

# THE SHADOWS OF WAR

World War 1 would drag on for 4 and a half long years. During the war, the armies basically stalled in their trenches, and little movement was achieved by either side. Millions of men would die of diseases in the trenches, or torn apart by shrapnel or machine gun bullets charging at positions that they would ultimately lose back to the enemy. The landscape, particularly in France, was devastated. The utter senselessness of the fighting would have a profound impact on soldiers, many of whom would bear the permanent scars of the war, both physically and mentally, as a constant reminder.

## United States Isolationism

The United States began WW1 as a neutral country. They were seeing the high casualty rates among the European nations, and had decided that they were going to stay out of the problems in the European countries. By this point, however, the economic prosperity of every country relied on trade with other nations, and the US in particular was involved in a lot of trade with Great Britain and France. During the War, many US companies saw great opportunities for trade, as Britain and France desperately needed supplies, ammunition, and weapons that US factories could produce.

The Germans had a major problem with this, since those supplies were being used against them in the war. Germany had also gained a huge tactical advantage in the seas, by creating the first sea-worthy submarines. These submarines were not very good at directly fighting against battleships, which were heavily armored and had very powerful guns, but they were very effective at raiding the shipping and trading between countries. By choking off the trade to countries like Great Britain, Germany could basically strangle their economy and gain a large advantage over their enemies.



This conflict over trade would eventually lead to America's involvement in the war. After years of having US ships raided by German submarines, and with both sides continually threatening each other to stop or they would declare war, the US officially declared war on Germany in April of 1917. Despite casualties that didn't come close to any of the major European countries involved in the war, thousands of Americans would still die. This led most Americans to adopt a policy of isolationism, where they would avoid all foreign treaties and alliances, and even only trade as much as they had to. Many people felt that Americans should never again die for Europe's problems.

## The Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was the document that officially ended WW1. The Germans had no choice but to sign the treaty, since they were the ones that surrendered to the Allies (US, Britain, and France.) The treaty of Versailles ended up being a total disaster, and most historians agree that it is the biggest cause of WW2. The Treaty was bad for several reasons:

#1 The Treaty blamed Germany for the War and made them pay reparations to France. Since much of the fighting had occurred in France, miles and miles of French countryside, towns, and cities were totally destroyed. France insisted that somebody else pay for the damages. Germany was ordered to pay what would be \$185 billion in today's currency to France for the damages. For 2 years, the Germans flat out refused to make their payments until Britain and France invaded and forced them to pay.

#2 The Treaty forced the Germans to reduce their army to 100,000 men and 6 battleships (with no submarines.) They were ordered to turn over all of the rest of their ships to the British and French. The Germans destroyed the ships instead, and were extremely angry of their inability to defend themselves against other countries that had armies of a few million soldiers each.

#3 German land was given to other countries and their colonies were taken away by Britain and France. The Germans resented having to give away their land, especially since it meant that German citizens were now living in foreign countries.

## Shell Shock and other Diseases

Throughout the history of warfare, the actual fighting has had a brutal effect on the soldiers fighting in it.



*Hospitals like this one were set up for the Flu Pandemic*

Today, we know that this fighting can lead to a psychological trauma called PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) which literally changes the way a person's mind responds to its environment. My father used to work with a man who had fought in Vietnam, and if he heard a loud noise like someone dropping a box or using a hammer in another room, he would dive under the nearest table, even in the middle of an important business meeting. During his time fighting, his brain learned to automatically protect him from anything making loud noises, and that had lasted his entire lifetime, even forty years after the fighting was over.

In previous wars, most soldiers had no sympathy for anyone exhibiting signs of PTSD. They were often labeled as cowards and deserters, and were most often shot for refusing to fight. In WW1, doctors started to realize that

maybe it wasn't the soldiers' fault that they were so messed up by the fighting. The doctors guessed that it was something caused by being too close to the big guns firing all the time, so they called it shell shock. They didn't understand the trauma, but at least they were starting to understand that the men dealing with these problems weren't just being cowards.

Living in trenches for literally years at a time led to many types of bacterial infections. Soldiers got trench mouth from not brushing their teeth, smoking, and having dirt and mud in their mouths. They got trench foot from standing in cold, bacteria-filled water for hours or days. Disease accounted for almost as many deaths during WW1 as bullets, and the frustration over seeing so many men die of simple infections would inspire Alexander Fleming to discover Penicillin, the world's first anti-biotic in the 1920's.

Finally, all the men of the world coming together and then returning home would lead to the worst recorded global pandemic, the Spanish Flu or Influenza Pandemic of 1918. The pandemic would kill over 500,000 people in the world, and by the time it was done, literally one half of the world's population had contracted the disease. To try to stop the disease from spreading, many nations would stop trading with one another, and for a brief time people were concerned that this pandemic would be as serious as the Black Death.

### Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What is isolationism? Why did the Americans pursue this policy?
2. Why were the Germans so unhappy with the Treaty of Versailles?
3. What is shell shock?

Write about it.

Pretend you are a soldier describing your time in a trench. Write a letter to your family back home describing your experience of the war.