World War I was a war like no other, and U.S. participation in this global conflict had a profound impact on those who fought and on the future of the nation.

The Outbreak of War in Europe and the Debate over U.S. Involvement

War broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, after months of international tension. The spark that ignited open hostilities was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo, Bosnia. By the end of the year, the Central Powers, led by Germany and Austria-Hungary, were battling the Allies, led by Britain, France, and Russia.

The United States initially declared itself neutral, leading to years of argument over whether to join the conflict, and when. The debates surrounding isolationism and interventionism took place in popular culture and the arts as well as in the political sphere and the news.

The sinking of the British ocean liner Lusitania on May 7, 1915, killed almost 1,200 people, including more than 120 U.S. citizens. Many Americans, appalled that the German submarines, or U-boats, would sink a passenger ship, saw this as a brutal attack on freedom of movement and U.S. neutrality. The Lusitania was one of dozens of ships sunk carrying American passengers and goods.

Mobilization for War

The United States entered World War I on April 6, 1917, when the U.S. Congress agreed to a declaration of war. Faced with mobilizing a sufficient fighting force, Congress passed the Selective Service Act on May 18, 1917. By the end of the war, the SSA had conscripted over 2.8 million American men. The hundreds of thousands of men who enlisted or were conscripted early in the war still faced months of intensive training before departing for Europe. In an effort to finance the extensive military operations of the war, and to help curb inflation by removing large amounts of money from circulation, the United States government issued
Liberty Bonds. Bond drives, parades, advertisements, and community pressure fueled the purchase of bonds, which played a crucial role in financing the U.S. war effort.

**War on the Homefront**

However distant the battlefields, World War I led to dramatic changes in the United States. American women served in a multitude of capacities including agriculture, factory and munitions work, the medical field, and non-combat roles in the Army, Navy, and Marines. The expanded role of women in the American workforce during the war was an important factor in the growing support for women’s suffrage and the eventual passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.

The U.S. Congress passed the Espionage Act on June 15, 1917. The Act prohibited individuals from interfering with draft or military processes, expanded the punishment for insubordination in the military, and barred Americans from supporting enemies in a time of war. Supporters saw it as a necessary precaution to promote domestic and military security, while critics viewed it as an attack on freedom of speech and argued that this law unfairly targeted immigrants and ideological dissenters.

**War Overseas**

When U.S. troops arrived overseas, they found themselves in the midst of a war waged on the ground, in the air, and under the sea, using new weapons on an unprecedented scale. Combatants suffered casualties in quantities never before seen. Many U.S. soldiers recorded the experience of participating in such an overwhelming and sometimes disorienting conflict in diaries and letters home, as well as in poems and songs.

Often regarded as the world’s first modern war, it used military technology including tanks, airplanes, modern machine guns, and poison gas. Technological innovations extended beyond the military. The medical field also experienced a proliferation of new technologies, including blood transfusions, X-ray machines, and prosthetics. Communication systems drastically changed during the war, as the telephone was adapted to meet wartime conditions, and the wireless telegraph, a precursor to radio technology, became more widely used.

World War I saw unprecedented participation by African American troops, with over 350,000 African American soldiers serving. However, African American troops were only able to serve in segregated units, and many were excluded from combat, allowed only to provide support services. The return of African American soldiers to their home communities after the war was followed by both a series of bloody racial conflicts and a wave of civil rights activism.

**Armistice and Plans for Peace**

On November 11, 1918, an Armistice agreement effectively ended the fighting. The conditions of the Central Powers’ surrender were agreed upon when the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28, 1919. The Treaty assigned responsibility for the war to the Central Powers and required that they pay reparations for war damages.

In addition to drafting the Treaty, the Paris Peace Conference also formed the League of Nations, an organization intended to prevent aggressive conflict by uniting the major military powers of the world into one body. The harsh punishments of the Treaty and the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations are widely regarded as catalysts for the outbreak of another global war two decades later. The U.S. Senate ratified neither the Versailles Treaty nor U.S. entry in the League of Nations, primarily out of opposition to mandatory U.S. military involvement in foreign conflicts.
Print a selection of items from the set that depend on visual elements to convey a message. Allow students to select an item and examine it, attending closely to visual techniques. Pair students who selected the same item and allow them to compare their thinking. What techniques can they identify? Why do they think the creator of the item used those techniques? If time allows, also pair students with someone who selected a different item, to compare messages and techniques.

This set includes memoirs, poetry, and news reports. Provide time for students to analyze information from various genres, and then list or diagram similarities and differences.

Select items that represent changes in social conventions and customs of the time, such as contributions to the war effort by women or racial minorities. Before students analyze the items, ask them to jot down what they think they know. As students analyze the primary sources, encourage them to think about what they notice that surprises them, and what questions they have. Support individuals or small groups in research to find additional information.

Allow students time to study a small set of items, and then list technology featured or mentioned in the items. Assign or allow each student to research to learn more about a particular technology.
**Additional Resources**

**World War I**
https://www.loc.gov/wwi

**A Guide to World War I Materials**
https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/wwi/wwi.html

**World War I Sheet Music**
https://www.loc.gov/collections/world-war-i-sheet-music/about-this-collection/

**World War I Remembered 100 Years Later**
https://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/ex-war-wwi-100.html

**World War I: American Artists View the Great War**
https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/american-artists-view-the-great-war/
https://www.loc.gov/item/19013740/1919-01-01/ed-1/


https://www.loc.gov/item/rbpe.20802100/

https://www.loc.gov/item/96507165/

https://www.loc.gov/item/2010717793/

https://www.loc.gov/item/2002707406/


https://www.loc.gov/item/2011660506/


http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.23600/pageturner?ID=pm0003001&page=56

"[At Walter Reed Hospital, a soldier who is missing a foot lights a cigarette for another soldier who is missing both arms.]" Photograph. Washington D.C.: 1918. From Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3d01812/
