

Topic 7.3: Conducting World War I

Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Historical Thinking Skill(s)	Standards Alignment
Technology & Innovation (TEC)	Explain how governments used methods to conduct war	KC-6.2.IV.A.i, KC-6.1.III.C.i	Causation, Sourcing, Contextualization, Comparison	AP World History: Modern Unit 7

Learning Objectives

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify key methods governments used to conduct World War I
- Explain how total war mobilized societies and economies
- Analyze historical documents for sourcing and evidence
- Evaluate the effectiveness and consequences of wartime strategies

Lesson Overview

World War I marked a turning point in how wars were fought, introducing the concept of total war. Governments no longer relied solely on professional armies but mobilized entire populations, economies, and industries. Propaganda campaigns encouraged citizens to support the war effort, while governments imposed conscription, rationing, and economic controls. Colonies were also drawn into the conflict, providing soldiers and resources.

In this lesson, you will analyze a range of documents that reflect how governments conducted World War I. These documents will require you to interpret perspective, purpose, and historical context. By engaging with these sources, you will develop the ability to construct a strong DBQ argument about how technology and government policies shaped the war.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Total War:** A form of warfare in which governments mobilize all available resources and civilians to support the war effort
- **Propaganda:** Information used to influence public opinion, often through media, art, and messaging
- **War Economy:** An economy organized to prioritize military production and support
- **Trench Warfare:** A form of combat in which soldiers fight from defensive positions dug into the ground
- **Attrition:** A strategy aimed at wearing down the enemy through continuous losses

Background Reading

World War I was the first modern example of total war, as governments mobilized entire societies to support the conflict. Nations introduced conscription to expand their armies and relied on industrial production to supply weapons, ammunition, and equipment. Governments also controlled resources through rationing and redirected industries toward war production. For example, Germany's war economy focused heavily on producing weapons, while Britain used its naval strength to blockade enemy supplies. These strategies demonstrate how warfare expanded beyond the battlefield.

Technological innovation played a central role in shaping the war. New weapons such as machine guns, poison gas, and heavy artillery increased the scale of destruction. Trench warfare became the dominant form of combat on the Western Front, leading to prolonged stalemates and high casualty rates. Battles such as Verdun and the Somme exemplified the strategy of attrition, where both sides suffered massive losses without decisive victory. These developments highlight how technology transformed warfare.

Governments also relied heavily on propaganda to maintain public support. Posters, newspapers, and films encouraged citizens to enlist, conserve resources, and support the war effort. Nationalism was intensified through these campaigns, portraying the war as a moral struggle. Governments also censored information to control public perception. This demonstrates how political strategies were used alongside military tactics.

Colonies played a significant role in supporting European powers. Soldiers from Africa, India, and Southeast Asia were recruited to fight in the war, while colonial economies supplied raw materials. This global involvement reflects the interconnected nature of imperial empires. At the same time, colonial participation contributed to future independence movements, as colonized peoples questioned imperial authority after the war.

Compared to earlier conflicts, World War I represented a major shift in how wars were conducted. While previous wars involved limited engagement, WWI required full societal mobilization. The scale of destruction and involvement of civilians marked a significant change. However, the use of nationalism and propaganda showed continuity with earlier conflicts. These developments illustrate both change and continuity in warfare.

Document 1

- Type: Government Poster (text excerpt)
- Author: British War Propaganda Bureau
- Date: 1915

“Your country calls upon you—not only those who bear arms, but those who labor, produce, and endure. Every factory, every field, every household is a battleground in this great struggle. The enemy seeks not only to defeat our armies but to weaken our resolve. It is through unity and sacrifice that victory will be secured. Buy war bonds, conserve resources, and support our soldiers at the front. This war will not be won by soldiers alone, but by the steadfast determination of an entire nation.”

Historical Situation: Britain mobilizing civilian support.

Perspective/Limitation: Propaganda; emphasizes unity and duty.

Use in Argument: Evidence of total war and propaganda.

Questions:

1. What is the purpose of this propaganda message?
2. What evidence shows civilians are part of the war effort?
3. How does this reflect total war?

Document 2

- Type: Military Report
- Author: German officer at Verdun
- Date: 1916

“The intensity of artillery fire surpasses anything previously experienced. Entire sections of the front are reduced to rubble, leaving little cover for advancing troops. Machine guns sweep the battlefield with relentless efficiency, cutting down entire units within moments. Progress is measured not in miles but in meters, often at the cost of thousands of lives. Despite these losses, orders remain unchanged: the enemy must be worn down through continuous assault. Victory will belong not to the swift, but to the side that can endure the longest.”

Historical Situation: Battle of Verdun during attrition warfare.

Perspective/Limitation: Military viewpoint; focuses on strategy.

Use in Argument: Shows impact of new technology and attrition.

Questions:

1. How does the author’s role influence his perspective?
2. What evidence shows the effects of new technology?
3. How does this demonstrate attrition warfare?

Document 3

- Type: Diary Entry
- Author: French soldier
- Date: 1917

“The trenches are filled with mud, rats, and the constant fear of bombardment. We wait for orders that often lead us over the top, where survival is uncertain. Many of us question the purpose of these attacks, yet we continue because we are told it is necessary. The officers speak of honor and duty, but here, it feels like endurance is the only measure of success.”

Historical Situation: Trench warfare conditions.

Perspective/Limitation: Non-elite perspective; limited strategic understanding.

Use in Argument: Shows soldier experience and morale.

Questions:

1. What perspective does this source provide?
2. What evidence shows trench conditions?
3. How does this reflect challenges of conducting war?

Document 4

- Type: Government Directive
- Author: Russian government
- Date: 1916

“All factories capable of producing materials useful for the war effort are to be placed under state supervision. Production shall prioritize military needs above all else, and civilian consumption must be reduced accordingly. Citizens are expected to contribute through labor, conservation, and compliance with rationing policies. The strength of the nation depends upon the collective effort of its people.”

Historical Situation: Wartime economic mobilization.

Perspective/Limitation: Government perspective; ignores hardship.

Use in Argument: Evidence of war economy.

Questions:

1. What is the purpose of this directive?
2. What evidence shows government control of the economy?
3. How does this reflect total war?

Document 5

- Type: Colonial Speech
- Author: Indian nationalist observer
- Date: 1918

“Thousands of Indian soldiers have fought and died in a war that is not their own, yet they are told their sacrifice will bring recognition and reform. Our resources have been extracted, our people conscripted, and our loyalty demanded. If this war is truly fought in the name of freedom, then that freedom must extend beyond Europe. Otherwise, we must question the justice of this struggle.”

Historical Situation: Colonial participation in WWI.

Perspective/Limitation: Critical of imperial powers.

Use in Argument: Shows global impact and colonial perspective.

Questions:

1. What is the author’s perspective on the war?
2. What evidence shows colonial involvement?
3. How does this challenge European justifications for war?

Document 6

- Type: Newspaper Article
- Author: American journalist
- Date: 1917

“The entry of the United States into the war signals a turning point, not only in military strength but in industrial capacity. American factories, already among the most productive in the world, are being rapidly converted to supply the Allied forces. This influx of resources and manpower may prove decisive, demonstrating that modern warfare is as much an economic contest as it is a military one.”

Historical Situation: U.S. entry into WWI.

Perspective/Limitation: Emphasizes industrial power.

Use in Argument: Shows economic dimension of war.

Questions:

1. What is the author’s main argument?
2. What evidence highlights industrial power?
3. How does this reflect total war?

Document 7

- Type: Medical Report
- Author: British army doctor
- Date: 1916

“The introduction of gas warfare has produced injuries unlike any previously encountered. Soldiers arrive with severe burns to the lungs, blindness, and prolonged suffering. Protective measures have been developed, yet they remain insufficient against repeated exposure. The psychological effects are equally devastating, as fear of unseen weapons spreads among the troops. This new method of warfare has not only increased casualties but has altered the very nature of combat.”

Historical Situation: Use of chemical weapons.

Perspective/Limitation: Medical perspective; focuses on effects.

Use in Argument: Evidence of technological impact.

Questions:

1. How does the author’s role shape the description of gas warfare?
2. What evidence shows the effects of new technology?
3. How does this reflect changes in warfare?

Key Table: Methods of Conducting War

Method	Example	Impact
Propaganda	Doc 1	Mobilizes civilians
Technology	Docs 2,7	Increases casualties
War Economy	Doc 4,6	Sustains war effort
Colonial Mobilization	Doc 5	Expands global scope

Historical Reasoning

Change Over Time

World War I transformed warfare into total war, involving entire societies. Earlier wars were limited in scope, but WWI required mass mobilization. Technology increased destruction. Governments gained more control over economies. This marked a major shift.

Continuity Over Time

Nationalism continued to motivate participation in war. Governments still relied on patriotism. Competition between nations persisted. However, these factors were intensified. Continuity remained in motivation.

Comparison

Compared to earlier wars, WWI involved greater civilian participation. Both used nationalism, but WWI added industrial warfare. The scale was much larger. This shows both similarity and difference.

Key Takeaways

- WWI introduced total war involving entire societies
- Technology increased destruction and casualties
- Governments used propaganda and economic control
- Colonies played a major role in the war effort
- Warfare became industrial and global

DBQ Practice

Prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which technological innovation and government mobilization shaped how World War I was conducted.

Task Instructions:

- Develop a thesis
- Use at least 4 documents
- Include outside evidence
- Explain sourcing for at least 2 documents