The shots that killed the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo (Bosnia) on June 28, 1914 resonated well into the rest of the century. The assassination was supposed to be a political gesture in favor of Serbian nationalism against the Hapsburg domination of the Balkans, but it resulted in the first of the two world wars that marked and transformed the geographical and political scene of the 20th-century. WWI (1914-1918) was called the Great War as it saw the intervention of countries far removed from Europe (the United States, Australia, Canada, South Africa…), but also because it was supposed to be a war that – in the intentions of many of the participants – would redress old problems and put an end to any further conflict. This was, naturally, a grand illusion. The war caused the collapse of the Austrian empire (1918), which, together with the downfall of the Russian empire (1917) and the Ottoman rule (1923), triggered a series of geographical and political decisions that, in good measure, were responsible for the clashes that led to the second world war, and its long-term consequences: the Cold War, the anti-colonial struggles, the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1990’s ethnic wars in the former Yugoslavia, that is, in those exact lands that ignited the escalation that prompted WWI.

Many of today’s conflicts that inflame some of the former Soviet territories as well as the Middle and Near East are also, indirectly, a consequence of poorly thought or unwisely conceived geopolitical agreements that go back to the end of WWI. But the Great War was also a remarkable turning point for the modern development of the arts: Drama, figurative arts, cinema, literature, and music -- they have all been marked by the experience of the Great War. WWI was also the first moment in modern history that brought into the public debate many issues that are still very much discussed. Scientific and ethical concerns related to weapon of mass destruction, the ethical treatment of prisoners, the effect of humankind on the environment, the psychological health of the veterans, gender and race equality -- these are all themes that originate from the cultural aftermath of WWI. In this class we will examine the historical aspects that surrounded WWI and its many factors, as well as the myriad of topics that were motivated by its magnitude in the arts, and how many of those topics still face us in today’s global world.