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Introduction

By the end of the nineteenth century, societies around the globe had been brought into a single, rapidly evolving world system as a result of what can be called the modern revolution. This system linked different regions and peoples economically, politically, and culturally. Within this system, some states and groups accumulated colossal wealth and power, while others fell into economic and political decline.

The world system was dominated by the industrialized states of Europe, which had been weak and marginal powers just a few centuries before. In the nineteenth century, however, rapid industrialization gave European states colossal economic and military power. By 1910, they ruled India and most of Africa and Southeast Asia. Japan controlled Korea and Taiwan, and the United States held the Philippines. Other states, such as China, the Ottoman Empire, and several republics of Latin America, fell within the sphere of economic and political influence of one or more of these powers. Still other regions, including North America, parts of Latin America, Siberia, and Australasia had been largely settled by immigrants of European origin. European settler minorities dominated South Africa and Algeria. European culture and science, as well as a characteristically European faith in progress and reason, also exerted a powerful influence outside Europe. These ideas were particularly attractive to elite groups who wanted to modernize their own societies.

Where industrialization did not take place, integration into the world system often meant greater economic weakness. China, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire, for example, lost much of the economic clout they had possessed between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. At the same time, peasants and artisans throughout the world found it harder to compete in international markets against manufacturers and farmers in industrialized regions, who enjoyed the advantages of high productivity and government protection of their interests.

Early in the twentieth century, rapid economic and technological change, increasing competition among powerful states, and resistance to European domination worked together to destabilize the world system. Underlying tensions and weaknesses led to a series of crises that altered the world in several important ways:

- Rapid economic growth put increasing pressure on the natural environment.
- A return to economic protectionism—expressed chiefly in high tariffs for imports—undermined global economic integration.
- Two world wars, which unleashed terrible weapons such as the atomic bomb backed by the power of industrial production, devastated Europe, Japan, and other combat zones, and helped undermine European wealth and power.
- Countries with rising economies, notably the United States, Japan, and the Soviet Union, began to challenge Europe’s economic power.
- Anti-colonial and nationalist movements began to weaken Europe’s grip on its colonies and spheres of influence.
- In the sciences and arts, new theories, attitudes, and insights eroded the confidence of late nineteenth century European thinkers. The horrors of global war provoked new ways of looking at the world and a search for new ideas beyond Europe. At the same time, new technologies of mass communication brought to prominence a modern mass culture that was no longer the preserve of elites.

Despite these wrenching changes, the industrialized regions of Europe, North America, the USSR, and Japan, which together accounted for about 75 percent of the globe’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), still dominated the system. However, it was now split into competing blocs headed by two new superpowers, the US and the USSR. The confident faith in progress, reason, and enlightened liberal government that had dominated the thought of educated people in the later nineteenth century was now gone.

The Causes and Consequences of World War I



WHY STUDY THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF WORLD WAR I?

This chapter examines the mistakes that brought the world to the battlefields of World War I. It explores how alliances were formed, and how millions of youths died defending those alliances and misspending dreams of glory. It investigates why four empires crumbled in the ashes of the war. It demonstrates how the first “industrial war” ushered in the twentieth century. Students will examine what values were worth taking into the new century, and which ones should have been left behind. It provides a foundation from which to examine many of the world’s contemporary dilemmas, especially as they followed from the war’s devastation and the Treaty of Versailles.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this chapter, students will be able to:

1. Describe and analyze various factors contributing to the outbreak of World War I.
2. Describe characteristics, goals, and aspirations of the people of the Ottoman Empire.

3. Imagine how the goals and aspirations of the combatants might have been met if the war had been avoided.
4. Analyze the Armenian holocaust and compare it to genocide of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
5. Describe the effects of nationalism in the twentieth century, and speculate about the place of nationalism in the twenty-first century.
6. Evaluate the characteristics of a good treaty as they apply or do not apply to the Treaty of Versailles.

TIME AND MATERIALS

This chapter is divided into four lessons. Each lesson should take two or more class days, depending on classroom circumstances. If time is limited, parts of each lesson may be used at the discretion of the instructor.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Do you have a relative who participated in World War I? Perhaps a great-grandfather? Very few World War I veterans are still living. According to Veterans Affairs Department information for 2005, there are about 24.3 million veterans of American wars living today, but fewer than 50 of these are World War I veterans.

World War I was one of the first events in modern history that was both concentrated in time and global in scope. And it was a hugely important turning point in world history. Consider the world scene in 1914, the year the war broke out.

Europe was divided into a number of sovereign nation-states, but in some respects it still constituted a single cultural community. Even though there were many different church denominations, Christianity gave Europeans some generally shared ideas about the supernatural, morality, and destiny. European states had different sorts of governments. France and Portugal were the only republics. Most countries were monarchies, many of them constitutional monarchies such as Great Britain, some autocracies such as Russia. People could travel quite easily from one European country to another, and no one had to show a passport. (Today, the European Community is moving to eliminate passports between countries once again.) People traveled widely within Europe, especially using the railway networks that linked most countries together. Europeans spoke a variety of languages, not a single common one, but French served as the language of diplomacy and scholarly exchange throughout Europe.

Everyday culture was quite similar all across Europe, especially in the cities. Here, people tended to dress alike, eat many of the same foods, and enjoy the same art and music. The unity of civilization in Europe might be symbolized by the architecture of three sorts of public buildings. One was the railway station, which represented European communication and industry. The second was the town hall, which typified public participation in government. The third was

LESSON 1

Schools of Thought: Causes of World War I

Introduction

Scholars disagree about the causes of World War I. Some major factors to consider are:

- **Nationalism.** Political leaders believed in a world of independent nation-states, but also in defending and pursuing the interests of their own national community against all rival nation-states.
- **The balance of power and imperialism.** In the imperialist conquests of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conquerors believed they were playing a “zero-sum game.” The leaders of each state believed that conquerable territory and resources were limited and finite and that whatever gains a rival nation-state made would be to their loss.
- **Interests of individual nations.** Individual states believed that they had something to gain nationally and internationally in pursuing and winning a general war. But also, the two alliance blocs formed before the war did not limit conflict but caused it to mushroom in scope.
- **Arms buildup.** If the major powers had not built stockpiles of weapons—from machine guns to battleships—the war would not have started in the summer of 1914. Without huge weapons reserves, the powers would have taken a year to mobilize, long enough to negotiate a peaceful solution.

Activities

Have students read Student Handout 1.1.1 for a general overview of each school of thought. Have students select one or two which seem most credible to them. Explain that historians disagree on which school is most valid. Narrow the choice down to one school of thought and seek like-minded students to form a fish bowl discussion group.

Fish Bowl: Have students select the school of thought which they feel is most credible.

They should team up with those with whom they agree and form a fish bowl discussion group about the ideas that brought each person to this conclusion. Have each group engage in a fish bowl discussion as other students in the class observe and ask questions. Center discussion on the following questions:

- What are the real vs. the rhetorical issues about the causes of World War I?
- Why do you feel the school of thought you have selected is most credible?
- Why are the others less convincing?

Analysis: In discussion with the entire class, analyze the quality of arguments and presentation made by each fish bowl group. Use the following factors as criteria:

- Quality of historical evidence that the group brought to bear on the discussion.
- Number of group members who participated and how much.
- Quality of discussion in stimulating interest and thought.
- Ability of group members to think on their feet.
- Ability of group members to give insightful answers to audience questions.