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WHP AP | Unit 7 Overview | World History Project

Nationalism and fascism are two militant ideologies attributed with the world wars of the 20th century. But, as always in world history, there's a lot more to the story of these brutal wars. Some people—on all sides of these conflicts—questioned the justification of war and the United States' entry into it. These people, known as Pacifists, would go on to beg important questions on the rationalization of wars to come.



0:13

Narrator speaking in head bubble; images of the world wars

Text bubble: total war; text bubble: Pacifism

Do me a favor. Close your eyes and imagine World War I and World War II. What comes to mind? Tanks, planes, bombs, soldiers in green and grey shooting at each other in the name of democracy or fascism? Two all-out wars in which the whole world dedicated itself to the task of destruction?

You're not wrong.

But there's more to this story. Militant ideologies like nationalism and fascism get a lot of attention and narratives about the world wars, and rightly so. These were history's first "total wars"—wars in which the entire engine of society is devoted to the task of making war.

But there is another ideology that we rarely associate with this period from 1914 to 1945: Pacifism.

1:03

Photos of various war-leaders; photos and text bubble: Jeannette Rankin

Certainly, Pacifism didn't win the day. However, people on all sides of these conflicts argued against war, and their stories can also tell us about historical trends in this era of violent conflict.

So, while this unit will highlight war leader figures like Kaiser Wilhelm and Winston Churchill, for this video, we're going to focus on a woman named Janette Rankin.

Unless you're from Rankin's home state of Montana, that name might not ring a bell. But this local hero has great national significance, so let's ring that bell now.

Jeanette Rankin was the first woman to serve in the United States Congress and the only woman Montana has ever elected to congress. In fact, she was elected in 1916, four years before women even won the right to vote in national elections.

1:58

Photo of congress in session; photo of Rankin

And finally, she was the only U.S. congressperson to vote against American entry into both world wars.

Her very first vote in Congress, on April 6, 1917, was her vote against U.S. involvement in World War I. Along with about 50 other congressional members, Rankin refused to give her consent. She said, "I want to support my country, but I cannot vote for war." Faithful to her principles, she insisted, "We cannot settle disputes by eliminating human beings."

Text bubble: Unit Overview; transitional music

Most leaders of the 20th century seem to have been of a very different mind. But, as Jeannette Rankin predicted, the two world wars would raise as many questions as they solved.

Text bubble: Unit 7: Global Conflict

Hi, I'm Rachel Hansen, and this is Unit 7: Global Conflict 1900 to the Present.

2:53

Text bubble: the war to end all wars; devastating images of the wars

In the summer of 1914, the great industrialized empires of the world began a mighty struggle on a global scale in what some called "the war to end all wars."

Pacifists like Jeanette Rankin doubted that claim.

Text bubble: What caused global conflict?

And sure enough, 20 years after the end of the first war, a second, even more devastating conflict erupted. In this unit, we'll ask: Why did the nations of the world engage in these global conflicts?

Photo of a military parade; photo of people at an event; painting of revolutionaries

3:42

Photo of a steamship

World war I images;

Our story starts in May 1914, a month in which the transformations of the long 19th century still seemed to offer a world of promise for some. Political revolutions had created new nations and democratic governments in some parts of the world

The Industrial Revolution promised efficient production, cheaper goods, and faster communication and travel.

Yet, not everyone shared in these promises, and from 1914 to 1918, all the promise of the long 19th century collapsed into global conflict. This war lasted four long years and cost millions of lives. It revealed a broken global system. And even its conclusion in 1918 didn't solve the problems of that system.

Instead, by the 1930s, these tensions would send the sons and grandsons of those who had fought in the First World War into the battles of the Second. And you didn't have to be a soldier to lose your life. Both wars witnessed horrific atrocities against civilian populations.

4:35

Text bubble: questions; text bubble: Thematic Overview; transitional music

In this unit, you'll seek out the causes of global conflicts. How did the long 19th century set the stage for the First World War? And how did the failures of the interwar years lead the world back into war? And finally, you'll ask: did these two wars solve anything? And what problems did they leave unsolved?

Let's look at these questions through our themes.

In the last unit, you explored how the dual revolutions in politics and industrialization created the new imperialism. In this unit, you'll see how competition among empires helped produce an era of global war.

5:20

Political cartoons; clips of 20th century newspaper and the war

You see, there's only so much land on Earth. And as imperialist nations began expanding to new regions of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, they eventually came into competition over colonies and resources. Militant nationalism helped motivate support for imperial competition. Soon, complicated alliance systems emerged, meant to balance nations against each other and ensure each country's security. Sadly, this careful balancing act collapsed like a house of cards in 1914.

Meanwhile, the industrialization of the long 19th century produced incredibly deadly weaponry that left the generation of men dead. Advances in communications and transportation allowed the rapid deployment of huge numbers of soldiers and weapons all around the globe. These technological trends only intensified during the Second World War.

6:18

Text bubbles: total deaths of the world wars; photos displaying the atrocities of the world wars

New technologies, unfortunately, made mass murder possible on a new scale. World War I killed over 20 million soldiers and civilians. World War II killed over 70 million humans. Many of these were victims of social trends like racism, anti-semitism, and eugenics that were used to justify atrocities by one group against others.

Photos of factories making weapons; political cartoons

7:09

Photos of politicians gathering after WWI

United Nations meeting and political cartoon; text bubble: Illustrative Example; transitional music

Photos of Jeanette Rankin

8:07

Text bubble: Rankin quote

Photo of Rankin in a phone booth

9:05

Photo of an older Rankin; text bubble: Rankin quote

Photo of Rankin with a scroll; photo of Vietnam protestors

Text bubble: questions

These were also “total” wars. That meant that the entire economic engines of the warring nations were turned to the war effort—and often to atrocities against civilians. It also meant that factories, workers, infrastructure, and civilians became valid targets for bombs. As a result, the world wars devastated the economies of major world powers and their colonies, as well as many neutral nations.

After the First World War, governments were eager to avoid repeating the death and destruction. But in the interwar period between 1919 and 1939, these efforts failed. The internationalism of the League of Nations faltered in the face of extreme nationalist ideologies like fascism.

After 1945 and the end of the Second World War, governments once again looked for ways to prevent conflict. The victorious powers created the United Nations and attempted to succeed where the League of Nations had failed.

Where does Jeanette Rankin fit into this? After voting against American entry into the First World War, she lost her congressional seat in the next election. But as fate would have it, she won another term in Congress in the 1940 election, just as the United States was debating whether it should enter the Second World War.

In 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor united the nation and ended almost all opposition to war. But Rankin held firm in her belief that “There can be no compromise with war; it cannot be reformed or controlled; cannot be disciplined into decency or codified into common sense; for war is the slaughter of human beings, temporarily regarded as enemies, on as large a scale as possible.”

This time she was the only member of congress to vote against war. You can see her here, in a phone booth, taking shelter from a mob of angry reporters after casting her vote. It ended her political career—as she knew it would. She was widely condemned. However, many also praised Rankin—if not for her vote, than for the courage of her convictions.

Asked years later if she ever regretted her decision, Rankin responded: “Never. If you’re against war, you’re against war regardless of what happens. It’s a wrong method of trying to settle a dispute.”

Congresswoman Rankin insisted that victory in war is impossible. She claimed that, “You can no more win a war than win an earthquake.” And she protested war for the rest of her long life. But many people still see the Second World War at least as a just war—one that the United States did not ask for, and one that pitted democracies against authoritarian, and even murderous states.

What do you think? Do you agree with Rankin? Or are there conditions that justify war? The Allied powers were victorious at the end of both wars. And they imposed their will on their defeated foes. But did their victory bring peace? Did it stop future atrocities? You’ll consider those questions in this unit and the two that follow.

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