

READING

The Brutal Realities of World War I

When World War I began in August 1914, both sides expected a quick victory. Neither leaders nor civilians from warring nations were prepared for the length and brutality of the war, which took the lives of millions by its end in 1918. The loss of life was greater than in any previous war in history. The carnage from World War I was incomprehensible to everyone, as millions of soldiers and civilians alike died.

The chart below provides estimates of the number of soldiers killed, wounded, and reported missing during World War I. Exact numbers are often disputed and are nearly impossible to determine for a variety of reasons. Different countries used different methods to count their dead and injured, and some methods were more reliable than others. Records of some countries were destroyed during the war and its aftermath. Also, some countries may have changed the number of casualties in their official records for political reasons. The numbers of civilians from each country killed during the war are even more difficult to determine, though historians estimate civilian deaths at about 5 million.¹ The numbers in the chart reflect the estimates made by most historians today.

World War I Casualties

Country	Total Mobilized Forces	Killed or Died*	Wounded	Prisoners or Missing	Total Casualties
Allied Powers					
Russia	12,000,000	1,700,000	4,950,000	2,500,000	9,150,000
France**	8,410,000	1,357,800	4,266,000	537,000	6,160,800

¹ Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), xv.

British Empire	8,904,467	908,371	2,090,212	191,652	3,190,235
Italy	5,615,000	650,000	947,000	600,000	2,197,000
United States	4,734,991	116,516	204,002	—	320,518
Japan	800,000	300	907	3	1,210
Romania	750,000	335,706	120,000	80,000	535,706
Serbia	707,343	45,000	133,148	152,958	331,106
Canada ²	424,000	59,694	172,000	3,800 ³	61,082
Belgium	267,000	13,716	44,686	34,659	93,061
Greece	230,000	5,000	21,000	1,000	27,000
Portugal	100,000	7,222	13,751	12,318	33,291
Montenegro	50,000	3,000	10,000	7,000	20,000

² Except where otherwise noted, statistics are from The Cost of Canada's War, Canadian War Museum website, accessed November 21, 2018.

³ Canadian Prisoners of War, The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed November 21, 2018.

TOTALS	42,612,810	5,211,809	13,003,004	4,124,890	22,165,291
Central Powers					
Germany	11,000,000	1,773,700	4,216,058	1,152,800	7,142,558
Austria-Hungary	7,800,000	1,200,000	3,620,000	2,200,000	7,020,000
Turkey	2,850,000	325,000	400,000	250,000	975,000
Bulgaria	1,200,000	87,500	152,390	27,029	266,919
TOTALS	22,850,000	3,386,200	8,388,448	3,629,829	15,404,477
GRAND TOTALS	65,462,810	8,598,009	21,391,452	7,754,719	37,569,768

Source: WWI Casualty and Death Tables, "The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century," PBS / WGHBH.

* Includes deaths from all causes.

** Official figures.

Connection Questions

1. How was war different in World War I? Why did this war result in so many casualties?
2. How did the reality of combat in World War I compare to the beliefs and attitudes many Europeans had about war before fighting broke out?
3. What did Richard Tobin mean by his statement, "The veneer of civilization has dropped away"?
4. How would you describe the mood and tone of the voices of soldiers quoted in this reading?