World War I: Why It Still Matters

In 1919, the 'war to end all wars' formally ended with the Treaty of Versailles. But 90 years later, we're still living with the consequences.

By Craig R. Whitney

World War I, the most murderous conflict in history up to that time, came to a halt with a cease-fire at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. In four years, 16 million people had died, centuries-old empires and dynasties had come crashing to the ground, and economic and political chaos had overtaken much of the globe.

Sadder still, the "War to End All Wars" proved anything but. The Treaty of Versailles may have formally ended the war in June 1919, but 90 years later, the war's consequences are still being felt around the globe: The war in Iraq, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and tensions with Russia are just a few of the foreign-policy challenges on President Obama's plate whose roots go back to World War I and its aftermath.

The war began in 1914 with the assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which drew the great powers of Europe, entangled by all sorts of complex alliances, onto the battlefield.

After staying neutral for three years, the United States entered the war in 1917 to "make the world safe for democracy," as President Woodrow Wilson put it, and to come to the aid of Britain and France in their struggle against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Turks.

When it was over, the victorious Allies set about trying to prevent future global conflicts, to punish their enemies, and, with the demise of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, to redraw the maps of Europe, the Middle East, and even Asia.

You've probably read in your history textbooks about the war's most immediate consequences: Wilson advocated for his "Fourteen Points," which called for, among other things, an end to colonialism (which the British and French mostly ignored), and a League of Nations, the first international body dedicated to keeping the peace.

ANOTHER WORLD WAR

But Wilson was incapacitated after suffering a stroke, and the U.S. Senate refused to approve American participation in the League, which rendered it toothless. It was replaced in 1945 with the United Nations.

The harsh terms that Versailles imposed on Germany after the war, including billions of dollars in reparations to make it pay the cost of the conflict, decimated the nation's economy. In the 1920s and '30s Adolph Hitler capitalized on Germany's humiliation to bring the Nazi party to power.

The result was World War II, which began in 1939, and the systematic murder of millions of innocent Europeans, including 6 million Jews, who Hitler blamed for many of Germany's problems.

Here's a look at some of the other consequences of World War I that you may be less familiar with, and that lie behind many of the headlines we see today.

IRAQ

Before World War I, the Ottoman Empire spanned southeastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. After the war, the League of Nations gave "mandates" over parts of the Mideast to France and Great Britain that suited the interests of Paris and London, but ignored the wishes of most of the people who actually lived there. In Mesopotamia, the Ottoman territory that became Iraq, the British cobbled together the provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, whose people—Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds, respectively—were as much at odds with each other in 1919 as they are today. (The Shiite and Sunni sects of Islam had split centuries earlier over who would succeed Muhammad as Islam's leader.)

"In 1919," according to historian Margaret MacMillan, "there was no Iraqi people: History, religion, geography pulled the people apart, not together."
The British installed Feisal, the son of the ruler of the Muslim holy city of Mecca (in present-day Saudi Arabia), as King. The monarchy lasted until it was overthrown in 1958. After several military coups, Saddam Hussein seized power in 1968 and ruled until the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

Without a strongman like Saddam holding it together, the seams knitted together in 1919 came apart and Iraq descended into civil war, despite the efforts of American and other Allied troops to stabilize the country. Now, with the situation somewhat improved, President Obama has pledged to withdraw all U.S. combat troops from Iraq by August 2010. But it’s still an open question whether Iraq's Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds can live together peacefully.

**ISRAEL & THE PALESTINIANS**

The British Mandate for Palestine included present-day Israel, Jordan, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 1921, Britain carved out what became Jordan on the East Bank of the Jordan River, and put Feisal's brother Abdullah on the throne. Jordan gained independence in 1946, and Abdullah was assassinated in 1951. The current King, Abdullah II, is his great-grandson.

West of the Jordan River, the issue of a Jewish homeland played out over the next three decades. The British found themselves caught between the two sides in Palestine: Jews who wanted a homeland in at least part of the ancient land of Israel, and Arabs who opposed the idea of a Jewish state.

In 1947, after World War II and the Holocaust, the United Nations voted to partition the slice of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea into Jewish and Palestinian states. While Jewish leaders accepted the U.N. partition plan, the Arab states rejected it and attacked the newly declared state of Israel when the British left in May 1948.

Israel prevailed, and other Arab-Israeli wars followed. The Six-Day War in 1967 left Israel in control of the Sinai Peninsula (later returned to Egypt), along with the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights, and all of Jerusalem.

In 1993, an agreement between Israel and Palestinian leaders granted Palestinians limited control of the West Bank and Gaza, in anticipation of a future Palestinian state. But little progress has been made toward that goal in the years since. The 2006 Palestinian elections were won by Hamas, which advocates the destruction of Israel and which the U.S. considers a terrorist group; peace efforts have been virtually frozen since.

Obama has promised to take an active role in the peace process, saying last month that Israelis and Palestinians "must overcome long-standing passions and the politics of the moment to make progress towards a secure and lasting peace."

**RUSSIA**

Tsarist Russia, which fought on the Allied side with Britain, France, and the U.S., paid a heavy price in World War I. It suffered more deaths—more than 3 million—than any other nation, and the war left the country hungry and broke.

The widespread opposition to Tsar Nicholas II before the war exploded as the conflict progressed, and the Russian Revolution was the result. In 1917, the Tsar was overthrown, and in November of that year, led by Vladimir Lenin, the Communists took power and pulled Russia out of the war two months later.

The renamed Soviet Union fought alongside the U.S. against Germany in World War II. But after the war ended in 1945, the Soviets faced off against the U.S. and its allies in a Cold War that lasted until the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Russia became a democracy, but Vladimir Putin, who served as President and is now Prime Minister (and thought still to be in charge), has turned back democratic reforms and tried to reassert the influence over its neighbors that Russia's Tsars and Communist rulers long had.

Last year, when Russian troops invaded neighboring Georgia, a former Soviet republic, many in the U.S. saw the attack, despite evidence of Georgian provocation, as a throwback to the Cold War. The conflict in Georgia, along with Russia's objections to an American plan to install defensive missiles in Poland, sparked new tensions with the U.S. and its European allies.
President Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev pledged last month to "move beyond Cold War mentalities" and to work together on arms control and other issues, though some observers believe that might be easier said than done.

TURKEY
From the 14th to the 20th century, the Ottoman Empire, with its capital in Constantinople (now Istanbul), was the political and economic heart of the Muslim world. The Ottomans' defeat in World War I led to the collapse of their empire, with the victorious Allies carving most of it up to create the modern Middle East.

On the land that remained, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded modern Turkey as a secular democracy in 1923, after expelling occupying armies from the old Ottoman capital.
But Turkey, which straddles both Europe and Asia, has struggled with its identity for the last 90 years: Should it turn East, toward the Muslim world, or West, toward Europe?
Like many countries in the Mideast, Turkey has experienced an Islamic revival, and in 2002 it elected a Prime Minister from an Islamic-oriented party, alarming the nation's secularists.
President Obama sees Turkey as a strong U.S. ally and as a showcase for improving America's relations with the Muslim world. He also wants Turkey's cooperation on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Israel/Palestinian peace process. In April, he traveled to Istanbul, voicing support for Turkey's bid to join the European Union, but also addressing Muslims in Turkey and beyond.
"We seek broader engagement" with the Muslim world, Obama said, "based upon mutual interest and mutual respect."

VIETNAM
Germany and the other losers in World War I weren't the only ones disappointed with the peace settlement of 1919. The Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh, who traveled to Paris hoping that the Versailles peace conference would support Vietnam's bid for independence from France, its colonial ruler, was turned away without a hearing.
He went on to lead a decades-long struggle, which drove the French out of their century-old colony in 1954. Vietnam was partitioned into a Communist North and a South backed by the West. The two sides went to war, with the U.S. first sending military advisers, and then combat troops beginning in 1965.
By the time the Communists prevailed in 1975, more than 58,000 Americans had died, and the war had become the most unpopular in American history.
Vietnam remained a one-party Communist state, but it began free-market reforms in the 1990s and its economy boomed, especially after the U.S. lifted a trade embargo in 1993.
In the U.S., the memory of the war lives on, especially in the fear that Iraq or Afghanistan could become "another Vietnam"—lengthy conflicts without clearly defined goals, with little support at home, and mounting American casualties.
"There's got to be an exit strategy," Obama said last month about the war in Afghanistan. It was one of the harshest lessons of Vietnam.

Summarize (2-3 sentences for each) the impact of World War I on each of the following:

1. Another World War
2. Iraq
3. Israel & the Palestinians
4. Russia
5. Turkey
6. Vietnam