



Unit 6 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 the system of great empires all helped to cause the war and its immense suffering. But the massive impact of the war created cracks in this system. Some of these changes—like the emergence of communism in Russia—would happen almost immediately. Others—like the decline of formal overseas empires—would take decades to develop. Was the war a symptom of change, or its cause?



00:01

*Kim Lochner and Colby
Burnett in conversation*

Let's call it the Great War.

No.

Or the war to end all wars.

It's called the First World War, or World War I.

Spoilers!

I don't want to alarm you, but I think they already know there were two.

Okay.

*Photo/artwork montage:
19th century revolutions,
protests for labor reform,
democratic government*

*children in schools; women
working in a sewing
production facility*

Hi, I'm Kim Lochner, and along with Colby Burnett, we're introducing Unit 6: World War I. What does the world of May 1914 look like in the pages of an average history textbook? The revolutions of the Long 19th Century were in full swing, or even completed. Most promised something new and fresh for many people—if not equally for everyone. By May 1914, liberal and democratic revolutions had brought representative government to significant parts of the world for the first time. Slavery had been legally abolished. In many places, labor reforms put children in schools, rather than on factory floors or farm fields. They also introduced safety regulations and protections for workers.

01:06

*A city-planning diagram
shows gas lines
underground
Footage of telegraphs,
steamships and railroads*

Meanwhile, the Industrial Revolution promised more efficient production and cheaper consumer goods. Indoor heating, sewer systems, and other great modern innovations were slowly spreading. Capitalism had brought freedom of economic exchange and greater overall wealth. At the same time, socialism and reformism promised to spread that wealth to more people. Telegraphs, steamships, and railroads moved people, goods, and ideas more rapidly than ever before. They connected societies and individuals to each other in radical new ways.

01:43

*Colby Burnett
Footage of oppressed
people working under
bad conditions despite the
reforms coming into place
Kim Lochner*

We've seen that many of these advances and innovations were not available to much of the population of the world. In a lot of places, women, the working classes, colonial subjects, and minorities had little access to these new rights and wealth. Instead, they faced a great deal of discrimination. Nevertheless, many people could still point to great achievements that the Long 19th Century had brought.

*A painted depiction of the
assassination of Franz
Ferdinand; video footage
of World War 1 and the
destruction that resulted
from it*

But the Long 19th Century was about to end in a way that would bring all that "progress" into question. In fact, in many ways, it was in its final month in May 1914. On June 28, Gavrilo Princip would assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Less than two months after that, the First World War would erupt. The most powerful countries in the world would turn all of their nationalist passions, money, factories, railroads, and steamships to the task of killing each other. As a consequence, the global connections or networks that tied people together would shrink for a while. Nations would tear apart what it had taken them so long to build.

02:53

Colby Burnett

Animated map shows the territory occupied by European states in 1914.

In this unit, we ask some key questions. In what ways was the First World War the result of changes that occurred in the Long 19th Century? Was it a turning point in world history? As we have just seen, one way to begin to answer those questions is to look backward from May 1914. We can view the war as bringing into question all of the progress that people believed had been made over the course of the Long 19th Century. Another way to answer the same questions is to look from 1914 forward into the century that would follow. The world of 1914 was very much a world with an economic and political center. Powerful European states like Britain, France, and Germany dominated diplomacy. They ruled vast empires, and could project military force around the world. Their economies hummed along, extracting raw materials from their colonies and other smaller, weaker states. They then sold back finished products—from pens to whole cars—at great profit.

03:55

Kim Lochner

A photo of soldiers fighting in a trench; a timeline shows the events (WW2, the Great Depression, the Cold War, Decolonization) set into motion by the first world war.

But after 1914, the First World War began a long process that would eventually end the concentration of power in the hands of European states. The conflict was expensive. It put many of the big European states into great debt. The decades that followed would bring the Great Depression, and then another world war. By the 1950s, power would decisively shift away from Western and Central Europe to the Soviet Union in the East and the United States in the West. A few decades later, new global centers would arise. East Asia would become the world's great manufacturing center. Meanwhile, empires would be in collapse as African, Asian, Caribbean, and Pacific colonies became independent countries. These changes would take decades, but the First World War started them in motion.

04:54

Colby Burnett

Chart shows GDP per capita, military burden, defense share, and military personnel statistics between the years 1914-1918

Why did the First World War have such a huge impact? One answer can be found in the staggering costs of the war. We can see these costs in data like this chart, produced mainly by Finnish historian Jari Eloranta. The chart shows changes in economic and demographic data in some of the major combatant countries. It covers the time between the beginning of the war in 1914 and its end in 1918. Two important trends stand out here. The first is the military burden, or the percentage of a nation's economy spent on the military. It is very difficult to sustain this percentage above 15%. In the United States today, for example, the military burden is about three percent. But by the end of the First World War, it was incredibly high in all of the countries for which we have data. In Germany, it was almost 40%, and in France, it was more than half the economy—60%.

05:48

The percentage of the population actually in the military shows us a second interesting trend. Normally, this number is very small, below one percent. In Germany in 1914, it was 1.3%. In the U.S., it was 0.17%. By the end of the war, these numbers had grown to unprecedented levels. In the United States, 2.81% of the population—over four million men—had been enlisted. In the United Kingdom, ten percent of people were in the military. In France and Germany, incredibly, almost 14% of the population was in the military, meaning almost every man of fighting age.

06:29

Footage of European colonists exercising power over their colonies

Total war on this scale had a huge effect on the societies that waged it. World War I left nations in debt and without enough surviving workers to power the economy. Some countries, like Britain and France, continued to use profits from their colonies to maintain their power. The losers in the conflict—Germany,

the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire—experienced much more upheaval, with dramatic effect.

06:55

*Kim Lochner
A photo of structures in
ruins in Russia*

But perhaps the most obvious example of the disruption caused by the war took place in Russia. Even though Russia was technically on the winning side, it was nevertheless devastated by the conflict. In 1914, St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia, was a city entering industrialized modernity. It was once largely an administrative center, full of aristocrats, university students, naval officers, and the shops that served them.

*A painting of the port in
St. Petersburg, a photo
of workers in a crowded
living facility*

But, by the 1890s, St. Petersburg had begun to develop large factories and power plants. Trains brought goods and people thousands of miles from Siberia and the Russian interior to the port city. Ships connected it to Europe. This new St. Petersburg attracted a large working class eager for jobs. Many were forced to live in segregated districts, separated from the wealthy. Others lived and worked in the basements and kitchens of the wealthy. Migrant workers from rural areas and everyday sailors and soldiers were barred from parks, gardens, and other public spaces.

07:59

Colby Burnett

*Photographs of workers'
protests in Russia*

Tensions were already high when Russia entered the war against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. But at first, nationalism inspired workers to support the war effort. However, by 1917, after three years of war, Russia was in shambles. Terrible defeats led to the catastrophic loss of millions of lives. The war led to food and fuel shortages. Workers suffered greatly. On February 23, female textile workers marched, demanding an end to the war and calling for food. Within three days, 200,000 workers were on the street. By the end of February, the Russian monarchy had been dissolved and replaced by a parliament. This new government continued the disastrous war.

*Vladimir Lenin speaks to a
crowd of people*

But in October, a second revolution replaced the parliament with the first large-scale communist government in world history. Its leader, Vladimir Lenin, spoke from St. Petersburg. He declared the moment ripe for a worldwide socialist revolution. Soon after, St. Petersburg would be renamed Leningrad.

09:05

Kim Lochner

The First World War changed the world forever. Events in St. Petersburg were just one early result—although an important one. The war also weakened imperialism. It disillusioned an entire generation in many countries. It led to cries for perpetual peace, but it also set the scene for an even more terrible conflict to follow. As a result, the story of the First World War did not end when the shooting stopped in 1918. It did not end with the peace treaty signed in 1919. Instead, it continued to reverberate in the years that followed.

*Colby clinks finger
cymbals – Kim and Colby
in conversation*

What the?

It's reverberating.

This is a serious subject.

I'm taking it seriously.

You need to read the room.

*Colby hands the finger
cymbals to Kim; she
shrugs and clinks them*

And you need percussion.