

WORLD WAR I

“There’s No One Here But the Dead!”

Millions of people were killed, mighty empires fell, and the globe was remade during World War I. It was a conflict with consequences we continue to struggle with today. BY BRYAN BROWN

IN ONE MOMENT, the world stopped and began again. On November 11, 1918, at exactly 11 a.m. Paris time, bells rang and celebrations broke out all over the globe. After four years and millions of deaths, World War I was over.

The timing had been laid out in an armistice—an agreement to stop fighting—written by the war’s victors. They were called the Allied Powers. Led by France, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and the United States, the Allies had forced their defeated enemy, Germany, to sign the agreement.

The conflict it ended was so massive, people referred to it simply as the Great War. Up to that point in history, it was the bloodiest war ever. About 20 million people—both soldiers and **civilians**—were killed. France alone lost 1.7 million soldiers in battle, 17 percent of all the country’s fighting-age men.

“Europe lost those who might have been its scientists, its poets, and its leaders,” historian Margaret MacMillan has written of the conflict. “And the children who might have been born to them.”

This November 11, bells will again ring around the world to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. The war continues to influence our world. Here are some essential things to know about it.

1 The war introduced deadly new weapons.

The war began in July 1914 as a struggle for power between two groups of European nations: the Allied Powers—first led by Russia, France, and the U.K.—and the Central Powers, headed by Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the **Ottoman Empire**, centered in what is now Turkey (see map, p. 21).

Few people could have predicted

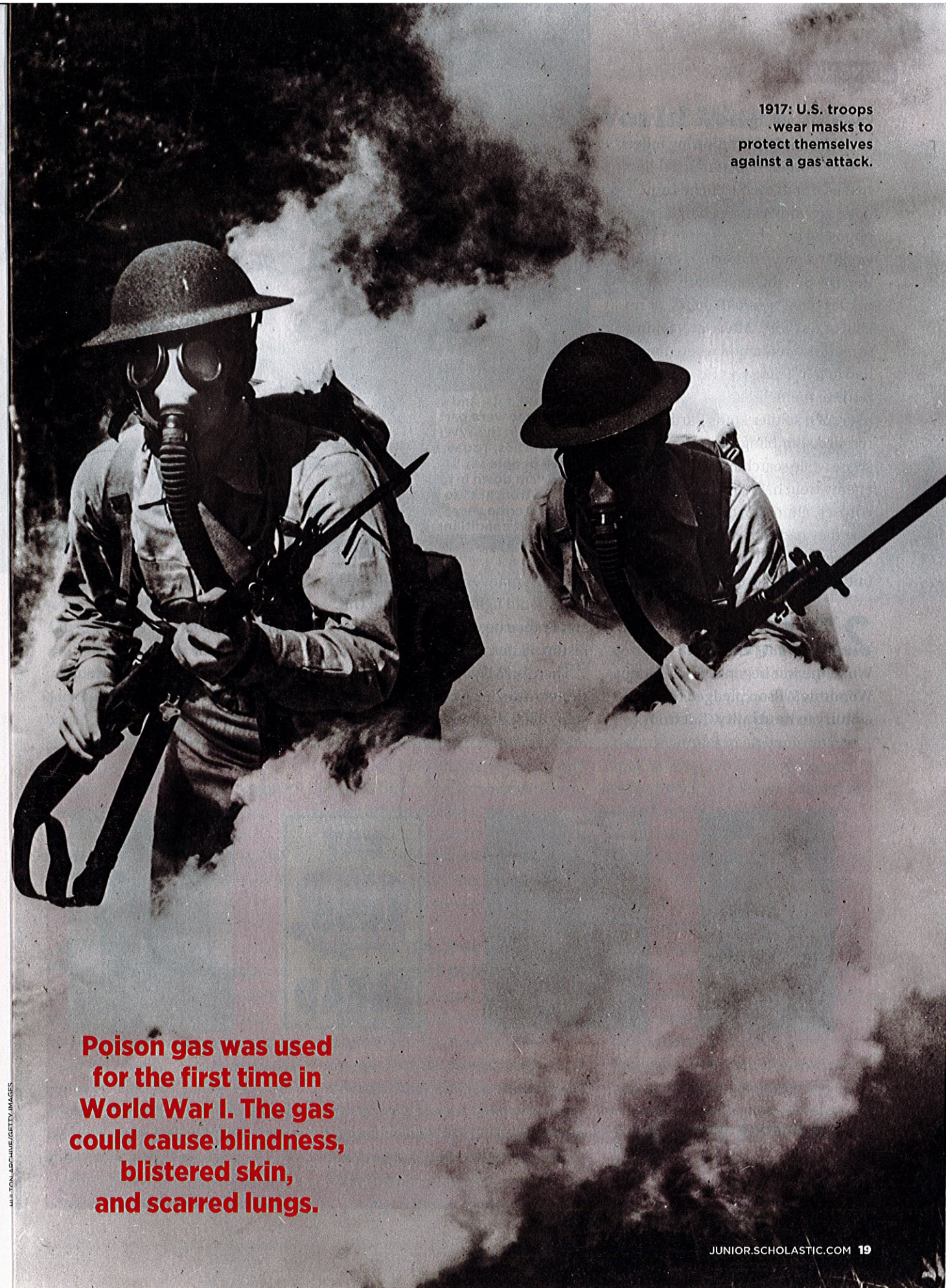
that so many soldiers would be killed. A main reason for the historic loss of life, say experts, was the introduction of deadly new weapons. Among these were machine guns and **artillery**—large guns that shot heavy shells—which could fire more rapidly than before. Poison gas was also used for the first time in World War I.

For protection, troops on both sides dug long ditches in the ground called trenches and used them to take cover. Soldiers sometimes stayed in them for weeks or months.

By the end of 1914, the opposing armies had created an almost unbroken battle line of parallel trenches that stretched from the coast of Belgium to Switzerland. This 450-mile-long line of trenches was called the Western Front.

In letters home, soldiers described the brutal reality of life in the trenches: mud up to their →

1917: U.S. troops wear masks to protect themselves against a gas attack.



Poison gas was used for the first time in World War I. The gas could cause blindness, blistered skin, and scarred lungs.

LIVING HISTORY

knees, rats as large as cats, and the horrible smell of overflowing toilets.

When ordered to attack, soldiers rushed out of their trenches onto open ground. As they charged the opposing trenches, waves of men would be mowed down by enemy fire. Despite the high death count, battles often resulted in little or no gain of territory. Afterward, bodies sometimes remained where they had fallen. There was no safe way to retrieve them.

French soldier Louis Barthas recalled stumbling upon a gruesome scene while searching an abandoned enemy trench. "I saw . . . a pile of corpses, almost all of them German, that they had started to bury right in the trench. . . . 'There's no one here but the dead!' I exclaimed."

2 The U.S. didn't want to get involved.

When the war began, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson pledged the country to **neutrality**. But from



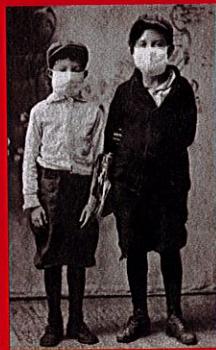
Mud, rats, and disease were part of life in the WWI trenches. Today, people say "I'm down in the trenches" to describe very difficult conditions.

the start, many Americans felt the U.S. should fight alongside the U.K. and France because of our strong historical ties to those countries.

Then, on May 7, 1915, a German submarine sank a British passenger ship called the *Lusitania* off the

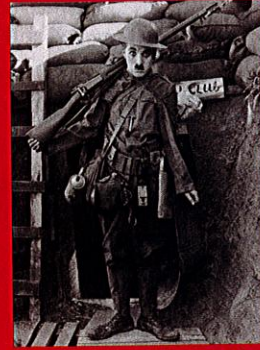
coast of Ireland. Among the 1,200 civilians who died, 128 were Americans. "What the *Lusitania* did was to bring the war home to Americans," historian John Cooper has said. Suddenly, that foreign conflict felt like our own.

If YOU Were a Kid in 1918...



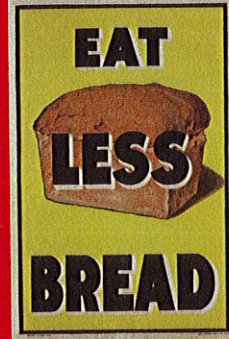
You feared the flu

The Spanish flu of 1918-19 killed as many as 100 million people. It was one of the worst disease outbreaks in world history.



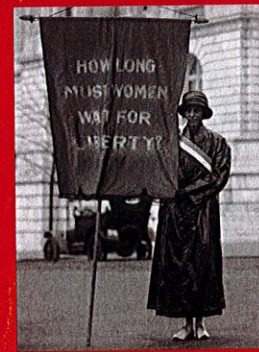
Your movie ticket cost 15 cents

One of the most popular films that year was *Shoulder Arms*, a silent comedy starring Charlie Chaplin (above) as a U.S. soldier.



You ate "war bread"

The government urged Americans to save wheat for U.S. troops and allies. Women substituted potatoes to make "war bread."



Your mom couldn't vote

Women were unable to cast ballots in national elections until the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920.

PHOTO (TOP) VIA GETTY IMAGES (TRENCHES); STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA (FLU); COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION (CHARLIE CHAPLIN); WWW.VIA GETTY IMAGES (WAR BREAD); WWW.VIA GETTY IMAGES (WAR BREAD); GHI/UNIVERSAL HISTORY ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES (SUFFRAGETTE); JIM McPHERSON/PAPPHAN

Still, it took nearly two more years—and the steady worsening of the U.S.-German relationship—for America to enter the fight. On April 6, 1917, President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war. The Germans were waging "a warfare against mankind," Wilson said. "The world must be made safe for democracy."

3 U.S. troops helped save the day.

In June 1917, American soldiers began arriving in Europe. The people of Britain and France, devastated by years of fighting, cheered the young Americans who marched through their streets on the way to the battlefield.

Those fresh American troops helped turn the war around for the Allies. In July 1918, U.S. forces joined with British and French troops to push back the Germans at the Second Battle of the Marne. The battle proved to be the last major stand for an exhausted Germany.

By early November, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, who were fighting the Allies on the war's Eastern Front, had surrendered. Then Germany, the last of the Central Powers, agreed to a peace settlement.

4 World War I remade the globe.

The war triggered the collapse of four powerful empires: Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire. "Those dynasties had been there for centuries," says Michael Neiberg of the U.S. Army War College in Pennsylvania. "Now, in four years, they were gone."

When it was all over, Germany was forced to accept blame for the

Europe During World War I



war, give up about 10 percent of its territory, and severely reduce its military. The country was also forced to pay the Allied nations about \$33 billion in damages.

These terms filled Germans with anger. In 1933, that rage helped fuel Adolf Hitler's rise to power. In part seeking revenge for Germany's humiliation in World War I, Hitler would eventually attempt to conquer Europe, plunging the globe into World War II.

5 The U.S. became a global power.

One nation emerged from the war stronger: the U.S. With its industrial might and more than 2 million troops, America proved itself a powerful force and was transformed into a world leader. "That was the moment when the U.S. began to get involved in foreign affairs almost everywhere," says Neiberg.

Today, however, many

Americans question whether the cost of being involved in conflicts around the world is too high. The Middle East is a prime example of this. Since 2001, America has battled terrorist armies in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2011, the fighting spread to Syria, fueling a civil war. Trillions of dollars and nearly 7,000 American deaths later, conflicts in all three countries continue.

Like past presidents, President Donald Trump and his advisers have questioned what to do. What can the U.S. hope to accomplish in foreign wars? Can the world ever truly be made safe for democracy?

According to Neiberg, "this is a debate that comes directly from World War I." It's one, he says, that we may never finish struggling with. ♦

WRITE ABOUT IT!
Using facts from the article, write a summary paragraph explaining why the U.S. joined World War I.