.7 million French.
One million British.
And 117,000 Americans.

Russia was now in the hands of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks. France and Britain were physically and morally shattered. Germany, forced into a humiliating surrender treaty at Versailles, would soon be further decimated by runaway inflation that destroyed what was left of its economy. Meanwhile, the United States retreated into isolationism.

It was pause, not a peace. The stage was being set for a new and very much worse disaster—a second World War, one that would lead to three times the deaths of the first one. It would be instigated by a madman who fought for the Kaiser and shared the same dream of world domination.

Had it not been for WWI, we would have never heard of him.

I'm Andrew Roberts for Prager University.