



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE:

What's so Great about the Great War?

AUTHOR:

Stephanie Hammer

GRADE LEVEL & SUBJECT

**U.S. History II
Grades 6, 7**

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – Why is World War I historically significant?
2. **Contextual Essay**

What's so Great about the Great War?

They called it the Great War. What made it great and how does that translate into a lesson about historical significance? Overshadowed by World War II, the Great War is often lost in the pages of history books and overlooked by contemporaries of the modern world. America's involvement in the war was brief. We weren't attacked and it pales in comparison with the Civil War and the Second World War, in the eyes of students. Yet, it bridges the gap between the old world and the modern world and was the first international conflict in an emerging global world. "World War I is the cradle of modern civilization. More than any other event, it shaped the 20th century." (Kratsas)

Events can be considered historically significant when they resulted in great change over long periods of time for large numbers of people.¹ This historical investigation examines the war's significance through three lenses. How was the war important to people living at the time? How deeply were people's lives affected by the war? How does the war contribute to an understanding of life following the war? The answers to these questions can help to answer the question, what's so great about the Great War?

How was the war important to people living at the time?

Statistics can be compelling to student understanding an historical event and demonstrate the significance of the war. Over 65 million soldiers fought in the war with over 33 million casualties and 14 million deaths. The total cost was over 24 billion dollars.² Britain had 908,000 war deaths in World War I, more than two times the number of deaths they had in World War II. 1,300,000 people from France died in World War I. In World War II they had 567,000 deaths. (Neiberg) By the end of the war 4.3 million U.S. men served. There were more than 1.2 million American soldiers at the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

¹ Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness

² <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/rotogravures/rotoevents2.html>

That is more than the entire Confederate Army during the Civil War. (Keene) Secretary of War Baker notes the sacrifices, "While we rejoice that our losses were no heavier we still bear in mind the thousands of homes throughout the country upon which the heavy burden of war has fallen. To these homes the Nation owes a debt of fullest gratitude."³

Significance can depend upon perspective. The war brought change to two groups of Americans. Many African Americans took the opportunity to seek industrial employment in the North and escape the Jim Crow life of the South. W.E.B. DuBois said, "Let us, while the war lasts, forget our special grievances and close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens ... fighting for democracy." Two African American divisions faced contrasting experiences. The 92nd Division lacked training and the army spoke of their poor showing at the Meuse-Argonne campaign. Yet, there was little comment made about the poor performance of the white combatants who also lacked training. The 93rd Division was successful with the training they received under the French military and became decorated soldiers by France for their service. (Keene)

Women served as nurses, both on the homefront and overseas, and worked in war industries. "The war's scale affected food supplies and supplies of all kinds of goods. It was quite obvious that women had to fulfill a new role in all sorts of jobs or the war couldn't have been fought." (Braybon) The YWCA sent workers overseas to provide administrative leadership and support to U.S. Armed Forces. "It is a program that includes the sister of every man, the daughter of the American as well as the foreign-born; it is planned for women of all races and creeds. It aims to help the soldier through its service to girls and women. It seeks to create the highest standards of patriotism in times of war."⁴

How deeply were people's lives affected by the war?

The soldiers' experience in the trenches was dreadful and created health problems, "but they saved lives. The war would have been far more horrific if there had been no trenches." (Strachan) Private Clayton Slack said of the trenches, "Those that weren't scared, weren't there." (Keene) But it wasn't just the soldiers that were deeply affected. For every soldier, a family was left behind. Evelyn Albright, in her letter to her husband written after he was killed in the war, wrote, "It has come to me that time might dim your image and your dear companionship, and I cannot bear to think of that." Families were displaced as evidenced by the photo, "Soldier Giving Direction to Family".⁵ The war's deep affect on the individual, whether on the home front or a soldier in the trenches was significant.

Industrialized military operations had a deep impact on war destruction. Michael Neiberg's graphs comparing the Gettysburg and Verdun battles demonstrate the increased duration and battle casualties of World War I. Two communities deeply impacted by were Ypres, Belgium and Verdun, France.

Ypres was almost completely destroyed. As a key location with access to the English Channel, the Imperial German Army first arrived in Ypres with 8,000 soldiers. After ordering thousands of loaves of bread to be baked, they moved on. But over the course of the war, five major offensives occurred in Ypres. By the end of the war, with only a few buildings left, the entire town was in ruins.

The city of Verdun had the longest battle of the war, from February 21 through December 18, 1916. Germany intended to force a war of attrition on the French. The first battle on February 21 included one million Germans against 200,000 French. In the end, there was little change in the front lines. France's efforts at holding Verdun became legendary. It

³ Yockelson, Mitchell. "They Answered the Call: Military Service in the United States During World War I, 1917-1919." *Prologue Magazine*. National Archives, 1998.

⁴ "Five Months of War Work." Harvard University Library. Young Women's Christian Association of the U.S.A, War Work Council, 1917.

⁵ "Soldier Giving Direction to a Family, amid Chaos and Destruction of War." Library of Congress.

symbolizes for France the strength of the French armed forces. Stephane Audion-Rouzeau said of the battle, "I think that French soldiers were perfectly aware of the meaning of the battle. In their eyes, the battle was a defense of their women, their wives, the children, the French religion, the French soil. For the French soldiers of 1916, it was very clear to them. The battle had real meaning."⁶ France declared Verdun a "Zone Rouge" because it is too dangerous to be inhabited or cleared.

How does World War I contribute to understanding life after the war?

The Treaty of Versailles led to problems in Germany. Germany, not present at the peace conference, was forced to sign the treaty without objection. It lost land. Germany was forced to accept responsibility, limit its military, and pay reparations. Germany was angry over these terms. Count Brockdorff-Rantzau stated in his response to the Versailles Treaty, "We are required to admit that we alone are guilty, such an admission from my lips would be a lie."⁷ The harsh provisions and high reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles caused bitterness. (Berenbaum and Kramer) This led to the rise of Nazi Germany.

The Nazi regime was bitter over the defeat of Germany and they blamed the Jews. In the propaganda film, *The Triumph of Will*, the opening narrative states, "September 5, 1934. Twenty years after the outbreak of the World War; sixteen years after the beginning of Germany's suffering..." (Berenbaum and Kramer) Feeling humiliated by their defeat in World War I, Hitler's war restored confidence in the nation. With a desire for *Lebensraum* (living space), Hitler sent his soldiers into Poland. In addition to this desire for more land, the other motive for going to war was to carry out the Nazi racial policy. In his sixth year in power, in 1939, Hitler issued a warning, "If international-finance Jewry (Hitler's term for the supposed conspiracy of Jewish bankers) inside and outside of Europe should succeed once more in plunging nations into another world war, the consequence will not be the Bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of the Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race." (Berenbaum and Kramer)

Boundary changes and the land grabs following the war are still causing problems today. The Soviet Union was established with the Bolshevik Revolution. New countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the division of Austria-Hungary into two countries were established. The Arab States in the Middle East were created. The United States emerged as a new global superpower.

African Americans came back charged up to win equal rights after their service to their country. W.E.B. DuBois declared, "*We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France, and by the Great Jehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.*" Their involvement in the war led African Americans to assert their citizenship and protest racial injustice in the years following the war.⁸

So what is so Great about the Great War?

World War I deserves greater importance in the study of the 20th century. The American Expeditionary Force fighting against the Germans made the French and British breakthroughs possible. The soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force knew the Americans had won the war on the Western Front. "An accurate assessment is that the Allies might have lost the war without the Doughboys." (Keene) The Great War is a critical part of American history and deserves greater recognition in the curriculum. To understand the world in which we live in today, the importance of the Great War should be recognized.

⁶ "The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century." PBS

⁷ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g5/cs1/g5cs1s3a.htm>

⁸ Williams, Chad. "African Americans and World War I." *Africana Age*. Schomburg-Mellon Humanities Summer Institute, 2011.

3. Annotated Bibliography

Badsey, Stephen. "The Western Front and the Birth of Total War." *BBC History*. BBC, 08 Mar. 2011.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/total_war_01.shtml

Dr. Stephen Badsey is a senior lecturer in the Department of War Studies at the Royal Military Academy. His article explains connections between the Industrial Revolution, social and political changes that were taking place during this time, and the events of World War I.

Berenbaum, Michael, and Arnold Kramer. *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006.

The World Must Know tells the story of the Holocaust with an invaluable collection of Holocaust documents and stories. It provides a history of the early Nazi regime and references the distress the Nazis felt about the outcome of the Great War. Several quotes either written by Hitler or because of Hitler gives the reader insight into his extreme racist attitudes.

Braybon, Gail. "Women's Contribution to the War Effort." *The Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*. PBS. http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist_braybon_01_women.html

Braybon discusses the involvement of women in the industrial war effort. She details the dangers of war work with munitions and TNT. Most people were not aware of the dangers women took in working in these areas. Her article is helpful in understanding the scale of the war and the need for women to contribute by working in industry.

Brittain, Vera. *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925*. New York: Macmillan, 1933.

The Testament of Youth is an autobiographical account of the generation that came of age during World War I. Told from Brittain's perspective as a British citizen and based on her diary entries, the reader learns the story of her life after leaving Oxford and working as a nurse during the war. Through her story the reader learns about the impact the war had on the generation of World War I.

"Five Months of War Work." Harvard University Library. <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/2582289?n=1>

This 1917 pamphlet explains the war work of the YWCA. Their work included community service, provided help to the families of soldiers, housing for women working in industry, and overseas work. As a community service organization, the pamphlet exemplifies the concept of how total war affected all people.

"A Guide to WW1 Battlefields and History of the First World War." *A Guide to the WW1 Battlefields and Home to the Poppy Umbrella*. Ed. Joanna Legg. Rembrella Ltd., 2009. <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/index.htm>

Battlefields, monuments, and memorials are the focus of information on this website. The information includes historical information about each location along with a geographical description of each area. It also interestingly notes what the areas are like now and how those areas demonstrate the impact the war continues to have on the area today.

"Historical Significance." *The Historical Thinking Project*. Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. <http://historicalthinking.ca/concept/historical-significance>

This website was helpful with understanding not only how to help students understand and explore historical significance, but also provided a clear explanation of what historical significance means and the value it plays in history education.

Keene, Jennifer D. "Americans as Warriors: "Doughboys" in Battle during the First World War." *Magazine of History* 17.1 (2002): 15-18. JSTOR.

Keene presents a compelling article about the Doughboys and their contribution to the outcome of the war. She includes first-hand accounts of their experiences and identifies the contributions made by African American soldiers.

Kratsas, James. "The Great War: World War I and the American Century - A Ford Museum Exhibit." *The Record - September 1998*. National Archives. <http://www.archives.gov/publications/record/1998/09/the-great-war.html>

James Kratsas, Curator of the Gerald R. Ford Museum, wrote this article for the National Archives. He identifies significance of World War I by making an argument that shows the war as a turning point between the 19th and 20th centuries.

Mintz, S. "Learn About World War I." *Digital History*. University of Houston.

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/ww1/index.cfm>

This site has statistical information about the consequences of the war. It also provides useful links to several easy to use and content rich website that would be beneficial to teachers.

"Modern History Sourcebook: Treaty of Versailles, Jun 28, 1919." *Internet History Sourcebooks*. Ed. Paul Halsall. Fordham University, 2006. <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/modsbook38.asp>

While used predominately for information about the Treaty of Versailles, the collection of original articles to this website and links to articles and primary source documents on other university websites makes this useful to the teacher of history. In addition to a general overview of the war, key documents related to the aftermath of the war are included. The documents are categorized both chronologically and categorically. Two sections of special interest include resistance to war and literary responses to the war.

Neiberg, Michael S. *Fighting the Great War: A Global History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005.

Michael Neiberg's book provides an interesting account of the battles of World War I. Told in chronological order, the stories of specific areas are woven throughout the book and the reader gains a greater understanding the places by reading the stories in between events that happened in the same areas. His introduction about the telegrams sent between countries helps the reader to understand the story of the beginning of the war.

Neiberg, Michael. "What Students Need to Know about World War I." *Footnotes The Newsletter of FPRI's Wachman Center*. Foreign Policy Research Institute, Aug. 2008.

<http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1319.200808.neiberg.studentsworldwar1.html>

Neiberg's article helps the teacher gain a sense of what is historically significant about World War I. and provides insight into how to frame the teaching of the war. He compares and contrasts European countries with the United States to clarify the difference in understanding the importance the war to citizens of each country. He makes a compelling argument for the importance of teaching World War I.

"One Thousand Children: Georgia's Role in the Rescue of Jewish Children." *One Thousand Children: Georgia's Role in the Rescue of Jewish Children*. The William Breman Jewish Heritage & Holocaust Museum., 2008.

<http://www.thebreman.org/exhibitions/online/1000kids/WWI.html>

Mainly about the World War II and the Holocaust, this article explains the connection between the aftermath of World War I in Germany and World War II and the Holocaust. Other components of the website include contemporary Anti-Semitism and genocide issues and an article about Imperial Germany to help with understanding the history of Germany prior to World War I.

"Selective Service Act of 1917." *Major Acts of Congress*. Ed. Brian K. Landsberg. Gale Cengage, 2004.

<http://www.enotes.com/selective-service-act-1917-reference/selective-service-act-1917>

This article explains the history of the Selective Service Act and how it increased the number of American soldiers in the war. Since Germany fully expected the strength of the American Expeditionary Force to increase in 1919, and that led to their willingness to agree to end the war, the Selective Service Act worked to enable the United States to achieve its goal in the Great War. With 34 million American soldiers, World War I was clearly a total war.

"Speech Delivered by Hitler in Salzburg, 7 or 8 August 1920. (NSDAP Meeting." *Statements by Hitler and Senior Nazis Concerning Jews and Judaism*. S.D. Stein. <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/statements.htm>

While chilling to read, Hitler's speech allows the reader to see what he was thinking in terms of the Jewish population in Germany. Since this was delivered in 1920, one can now see that the writing was on the wall. Put into historical context with other events of the 20s and 30s, it is easy to see how the war affected life following the war.

Strachan, Hew. *The First World War*. New York: Viking, 2004.

Strachan presents the argument that the war had a lasting impact on the 20th century and there should be more value placed on it in the history of western civilization. It covers the western and non-western fronts with vivid details of the fighting. The pictures on almost every page help the reader to visualize the events he is explaining.

Tuchman, Barbara Wertheim. *The Guns of August*. New York: Macmillan, 1962.

Written in narrative style, *The Guns of August* presents the story of the prelude to the war with vivid details. She brings the people and events to life as she tells the story of the causes, the preparations made, and the chain of events that led to the war.

Unikoski, Ari. "Summary of the Air War." *First World War.com*. Michael Duffy, 2009.

<http://www.firstworldwar.com/index.htm>

This website has a wide variety of World War I content. It has informative sections about weaponry used during the war, which detail the history of the weapon along with the pros and cons of the weapons during the war. In addition, the primary source narrative section, with a focus on memoirs and poetry, is extensive. Unikoski's explanations helped with understanding the impact of not only the weapons, but the historical context of industrialization as well.

Williams, Chad. "African Americans and World War I." *Africana Age*. Schomburg-Mellon Humanities Summer Institute, 2011. <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-world-war-i.html>

Set within the larger story of African Americans during the 20th century, this article about African Americans during World War I is well documented and detailed with information. Williams argues that the war was a transformative moment in African American history. He starts with the Great Migration North, moves into the war and its connections to racism in the United States, discusses the involvement of African Americans in the military, has a special focus on African American women during the war, and then finishes with experiences of African Americans after the war. Included with the article are a set of images that include captions and citations. The section about life after World War I was helpful in understanding how the war affected life, or didn't affect their lives, after it was finished.

"The World War I Document Archive." *The World War I Document Archive*. <http://www.gwpda.org/>

International in focus, the website provides a collection of primary source documents related to World War I. The user can search documents by year or by type of document. Full documents are included along with authors and dates pertaining to each document. Many of the text documents used came from this site.

Yockelson, Mitchell. "They Answered the Call: Military Service in the United States During World War I, 1917-1919."

Prologue Magazine. National Archives, 1998. <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1998/fall/military-service-in-world-war-one.html>

While the main focus of this article was about understanding World War I military records at the National Archives, it documents military statistics that I used to verify statistics found in other sites. The statistics help to understand the scale of the war.