

Europe in Crisis – Class 3 – World War I
Lecture Notes

Slide 1

Poppies in Belgium. Poppies became a symbol of the blood shed and the young lives lost during WWI. They also grew easily in Belgium, where much of the fighting took place.

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The War on the Western Front:

- The western front was a series of trenches that stretched from Belgium to the Swiss border.
- **1915:** In 1915, both sides focused on trying to achieve some sort of breakthrough, so they could get past the other side's trenches. Many attempts were tried, but few had any success.
- **1916:** At the beginning of 1916, the Germans are feeling hot. The war on the Eastern front is going well, and Serbia had been knocked out. They decided to try to force France to concede by making her run out of men. They launched a huge offensive in March 1916 on the town of **Verdun**. It would be impossible for the French to retreat from Verdun, because it was on the road that led straight to Paris, so the Germans hoped to "bleed France white," here. During the course of the six-month battle, 22 million German shells were fired. The Germans were not able to turn the tide of the war at Verdun, and the battle ended up being nothing more than a tragic exercise in industrialized killings.
 - **The Battle of the Somme:** The British launched a massive attack a town called Somme with the intention of relieving pressure from Verdun and from the Eastern front. While they didn't achieve a breakthrough, they achieved their goal of being a distraction. This battle was also important, because it caused the British to realize the importance of **small-infantry tactics** and **tanks**, which would be instrumental in winning the war.
- **1917:** Early in 1917, the Americans decide to enter the war on the Allies' side. However, they do not begin to arrive until summer 1917, and don't fight until late 1917. This provides a valued moral boost – the French had suffered wide scale mutinies in May 1917. In late 1917, the **Battle of Cambrai** is fought, and tanks are used to great success. This inspires the British to launch a tank-heavy counteroffensive.
- **1918:** The Germans take advantage of the fact that the Eastern Front has closed after the Russian Revolution to launch a major offensive on the Western Front. However, by this point, the Allies are better at coordinating with each other and the attack is rebuffed. Later that year, the Allies launch the **Hundred Days Offensive**, in which they use tanks to break through German lines. Germany was already under great internal strain, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back. Armistice was declared on November 11, 1918.

Slide 3

Trench Warfare on the Western Front:

- Why are we spending so much time on trench warfare?

- Veterans of WWI in Germany, France and Britain were responsible for the conditions that led to WWII. It is imperative to understand what they went through.
- Also, trench warfare explains why WWI lasted so long, despite promises it would be “over by Christmas.”
- For most of the war, people fought with 19th century tactics and 20th century weapons.
 - During the 19th century, there had been huge technological changes that hadn’t been applied to a large war yet. While there were certainly signs that these new technologies were going to be extremely deadly (the American Civil War, 1861-1865, the Russo-Japanese War, 1905), few European generals studied the lessons these wars offered.
 - Most generals were expecting a brief, Napoleonic-style war – stand in formation, and shoot at the enemy. They did not imagine how complex war would become when millions of men were fighting with industrialized weapons.
 - Indeed, some horse cavalry units were brought to the front to fight - generals could not imagine how useless they would be until the war actually started.
- Trench Warfare: Sophisticated trench warfare made WWI especially long and deadly.
 - Trench warfare has existed almost since the beginning of warfare itself. It simply means that an army digs holes in the ground and builds bunkers to shelter themselves from the enemy.
 - In WWI, trenches were usually built so that they zigzagged every 10 meters, so that if one wall was taken out, it wouldn’t destroy the trench. There were many more soldiers fighting in WWI, which meant that a huge number of people were involved in this war. This meant trenches had to be HUGE, designed to accommodate millions of men. While trenches built up on both the Eastern and Western Fronts, they were more characteristic of the Western Front.
 - What did Trench Warfare look like?
 - Only about ¼ of soldiers spent much time on the front line. The rest were involved in administration, medical and artillery. These soldiers had very high mortality rates, and could expect to receive at least one serious injury. Only about 1/8 would escape the war without some sort of casualty.
 - Even while they were in the trenches, soldiers did not always see action.
 - Early in the war, soldiers would leave the trenches to storm the enemy’s trenches. This tactic was ultimately unsuccessful; it was too easy for troops fortified in a trench to kill attackers.
 - Instead, warfare was often characterized by “night raid,” in which a small group would attack at night when they couldn’t be seen.
 - Often, soldiers would just sit around in trenches. However, this did not save them – they were still in danger from shellings and poison gas, even if they were not actively fighting.
 - When they were actively fighting, though, the fighting was dreadful.

- Artillery was hugely important. Before a major infantry attack, artillery would usually prepare the way, by killing and demoralizing the enemy. Then, the artillery would protect the infantry while they attacked.
- Poison Gas: The gasses used in WWI were mainly chlorine gas and mustard gas. Chlorine gas was first used by the Germans in 1915, who intended to use the new weapon to punch a hole through the British line. Initially, they were able to do so, but German troops were afraid to get near the gas, and the British were quickly reinforced by Canadians. Afterwards, the Allies realized that if they tied a wet rag around their mouth, it would neutralize the affects of the gas. Later on, gas masks were developed. Mustard gas was also developed in 1917.
 - Gas masks were scary, dehumanizing and uncomfortable. They made it difficult to breathe, and contributed to the already wretched conditions in the trenches.
 - Chlorine gas: Causes death by asphyxiation. Most people aren't exposed enough to die, but they can suffer blindness.
 - Mustard gas: Causes blisters to develop on your skin. The gas smells kind of like mustard. When breathed in, blisters will develop on the inside of your lungs, which results in a slow, painful death.
 - Gas was not ultimately a very effective weapon because it was easy to block. However, it became standard for both sides. After WWI, the use of poison gas was banned.

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- Why did trench warfare result in a stalemate?
 - The strategy behind trench warfare was to strongly defend your position while doing your utmost to attack the enemy's position. However, people were so good at defending their trenches, that it was difficult to ever get close enough or inflict enough damage to really debilitate the enemy. This is why the war was able to stretch on so long.
 - Improved Artillery and Guns: Highly explosive shells were developed. While warfare had always featured artillery, never before had such accurate, deadly and cheap artillery weapons. Meanwhile, rapid-fire guns, like machine guns, and steel breech loading guns were also developed. During the war, the German Army even developed primitive flamethrowers. The combination of these weapons made it too lethal for one army to attack the other head on. Instead, a region called **no-man's land** developed between both sides' trenches.
 - Machine Guns: Machine guns were bulky and required many people to man them. Consequentially, they could not be used well in an offensive attack. Machine guns are the signature weapons of trench warfare. However, they were not adapted by the British to any great extent until

later in the war, because British generals saw such a lethal weapon as “unsporting.”

- **Barbed Wire:** To a soldier used to machine guns and flame throwers, barbed wire is relatively harmless. However, it slows attackers down, making it easy for them to be killed by gunners that are relatively protected in their trenches.
- **Relief Trenches:** Relief Trenches were mainly a German development. A series of trenches would be built behind the front line trench, so that if the front line fell, it would be easy for them to retreat to another fortified position. This made it very difficult for any Allied attack to have long-term success.
- **War of Attrition:** Because of the defensive nature of the warfare, both sides entered a war of attrition – they were waiting for the enemy to run out of resources: money, men, weapons and food. This meant that some tactics were designed simply to make the enemy waste resources: for example, the Battle of Verdun, a German offensive, was designed to “bleed France white” – essentially, to kill enough French men that there wouldn’t be anyone left to fight the war. German soldiers were not opposed to killing French civilians for the same reason.
 - In the end, though, both sides were fairly evenly matched for resources, which is why the war dragged out so long.
- **Total War:** To win a war of attrition, a country must engage all of its resources. This means the government must organize its industry and agriculture so that resources are used efficiently, and enough is produced both for the soldiers and for the people back home. Essentially, many European countries began running on socialist systems.
 - War became all-consuming, and governed all aspects of life on the home front. This also meant that the whole population became engaged: many civilians were killed, and civilians were bombarded with propaganda.

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- **Human Effects of Trench Warfare.**
 - About 10% of fighting men died, 56% suffered some kind of casualty.
 - Soldiers did not spend all of their time in the trenches. A soldier’s life could be divided up as such. Some sectors of the Western Front didn’t even see much action – the soldiers would merely sit in the trenches most of the time, and conduct raids on the enemy at night. However, even these soldiers risked death from poison gas, snipers, artillery and, of course, disease. At this point, antibiotics had not been developed, and even a minor wound could turn deadly easily.
 - **Shell Shock:** The enemy would shoot shells into enemy trenches. Watching your friends die in seconds from mortar fire was extremely traumatic, and many soldiers developed post-traumatic stress disorder. Commanders did not realize how debilitating shellshock was, and sufferers were often accused of cowardice, or even executed if they tried to run from the shells. A huge number of soldiers were affected by shell-shock, and after the war, it was a common feature in European society.

- Soldiers were told that they were enduring these horrific conditions to protect their family back home. At first, soldiers were proud to be doing such important work, but many eventually grew to hate those back home. Fathers were hated for encouraging the militaristic and nationalistic environment that allowed war to develop, and wives and girlfriends were suspected of infidelity.
- After the war, soldiers had many varied reactions to the horrors they had suffered, but they can be divided into two general categories:
 - Hatred of the Old System: there was a desire to reform the culture that had brought the war about.
 - Hatred of the Enemy: former soldiers blamed the enemy for everything they had suffered, and wanted revenge.

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- You can see these two reactions, hatred of the old system and hatred of the enemy in some literature that came out of World War I.
 - *In Flanders Field* is a poem by John McCrae, a Canadian doctor who wrote this poem as a reaction to the death of a friend in May 1915.
 - The poem is touching and moving, and expresses the tragedy of the First World War. However, it also encourages others to continue fighting the enemy, instead of calling for an end of war in general.
 - *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque, is a novel based on Remarque's experiences as a German soldier on the Western Front. He dramatically portrays the terror of war, as well as criticizes the German government and German people for dragging Germany to war.
- You can access selections of *All Quiet on the Western Front* and the poem *In Flanders Field* at the OCW website.

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The War on the Eastern Front

- More traditional warfare – the front is too long and there are too few soldiers for trench warfare to develop. Also, Russia and Austria simply don't have the technology to wage trench warfare.
- **1914:** The Russians attack East Prussia (Germany) and Galicia (Austria). They are rebuffed in Prussia, but make inroads in Galicia.
- **1915:** That winter, the Austrians try to retake Galicia, and the Germans try to attack out of East Prussia. Both campaigns are unsuccessful. However, both the Germans and the Russians believe they are on the brink of winning the war. The Germans end up being more successful in the summer of 1915 when they attack Warsaw.
- **1916:** Both sides stalemate.
- **1917:** The Russian economy nears the point of collapse, the Russian revolution occurs. It is the first power to fall in the war of attrition.

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The Russian Revolution

- Russia had a history of instability. In 1905, there was nearly a revolution after Bloody Sunday. Russia also had other problems: an unpopular, inflexible monarch, an embarrassing loss to the Japanese in 1905 and an oppressed peasant class. The proletariat was also unhappy, and the bourgeoisies were annoyed by the cliquishness of the aristocracy, and the lack of white-collar jobs.
 - Nicholas II jumped at the opportunity to enter the war because it would make him more popular with the extremely nationalistic Russian people. However, by 1917, the war isn't going well.
 - Industrial technology and infrastructure begins to break down. There are not enough peasants left in the country to grow enough food, and there are not enough trains to get the food to people who live in the cities.
 - The royal family is unpopular. The Tsarina, Alexandra, is German herself.
 - Alexandra also places her trust in the scandalous monk, Rasputin. Rasputin was a Siberian priest who convinced Alexandra he could cure her son, Alexi, or his hemophilia, a bleeding disorder.
 - Rasputin convinced many people the Romanovs, the royal dynasty, had completely lost it.
 - Nicholas II, encouraged by Alexandra, treats the Duma, a primitive parliament, with contempt.
 - In 1916, the number of strikers doubles from 1915. In early 1917, strikes are the largest they've ever been. These strikers were encouraged by socialist and Marxist groups.
 - Basically, what happened is everyone got angry with Nicholas. Revolutions tend to happen when you lose the support of the vast majority of the people. Each class abandoned Nicholas for different reasons:
 - Nobles: Their sons were dying on the front.
 - Industrialists: Only a few were getting rich from war contracts.
 - Middle Class: Even more frustrated than usual by bureaucratic incompetence.
 - Poor: Starvation, due to bad harvests and bad railroads.
 - Military: Contempt for the way the war was managed, the fact it was being fought at all.
 - February Revolution: Riots begin in St. Petersburg on February 23, 1917. They want food, peace, stability, higher wages. This isn't unusual in Russia, and such riots are usually quelled. However, the troops and policemen in the capital refuse to fire on the rioters, leaving the government powerless.
 - While all this is happening, Nicholas II is out of town. The Duma (which is a fairly conservative body at this point, because of Nicholas II's appointees) realizes that as long as Nicholas II remains in power, they cannot get St. Petersburg under control. On March 2, the tsar abdicates, and the Duma takes over as provisional government, and is run by a left of center group called the Cadets.
 - The Proletariat: Want higher wages, and get them by scaring their employers into giving that to them
 - Soldiers: End of the war, to be not treated poorly by the commanders.
 - Peasants: Land. They will not compromise on this
 - Bourgeoisie: Are thrilled that they are in power.

- Shortly after the Romanovs fall, a “Soviet,” a council made up of workers, soldiers and revolutionaries, forms in St. Petersburg. The Soviet was probably powerful enough to take power from the provisional government, but they were afraid the army would react if they did.
- The Soviet and the provisional government are now in an uneasy truce.
- Socialists talk about how they would soon end the war, democratize the army and redistribute land to the peasants. More conservative leaders were irritated, and insisted that land reform be pushed off until a constitutional assembly met. However, they were forced to concede to democratizing the army.
- Kerensky becomes the new minister of war, and on July 1, he launches a massive offensive against the Austrians. The offensive is successful, and may very well have been the death keel for the Austrians. However, the Russian soldiers don’t put their hearts into the attack. Some soldiers reach the empty Austrian trenches, parade around them, and then go back to the Russian trenches. Others shoot officers who encourage them to go onwards. Essentially, the military collapses in Galicia.
- The moderate provisional government is losing control of the situation. The people want land and they want the war to end, but the provisional government is asking them to wait until the moment is right. However, the people are tired of waiting.
- During the spring of 1917, land hungry peasants begin forcing nobles off their estates.
- Vladimir Lenin sees an opening. He mocks Kerensky by saying “Wait until the Constituent Assembly for the land, wait until the end of the war for the Constituent Assembly, wait until total victory for the end of the war.” Lenin also promises “bread, land and peace.”
- Lenin Returns: Lenin was a prominent, well known leader. He had spent the last few years in Switzerland because he was in exile. The Germans paid for him to return to Russia in an armored car. When he came back, he was greeted enthusiastically, but surprised people when he refused to endorse the new government. He was only interested in his narrow, Bolshevik view of what Russian government should look like. He tried to incite a February-style revolution, but was thwarted again and again. He realized he needed a top-down approach.
- He saw that the chink in the provisional government’s armor was their support of the war. The provisional government wanted to maintain Russia’s territory, and was trying to figure out the best way to leave the war, or at least reduce it without losing land. They even considered staying in the war to gain land. Lenin bravely proposed that he did not care how much land was lost or gained so long as Russia left the war immediately. This message resonated with the people, soldiers especially.
- On October 24, 1917, Lenin instrumented a coup. He organized a small, but well trained army of Bolsheviks to take lightly guarded government buildings. The next day, Kerensky left to go to the front for reinforcements. At this point, only the Winter Palace was still under the provisional government’s control. It took Lenin about a day to take the palace, because it was guarded by a few soldiers, and Lenin’s soldiers were reluctant to shoot fellow Russians. Eventually, they talked the guards into leaving, and went inside and captured the provisional government, proclaiming a Communist Revolution. Few people realized the significance of what had just happened.
- The New Government:
 - One of Lenin’s first acts is to sue for peace in the Brest – Livstok Treaty of 1918. Russia loses a lot of land, including parts of Poland and the Ukraine, but they don’t care because it means the war is over.

- Also calls for elections of a constituent assembly. However, the Bolsheviks only took 25% of the vote. The Bolshevik army forced the Constituent Assembly to step down, and after that, Lenin's speeches were filled with rants about how democracy was a Western invention that was eating away at the country.
- By 1918, Russia is in civil war: Reds vs. Whites. In the chaos of the war, the Russian royal family is killed, which makes the rest of the world, already irritated with the Russians for leaving the war convinced that this new government is composed of absolute barbarians.
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