

Warfare in World War I

World War I was less than one year old when British writer H. G. Wells lamented the fate of humanity at the hands of “man’s increasing power of destruction” (H. G. Wells, “Civilization at the Breaking Point,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1915, 2). Although considered a father of science fiction, Wells was observing something all too real—technology had changed the face of combat in World War I and ultimately accounted for an unprecedented loss of human life. Infantry warfare had depended upon hand-to-hand combat. World War I popularized the use of the machine gun—capable of bringing down row after row of soldiers from a distance on the battlefield. This weapon, along with barbed wire and mines, made movement across open land both difficult and dangerous. Thus trench warfare was born. The British introduced tanks in 1916; they were used with airplanes and artillery to advance the front.

The advent of chemical warfare added to the soldier’s perils.



Images Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Sea and airborne weapons made killing from a distance more effective as well. Guns mounted on ships were able to strike targets up to twenty miles inland. The stealth and speed of German submarines gave Germany a considerable advantage in its dominance of the North Sea. Although airplanes were technologically crude, they offered a psychological advantage. Fighter pilot aces such as Manfred von Richthofen, Germany’s “Red Baron,” became celebrities and heroes, capturing the world’s imagination with their daring and thrilling mid-air maneuvers.

Newspapers charted the public's reaction—horror and vengeance—to these technological advancements. A few weeks after the Germans first used poison gas in Ypres, Belgium, on April 22, 1915, a London newswire to the *New York Times* described the brutal details of the attack and the immediate effects on the soldiers, concluding: "It is without doubt the most awful form of scientific torture." Yet a *Daily Chronicle* [London] editorial urged Britain to retaliate with poison gas use of its own (quoted in *New York Times*, May 7, 1915). In fact, Germany claimed that the Allies were already using mines charged with poison gas. So horrified were people by chemical warfare that the use of poison gases was banned for future wars, although not until 1925.

When Germany's plan for a swift military victory, a *blitzkrieg*, went unrealized, the pace of war bogged

down. Both sides tried to break this stalemate through the use of force. In previous wars, victory was achieved through territorial supremacy; in World War I it was accomplished by simply outlasting the opponent—a "war of attrition." Initially described at the onset of the fighting in April 1914 as a "splendid little war" that would be over by Christmas, the conflict lasted for more than four years and scarred an entire generation with its unprecedented brutality.



Images Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Warfare in World War I Article Questions

Name: _____ C: _____

Date: _____

- 1.** According to the article, what were new weapons or technologies that were used in World War I? Create a list.

- 2.** Out of all these new weapons or technologies which one do you feel had the most significant impact on the war? Explain why by citing evidence from the article.

- 3.** What was meant by a “war of attrition”?

War Statistics Chart

	Civil War Total (1861–1865)	American Revolution (1776–1783)
Total Forces	3,867,0000	200,000
Killed in Combat	184,594	4,435
Wounded in Combat	412,175	137,000
Total Casualties	634,703	335,524

World War I Casualties

Allied Powers				
	United States	Russia	England	France
Total Forces	4,355,000	12,000,000	8,904,467	8,410,000
Killed in Combat	116,516	1,700,000	908,371	1,357,800
Wounded in Combat	204,002	4,950,000	2,090,212	4,266,000
Total Casualties	323,018	9,150,000	3,190,235	6,160,800

Central Powers				
	Germany	Austria-Hungary	Turkey	Bulgaria
Total Forces	11,000,000	7,800,000	2,850,000	1,200,000
Killed in Combat	1,773,700	1,200,000	325,000	87,500
Wounded in Combat	4,216,058	3,620,000	400,000	152,390
Total Casualties	7,142,558	7,020,000	975,000	266,919

Data from U.S. Department of Justice