

Chronological Reasoning: **CAUSES OF WAR & AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT**



Exhibition Areas: The War in Europe | American Entry into the War | “Over There”



EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

LESSON

1

GRADES 8–11

This curriculum is aligned with
the New York State
P–12 Learning Standards.



The New York State Museum is a program of
The University of the State of New York
The State Education Department
Office of Cultural Education



The assassination of Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo

Courtesy of *La Domenica del Corriere* via Wikimedia Commons

LESSON

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OBJECTIVES

- ✦ Students will be able to identify the causes of WWI and the sequence of events that led up to the war.
- ✦ Students will be able to explain what developments in technology and tactics made WWI a turning point in the history of warfare.
- ✦ Students will evaluate the United States entry into WWI and will decide which side of the war the US should have entered on.



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RATIONALE

WWI was a major turning point in US and world history. To understand the impact of this event, students should understand the flow of events that led to this conflict. In this way, students will begin to evaluate the complex series of events that swayed public opinion and led the US to decide to enter the conflict in Europe and will help explain why the US chose to enter the war on the side of the Allies.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In June 1914, Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian Nationalist in Sarajevo. The death of the heir to the Austrian throne set in motion a series of alliances that drew the entire continent into war. The **United Kingdom, Russia, and France** led a coalition of other nations called the **Allied Powers**, against a coalition between **Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire**, known as the **Central Powers**. As Europe and other parts of the world plunged into total war, **isolationist** sentiment in the United States pressured the government to stay out of the conflict. When war consumed that continent in 1914, **President Woodrow Wilson** and American political leaders asserted American **neutrality**. Many feared that American entry into the war would damage the economy and that the nation was not prepared to fight a global war.

After initial advances by the German Army, a stalemate developed on the Western Front. Both sides dug in and a series of trenches stretched over 1,000 miles from Switzerland to the English Channel. In an effort to end the stalemate, Germany sought to utilize a new weapon—the submarine—to disrupt supplies to Great Britain, France, and Russia. During this period of unrestricted submarine warfare hundreds of Allied vessels were sunk. In May 1915, German radio transmissions were sent to waiting submarines to “Get Lucy.” With that message, the passenger ship *Lusitania* was torpedoed in the Atlantic, killing 1,198 people, including 128 Americans. President Woodrow Wilson ordered the German-owned Telefunken wireless tower in West Sayville, NY to be

seized by U.S. troops, as the tower was suspected of sending encoded transmissions. The public outrage in America forced the Germans to end the indiscriminate sinking of merchant vessels. In 1916, President Wilson won re-election on a platform of continued U.S. neutrality, however, world events eventually forced him to abandon this policy and ask for a declaration of war against Germany.

In March 1917, unrest in Russia culminated in revolution. With the country in chaos, the revolutionary Bolshevik Government sought peace with Germany, freeing up thousands of troops for use against Britain and France. As the war on the Western Front dragged on, the Germans again let loose their U-boats on Allied shipping, hoping to end the war before the United States became involved. In addition, the German foreign secretary sent a coded message known as the **Zimmermann Telegram** to the Mexican Government, guaranteeing German aid if Mexico would agree to go to war with the America. It was secretly transmitted through the same wireless station on Long Island. The message was intercepted and deciphered by British code breakers and subsequently leaked to the American government. The continued attacks on American merchant vessels by German **U-boats** forced President Wilson on April 2, 1917 to ask Congress for a declaration of war. Congress replied and declared war on Germany on **April 6, 1917**.



LEARNING STANDARDS



New York State P–12 Learning Standards: <http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-p-12-common-core-learning-standards-for-english-language-arts-and-literacy>

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3: Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

NYS K-12 Social Studies Framework: <https://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-k-12-social-studies-framework>

8.4 WORLD WAR I AND THE ROARING TWENTIES:

Various diplomatic, economic, and ideological factors contributed to the United States decision to enter World War I. Involvement in the war significantly altered the lives of Americans. Postwar America was characterized by economic prosperity, technological innovations, and changes in the workplace. (Standards: 1, 2, 4; Themes: SOC, GOV, ECO, TECH)

8.4a European militarism, the alliance system, imperialism, and nationalism were all factors that contributed to the start of World War I.

8.4b International, economic, and military developments swayed opinion in favor of the United States siding with the Allies and entering World War I. Domestic responses to World War I limited civil liberties within the United States.

8.4c New military technologies changed military strategy in World War I and resulted in an unprecedented number of casualties.

10.5 UNRESOLVED GLOBAL CONFLICT (1914–1945):

World War I and World War II led to geopolitical changes, human and environmental devastation, and attempts to bring stability and peace. (Standards: 2, 3, 4, 5; Themes: TCC, GEO, GOV, CIV, TECH, EXCH)

10.5a International competition, fueled by nationalism, imperialism, and militarism along with shifts in the balance of power and alliances, led to world wars.

10.5b Technological developments increased the extent of damage and casualties in both World War I and World War II.

11.6 THE RISE OF AMERICAN POWER (1890–1920):

Numerous factors contributed to the rise of the United States as a world power. Debates over the United States' role in world affairs increased in response to overseas expansion and involvement in World War I. United States participation in the war had important effects on American society. (Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4; Themes: GEO, SOC, GOV, ECO)

11.6b While the United States attempted to follow its traditional policy of neutrality at the beginning of World War I, the nation eventually became involved in the war. President Woodrow Wilson led the nation into war with the hope of reforming the international order through his Fourteen Points.



LESSON



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WARM-UP:

Ask students to describe cause and effect and analyze sequence by writing in their own words the relationship between any two connected events in history or their lives, emphasizing how one effect was the result of prior circumstances. Then engage the students in discussion, analyzing the backdrop of political alliances between the major European powers prior to the First World War.

GUIDED INSTRUCTION:

Visit this exhibition gallery via field trip or access our accompanying online exhibition (www.nysm.nysed.gov/exhibitions/WWI) in a classroom setting. Ask students to focus especially on the chronology in Exhibition Areas: *The War in Europe*, and *American Entry into the War*. (Note the digital interactive timeline found in the exhibition gallery and online.) Point out the unique form of combat which defined WWI, highlighting the use of new weapons technology, such as trenches, chemical weapons, machine guns, barbed wire, tanks, submarines and aircraft, and the increased devastation wrought by modern innovation, found in Exhibition Area: *Over There*. Using the exhibition and the **Historical Background** information given above, the teacher will ask students to focus on why the United States joined this European conflict.

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE:

In the classroom, arrange a group debate as to why America should or should not participate in the First World War. Ask students to independently examine the events and causes of American entry into the First World War, specifically on the side of the Allied Powers, and not the Central Powers. Students will weigh and discuss domestic policies and public opinions against foreign events of 1917.

ADVANCED PRACTICE:

Students will write a short essay describing how the United States was gradually steered away from military neutrality towards entry into foreign conflict, emphasizing the change in public opinion and shifting political realities. Students will display comprehension of the various social pressures moving within American society.

ASSESSMENT:

Teachers will evaluate students on their knowledge of the following criteria:

- Who were the major powers involved in the war?
- What was the result of Europe's entangling political web of alliances?
- Why did many Americans desire to remain neutral, while others wanted to enter the war?
- What foreign and domestic political forces led to U.S. involvement?
- When did the conflict begin and what led to US entry into the war?