

# Descent into the Abyss: World War I and the Crisis of the European Global Order

## The Coming of the Great War

- Germany, led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, was increasingly powerful and aggressive in the 1890s. Britain joined with Russia and France, forming the **Triple Entente**, while Austria-Hungary, Italy, and Germany formed the Central Powers. Italy's membership was made problematic because of its conflicts with Austria-Hungary. Tensions in Europe were exacerbated around the world. France and Germany faced off in North Africa, coming to the brink of hostility more than once. The formation of the two alliances added to the war of rhetoric. An arms race between Britain and Germany over naval power was matched by growing land forces. Mounting international conflict was made worse by internal strife, largely resulting from industrialization.
- European concerns focused on the Balkans, where a multiplicity of ethnicities struggled. It was the assassination of the heir to Austria-Hungary, **Archduke Ferdinand** at **Sarajevo**, by a Serbian, that triggered the war. Russia supported the Serbians, as fellow Slavs, transforming a regional crisis into a European war. Britain entered the war, involving its vast empire and making the conflict a global war. Germany and France carefully planned the kind of war they were sure would give them a quick victory.

## A World at War

- Germany's strategy of quickly moving through Belgium was stopped by British support of the latter. The war all had expected to soon win turned into a long standoff on the Western Front. Digging trenches was the only defense against the new artillery. Staggering casualties and the inability to gain any ground made the war a new experience. Leaders on both sides failed to adapt to the conditions, sending one group of soldiers after another "over the top" to die quickly from machine-gun fire.
- In the east, Germany pushed Russia back, inflicting large casualties. **Nicholas II** personally led the fighting, but with such poor results that it was one of the causes of the Revolution of 1917. Russia had some success against Austria-Hungary, but gained little ground. Austria-Hungary and Italy turned against each other. British and French aid helped stop the Austrian assault on Italy, but widespread desertion and the threat of invasion panicked Italy.

- While soldiers faced the inglorious reality of trench warfare, those at home continued to view the war with undiminished zeal. States expanded to control transportation, direct the media, and impose rationing. Propaganda was used to keep the home front loyal to the war. Although labor leaders were given a voice in industrial management, workers' protests were not silenced. Germany faced revolution in 1918–1919, as food shortages and labor unrest created a precarious situation. Women took men's places in factories, gaining better wages than ever. Many of these gains were lost after the war, but women won the vote in Britain, Germany, and the United States.
- Conflicts between European powers extended to their empires. Colonial subjects were called to serve the war. Britain's empire in particular expanded the scope of the war. Britain's 1902 alliance with Japan drew the latter in. Troops from Britain's dominions were particularly important in the Middle East, for example in the fighting at **Gallipoli** in 1915. British Indian and African troops, and French and German Africans fought in the war. The Ottoman Empire supported Germany, following cooperation between Germany and the Young Turks. Blaming the Armenian Christians for Turkish military disasters, the latter launched the **Armenian genocide** in 1915. The United States entered the war in 1917, heralding its real entry into world affairs. Americans were divided on the question of joining the war, but U.S. businesses profited. German attacks on neutral shipping finally pushed the United States into the war. By 1918, the large numbers of U.S. soldiers shipped to Europe had begun to impact the war.
- On the **Eastern Front**, Russia's withdrawal allowed the Germans to focus on the other front. With U.S. help, the Germans were halted and then pushed back. The Austro-Hungarian fronts failed, and the Empire broke apart. Germany agreed to an armistice on November 11, 1918. Having been informed only of victories, the Germans were stunned, a feeling of betrayal that was later used by **Adolph Hitler**. With ten million dead and twenty million wounded, the war far outstripped any that had preceded it. The influenza pandemic that followed claimed millions more.

## Failed Peace

- Peace negotiations were greatly influenced by pressures from each leader's constituency. **Georges Clemenceau** of France wanted the Germans to be punished, as did many British, while their prime minister, **David Lloyd George**, balanced those demands with a desire for a more moderate peace. All of the Western powers, including U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, were agreed in applying the principle of **self-determination** only to European peoples. Western overseas empires were not disturbed. The Peace of Paris laid down the terms of a peace that the Germans subsequently fought to overturn. The Germans were intentionally humiliated both in negotiations and in the terms of the peace. The Russians, Arabs, Chinese, and Vietnamese—in the person of Ho Chi Minh—were also treated with disdain. The U.S. Congress refused to approve the **League of Nations** charter.

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## The Nationalist Assault on the European Colonial Order

- World War I saw the first outright conflict over colonial possessions. Although the colonial powers held onto their colonies, the war was a period of growing industrial and commercial power for India, and gave the subjugated peoples a lesson in the barbaric behavior of their masters. In addition, the European overseas military presence was necessarily lessened. The potential danger this caused was held off by attractive promises, which were not made good after the war. In short, the war shook imperial control, both by spreading doubts about Western racial superiority and by weakening of the means of control.
- India's nationalist movement led the way in the colonies by virtue of the size of the colony and because of the central role it had long held in the British Empire. The movement had all of the elements that were to appear in later, similar developments: influential groups educated in the West, charismatic leaders that brought the movement to the masses, and nonviolent means. India's **National Congress Party** brought together disparate groups, and was acknowledged by the British in 1885. Hoping to use the Congress Party to identify rebellious elements, the British found instead that it became a powerful force for criticism of imperial rule. Many initially loyal Indians became outraged at their treatment by racist British leaders.
- Looking for a cause to mobilize more of their fellow Indians, nationalist leaders began to make use of the negative economic impact of colonization. Indians paid for British armies, British civil servants, and public works built using British materials, all of which helped the British economy. In the countryside, subsistence agriculture and farming for Indian consumption had given way to crops for British consumption. The peasants were beset by food shortages and epidemics, which were blamed on the British.
- The Indian nationalist movement was split by the religious divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Leaders such as **B. G. Tilak** supported the establishment of the Hindu religion as a state religion, largely ignoring the Muslim population. Tilak gained a large following, but left out all but conservative Hindus. British rule was also threatened by radical groups that sought change through terrorism. Yet more moderate leaders emerged, aided by the British **Morley-Minto reforms**, leading to a more peaceful, inclusive independence movement.
- The First World War saw the adherence of many Indians to the British cause. At the same time, economic dislocations had an adverse effect. British failure, in 1918, to honor promises made to Indian leaders during the war was ameliorated the next year. In 1919, the **Montagu-Chelmsford reforms** gave Indians some control of legislation and administration, yet at the same time the **Rowlatt Act** attacked basic civil rights. In this climate, **Mohandas Gandhi** emerged. His attraction lay in his successes in a similar situation in British South Africa, his nonviolent protests—called **satyagraha** or truth force—his legal background, and the charisma of a guru. He appealed both to intellectuals and to the mass of Indians.
- Nationalism in Egypt, unlike other colonized areas, predated conquest. **Lord Cromer's** rule as high commissioner included reforms that benefited the ruling

elite and some urban areas. The *ayan*, rural landowners, took advantage of the reforms to amass larger holdings, while spending their time luxuriating in Cairo. Younger sons from the small but growing middle class, the **effendi** or professional and business class, formed the independence movement. Arabic newspapers voiced increasing criticism of the British rulers. In 1906, the **Dinshawi incident**, resulting in the hanging of four Egyptian villagers, sparked Egyptian demonstrations. By 1918, the force of nationalism led the British to grant a constitution and representation.

- The Ottoman Empire was ended by division. Mustafa Kemal, called **Ataturk**, rallied the Turks against Greek nationalism, establishing an independent Turkey by 1923. His rule advanced westernization, but also followed the line of development begun in the 19th century. France and Britain continued to occupy Arab portions formerly under the Ottomans. **Hussein** led Arabian resistance to Britain, helped along by failed British promises for Arabic independence. British and French **mandates** were threatened from the outset by the Arabs' sense of betrayal. The **Balfour Declaration**, promising land in the Middle East to European Zionists, was made good. The Zionist movement, fueled by pogroms in the late 19th century, was led by such leaders as **Leon Pinsker** and **Theodor Herzl**. The Society for the Colonization of Israel began the process of forming a Jewish nation. The wrongful conviction of **Alfred Dreyfus** gave further momentum, as French Jews joined the movement. The **World Zionist Organization** included Jews from across Europe. Herzl's success in gaining Palestine for the Jews was a clear message to the area's Arabic peoples. British attempted to control both groups.
- Egypt's post-war situation differed from that of the Arab world, because it was already under British control and did not experience the sense of betrayal over failed promises. However, Egypt was used as a staging ground for the Entente forces, draining resources. Growing anger, increased when the Egyptian delegation to Versailles—the *wafd*—was shunned, led to revolts. The **Wafd party** was led by **Sa'd Zaghlul**. British inquiries into the situation led a decision to a withdrawal from Egypt from 1922 to 1936. Increased political power was used by many Egyptian leaders to consolidate their position and increase their wealth. Bankruptcy in the 1940s led to Gamal Abdul Nasser's coup of 1952. Massive economic inequities had fed unrest.
- Africa differed from India in being colonized just decades before World War I broke out. Again, Western-educated groups were influential. Again, broken promises had their effect. Again, increasing knowledge of European weaknesses and repressive measures changed colonial attitudes. Although African resources were instrumental in the war efforts, economic dislocation had an adverse impact in Africa. African Americans such as **Marcus Garvey** and **W. E. B. du Bois** were influential, creating **pan-African** organizations. Although these did not lead directly to independence, they helped arouse anticolonial feelings. The **negritude** literary movement gained Africans more respect among the French. **Léopold Sédar Senghor**, **Léon Damas**, and **Aimé Césaire** used their writings to celebrate their culture. In the post-war decade, many British colonials were given more political freedom. Early groups such as the National Congress of

British West Africa were replaced by smaller groups, each representing an individual colony.

### Multiple-Choice Questions

1. The immediate cause for the outbreak of World War I was
  - (A) a naval race between Germany and Great Britain.
  - (B) the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand.
  - (C) colonial disputes over Morocco.
  - (D) conflicting alliances.
  - (E) the Industrial Revolution.
2. The influence of technology on modern warfare is demonstrated by all of these developments in World War I EXCEPT:
  - (A) submarines.
  - (B) airplanes and aerial warfare.
  - (C) the destructive power of artillery and machine guns.
  - (D) mechanized warfare as demonstrated during the Blitzkrieg.
  - (E) poisonous gases and barbed wire.
3. It was inevitable that conflict in Europe would become a world war because
  - (A) Great Britain and France had existing alliances with Japan and the United States.
  - (B) the European combatants had colonies and forces around the world.
  - (C) Germany attacked China and Japan.
  - (D) Germany had alliances with Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico.
  - (E) the United States was heavily invested in German industry and protected its ally.
4. The biggest battles outside of Europe during World War I occurred in
  - (A) African colonies of Europe.
  - (B) East Asia, where Japan and China fought each other.
  - (C) the Middle East, where the Turks fought Britain, Russia, and France.
  - (D) the Pacific, where Germany and Japan fought to control key islands.
  - (E) Latin America, where Mexico invaded the United States.
5. The earliest result of World War I was the
  - (A) rise of the United States as a great power.
  - (B) beginning of European decolonization.
  - (C) rise of Japan to great power status.
  - (D) Great Depression.
  - (E) collapse of all European empires.
6. The principle of Woodrow Wilson that influenced future decolonization was
  - (A) immediate independence for all colonies.
  - (B) evacuation of all occupied territories.
  - (C) popular self-determination.
  - (D) reparations for war damages.
  - (E) the League of Nations.
7. The Indian National Congress Party
  - (A) was composed primarily of peasants and Muslim holy men.
  - (B) from the outset took part in acts of violence against the British Raj.
  - (C) included only Hindus.
  - (D) was initially loyal to the British rulers and primarily concerned with the interests of the Indian elite.
  - (E) was a radical faction devoted to the ousting of British rule by any means needed.
8. Which of the following statements concerning British administration of India in the last decades of the 19th century is most accurate?
  - (A) The British demilitarization of India caused substantial unemployment.
  - (B) The enlightened British policy, begun in the 1880s, of fostering Indian industrialization through tariffs on imported British goods began to improve the Indian economy.
  - (C) British emphasis on the production of cash crops such as jute, cotton, and indigo led to shortages of food production in India.

- (D) Indian economic dependency on Britain was beginning to end, as more of the steel for production of railways was produced on the subcontinent.
- (E) India never had a strict dependency on the British.
9. Who was the first Indian leader with a genuine mass following?
- (A) J. Nehru  
(B) M. K. Gandhi  
(C) M. A. Jinnah
- (D) B. G. Tilak  
(E) C. J. Bodisramda
10. Egyptian nationalism differed from that of India because
- (A) it featured non-violent protest.  
(B) religious divisions split the movement.  
(C) economic dislocations of World War I caused hardships that set colonists against the colonial rulers.  
(D) charismatic leaders unified protest.  
(E) it originated in the precolonial period.

### Free-Response Question

*Can the “Indian prototype” of independence be applied to Egypt?*

## ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

### Multiple-Choice Questions

- 1. (B) is correct. Although all of the answers were factors, it was the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist that triggered the war.
- 2. (D) is correct. A, B, C, and E were key military technologies used in World War I, but D took place in World War II.
- 3. (B) is correct. Large European empires, especially the British Empire, meant that when European countries went to war, their empires would be involved.
- 4. (C) is correct. The crumbling Ottoman Empire was not only one of the key issues leading to the war, its size and proximity to Europe also made it a major theater.
- 5. (A) is correct. Although all five answers followed soon after the war ended, the United States was already a power at the end of the war.
- 6. (C) is correct. A and B did not occur; D and E were not influential in the colonies. Self-determination, while initially denied to colonial subjects, became a governing principle in decolonization.
- 7. (D) is correct. Loyalty to the Raj prevailed until the post-war period.
- 8. (C) is correct. Shrinking food production for home consumption became a key issue in Indian nationalism.
- 9. (D) is correct. Tilak’s leadership gained a large Indian following. The main reason he was not ultimately successful was the privileged place he gave Hindus.
- 10. (E) is correct. Both movements featured non-violent protest and charismatic leadership. Both were fueled by anger over economic hardships caused by British policies. Unlike the Indian experience, Egypt’s nationalism arose before outright colonization.

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**Free-Response Essay Sample Response**

*Can the “Indian prototype” of independence be applied to Egypt?*

While all of the factors that made India’s experience the quintessential independence movement, Egypt’s experience differed in several respects. Egyptian, like Indian, independence was led by a group of influential, Western-educated elites, charismatic leaders and used non-violent methods. However, Egyptian independence was less unified than that of India, although its nationalism movement came earlier.