The Role of Non-European Nations in WWI

In learning about World War I, we have primarily studied the role of European nations during the war. Many other cultures, nationalities and ethnic groups, however, made significant contributions to and were deeply involved in the Great War. The following information proves that World War I was a war that truly involved and impacted people throughout the world.

ASIA

China: Although less involved than the citizens of many other countries, some 175,000 Chinese were recruited by the British to serve in their Labor Corps. The Chinese in the Labor Corps dug trenches, brought up supplies, felled timber, carried ammunitions, built roads and laid railroads, all of which were critically important for the British. A combined force of over 50,000 Chinese and Indian laborers died on the Western Front, often working in close proximity to German guns, some serving directly on the front line.

Vietnam: It is estimated that Vietnam contributed between 94,000 and 140,000 people to the allied (specifically French) war effort. There were, however, harsh and repressive measures that were often used to enlist "volunteers" in Vietnam. Resistance on the part of the Vietnamese to the forced draft led to the formation of secret societies designed to actively combat French recruitment.

India: When the First World War broke out in August 1914, Britain had only a small standing army of no more than 150,000 men. Britain's only immediate source of additional soldiers was their colonial empire, which included India. 1.4 million Indian soldiers fought for the allied cause during the war and 113,743 Indians were reported dead, wounded, or missing at the end of the war. In addition, 600,000 Indian non-combatants worked in the war effort in jobs such as laborers, carriers, and railway constructors. According to some historians, the timely arrival of the Indian Expeditionary forces almost certainly prevented an allied defeat on the Western Front in 1914. Indian personnel won 12,445 British and 463 allied medals and decorations for bravery, including 12 Victoria Cross awards. (The Victoria Cross is the highest award for bravery that Britain gives).

Japan: Japan quickly declared war against Germany within a few weeks after the war had broken out in Europe. The Japanese quickly overran German possessions in China and captured most of Germany's Pacific Island colonies.

NORTH AMERICA

Canada: Though the United States is universally associated with World War I, little mention is generally made of Canadian involvement in the war. Canada contributed roughly 640,000 troops to the British war effort, 57,000 of whom died as a result of the conflict.

The United States: The United States entered the war on the side of the Allies in 1917. The United States sent over 2 million soldiers (¾ of them saw battle), money, and supplies. Although the role of American soldiers in World War I is well known, the importance of African-American soldiers in the war is less talked about. More than 50,000 black troops from the U.S. made up over one-third of the entire U.S. force in Europe. Despite their loyal and courageous effort, black soldiers faced explicit racism within the armed forces. Not only were black soldiers and porters frequently given the worst jobs to do, but also they were often sent into extremely dangerous situations where immediate death was almost certain. For example, black soldiers might be sent out as targets so that the allied forces could identify where enemy guns were located. Among various military and civilian officials, arguments occurred as to whether black soldiers should be allowed to have guns. The fear was that these soldiers might use their weapons against their white commanders. Such fears were unfounded. Blacks serving in the military served bravely, loyally, and with distinction and extraordinary sacrifice.

SOUTH AMERICA

Latin America: When World War I began, Latin American countries hoped to stay out of the conflict. By July of 1918, however, the majority of the population sided with the allied causes. The four major nations in Latin America were Mexico, supplying oil; Argentina, supplying surplus wheat; Chile, attempting to meet the unprecedented demand for Chilean nitrates and copper; and Brazil, supplying food, especially beef, beans and sugar, and the use of seized German ships. While South American countries were officially pro-Allies, Brazil was the only South American country to officially declare war on Germany.

AFRICA

Cameroon & German East Africa (modern-day Tanzania): Although World War I would be won or lost in Europe, the Allies decided in 1914 to attack Germany's overseas possessions. Thus, the war in Europe was carried into Africa, where the territories governed by Britain, France, and Belgium provided soldiers and supplies to fight the colonies ruled by Germany. On both sides Africans joined colonial forces. They served not only as soldiers, but also as porters or carriers of supplies and weapons to the Europeans. The latter was often a dangerous and exhausting job as they often walked over 14 miles per day through war-torn areas to deliver their goods to the armed forces. One historian estimates that some 200,000 to 250,000 Africans died during the war—a death rate of slightly more than 10 percent of the two million who saw service as soldiers and laborers during the war. Not only did Africans suffer large numbers of casualties, but also they faced racism and mistreatment on a regular basis.

South Africa: When World War I began, the British government thought it desirable if the South African forces could capture German South West Africa and destroy the powerful wireless transmitters there to knock out Germany's communication systems. South Africa pledged Britain full support at the outset of the war, in 1914.

West Africa (includes modern-day Senegal & Morocco): Over the course of the war, the French drafted some 135,000 West Africans from their colonies to join the allied forces on the Western Front. West African conscripts endured extreme difficulty, fear, and degradation during the war. Drafting procedures were coercive, as French officials threatened local chiefs with imprisonment in order to ensure sufficient numbers of conscripts. Once in France, West African soldiers experienced segregation and isolation from the French army and French society. African units often served as "shock troops," leading other allied troops into battle. This led to an astonishingly high death rate among the West African soldiers on the Western Front, sometimes as much as 25 percent higher than their French counterparts. Some West African troops became played crucial roles in allied victories; for example, the Moroccan army was essential in the defense of Paris and became the most decorated unit in the French army.

AUSTRALIA

Australia: In 1914 Australia was a British colony, not a sovereign state. From a population of less than 5 million, an army of almost 417,000 men was raised between 1914 and 1918; over 330,000 of them served overseas. Australian soldiers are most well-known for their contribution to the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 wherein the Allies attempted to take control of the capital of the Ottoman Empire in order to establish supply lines to Russia. The Gallipoli operation was not successful and cost 26,111 Australian casualties of whom 8,141 were killed. During the entire war, 58,132 servicemen died and 156,228 were gassed, wounded or taken prisoner of war.