The Great War: Themes and Topics

1. Watershed Event: For those who had grown up before 1914 the contrast (before and after) was profound. “Peace” meant “before 1914,” after that came chaos. In 1914, there had been no major war for a century involving the great powers (only the Crimean, American Civil War, and Franco-Prussian) and no world wars at all. 1914 launches the “Age of Total War” that dominates the 20th century. Ranked by the number of people they killed, among 74 international wars between 1816 and 1965, the top four occur in the 20th century: the two world wars, the Japanese war against China (1937-39), and the Korean War. 1914 opens the age of massacre.

2. All the major powers became combatants: (Indeed, all European states except Spain, the Netherlands, the 3 Scandinavian countries and Switzerland.) The war was literally global. It began as an essentially European war between the triple alliance (France, Britain and Russia) and the central powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). Serbia and Belgium were drawn in as victims of invasions by the central powers. Turkey and Bulgaria joined the central powers. Italy, Greece, Rumania, Portugal, Japan and ultimately the USA joined the triple alliance.

3. The Machine for Massacre. The Germans were faced (as in WWII) with a possible war on two fronts. Their plan was to knock out France (with a lightning campaign called blitzkrieg in WWII), then quickly do the same to Russia in the East. They were stopped five weeks after the war began at the river Marne. They then withdrew slightly, improvised parallel lines of defensive trenches and fortifications which stretched from the English Channel (Brugge) to the Swiss frontier. The Germans and their French and British opponents did not shift significantly for the next 3 1/2 years. This was the Western Front, featuring weeks of unceasing artillery bombardment (hurricanes of steel) and mass charges across no-man’s land into the teeth of machine-guns. February-July, 1916, the Germans tried to break through at Verdun—a battle of 2 millions, with one million casualties. At the Somme (1916), the British lost 420,000 dead, 60,000 on the first day of attack. (See the casualty figures in Nye)

4. Breaking the Stalemate in the West: (without victory in the West, neither sides could win the war) They tried to do it by technology: poison gas, caterpillared armored vehicle (tank), airplanes, dirigibles, submarines. Ironically, what the submarine did most was draw the US into the war and despite the fact that the German army was strikingly superior to any other (as in WWII), the practically unlimited resources of the US from 1917 on essentially determined the outcome.

5. Brutalizing of war and politics: Most men who served in the Great War overwhelmingly as conscripts (draftees), came out of it as convinced haters of war. They filled the ranks of the post-war political left. After the war it became
quite evident to politicians (especially in democratic countries) that bloodbaths like 1914-1918 would no longer be tolerated by the voters. Post-1918 strategy in Britain and France, like the post-Vietnam strategy of the US, was based on this assumption. Some ex-soldiers who passed through the horror without being turned against it, emerged with a sense of savage superiority. Adolph Hitler was only one of such men who filled the ranks of the ultra-right.

6. Waging a war without limits----unlimited goals, unlimited means. This war was not driven by ideological animosity. Most non-revolutionary and non-ideological wars of the past have not been waged as struggles to the death or total exhaustion. The Great War was fought as a war which could only be totally won or totally lost. Global powers engaged in an international political rivalry that was modelled on economic growth and competition------the dominate feature of this competition was precisely that it had no limit.