

The First World War in numbers

It would be crass to not begin with headlines and examples of the horrific human suffering during and immediately after the conflict.

- 9.4 million military deaths (Allies 5.4 million, Central Powers 4 million), 21 million military wounded, and 6 million civilians died.
- The outbreak of Spanish influenza in 1918 and 1919 killed 100 million people.
- In 1918-19 half the new-babies born in Berlin died of malnutrition.
- The post war redrawing of borders resulted in 9 million displaced Germans.
- Pogroms, refugee crises, forced transfers of populations and genocide all occurred in the First World War.¹

But there were other losses such as property destruction and environmental damage.

Land and property damage and destruction in France 1914-18²

Forest laid waste (square miles)	1,857
Farm land laid waste (square miles)	8,000
Houses destroyed	300,000
Factories destroyed	6,000
Schools destroyed	1,600
Churches destroyed	1,200
Livestock lost	1,300,000

The numbers which follow are also headlines and examples, but concerned with financial costs particularly relating to military spending to highlight that the enormous build-up of military infrastructure and equipment meant that the war was more likely to begin and to be catastrophic.

The Depression is attributed to the cost of fighting the First World War, estimated as \$208.5 billion (Allies \$147 billion, Central Powers \$61.5 billion).

- Enough, it has been calculated, for every family in Russia, most of Europe, Canada, the USA, and Australia to have had \$3,500 for a home and furniture plus five acres of land.
- In addition, enough to grant a \$2 million library, a \$3 million hospital and a \$20 million college to every city of over 20,000.
- And the remainder would have purchased all the property in Germany and Belgium.³

The pre-war total military spending of the main powers (Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia) shows significant increase particularly between 1900 and 1914.

Pre-war total military spending of the main powers in £millions

1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1914
94	130	154	268	289	398

Percentage increase in military spending 1890-1913⁴

Austria-Hungary	160%
Britain	117%
France	92%
Germany	158%
Russia	19%

These increases enabled the states to expand their armies and exploit the modernisation of weaponry and equipment. For example, a naval arms race developed between Britain and Germany.

Tonnes of military shipping owned by Britain and Germany

	1880	1910
Britain	650,000	2,174,000
Germany	88,000	964,000

- In 1906 Britain launched the first Dreadnought, a large, fast and heavily armed battleship with 12-inch guns, setting a much higher standard for naval weaponry.
- Between 1909 and 1911 Britain built 18 Dreadnoughts while Germany completed nine.⁵

But there were those who stood against the conflict.

- On 2nd August 1914, 'the last Sunday of peace', there was a large anti-war rally in Trafalgar Square and 100,000 attended similar rallies in other parts of the country.
- In Britain more than 16,000 men registered as Conscientious Objectors after the Military Service Act became law in 1916.
- But over 80 COs died as a result of their treatment while imprisoned.
- 1,200 women from 12 countries overcame many obstacles and gathered in The Hague during the war in 1915. There they drew up 20 proposals to stop the conflict by negotiated peace and took them to world leaders, unfortunately without success.⁶

The Romans were wrong, since if you prepare for war you are more likely to get war than if you prepare for peace. A lesson we still seem not to have learnt.

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References

- ¹ http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/aftermath/counting_cost.htm
- ² <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWproperty.htm?menu=FWWstatistics>
- ³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-17011607> and <http://warisacrime.org/content/where-does-war-come>
- ⁴ <http://www.funfront.net/hist/wwi/military.htm> and <http://www.historyhome.co.uk/europe/causeww1.htm>
- ⁵ <http://www.historyhome.co.uk/europe/causeww1.htm> and <http://www.funfront.net/hist/wwi/military.htm>
- ⁶ 1914, BBC History Magazine, January 2014, p. 27 and *Opposing World War One: Courage and Conscience*, published 2013 by Pax Christi and others, p. 3 & p. 9.