



## Frames in Unit 6

The First World War is often described as a threshold event, a moment of decisive change. Was it? Some empires broke up, but others did not, and some even expanded. New states were created, and many people's attitudes towards the state changed in some ways. It was the first economic 'total war', but the global economic system didn't really change. So was it a real transformation or just a brief blip that interrupted the human story?



**00:01**

*Bob Bain, PhD, University  
of Michigan  
Disturbing images of war:  
soldiers on the ground in a  
burned landscape; bodies*

The First World War feels like a threshold event, a moment in which something significant changes in world history. Now, this may be because of the drama and tragedy of millions of deaths. But it may also be because something irreversibly changed with the events of the First World War. It ushered in a new and different era on a global scale.

**00:29**

*Painting and photo  
depicting thriving empires*

Now, we can explore these changes—how transformative they really were—by looking at the conflict of 1914 through 1918 using the course frames. For example, we see some huge changes in the way people organized their communities after the First World War. Some huge states, like the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, broke into smaller countries. Many of these new countries were supported by a form of ethnic nationalism. At the same time, however, a number of large empires—especially the British and the French—ended the war seemingly unaffected. In fact, they were even enlarged as they acquired the colonies of the defeated states, such as Germany.

**01:13**

*Photographs: large armies  
carrying guns; female  
laborers making military  
uniforms*

Yet in many places, people's attitudes towards the state changed. Disillusioned by the war, people in some countries lost their faith in government, rules, and even organized religion. The First World War was also a threshold in terms of production and distribution. Many historians refer to it as a "total war." The phrase "total war" indicates a war in which all of the society's political, social, and economic systems commit to warfare. The combatant countries raised armies in the millions, drawing from their colonies, as well as their homeland. Meanwhile, production of consumer goods and services slowed and almost stopped. Instead, the war effort drew in laborers and used resources to make guns, uniforms, ammunition, and rations for the troops, rather than goods for civilians.

**02:05**

*More scenes of war: two  
men operate a large gun;  
a soldier has been killed;  
children wait in line for  
rations of food*

This industrialized warfare had never been seen before. This total commitment to warfare caused enormous casualties on the war front and deprivation at home. In at least one place, Russia, this effort completely discredited the economic system. So much so that people overthrew it and replaced it by a new, socialist system called communism. Yet, not everywhere experienced such large economic change. In most places, the economic system continued much as it had before 1914.

**02:39**

*A detailed drawing of a  
huge ship going down in  
the sea*

*Photograph of colonists;  
uniformed soldiers*

Similarly, the First World War diminished the global networks overall. During the war, of course, the exchange of ideas between opposing powers nearly came to a halt. People had less ability to travel, communications were censored and carefully watched, and distrust broke apart relationships across the battle lines. Imperial powers found it harder to stay connected to, and in control of, their colonies. But at the end of the war, surprisingly, networks and exchange grew again. Relationships, from the diplomatic to the personal, resumed quite quickly. Colonialism was rapidly reasserted.

The question remains: was the First World War a real transformation or just a brief blip that interrupted the human story? Or was it something else—not a transformation itself, but the beginning of something massive and important?