



THE NATIONAL
WWI MUSEUM
AND MEMORIAL



Black and white photograph of Austro-Hungarian soldiers with mules marching

Online Collections Database, 1983.41.47, www.theworldwar.org/research/database. National WWI Museum and Memorial. Online.

A Tangled Web: Unraveling the Origins of World War I

Recommended Grade Levels: 6-12

Course/Content Area(s): History

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| LESSON OVERVIEW: | This lesson introduces students to the origins of World War I, focusing on the political, economic, and social factors that contributed to the war's outbreak. Through interactive activities, primary source analysis, and role-playing, students will explore the complex web of alliances, rising tensions, and key events leading to WWI. Using resources from the National WWI Museum and Memorial, students will engage in critical thinking and historical inquiry to understand how Europe moved from diplomatic tensions to global conflict. |
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| OBJECTIVES: | <i>Students will:</i> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analyze the political landscape of Europe before WWI. ● Examine primary sources and artifacts related to WWI's origins. ● Engage in a role-playing activity to understand the impact of alliances. ● Reflect on how historical conflicts connect to modern-day international relations. |
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| STANDARDS ALIGNMENT: | <p>National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) C3 Framework Standards:</p> <p>D2.His.1.3-5: Create and use a chronological sequence of related events to compare developments that happened at the same time.</p> <p>D2.His.2.3-5: Compare life in specific historical time periods to life today.</p> <p>D2.His.10.3-5: Compare information provided by different historical sources about the past.</p> <p>D2.His.16.3-5: Use evidence to develop a claim about the past.</p> <p>English Language Arts</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p> <p>ISTE Standards:</p> <p>ISTE Standard 6: Creative Communicator: Students communicate clearly and express themselves creatively for a variety of purposes using the platforms, tools, styles, formats, and digital media appropriate to their goals.</p> |
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| TIME NEEDED: | 1-2 class periods (45-60 minutes each) |
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| INTERDISCIPLINARY: | <p>Language Arts: Analyzing primary sources and writing reflections.</p> <p>Geography: Mapping alliances and tracing European tensions leading to war.</p> |

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| <p>PRIOR KNOWLEDGE:</p> | <p>Students should have a basic understanding of the following aspects before beginning this lesson:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Political Landscape of Europe Before WWI: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The major European powers, including Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire. ○ The political structure of these nations, including monarchies, empires, and democratic influences. ○ How nationalism and imperialism influenced political tensions in Europe. ● Key Events Leading to the War: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The growing military buildup (arms race) among European powers. ○ The role of colonial rivalries and economic competition in increasing tensions. ○ The formation of alliances such as the Triple Entente and Triple Alliance and their significance. ● The Role of Alliances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How mutual defense agreements created a domino effect, pulling multiple countries into war. ○ The importance of diplomacy and how failures in diplomacy contributed to conflict. ● Impact of Industrialization and Military Technology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The development of new weapons, including machine guns, artillery, and early aircraft. ○ How industrialization led to economic rivalries and military preparedness. ● Crisis in the Balkans: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The political instability in the Balkans and the decline of the Ottoman Empire. ○ The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and how it served as the spark for war. |
| <p>MATERIALS NEEDED:</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● National WWI Museum and Memorial’s WWI Origins Interactive Timeline ● National WW1 Museum and Memorial’s Online Collections Database for Teachers section. ● European Political Landscape Map (pre-WWI) ● Different colored yarn skeins (for alliances activity) ● Interactive Timeline Exploration Worksheet (Appendix A) ● Primary Source Analysis Worksheet (Appendix B) ● "Alliance Tangle" Role-Playing Handout (Appendix C) ● Google Slides/PowerPoint Presentation for Teacher Guidance ● Exit Ticket Reflection Questions |

LESSON

PRE-ASSESSMENT/INTRODUCTION/HOOK:

Think-Pair-Share:

- Ask students: “How do political alliances shape global events today?”
- Discuss historical and modern examples of alliances and their impact (e.g., NATO, UN, trade agreements).
- [Play a video clip on the pre-war political landscape of Europe \(from the Imperial War Museum\)](#)

DIRECTIONS:

Part 1: Interactive Timeline Exploration (15-30 minutes):

1. Students explore the National WWI Museum’s Interactive Timeline in pairs or small groups.
2. Using a timeline worksheet (Appendix A), they identify and discuss significant events leading up to WWI.
3. Discuss key moments such as rising tensions between major European powers, economic rivalries, and territorial disputes.

Class discussion questions:

How did rivalries between major powers escalate? What role did industrialization and military buildup play?

Part 2: "Alliance Tangle" Hands-On Activity (15-30 minutes):

Teacher Preparation:

- **Materials Needed:**
 - 2 different colors of yarn (one for Allies, one for Central Powers)
 - Pre-cut yarn strips (4-5 feet each)
 - Country role cards (with country names & brief descriptions) (Appendix C)
 - Large classroom space (clear desks/tables if needed)
 - Projector/Whiteboard (to reference alliances as you guide the activity)
 - Name tags (made by the student or stickers)
- **Student Assignments:**
 - Assign students a country (adjust based on class size).
 - Major Players (1 student per country or team of 2-3 for larger classes):
 - Allies: Serbia, Russia, France, Britain, Japan, Italy, U.S.
 - Central Powers: Austria-Hungary, Germany, Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria
 - Smaller Players:
 - Allied Powers: Belgium, Romania, Greece, Portugal, Montenegro

- Central Powers: (None additional after Bulgaria)
- Students should wear name tags or hold country signs.

Instructions for Running the Activity:

Step 1: The Initial Conflict (Austria-Hungary vs. Serbia)

1. The student representing Austria-Hungary starts by declaring war on Serbia.
2. The Serbia student holds onto one end of a yarn strand (Allies' color), symbolizing Serbia's position.
3. Serbia "calls" Russia for help (Russia takes the other end of Serbia's yarn).
4. Teacher Asks: *"How does Serbia's alliance with Russia increase tensions?"*

Step 2: The Alliance Web Expands

5. Russia now holds the yarn and "calls" France, passing the yarn to them.
6. France then "calls" Britain, connecting to them with the same yarn.
7. Britain now holds the yarn and "calls" Japan, adding another strand.
8. Italy was hesitant at first (historically, Italy was allied with Austria-Hungary but later joined the Allies). After one round of discussion, Italy connects to France & Britain.

Step 3: The Central Powers Join the Fight

9. Meanwhile, Germany & Austria-Hungary hold onto a different colored yarn strand (Central Powers' color).
10. Germany "calls" the Ottoman Empire, passing a red yarn strand.
11. Bulgaria later joins the Central Powers and is connected by Germany & Austria-Hungary.

Step 4: The War Escalates

12. The U.S. initially remains neutral, standing aside.
13. Teacher Asks: *"What event pulled the U.S. into the war?"* (Students may reference unrestricted submarine warfare, Zimmermann Telegram, etc.)
14. Once the U.S. enters (1917), they take new blue yarn and connect to Britain, France, and Russia.

Final Demonstration: The "Tangle Effect"

15. Now, instruct students to gently pull on their yarn when their country gets "attacked."

Example: Austria-Hungary attacked Serbia → Serbia pulls the yarn → Russia feels the pull → Russia declares war → France feels the pull → etc.

16. Students will physically see the war's escalation as each new country feels the tension spread.

Discussion Questions:

- *What did you notice about alliances?*
- *Could this war have been avoided? How?*

- *Can you think of modern-day examples where alliances play a role in global conflicts?*

Part 3: Primary Source Exploration (15 minutes):

1. Students analyze primary source documents from the National WWI Museum’s digital collection For Teachers section.
2. Each student or group selects an artifact (such as propaganda posters, political cartoons, letters, or newspaper headlines) to study in depth.
3. Guiding questions for analysis (Appendix B):
 - a. What message does this artifact convey?
 - b. Who was the intended audience, and what was the artifact’s purpose?
 - c. How does it reflect the tensions and concerns leading up to WWI?
 - d. Does it contain bias or persuasive elements? How does this affect the message?
4. Students take notes and then present their findings in a gallery walk or small group discussion.

Reflection & Exit Ticket (5 minutes):

Students answer:

- How did alliances contribute to the origins of WWI?
- Can we see similar tensions in the world today?

POST-ASSESSMENT:

Formative Assessment: Participation in discussion, timeline analysis, and artifact interpretation.

Message Clarity and Effectiveness:

Evaluate how well students articulated the connections between alliances and war. Did they clearly communicate how political relationships escalated tensions? Were their arguments well-structured and supported by historical evidence?

Understanding of WWI Origins:

Assess students' grasp of key events leading to WWI. Did they correctly identify major alliances and conflicts? Were they able to describe the political landscape of Europe before the war?

Participation and Teamwork:

Observe how students interacted within their groups. Did they actively contribute to discussions and activities? How effectively did they collaborate in creating their presentations or political cartoons?

Creativity and Critical Thinking:

Analyze students’ ability to think beyond the surface. Did they draw insightful connections between historical alliances and modern-day international relations? How original were their political cartoons or journal entries?

Overall Lesson Objectives:

Determine whether students met the goals of the lesson. Did they leave with a deeper understanding of how diplomatic decisions led to global conflict? Were they able to reflect on the long-term consequences of pre-war alliances?

MODIFICATIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS

For Students with Physical Disabilities: Modify activities to ensure accessibility. For example, simplify the "Alliance Tangle" movement or allow participation through verbal collaboration rather than physical interaction.

For Students with Learning Disabilities: Provide structured graphic organizers and guided notes. Offer sentence starters for discussion and written responses.

For English Language Learners (ELLs): Include visual aids, bilingual resources, and translations of key terms. Pair ELL students with supportive peers for group discussions.

For Advanced Learners: Encourage deeper analysis of primary sources, asking students to compare multiple perspectives or create their own propaganda-style messages.

General Accommodations: Offer verbal and written instructions, check for understanding frequently, and allow students flexibility in the roles they take on during activities.

Appendix A:

World War I Origins: Interactive Timeline Worksheet

Instructions:

As you explore the National WWI Museum and Memorial's Interactive Timeline:

1. Work with a partner or small group.
2. Record at least **10 important events** that occurred before WWI officially began in 1914.
3. Include the date, a brief description, and the countries involved.
4. After filling in the chart, answer the reflection questions.

Timeline

| Event | Description |
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Reflection Questions

1. Which event do you think had the biggest impact on starting WWI?
Why?

2. What patterns did you notice in the relationships between countries?

3. How did industrialization and imperialism contribute to rising tensions?

4. Do you see any parallels between these events and current global issues today?

6. Do you see any bias or persuasive techniques? Explain.

7. Why do you think this artifact was important at the time?

Gallery Walk/Group Notes:

Two interesting things you noticed in other groups' artifacts:

1.

2.

Appendix C: Alliance Tangle Simulation Role Cards

| Country | Alliance | Year Entered War | Student Role Description |
|----------------------|---------------|------------------|--|
| Serbia | Allied Powers | 1914 | A small Balkan nation blamed for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. You are the first to be attacked and must call on your ally Russia for help. |
| Russia | Allied Powers | 1914 | A large empire with strong ties to Serbia. You enter the war to protect Serbia and then call on France to honor your alliance. |
| France | Allied Powers | 1914 | Long-standing rival of Germany. You are allied with Russia and Britain. Join the war after Russia and help expand the Allied web. |
| Britain | Allied Powers | 1914 | A major world empire. You join the war after Germany invades Belgium, and you are connected to France and Russia through alliance and diplomacy. |
| Japan | Allied Powers | 1914 | You join the war to support Britain and expand influence in Asia. You are a smaller but strategic member of the Allied Powers. |
| Italy | Allied Powers | 1915 | Initially part of the Triple Alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, but switched sides in 1915. Joined France and Britain after staying neutral in 1914. |
| United States | Allied Powers | 1917 | You stay neutral until 1917, when German submarine attacks and the Zimmermann Telegram push you to join Britain, France, and Russia in the war. |
| Belgium | Allied Powers | 1914 | A neutral country invaded by Germany. Your invasion caused Britain to join the war. Connect with Britain and France. |

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| Romania | Allied Powers | 1916 | You join the war to regain territory from Austria-Hungary. Connect to Russia and France. |
| Greece | Allied Powers | 1917 | You face internal political struggle but eventually join the Allies to oppose the Central Powers. Connect to Britain and France. |
| Portugal | Allied Powers | 1916 | You join to support Britain and contribute troops to the Western Front. Connect with Britain. |
| Montenegro | Allied Powers | 1914 | You are a small Balkan country that supports Serbia and declares war on Austria-Hungary early on. Connect to Serbia and Russia. |
| Austria-Hungary | Central Powers | 1914 | You declare war on Serbia first, setting off the conflict. Call on Germany to support you and connect with the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria later. |
| Germany | Central Powers | 1914 | A powerful empire and Austria-Hungary's main ally. You support Austria-Hungary and declare war on Russia and France. You call on the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. |
| Ottoman Empire | Central Powers | 1914 | You join Germany and Austria-Hungary to regain power and land in the Middle East. Connect to both major Central Powers. |
| Bulgaria | Central Powers | 1915 | You join the Central Powers to regain territory lost in earlier Balkan wars. Connect to Germany and Austria-Hungary. |

Additional Resources:

- [WWI A-Z: An A-Z Guide to the War that Shaped the 20th Century](#)
- [Key Dates of WW1](#)
- [June 28, 1914](#)
- [Global WW1 Map](#)

Primary Sources from the Museum's Online Collections Database:

- Object ID:2019.47.1258: Pre-war Photograph of a Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz-Ferdinand and his family Princess Sophie and their children are at their side.. On the reverse is a name and address for a person in Posen.:
<https://collections.theworldwar.org/argus/final/Portal/Default.aspx?component=AAAS&record=d14ddc1e-43d2-410f-9199-24c98a01acdf>
- Object ID:1986.213.109: Country of Origin: Germany. Title: Who is a Militarist? Artist: Louis Oppenheim, signed LO Date: n.d. Size: 47.9 x 61.4 cm Issuing Agency: Medium: Lithograph, printed by Hermann-(unreadable), Berlin
<https://collections.theworldwar.org/argus/final/Portal/Default.aspx?component=AAAS&record=3533006d-8d7d-4c97-bb39-45bb02af4790>
- Object ID:1926.28.134: Black and white photograph. Signal Corps #18792. From the Catalogue of Official A.E.F. Photographs taken by the Signal Corps: "Officers and staff officers at inspection. In group are: Gen. Sir Henry Home, K. C. B., K. C. M. G., commanding officer, British First Army; Lieut. Gen. Orth, Belgian Army; Maj. Gen. George W. Head, commanding officer, Second American Army Corps; Col. Henry, First Army, French- Mission; Capt. Venier, First Army, French Mission; Capt. de Columbel, First Army, French Mission; and Maj. Gen. James H. McEae, American Army, commanding officer Seventy-eighth Division. Ranchicourt, France. First British Army headquarters. August 4, 1918."
<https://collections.theworldwar.org/argus/final/Portal/Default.aspx?component=AAAS&record=2c319eab-249b-4f74-ba3d-f94b47719db8>

Bibliography:

Clark, C. (2012). *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. Harper.

A detailed account of European diplomacy and alliance systems that led to WWI, emphasizing political missteps and nationalist tensions.

Hastings, M. (2013). *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*. Knopf.

A comprehensive narrative of the critical months leading to WWI, analyzing military decisions and diplomatic failures.

The National WWI Museum and Memorial. (n.d.). *Interactive WWI Timeline*.

<https://www.theworldwar.org/interactive-wwi-timeline>

An engaging, interactive timeline that traces the key events leading up to and throughout World War I, helping students visualize how tensions escalated across Europe and the world.

The National WWI Museum and Memorial. (n.d.). *Online Collections Database*.

<https://collections.theworldwar.org>

Primary sources include photographs, propaganda, and maps relevant to the prelude and early stages of the war.

Imperial War Museums. (n.d.). *How the World Went to War in 1914*.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-the-world-went-to-war-in-1914>

This article offers a clear summary of the July Crisis and how diplomatic failures, militarism, and alliances rapidly escalated a regional conflict into a global war.

Library of Congress. (n.d.). *World War I: A Resource Guide*. <https://guides.loc.gov/wwi>

Offers access to U.S. government documents, letters, and photographs from WWI, particularly useful for understanding U.S. entry and diplomatic context.

DocsTeach. (n.d.). *World War I Teaching Resources*. <https://docsteach.org/topics/wwi>

Educational tools and digitized primary documents for analyzing the events and decisions leading to U.S. involvement in the war.

National Archives (UK). (n.d.). *Letters from the First World War, 1915*.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/letters-first-world-war-1915/>

First-person letters from British soldiers and civilians that offer personal insights into pre-war alliances and sentiments.