

THE LONG ROAD TO WORLD WAR I

A Historical Survey of Civilization, Nations, and the Origins of the Great War

Union of Saints Research Division

Historical Overview

This document is intended as a general educational survey of the major historical eras and events that influenced the development of modern civilization and ultimately contributed to the circumstances surrounding World War I.

The document provides a chronological understanding for continued historical study, discussion, and research.

History is best understood as a continuous story rather than as a collection of isolated events. World War I did not arise from a single assassination or diplomatic dispute alone. It followed thousands of years of political development, technological innovation, military evolution, religious change, economic transformation, and international competition.

PART I

HUMAN ORIGINS AND THE FIRST CIVILIZATIONS

Prehistory

Before Written Records

c. 300,000 BCE–3,500 BCE

The earliest period of human history occurred before the development of written records.

Major developments included:

- Early modern humans (*Homo sapiens*)
- Hunter-gatherer societies

- Development of language and culture
- The Stone Age
- The Agricultural Revolution, beginning around 10,000 BCE
- Formation of permanent villages and settlements

The Agricultural Revolution allowed human communities to cultivate crops, domesticate animals, and establish increasingly permanent societies.

Ancient Civilizations

c. 3,500 BCE–500 CE

The establishment of permanent settlements eventually led to the development of cities, organized governments, systems of writing, laws, trade networks, and large civilizations.

Mesopotamia

c. 3,500 BCE

Mesopotamia is often called the **Cradle of Civilization**.

Major developments included:

- The first cities
- Writing through cuneiform
- Written law codes
- Irrigation systems
- Organized governments

Mesopotamian civilizations developed between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers and played an important role in the early history of government, agriculture, religion, and written communication.

Ancient Egypt

c. 3,100 BCE

Ancient Egypt developed along the Nile River and became one of history's most enduring civilizations.

Ancient Egypt was known for:

- Pharaohs
 - Pyramids
 - Hieroglyphics
 - Advanced engineering
 - Nile River agriculture and civilization
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Indus Valley Civilization

c. 2,600 BCE

The Indus Valley Civilization developed in areas that are now part of Pakistan and northwestern India.

It was known for:

- Carefully planned cities
 - Advanced sewer systems
 - Extensive trade networks
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Ancient China

Major Chinese dynasties included:

- Xia, traditionally dated
- Shang
- Zhou
- Qin
- Han

Major Chinese contributions included:

- Paper
- The compass
- Gunpowder, developed during a later period
- Silk
- Civil-service traditions

PART II

THE CLASSICAL WORLD

Ancient Greece

c. 800–146 BCE

Ancient Greece made lasting contributions to philosophy, political thought, science, mathematics, literature, and the arts.

Major contributions included:

- Democracy in Athens
- Philosophy
- Mathematics
- Theater
- Science

Notable philosophers included:

- Socrates
- Plato
- Aristotle

Roman Republic and Roman Empire

509 BCE–476 CE

Western Roman Empire

Rome developed one of the ancient world's most influential political and military civilizations.

Roman achievements included:

- Roads
- Engineering
- Republican government during the earlier period

- Roman law
- Military organization

Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire during this period and later became one of the most influential religions in Europe and the wider world.

PART III

THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

The Middle Ages

c. 500–1500

The Middle Ages followed the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

During this period, Europe experienced:

- Feudalism
- Castles
- Kingdoms
- Expansion of Christianity
- Growth of Islam
- The Viking Age
- The Crusades from 1096 to 1291

Major developments included:

- Charlemagne's coronation in 800
 - Expansion of the Mongol Empire across Eurasia during the thirteenth century
 - The Black Death from 1347 to 1351, which killed a large proportion of Europe's population
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PART IV

RENAISSANCE, EXPLORATION, AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE

The Renaissance

c. 1300–1600

The Renaissance was a period of renewed interest in classical learning, art, science, literature, and humanism.

Major developments included:

- Art
- Science
- Literature
- Humanism

Important Renaissance figures included:

- Leonardo da Vinci
 - Michelangelo
 - Nicolaus Copernicus
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The Age of Exploration

1400s–1700s

European exploration expanded connections among continents and significantly increased international trade.

Major explorers included:

- Christopher Columbus
- Vasco da Gama
- Ferdinand Magellan

This era expanded global commerce and led European powers to establish colonies in many parts of the world.

The Protestant Reformation

1500s

The Protestant Reformation reshaped Christianity throughout Europe.

Beginning in 1517:

- Religious divisions increased
- Wars of religion occurred in parts of Europe
- New Protestant denominations emerged

The Scientific Revolution

1500s–1700s

The Scientific Revolution transformed human understanding of the natural world.

Major advances occurred in:

- Modern astronomy
- Physics
- Mathematics
- Medicine
- Scientific methodology

Important figures included:

- Galileo Galilei
- Isaac Newton

The Enlightenment

1600s–1700s

Enlightenment thinkers emphasized:

- Reason
- Individual rights

- Constitutional government
- Separation of powers
- Scientific inquiry

Enlightenment ideas influenced later political movements and the development of constitutional governments.

PART V

THE AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

Major Revolutionary Movements

Major events included:

- The American Revolution, 1775–1783
- The French Revolution, beginning in 1789
- The Napoleonic Wars, 1799–1815

These revolutions transformed ideas concerning government, citizenship, political representation, liberty, and national identity.

The French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars

1789–1815

Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power following the French Revolution.

Major developments included:

- European monarchies were challenged
- Revolutionary ideas of nationalism and republicanism spread
- Napoleon conquered large parts of Europe
- Nearly every major European power fought against France

The Napoleonic Wars ended with Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

Congress of Vienna

1815

Following the Napoleonic Wars, European powers met at the Congress of Vienna to restore stability.

Major participants included:

- Austria
- Britain
- Prussia
- Russia
- France

The principal goals were to:

- Restore monarchies
- Prevent the rise of another ruler like Napoleon
- Maintain a balance of power in Europe

For several decades afterward, Europe experienced relatively few continent-wide wars.

PART VI

NATIONALISM, INDUSTRIALIZATION, AND EMPIRE

National Unification Movements

1820s–1870s

Many peoples and regions pursued national independence or political unification.

Examples included:

- Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire
- Italian unification
- German unification under Prussian leadership

Nationalism became one of the strongest political forces in nineteenth-century Europe.

The Industrial Revolution

Late 1700s–Early 1900s

The Industrial Revolution transformed economies, societies, transportation, communications, and warfare.

Major innovations included:

- Steam engines
- Railroads
- Telegraphs
- Modern factories
- Steel production
- Electricity
- Modern banking and finance

Military technology also advanced through:

- Rifled artillery
- Machine guns
- Ironclad warships
- Modern systems of logistics

Industrialization greatly increased the ability of governments to produce weapons, transport troops, communicate over long distances, and sustain large armies.

European Colonial Expansion

During the nineteenth century, European powers expanded their overseas empires across:

- Africa
- Asia
- Oceania
- Parts of the Middle East

Major colonial powers included:

- Britain
- France
- Germany
- Belgium
- The Netherlands
- Portugal
- Spain
- Russia

Competition for colonies, resources, trade routes, and international influence contributed to growing rivalries among European states.

The Crimean War

1853–1856

The Crimean War involved:

- Russia
- Britain
- France
- The Ottoman Empire
- Sardinia

The war highlighted:

- Russia's military weaknesses
 - The increasing importance of modern communications and logistics
 - The strategic importance of the Black Sea region
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The American Civil War

1861–1865

Although fought in North America, the American Civil War demonstrated the destructive potential of industrial warfare.

Important military developments included:

- Use of railroads for troop transportation
- Telegraph communications
- Ironclad warships
- Trench fortifications during some campaigns
- Large-scale military mobilization

Military observers from other nations later studied aspects of the conflict.

German Unification

1871

Following Prussia's victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871, many German states were unified into the German Empire.

Otto von Bismarck played a central role in German unification.

The establishment of a unified Germany significantly changed the European balance of power.

Major effects included:

- Germany became one of Europe's strongest industrial and military powers
 - France sought to recover Alsace-Lorraine, which it had lost to Germany
 - The political and military balance of power shifted dramatically
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PART VII

THE ROAD TO WORLD WAR I

Long-Term Conditions

The years preceding World War I were marked by:

- Rising international tensions
- Military competition
- Nationalism
- Imperial rivalry

- Expanding armed forces
- Complex systems of alliances
- Repeated diplomatic crises

World War I did not arise from one event alone. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand served as the immediate trigger, but it occurred within a wider environment of political, military, economic, and strategic tension.

The Alliance System

European powers created military alliances intended to discourage aggression and preserve the balance of power.

However, these alliances also meant that a conflict involving one country could quickly involve several others.

Triple Alliance

- Germany
- Austria-Hungary
- Italy, until 1915

Triple Entente

- France
 - Russia
 - United Kingdom
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Imperial Competition

European empires competed for colonies and influence in:

- Africa
- Asia
- The Middle East

Major competing powers included:

- Britain
- France

- Germany
- Belgium
- Russia
- Italy

These imperial rivalries increased diplomatic tensions.

Militarism

Many European countries expanded their armed forces.

Examples included:

- Germany developing a powerful army and navy
- Britain expanding and maintaining the Royal Navy
- Russia modernizing its military following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905

Military planning became increasingly detailed. Governments believed that rapid mobilization would be essential if war began.

This created pressure for national leaders to act quickly during a crisis because delays in mobilization could place their countries at a military disadvantage.

Nationalism

Nationalist movements grew throughout Europe.

Examples included:

- Serbia supporting the independence and unity of South Slavic peoples
 - Ethnic groups within Austria-Hungary seeking greater autonomy or independence
 - France desiring the return of Alsace-Lorraine
 - Germany promoting national power and prestige
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The Balkans: The Powder Keg of Europe

The Balkan Peninsula became one of Europe's most unstable regions.

The decline of Ottoman influence created a political power vacuum.

Competing interests included:

- Serbia
- Austria-Hungary
- Russia
- Bulgaria
- Greece

Conflicts in the region created fears that a local confrontation could expand into a wider European war.

The Balkan Wars

1912–1913

The Balkan Wars weakened Ottoman control in southeastern Europe and increased tensions between Serbia and Austria-Hungary.

Serbia emerged from the wars larger and more confident, alarming the leaders of Austria-Hungary.

Other Important Developments Before 1914

Russo-Japanese War

1904–1905

Japan's victory weakened Russia and encouraged Russian military reforms.

First Moroccan Crisis

1905–1906

Germany challenged French influence in Morocco, increasing tensions among Germany, France, and Britain.

Bosnian Crisis

1908

Austria-Hungary formally annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, angering Serbia and Russia.

Second Moroccan Crisis

1911

A second dispute over Morocco further strained relations among the European powers.

Rapid Industrialization

European countries expanded:

- Railroads
- Heavy industry
- Arms production
- Military transportation networks

These developments made it possible to mobilize larger armies and move them more rapidly.

The Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

June 28, 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Sophie, were assassinated in Sarajevo.

The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, was a Bosnian Serb nationalist associated with a Serbian nationalist movement.

Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia for the crisis and issued an ultimatum.

The July Crisis

Following the assassination:

1. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.
2. Russia mobilized in support of Serbia.
3. Germany declared war on Russia.
4. Germany declared war on France.
5. Germany invaded Belgium.
6. Britain declared war on Germany after Belgian neutrality was violated.

Within weeks, much of Europe was at war.

PART VIII

RUSSIAN OFFENSIVES AGAINST GERMANY IN WORLD WAR I

Russian Entry into the War

During World War I, the Russian Empire attacked German forces primarily on the Eastern Front from August 1914 until the Russian Revolution in 1917.

Russia entered the conflict after Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, a Russian ally.

Germany declared war on Russia on August 1, 1914.

Initial Invasion of East Prussia

The first major Russian offensive targeted German East Prussia.

Russia mobilized quickly because of earlier military reforms and launched a pincer movement in August 1914.

Russian armies advanced from the east and southeast in an effort to trap German forces commanded by General Maximilian von Prittwitz.

Early battles included:

- Battle of Stallupönen
- Battle of Gumbinnen

Russian successes in these early engagements temporarily raised morale.

The Eastern Front

August 1914–March 1918

The Eastern Front involved Russia fighting against:

- Germany
- Austria-Hungary
- Later, the Ottoman Empire

The front extended across an enormous geographical area and required extensive manpower, transportation, supplies, and military coordination.

Siege of Przemyśl

1914–1915

The Siege of Przemyśl was a prolonged campaign in Galicia.

Russian forces surrounded and eventually captured the Austro-Hungarian fortress after an extended resistance.

The siege represented one of Russia's significant early successes against Austria-Hungary.

Gorlice–Tarnów Offensive

May 1915

The Gorlice–Tarnów Offensive was a major German-led counteroffensive.

German and Austro-Hungarian forces broke through Russian lines and forced the Russian army into the **Great Retreat**.

The offensive:

- Severely weakened the Tsarist army
 - Forced Russia to abandon extensive territory
 - Exposed weaknesses in Russian supplies and military coordination
 - Increased military and political pressure on the Russian government
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The Attack of the Dead

Osowiec Fortress, August 1915

One of the most famous incidents on the Eastern Front occurred at Osowiec Fortress.

German forces used poison gas against the Russian defenders.

Gas-poisoned Russian soldiers, some of whom appeared close to death, launched a counterattack against the advancing German troops.

The unexpected appearance of the wounded defenders caused panic and contributed to a German withdrawal.

The incident became known as the **Attack of the Dead**.

Brusilov Offensive

June–September 1916

The Brusilov Offensive was one of Russia's largest and most successful offensives during World War I.

Russian forces launched a massive attack against Austro-Hungarian positions.

The offensive:

- Shattered large portions of the Austro-Hungarian defensive line
- Inflicted severe casualties on Austria-Hungary
- Forced Germany to send reinforcements to support its ally
- Temporarily restored confidence in the Russian military
- Reduced pressure on other Allied forces

Despite its initial success, the offensive failed to produce a decisive defeat of Germany.

Russia also suffered heavy casualties and struggled to replace soldiers, equipment, and supplies.

Russian Military Tactics and Difficulties

Russian offensives frequently relied upon:

- Large-scale troop movements
- Artillery barrages
- Mass mobilization
- Attacks across broad fronts

Russian operations were frequently hampered by:

- Poor logistical support
- Supply shortages
- Coordination problems
- Inadequate transportation
- The immense size of the Eastern Front

- Heavy casualties
 - Political and economic instability within Russia
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The Russian Revolution

1917

Russia's military difficulties contributed to political and social unrest.

In 1917, revolutionary movements overthrew the imperial government.

The Bolsheviks later seized power and sought to end Russia's participation in the war.

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

March 1918

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk formally ended Russia's participation in World War I.

Russia surrendered extensive territories and withdrew from the conflict.

Germany was temporarily able to transfer troops from the Eastern Front to the Western Front.

Outcome of the Eastern Front

Russia launched numerous attacks and offensives, including operations in:

- East Prussia
- Galicia
- The Carpathian Mountains
- Austro-Hungarian territory

However, Russia was unable to achieve a decisive victory over Germany.

The Eastern Front developed into a prolonged war of attrition and caused enormous casualties.

Russia's military setbacks, economic difficulties, supply shortages, political instability, and internal revolution ultimately led to its withdrawal from the war.

Russian forces actively fought and repeatedly attacked Germany and its allies beginning with the invasion of East Prussia in 1914 and continuing through major offensives until 1917.

Despite significant campaigns and temporary victories, Russia was unable to turn the Eastern Front decisively in its favor.

PART IX

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Date or Period	Historical Development
Before c. 3,500 BCE	Prehistory
c. 10,000 BCE	Agricultural Revolution
c. 3,500 BCE	Mesopotamian civilization develops
c. 3,100 BCE	Ancient Egyptian civilization develops
c. 2,600 BCE	Indus Valley Civilization
c. 800–146 BCE	Ancient Greek civilization
509 BCE–476 CE	Roman Republic and Western Roman Empire
c. 500–1500	Middle Ages
800	Charlemagne crowned
1096–1291	Crusades
1200s	Expansion of the Mongol Empire
1347–1351	Black Death
c. 1300–1600	Renaissance
1400s–1700s	Age of Exploration
1517	Protestant Reformation begins
1500s–1700s	Scientific Revolution
1600s–1700s	Enlightenment
1775–1783	American Revolution
1789	French Revolution begins
1799–1815	Napoleonic Wars
1815	Congress of Vienna
1821–1830	Greek War of Independence
1830s–1900s	Industrial Revolution accelerates
1848	Revolutions across Europe
1853–1856	Crimean War
1861–1865	American Civil War
1861–1871	Italian unification
1870–1871	Franco-Prussian War
1871	German Empire established

Date or Period	Historical Development
1882	Triple Alliance formed
1894	Franco-Russian Alliance
1904	Entente Cordiale between Britain and France
1904–1905	Russo-Japanese War
1905–1906	First Moroccan Crisis
1907	Triple Entente completed
1908	Bosnian Crisis
1911	Second Moroccan Crisis
1912–1913	Balkan Wars
June 28, 1914	Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand
July–August 1914	July Crisis and outbreak of World War I
August 1914	Russian invasion of East Prussia
1914–1915	Siege of Przemyśl
May 1915	Gorlice–Tarnów Offensive
August 1915	Attack of the Dead at Osowiec Fortress
June–September 1916	Brusilov Offensive
1917	Russian Revolution
March 1918	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
1914–1918	World War I

The Opening Campaigns of World War I: Why Russia Invaded Germany and Why Germany Invaded France

The opening campaigns of World War I were largely formed by military alliances, strategic planning, and long-standing political rivalries rather than by one nation suddenly attacking another without context.

After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914, Russia began mobilizing its military in support of Serbia. Germany, which was allied with Austria-Hungary, viewed Russian mobilization as a direct military threat and declared war on Russia on **August 1, 1914**.

Germany also expected that France, Russia's military ally since the 1890s, would enter the conflict. German leaders believed that if they fought Russia, they would inevitably have to fight France as well. They therefore sought to avoid a prolonged two-front war by defeating France first before turning their full attention eastward against Russia.

This strategy became known as the **Schlieffen Plan**. German military planners believed Russia's vast army would require several weeks to fully mobilize, providing Germany with a brief opportunity to defeat France quickly. Rather than attacking directly across the heavily fortified Franco-German border, Germany planned to advance through neutral Belgium, sweep around the French defenses, capture Paris, and force a rapid French surrender. Germany declared war on France on **August 3, 1914**, and invaded Belgium the following day.

Germany's invasion of Belgium had significant consequences. Belgium's neutrality had been guaranteed by Britain under the **1839 Treaty of London**, and Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality prompted Britain to declare war on Germany on **August 4, 1914**, expanding the conflict into a wider European war.

Russia, meanwhile, understood Germany's strategy and sought to relieve pressure on its French ally. Rather than waiting for Germany to defeat France, Russia mobilized far more quickly than German planners had anticipated. In **August 1914**, Russian forces invaded **German East Prussia**, opening the Eastern Front only days after Germany had declared war.

Russia invaded East Prussia for three principal reasons. First, Germany had already declared war on Russia, making Germany an active belligerent rather than a neutral nation. Second, Russia was honoring its military alliance with France by attempting to divert German forces away from the Western Front, thereby reducing pressure on the French Army. Third, Russian military planning called for offensive operations against both Germany and Austria-Hungary, and East Prussia was the closest German territory to the Russian border. Russia therefore launched a two-army pincer offensive designed to encircle the German defenders.

The Russian advance initially succeeded in forcing Germany to divert attention and troops toward the Eastern Front, disrupting German expectations that Russia would mobilize slowly. However, the two Russian armies were poorly coordinated. German commanders exploited these weaknesses and decisively defeated one Russian army at the **Battle of Tannenberg** in late August 1914, one of the war's most significant early victories for Germany.

Although Russia suffered a major defeat at Tannenberg, its rapid mobilization had already affected Germany's broader strategy by compelling Germany to commit resources to the Eastern Front earlier than planned. Historians continue to debate the extent to which these troop movements influenced Germany's campaign in France, but Russia's unexpectedly rapid advance clearly disrupted German assumptions about the pace of the war.

In summary, Germany invaded France not because France had invaded Germany, but because German leaders believed war with France was unavoidable due to France's alliance with Russia and sought a quick victory before Russia could fully mobilize. Russia, in turn, invaded Germany because Germany had declared war on Russia, because Russia was fulfilling its alliance obligations to France, and because Russian leaders hoped that an immediate offensive into East Prussia would force Germany to divert troops away from France and relieve pressure on the Western Front. These interconnected strategic decisions rapidly transformed a regional Balkan crisis into a continent-wide war.

CONCLUSION

World War I represented the culmination of centuries of political, economic, technological, military, religious, and ideological developments.

From the earliest permanent settlements and ancient civilizations to the development of empires, organized governments, international trade, scientific discovery, industrialization, nationalism, colonialism, and military alliances, each historical era contributed to the formation of the modern world.

The First World War did not develop from a single event alone. It arose within an international environment shaped by imperial competition, militarism, nationalism, alliance obligations, industrial warfare, and repeated political crises.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand served as the immediate trigger, but the foundations of the conflict had developed over generations.

Russia played a major role in the war from its beginning. Russian forces invaded East Prussia, fought major campaigns throughout the Eastern Front, captured the fortress at Przemyśl, endured the Gorlice–Tarnów breakthrough and Great Retreat, defended Osowiec Fortress, and launched the enormous Brusilov Offensive.

Although Russia achieved several important military successes, heavy casualties, logistical weaknesses, economic instability, and internal revolution ultimately forced it to withdraw from the war.

This historical overview is intended to serve as a foundational educational resource for continued study, research, and discussion within the **Union of Saints Research Division**.