The historical context

Do you have a relative who participated in World War I? Perhaps a great-grandfather? Very few World War I veterans are still living. According to Veterans Affairs Department information for 2005, there are about 24.3 million veterans of American wars living today, but fewer than 50 of these are World War I veterans.

World War I was one of the first events in modern history that was both concentrated in time and global in scope. And it was a hugely important turning point in world history. Consider the world scene in 1914, the year the war broke out.

Europe was divided into a number of sovereign nation-states, but it still constituted a single cultural community in some respects. Even though there were many different church denominations, Christianity gave Europeans some generally shared ideas about the supernatural, morality, and destiny. European states had different sorts of governments. France and Portugal were the only republics. Most countries were monarchies, many of them constitutional monarchies such as Great Britain, some autocracies such as Russia. People could travel quite easily from one European country to another, and no one had to show a passport. (Today, the European Community is moving to eliminate passports between countries once again.) People traveled widely within Europe, especially using the railway networks that linked most countries together. Europeans spoke a variety of languages, no common one. But French served as a language of diplomacy and scholarly exchange throughout Europe.

Everyday culture was quite similar all across Europe, especially in the cities. There, people tended to dress alike, eat many of the same foods, and enjoy the same art and music. The unity of civilization in Europe might be symbolized by the architecture of three sorts of public buildings. One was the railway station, which represented European communication and industry. The second was the town hall, which typified public participation in government. The third was the opera house, which symbolized common culture in the fine arts. These types of structures looked quite alike wherever one traveled in Europe.
In 1914, the industrial nation-states of Europe dominated most of the world. Three powers—Britain, France, and Germany—controlled about 80 percent of the world's inhabited surface. Those three powers also possessed about half of the world's industrial might. Their merchants controlled half the world's international trade.

So why did European countries make devastating war on one another? Both the economic power of the countries of Europe and their rivalry for world influence produced serious divisions and mutual suspicions among them—even though their affluent populations attended the same operas. National groups that did not have their own states, or not one that included the territories they wanted, expressed their nationalism loudly. These groups were concentrated in eastern Europe: Poles, Ukrainians, Croatians, Serbs, Czechs, and others. Tensions were growing between the sovereign states. There was general agreement in the early twentieth century that boundaries in Europe were to be regarded as fixed. One state was not supposed to covet the territory of other states.

Within Europe an ominous arms race was picking up. Germany, which became a unified sovereign state in 1871, was a new power on the scene. Germany's rapid rise as an industrial and military power caused alarm, especially for France and Britain. All the European powers informally agreed that whenever a conflict threatened to break out between two of them, the powers would gang up on the side of the underdog and the crisis would be defused that way. But Europe had no regular machinery for settling international disputes. Neither the League of Nations nor the United Nations yet existed.

Shifts and adjustments in the balance of power ended, and Europe divided into two solid alliance blocks: Germany and Austria-Hungary on one side, Britain, France, and Russia on the other.

The incident that precipitated World War I was in itself a small one: the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, who was the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was traveling in the town of Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. While his carriage was driving through the streets, a Serbian terrorist shot him. Serbian revolutionaries regarded Austria as the special enemy of the little country of Serbia. From this incident unrolled a series of events that nobody managed to control and that led directly to the outbreak of the war in August 1914. Austria made demands on Serbia. Russia was an ally of Serbia and therefore started mobilizing its army. Germany then mobilized as well because it felt it had to stand by Austria, its ally, against Russia. Finally, France and Britain, Russia's allies, mobilized too. Germany invaded France and tried to knock it out of the war fast, but the army got bogged down in Belgium and northeastern France. This is where the trench lines were dug. This was the Western Front.

The rigid alliance system made it almost inevitable that a local quarrel could become a European war, and that is what happened. And because of the involvement of European countries with their own colonies and with other countries in Africa, Asia, and America, it became a world war. Japan, China, Italy, and the US all came into the war.
eventually on the Allied side. Turkey joined the Central Powers. Before the war was over, more than thirty countries with a combined population of 1.4 billion people were involved.

World War I was a modern war: not a war between armies or between kings but between whole societies. Modernity had brought nationalism and popular participation in government. Modernity also meant that whole peoples could be mobilized to fight each other. No one expected the war to be four years of continuous slaughter. But when the fighting dragged on, the opposing states concluded that the only way to end it was to utterly ruin the enemy. Back in 1906, one German general observed: If war breaks out "it will be a national war which will not be settled by a decisive battle but by a long wearisome struggle with a country that will not be overcome until its whole national force is broken, and a war which will utterly exhaust our own people, even if we are victorious." He was right.

World War I was the first great industrial war. The Industrial Revolution had given the countries of western and central Europe tremendous power to produce goods. Now the factories of the belligerent countries churned out vast quantities of repeating rifles, machine guns, artillery, ammunition, uniforms, trucks, food for the troops, and on and on. The machine gun, a product of industry designed to kill large numbers of people very quickly, was the key weapon in the war. Machine guns defended territory so well against charging enemy troops that the war on the Western Front degenerated into a defensive stalemate. Meanwhile, scientists and engineers busied themselves deliberately inventing new kinds of weapons, like poison gas, tanks, submarines, and fighting aircraft. All this military production sustained and perpetuated the war. Perhaps the conflicting powers did not themselves realize how much power they had to keep the war going.

The war became global when the opposing states carried the fighting to their colonies. East Africa became a significant theater of war between Britain and Germany because both powers had colonies there. In the Middle East, the Ottoman Turkish empire came into the war on the side of Germany and Austria. The British, operating from Egypt, attacked the empire, which led to fighting in Arabia, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Moreover, European colonies provided strategic raw materials and thousands of soldiers from among colonial populations.

The death and destruction of World War I went far beyond any earlier war. Take the Battle of the Somme, an allied offensive against the Germans that lasted from July to November 1916. The British forces suffered 36,000 casualties in the first hour of the battle. When the offensive ended in November, Germany had lost 400,000 men. Britain and France together had lost 600,000 thousand. The reward for Britain and France was a maximum military advance of about seven miles. By 1917 the carnage had become so great and seemed so far from ending that two countries took special action. Russian troops on the Eastern Front said enough was enough,
revolted against their own officers, and refused to fight. The Communist Revolution in Russia shortly followed. In the same year, the United States entered the war on the side of the Allies. This intervention led directly to Germany's defeat on the Western Front in 1918.

What were the most important consequences of the war they called at the time the Great War?

First, large areas of Europe lay in ruin, economies were in a state of collapse, and almost an entire generation of young men in France and Germany had been wiped out. More than 9 million soldiers and sailors died in action. More than 21 million combatants were wounded. As if this was not enough, an epidemic of influenza spread through the world in 1918 and 1919, killing many millions more. So the task Europe faced just to get back on its feet was monumental.

Second, the map of Europe was radically changed. The victorious powers agreed on many of these changes at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Four different empires came to an end: the German, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires. In their place rose three new republics and a new Communist state. Also, nine new countries were created out of territory that had belonged to one or another of these empires: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Finland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Austria. The creation of these new nation-states satisfied the nationalist hopes of some people. But, in fact, the multiplying of countries in Europe also produced more tensions, and many nationalist groups still did not feel they had received their due.

Third, the European powers had justified their colonial control over much of the world by pointing to their cultural and racial superiority over Africans and Asians. But when these same
powers set out to destroy one another in the most savage and barbaric war in history, the luster wore off the idea of European superiority. Colonial peoples in Africa and Asia, many of whom had participated valiantly in the war on one side or the other, gained confidence to protest and resist European colonial control. Thereafter, nationalism surged in the colonial empires.

Fourth, the huge cost of the war in lives and property did not mean that tensions in western and central Europe dissipated. The war did not answer the political problem of achieving stable political relations between Germany, the big new power in Europe, and its neighboring countries. The victorious allies forced Germany to accept blame for the war, forcing it to sign the Treaty of Versailles. Prewar German militarism was one of the factors leading to the conflagration, but Germany was hardly to blame for it lasting for four years. The treaty also had provisions that forced Germany to pay for starting the war. Among Germans, these stipulations caused deep resentment and bitterness, opening the way for Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party. World War II broke out just twenty years after the Great War. So the second war was in a very real sense a continuation of the first.

The First World War: The Historical Context

Use the reading to respond to the following questions in your notebook using complete sentences.

1. How were the nations of Europe different in 1914?
2. How were they similar?
3. How dominant were Britain, France, & Germany?
4. Where were the stateless national groups of Europe concentrated?
5. Why was Germany viewed as a potential threat?
6. Explain the informal "balance of power" that existed in Europe prior to 1914.
7. What two alliances existed in Europe in 1914?
8. What event precipitated the First World War?
9. What did the fact that the First World War was modern war mean about the nature of the war?
10. How did the Industrial Revolution impact the nature of the First World War?
11. How did the First World War become a global war?
12. Simply, what does the author believe are the most important consequences of the First World War?