

Lesson 1: Introduction to the  
Unit on WWI & WWII  
from Winks & Adams p 209

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## *The Second World War and Its Aftermath*



In history nothing of consequence "just begins." Many developments are causes, and most are also effects—and so it is with the Second World War. This second conflagration of the twentieth century was in many ways a result of the unsuccessful peace settlement at the end of World War I, but it was also brought about by the economic dislocation of the interwar years and by the Great Depression itself. It was also made possible—even probable—by centuries of racism and xenophobia, by frustrated militarism in the totalitarian states, and even by well-meaning empathy among the democracies. So troubled were international relations for the twenty years after 1919, and so closely in time did the World War II follow on the first, that the interval between the two is sometimes called the "twenty years' truce." It is likely that historians in the distant future will consider the two wars really as one conflict, as they now consider the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon essentially one war; but for the present, most historians continue to deal with them as a First and a Second World War—as World War I (1914–1918) and World War II (1939–1945).

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Do technological advancements make war more destructive or antiseptic, and therefore more acceptable?

• **The Big Picture:** Why did Europe lose an entire generation of men during the Great War? What did they die for? Did the peace settlements at the end of World War I make World War II inevitable? Will the areas of Bosnia, Serbia, and Kosovo lead Europe to war again?

After the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, it was decided by the victors at the Congress of Vienna that Europe had to be governed by a policy of deterrence that resisted dominance by any one country. Nations required comparable strength in order to maintain the balance of power and thus preserve the peace. Great Britain led the way and applied this policy successfully throughout the nineteenth century. During this time, however, Europe was changing. The Industrial Revolution had increased the demand for trade, and various countries sought markets in Africa and the East, establishing hegemony over a region by military force. Imperialism and competition abroad affected the sense of security and the balance of power that were crucial to the preservation of peace at home. In addition, new factors were being introduced that further threatened to disrupt the balance.

The first serious threat to the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century came from the expansion of industry and the accompanying scientific progress. In the first decade of the twentieth century, new weapons were being developed, as were more rapid forms of communication and transportation, including the telegraph, the automobile, the railway, and the steamship. These technological advancements presented new possibilities for highly mobilized warfare that could be better coordinated and managed.

The second serious threat to the balance of European power in the late-nineteenth century was Germany. By 1870, the Prussians had unified north and west Germany through a policy of "blood and iron." The various regions of Germany had always been disunited, defying such masters as the Romans, Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperors, and Napoleon. But Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia (1797-1888), together with his master statesman Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) and his general Count Helmut von Moltke, made highly effective use of the military capabilities of a thoroughly disciplined and well supported army. To achieve unification, Prussia had beaten and humiliated the French in 1870 and succeeded in forging a unified German Reich. The balance of power had been upset and the lesson was clear: No nation in Europe could feel secure without training all of its young men for war, establishing a system of reserves, and creating a general staff that would prepare plans for potential wars and oversee a scheme for mobilization.

The concept of mobilization is very important in understanding why Europe and the world went to war. By 1914, every continental power had a complex plan and timetable for mobilizing against the most likely opponent or combination of enemies. When a country mobilized for war, its reserve troops were called to active duty, placed in the field, and supported with necessary rations,



Figure 8-1

This landscape of devastation in Belgium gives testimony to the mindless destruction that was such a part of the Great War. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London)

equipment, and armament. Timing was essential. Full mobilization took weeks, and it was important to get the process started before your enemy was ready to commit to such a policy. Hence the beginning of hostilities came when the various chiefs of state were convinced that military "necessity" required a mobilization order and that further delay would spell defeat by allowing the opponent to gain a military advantage that could not be overcome. Since mobilization involved a radical shift of the economy to maximum production and since troop movements could be detected by other nations within hours, the mobilization order could not be rescinded without the prospect of diplomatic and economic disaster. William H. McNeill, in *The Rise of the West*, notes that "the first weeks of World War I presented the amazing spectacle of vast human machines operating in a truly inhuman fashion and moving at least approximately according to predetermined and irreversible plans. The millions of persons composing the rival machines behaved almost as though they had lost individual will and intelligence." The "predetermined and irreversible" plans were centered on a military theory by Karl von Clausewitz that was accepted by all the general staffs of Europe: A swift and decisive battle that led to the initial destruction of the enemy's forces would achieve ultimate success. None planned for a long war—three or four months at most.

Thus, the nations of Europe were powderkegs waiting to go off when in June 1914 the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated at Sarajevo. The diplomats talked and then the armies mobilized one by one. The "guns of August" soon enveloped Europe in a war that was to last not four months but four years. Over 8.5 million people were killed, with a total casualty count of over 37.5 million.

## "The Sword Is Drawn!" (August 18, 1914)

KAISER WILHELM II

This was war on a world scale, involving hostilities in Africa and the Balkans, as well as an American presence. And it was war on some of the cruelest terms. Rules were changing. There were no longer strict orders to exempt the civilian population from harm. Nor were there moral constraints on the use of submarines, machine guns, and poisonous gas; all became permanent fixtures of conflict. The Great War stands unequalled in terms of blood sacrificed for miserable accomplishment. To die for a "victory" of a hundred yards of land needed justification, which was rarely forthcoming. The questions are disturbing and perhaps unanswerable: Why did commanders send their men repeatedly "over the top" of the trenches, across "no man's land," and into the bloody rain of machine-gun fire? Why was this slaughter of human life condoned by the diplomats and even by the soldiers themselves? Why did Europe lose an entire generation of men?

As we look back on the twentieth century, our perspective is clearly focused at the midpoint, when the threat of fascism and all the attendant horrors of World War II seemed to be the defining moments of an age of anxiety. And yet, many historians believe that our modern world was fashioned at the outset of the century in the trenches of Europe, at the confluence of nineteenth-century arrogance and twentieth-century technology. In 1912, the great ocean liner *Titanic* set sail from Britain to America. It was described as the quintessential expression of human technology—"unsinkable" said its creators. In 1985, the *Titanic* was finally discovered on the bottom of the Atlantic, the victim of a natural disaster on its maiden voyage, when the impact from a collision with an iceberg split the ship in two. More than this, its sinking symbolized an ordered world on the path to destruction. Two years after the *Titanic* vanished, the world went to war, a war unparalleled in its ferocity and barbarism.

This was the birth of the modern world. Europe in 1914 was on the brink of "becoming." In a sense, the transition had been foreshadowed in one of the great cultural moments of the period. In 1913, the young Russian composer Igor Stravinsky premiered his new ballet to elite society in Paris. The "Rite of Spring" was a story of primal ritual, of sacrifice to the earth and the ceremonial renewal of life. The irregular rhythms, dissonant harmonies, and blatant sexuality shocked the crowd, which roared in response.

The ritual of primal sacrifice would be played out during the next four years as the earth claimed so many human lives. When the war ended in 1918, the world of the nineteenth century had been forever altered. The thin veneer of

civilization had been shattered and the nations of Europe had difficulty defining what had happened and why. Europe would be led out of this abyss of disillusionment and despair by those promising order and respect: Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler.

For several years Europe had been diplomatically divided into two rival camps. The Triple Alliance was formed in 1882 among Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary. In 1907, the Triple Entente was established among Great Britain, France, and Russia. Both organizations were pledged by treaty to support their respective allies militarily should their mutual interests or existence be threatened. Thus, the European world was shocked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Poised on the brink of crisis, each nation took stock of its diplomatic commitments, its military arsenal, and its long-range goals. Such a slap in the face of the powerful Austro-Hungarian empire by Serbian terrorists had wide-ranging implications. Response had to be quick in order to preserve the honor and integrity of the throne and to assure that such action would not invite further insolence, which could lead to outright revolt. There were other factors to consider as well. How would Russia react to a severe stand against the Serbs? Russia, after all, was a Slavic nation and was promoting a policy that advocated the independence and cultural integrity of Balkan Slavs.

The Austrians sought German support in their plans to punish Serbia for the assassination of the Austrian heir. Germany would be an important ally in countering the potential hostility of Russia. On July 6, 1914, the German kaiser, Wilhelm II, sent a "blank check" telegram that guaranteed German support for whatever punishment Austria decided to inflict upon Serbia. Austria thereupon declared war and started mobilizing her military forces. One by one, the European powers declared war on each other, constrained by the dictates of their alliance systems and by the necessity to obtain an advantage in mobilizing their military forces as quickly as possible.

Today all have gathered to pray for the triumph of our weapons, for now that oath must be proved to the last drop of blood. The sword, which I have left in its scabbard for decades, shall decide.

I expect My First Guard Regiment on Foot and My Guards to add a new page of fame to their glorious history. The celebration today finds us confident in God in the Highest and remembering the glorious days of Leuthen, Chlun, and St. Privat. Our ancient fame is an appeal to the German people and their sword. And the entire German nation to the last man has grasped the sword. And so I draw the sword which with the help of God I have kept in its scabbard for decades. [At this point the Kaiser drew his sword from its scabbard and held it high above his head.]

The sword is drawn, and I cannot sheathe it again without victory and honor. All of you shall and will see to it that only in honor is it returned to the scabbard. You are my guarantee that I can dictate peace to my enemies. Up and at the enemy! Down with the enemies of Brandenburg!

Three cheers for our army!