Why was WW1 so deadly? | History | Years 5 & 6 | Autumn Term 2026-27

Late 1800s to early 1900s	1914 AD	1915 to 1917 AD	1918 to 1919 AD
After defeating France in the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, Germany unites into a great empire. Austria-Hungary annexes Bosnia in 1908, upsetting Serbia.	28th Jun – Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated. 28th Jul – Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia. 30th Jul – Russia, an ally of Serbia, mobilises its army. 1st Aug – Germany, an ally of Austria-Hungary, declares war on Russia. 3rd Aug – Germany declares war on France. 4th Aug – Great Britain declares war on Germany.	7th May 1915 – A German submarine sinks the Lusitania. 1st Jul to Nov 1916 – The Battle of the Somme. 6th Apr 1917 – US declares war against Germany and enters WW1 fighting alongside Britain and France.	9th Nov 1918 – Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates. Two days later Germany surrender and an armistice is signed. 28th Jun 1919 – The victors sign the Treaty of Versailles, making Germany accept full responsibility for the war and pay billions of pounds in reparations.

National Curriculum History

Pupils should continue to develop a chronologically secure knowledge and understanding of British, local and world history, establishing clear narratives within and across the periods they study. They should note connections, contrasts and trends over time and develop the appropriate use of historical terms. They should regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance. They should construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.
In planning to ensure the progression described above through teaching the British, local and world history outlined below, teachers should combine overview and depth studies to help pupils understand both the long arc of development and the complexity of specific aspects of the content.

Artefacts

Mark V Tank.

Type 93 U-Boat.

Vickers Machine Gun, Big Bertha and Paris Gun.

Propaganda posters.

Soldiers wrote letters home from the trenches.

Cause and Effect

What caused WW1 to break out?

In the late 1800s and early 1900s many European countries were engaged in militarism, alliances, imperialism and nationalism. These created the conditions whereby countries were poised and ready for war, which was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Why were so many lives lost on the Western Front?

The outbreak of WW1 brought with it new developments in weaponry. These changed the way war was fought, leading to trench warfare, many causalities and destruction on a scale never seen before.

How did WW1 end?

Naval blockades led to the surrender of the German navy, followed by its army and Kaiser in 1918. The Paris Agreement sought to punish Germany, but had unintended consequences of its own.

Vocabulary

Blockade: Blocking the ports of a country with ships to stop them getting supplies.
Mobilisation: When a country prepares for war.
Trench Warfare: Form of fighting where two sides dig trenches opposite each other.
No-man's Land: The empty strip of territory that divides two opposing forces.
Propaganda: Information designed to persuade people of something, often biased or untrue.
Rationing: Limiting the amount of food or other goods people receive.
Western Front: The long line (400 miles) of trenches stretching from the English Channel to Switzerland.
Reparations: Money to be paid by the losers after a war.
Treaty: A formal agreement between states.
Assassinate: Murder for political or religious reasons.

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Key Learning: When did this event happen? Beyond Living Memory (Modern Era) 1914 AD to 1918 AD	
1	**How did the conditions in Europe in the early 1900s / late 1800s contribute to war breaking out?** Understand how conflict during 1800s changed political borders of countries as empires grew. Explain some of these key changes in Europe during the 19th Century and compare to Europe today. Know the main causes of WW1 (militarism, alliances, imperialism and nationalism – MAIN) and explain how the situation in Europe during the late 1800s created the circumstances that made war more likely, including the arms race.
2	**How did conflict in the Balkans 'spark' the First World War?** Understand why the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the 'spark' for war and explain how MAIN had created the conditions for war. Know the countries that comprised the Triple Alliance (Central Powers), the Triple Entente (Allied Powers) and their respective allies, and those that remained neutral. Recall key dates of the July Crisis.
3	**Who was Archduke Franz Ferdinand?** ***(Independent Write in English)*** Recall the key events of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by writing a historically accurate account.
4	**Why were so many lives lost on the Western Front? – New Weaponry** Learn about and describe key facts of new weaponry in WW1. Compare and contrast these to previous weaponry. Understand the impact of new weaponry on the way the war was fought (trench warfare) and how this both increased devastation and prolonged the war with little ground being gained over many years.
5	**Why were so many lives lost on the Western Front? – Trench Warfare** Know and describe the key features of a WW1 trench. Explain the 'Western Front' and how this affected the war effort and lives of the soldiers living and fighting in the trenches both during the war and afterwards (e.g. 'shell-shock'). Understand and explain how WW1 trench warfare differed from previous wars.
6	**What factors led to the end of the war?** Learn key events about the Battle of the Somme (questionably the worst day in British military history) and the sinking of the Lusitania. Explain why these were key turning points in the war, especially when the USA joined the war effort on the side of the allies.
7	**Was the Treaty of Versailles fair?** Explain the reasons for the action taken by the Allies following the end of WW1 when Germany was defeated. Learn how and why the Treaty of Versailles reduced the size of both Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empires, creating new political borders and countries thus changing the map of Europe. Compare and contrast maps of Europe pre and post-WW1. Compare map of Europe from 1923 with Europe today to identify further changes. Say whether you believe the Treaty of Versailles to be fair (or not), justifying your opinion. Understand the effect on Europe then and today.
8	**How did women in Britain contribute to the war effort?** ***(Creative Homework Task)*** Know roles undertaken by women during the war and explain how these contributed to the war effort. Form and express own opinions about relative importance and impact, justifying with reasons. Devise and answer historically valid questions about women's roles during the war.

Note: Also show and discuss a range of propaganda posters during class assemblies this term.