

1200 UNIT 7:

Global Conflict

1914 to 1945 CE



Unit 7 Overview

The First World War was not a reversal of the trends of the long nineteenth century, but rather their product. Nationalism, industrialization, capitalism, and imperialism all helped cause the war and its immense suffering. The grandsons of those who fought in the First World War went back to war only a few decades later, in an even more devastating conflict, and one in which great violence was aimed at civilian populations. How does our understanding of these two wars—and the peace between—change when we consider them together, as one thirty-year period of conflict?



0:01

Kim Lochner and Colby Burnett in conversation. Their videos are filmed separately and shown next to one another on the screen.

Kim's video gets larger as Colby's shrinks.

Greetings from across the globe! I'm really looking forward to this unit.

Yeah, it's pretty action-packed with all the wars and invasions and hostility.

Sorry to interrupt, but is your window taking up more space than usual?

Yes, I've changed your appeasement settings. Don't worry - it'll stop soon.

I guess that's okay... Hey! It's not stopping!

Huh, appeasement never works.

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, the emperor of this overview video.

Hi, I'm Colby Burnett and I know the editor. We're introducing Unit 7: Global Conflict 1914 to 1945 CE.

0:44

Photographs and artwork depict industrial factories and technology

A painting shows a violent battle, in another, people are shining the boots of military officers seated above them.

In May 1914, the transformations of the long 19th century were full of promise. Liberal and democratic revolutions had brought representative government to significant parts of the world for the first time. The Industrial Revolution promised efficient production, cheaper goods, and faster communication and travel.

Yet, the effects of these revolutions were unequal for different people in different places, industrialization allowed some countries to control many others through vast overseas empires. Militant nationalism helped inspire competition among those empires. But, the long 19th century was about to end in a way that would bring all its progress into question.

1:30

An artwork depicts the assassination of the archduke; video footage of a tank driving through a destroyed and bombed out city. More video footage shows war scenes and soldiers.

On June 28th, 1914, Gavrilo Princip would assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Less than two months later, the First World War would erupt. The most powerful countries in the world would turn all of their nationalist passions, money, factories, railroads, and steam ships to the task of killing each other. From 1914 to 1918 many suffered through the First World War. The terrible trench warfare, gas weapons, artillery, and grinding conflict left a generation of men dead. The economies of major world powers and their colonies were destroyed. It seemed impossible that a war of that magnitude could ever happen again, so it was often referred to as the war to end all wars.

2:21

Video footage shows soldiers marching, moving off a ship, and civilians running down the street.

Only a few decades later, however, the world would start back down the road to conflict. The children, grandchildren of those who had fought in the First World War would become the soldiers, sailors, doctors, and nurses on the front lines of the Second World War. And this second war would cause even more death and destruction than its predecessor.

The screen reads: First World War: 1914-1918 Interwar: 1919-1938 Second World War: 1939-1945

Photographs show crowds of people outside of establishments and protesting

3:34

Photo montage of various government meetings taking place

4:15

A photo of women standing in line, holding signs that read "We demand jobs!"; other photographs show meetings of fascist leaders, such as Hitler.

4:54

Photographs of the League of Nations, a democratic meeting and alliance.

A map shows the locations of the atrocities that took place as a part of and around the second World War – the atrocities were widespread.

Most history textbooks divide the first and Second World Wars into two units. But what if we look at the whole period between 1914 and 1945 as a single, thirty-year period of conflict? In this way, the years between the two periods look like a brief interlude than a period of actual peace. It's as if the combatants were just taking a moment to catch their breath.

The problems left by the first war revealed a broken global system. They included resentful defeated powers, victorious states squabbling over the spoils, a global economic system hobbled by war reparations, and widespread trauma. From this perspective the Second World War looks inevitable. It seems like a logical result of the world's failure to solve these problems in the 1920s and 1930s.

Viewed through the communities frame, this period looks like a struggle between the different views of how we govern ourselves. After World War I, ideas about democracy and international cooperation clash with new, radical ideas about nationalism. The peace process did not discredit militant nationalism as a war-mongering ideology. Ultimately, it strengthened it. A new wave of thinking of the state as community emerged. It was very nationalist and authoritarian, meaning it required strict obedience. These new forms of nationalism depended on oppressive and discriminatory ideas about race.

Another way to understand the causes of conflict is to look through the production and distribution frame. Economic troubles, like the Great Depression beginning in 1929, drove people to look for someone to blame. Authoritarian political parties promised economic growth at the price of individual freedoms. After making alliances with wealthy business leaders and corporations, this was particular true of fascist parties in Germany and Italy. Once these parties gained power, they kept it by instituting popular policies of hyper-nationalism and discrimination against minorities.

Organizations for global cooperation tried to hold back these movements. The most extensive of these was the League of Nations, the world's first international political forum. But they failed and their failure set the scene for the horrors of the Second World War.

These horrors included the slaughter of Chinese civilians by the Japanese army, the deliberate starvation and oppression of populations in the Ukraine and Byelorussia by the Soviet Union, the Italian use of gas on Ethiopian civilians, the concentrated bombing of Spanish cities by Italian and German fascists during the Spanish Civil War, and the Allied fire bombing of German and Japanese cities, and finally the Nazi extermination camps in Germany and German-occupied Europe.

In this unit we ask the key question, "What caused the global conflicts and atrocities from 1914 to 1945, and how did people experience this period of global war?"

5:57

Chart shows the number of democracies increasing between 1900 and 1920 and then decreasing dramatically after 1930. The chart reads: "Democracy: the system of government in which all or many people participate in governing or electing representatives."

One method we can use to identify the causes of conflict is by looking at data. You can revisit this chart showing the number of democracies across the world at the time. You may remember we looked at this data in Unit 4 and we saw the number of democracies rising across the 19th century. But then the number levels off before suddenly dropping dramatically in the 1930s.

This chart defines democracy as a system that has institutions in which individuals can play a political role, voting and expressing their preferences. This definition requires that the people in charge are kept under some control by courts, journalists, and other institutions. Clearly, the number of countries that were democracies by this measure were decreasing in the 1930s as authoritarianism rose.

6:47

Photographs of the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. Both photos show many men gathered together in large rooms, sitting in an orderly fashion.

We can also explore the causes and experiences of this Thirty-year conflict by scale switching. We can zoom in to explore smaller stories. The Treaty of Versailles which ended the First World War also created the League of Nations. We established its headquarters in the neutral country of Switzerland. Here on the shores of Lake Geneva delegates from many of the world's nations met in the hopes of creating a better future. During the 1920s, the League passed treaties that sought to dictate the rules of war and protect civilians as well as wounded and captured prisoners. These would be the Geneva Conventions. But soon, authoritarian leaders would begin to test the League, challenging its authority.

7:32

A photograph of Emperor Haile Selassie arriving in Geneva

In June 1936, ruler of Ethiopia, Emperor Haile Selassie, arrived in the newly constructed Palace of Nations in Geneva. He was there to appeal to the League for protection against one of those challenges. Kim, help me out here.

Yeah, this part's tricky, so let's team up. Right, Selassie's nation was under siege. In the 1930s, Ethiopia was one of the few remaining independent African nations.

Photographs depict the invasion of Ethiopia by the Italian empire

Benito Mussolini, the fascist leader of Italy wanted to expand his empire, and in 1935 he had invaded Ethiopia. Italy's industrial military gave it a distinct advantage in the conflict. So Selassie fled to Geneva to seek the League's intervention. He asserted that the invasion was a violation of international law and accused the Italians of using mustard gas, which was banned under the Geneva Conventions.

8:28

A photo and video footage of Selassie speaking to the League of Nations.

In his speech to the delegates in the Palace of Nations, Selassie warned that the stakes of this conflict reach beyond Ethiopia's borders. Colby, can you read what he said? Here is it.

"It is international morality that is at stake. Have the signatures appended to a Treaty value only in so far as the signatory Powers have a personal, direct and immediate interest involved?... At a time when my people are threatened with extermination, when the support of the League may ward off the final blow, may I be allowed to speak with complete frankness... Should it happen that a strong Government finds it may with impunity destroy a weak people, then the hour strikes for that weak people to appeal to the League of Nations to give its judgement in all freedom. God and history will remember your judgement."

9:25

Photographs show contrasting images: people protesting the murder of Ethiopian people by fascist governments, and authoritarian leaders speaking to crowds.

Photographs of a group of victims, held prisoner, standing close together; a man picks up a handful of rings, assumed to be left by those that were murdered.

10:30

After his speech, Selassie warned the world, “it is us today, it will be you tomorrow.” His warning was ignored. The League failed to take action because its delegates feared that angering Mussolini would drive him to ally with Hitler’s Germany. Meanwhile, Mussolini declared himself Emperor of Ethiopia and withdrew Italy from the League of Nations. The League’s failure to act exposed its weakness. Authoritarians in Germany and Japan were now emboldened to continue their own aggressive expansions, confident they would not be challenged. This impunity helped produce the horror surrounding the Second World War in which over 70 million died.

Of these, 12 million were murdered by Germany’s Nazi state and the Holocaust. The dead included not only Jews, but also Roma, Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, political prisoners, disabled people, and citizens of Eastern European states.

Genocide. The attempt to extinguish entire peoples was one of the principal horrors of the Second World War. The war, and its horrors, was arguably the result of the unresolved conflicts of the three decades that preceded it. How would it influence the decades to come?

Okay, I finally get what you were doing with that appeasement settings thing earlier.

Oh. You do?

Yeah, I mean sure. At first it just looked like you were hogging all the screen time. But now I see you were illustrating how the Ally strategies of appeasing fascists in the 1930s was doomed to fail.

Yeah. That’s totally what I was doing. I am such a clever teacher. (music playing)