When Andrea Ciccarelli, dean of the Hutton Honors College, extended invitations to be part of a roundtable discussion of the legacy of World War I, he was astonished at the response. Diplomats from nine countries, along with two senior U.S. legislators, were eager to participate. The group came to Bloomington last November. As part of IU’s centenary commemoration of the war, President McRobbie chaired a panel in which he asked the 11 participants, who represented 340 years of collective diplomatic experience, to explore their country’s memory of the war and the lessons that might be drawn from it. There was quick consensus that the war to end all wars was in fact the beginning of social, cultural, and political upheavals that are still being felt today. And while the impact of these disruptions was universal, each nation’s experience of the war was distinctive.

The discussion held the audience’s attention for more than two hours, “a record for Bloomington,” as former Congressman Lee Hamilton quipped at the end. The entire event is available as a webcast at broadcast.iu.edu. A sampling of the discussion suggests the common concerns and unique perspectives of the participants.

The presentations began half a world away from the site of most of the fighting. Australian Ambassador Kim Beazley said, “World War I changed everything. For my country, sociologically and philosophically challenged by loss, it produced a sense of nationhood and national self-image. Our great national day into which our emotions are poured is our commemoration of Australian forces landing at Gallipoli, the battle that ended with 300,000 Australian soldiers wounded or dead. We fought in many wars since, but the resonance of the first war is such that Australian military personnel sense the obligation of the memory wherever they are deployed. ‘Have we lived up to our ancestors,’ is a question they ask themselves.”

Bulgarian Ambassador Elena Poptodorova described the experiences of a country at the heart of the fighting. “In 1914, Bulgaria had just emerged from the second Balkan war, completely drained, defeated. In that war, it had fought all its previous allies and had lost a number of territories to all its neighbors. Some declared that Bulgaria was the only country that bordered on itself. After World War I, with two national catastrophes and a dire financial situation, Bulgaria developed a communist government that affected the country for decades to come. We lived in a system that tore us away from Europe where we used to belong. Southeast Europe is still struggling with consequences that can be traced back to 1914. And we will have to continue this sad conversation for many, many more years to go.”

“Before World War I, Austria didn’t exist,” explained Austrian Ambassador Hans Peter Manz. “It was a product of the war, whatever was left over. This country, the size of Maine, lost its major agricultural and industrial resources and was left with many civil servants. Yes, it destroyed feudal empires, but it defeated even the
victors in Europe. Old empires were destroyed or, in the case of Britain and France, mortally wounded. Two competing social laboratories (capitalism and communism) permeated European politics for a long time—leading to civil war in many cases and some rather wild experiments.” But the shared experience of the war meant, Ambassador Manz concluded, that we now “speak the same political language. We understand each other; we know where we are coming from.”

German Minister Philipp Ackermann described a current debate in Germany regarding the First World War over where the fault for the war should lie. “The right question is why did it happen, not whose fault. I would not deny the importance of knowing who was responsible and who should take the blame. But I am convinced that reasons are more important than personalities because I think that 2014 looks in many ways like 1914. Rampant nationalism that a hundred years ago blinded everybody’s hearts and minds was one of the main reasons for this war. It was clearly stronger than Europe’s elites and policy makers in those days.

“We in Germany would like to feel this nationalistic attitude is very far away, but we have to take note of the fact that it is there at the borders of our country and continent. Aggressive Russian nationalism in Southeast Europe is extremely difficult to counter. And we have to look at our own countries. In very many European countries, right-wing parties have become very forceful and very important. The most striking thing about the First World War is that nobody thought it was necessary at that time, but said, ‘if we go to war, let’s do it now, it’s summer. We’ll be finished by Christmas.’ It was the most overwhelming miscalculation by politicians ever made. This is something that we politicians and diplomats should avoid at all costs.”

“I am impressed with the importance of statecraft as I listen to these experts on World War I. ... If bad decisions can lead to war, then maybe good decisions can lead to peace.”
—Former Congressman Lee Hamilton

The war began on horseback and ended with aerial bombing and poison gas.
Counselor Giorgio Aliberti of Italy extended that theme “Finally, nations realized that balance of powers was not enough, so there was incentive to find a new way to deal with these kinds of things. Integration is key. Russia’s integration into assembly of world powers. The integration of the Balkans into the European Union. European integration, although it needs to be redefined, has been of a powerful value and powerful force and is crucial for our development in the future. The path of international community for the future is to look back at what happened a hundred years ago.”

Consul General Marc Calcoen of Belgium brought a personal perspective to the discussion. He was born in Ypres. “100,000 people died there. It was the first time poison gas was used. Technology was changing rapidly, and politicians had a difficult time keeping up. War became normal. People became so used to war, it became like a banal thing. Maybe the First World War didn’t do as much physical damage as the Second World War, but it damaged probably permanently the European civilization that was based on rationality, liberalism, and enlightenment, and it led to all kinds of extremist factions, which we are still seeing the consequences of.

For the UK, “the shockwaves of 1914–1918 are still being felt,” Bridges said. “It marked the beginning of the modern age for the UK, the end of an empire. The social fabric of the UK changed monumentally; politics changed monumentally.” The war brought new political power to the working class and to women, but it also brought terrorism, genocide, modern warfare, money, and politics. “Have we learnt the lessons? No, we haven’t learned them as well as we should.”

French Consul General Vincent Floreani reaffirmed the continuing dilemmas left by the war. “The war caused social and cultural upheavals that are still active. There
are still matters unfinished: unfinished organization of the international community and unfinished emancipation for some.” He concluded with a passionate recognition of our unfinished quest for new values:

“The terrible WWI massacres represented a collapse of humanism. There was no reason for the war. We entered a world of absolute nihilism. It was a subversion of progress. It started as a traditional war with horses and swords, and ended with the massive use of tanks, planes, heavy weapons, machine guns, and gas. The industrialization of the war transformed soldiers into workers, each with its own specific task. Soldiers became part of a gigantic machine and part of a massive killing spree. Progress was no longer for the benefit for the human being but to kill as many with the most cruelty.”

Acting Consul General Dejan Radulovic of Serbia also expressed the feeling that the world has not learned much from WWI. Serbia experienced horrific casualties; 28 percent of the military and civilian population died. Like distant Australia, the war defined the nation’s sense of itself. “The collective memory of the first World War became the cornerstone of our nation’s identity.”

Former Senator Richard Lugar found a more positive outcome, at least for the U.S. It provided a new answer to the question, “Why should America care about the rest of the world?” The “idealism that came out of American intervention” was a “breakthrough in American foreign policy. It may have been lost for a while, but it was found again after World War II” with innovations “like the Marshall Plan and NATO.”

Former Congressman Lee Hamilton, in his capstone presentation, reiterated the themes that every aspect of modern life has been touched by World War I and that the impact of the war continues today.

“When leaders make bad choices, bad policies follow and bad results follow, leading sometimes to war.

Australias losses in the Dardanelles, amounting to more than 28,000 killed and wounded, played a major role in defining the countrys sense of nationhood.

World War I showed us the horror of systematic use of violence—against civilians, blockades, atrocities, and occupational regimes. World War I saw large government participation in management of the economy. We became the worlds leading creditor.

“World War I let loose a torrent of feelings, some good, some not so good—revenge, patriotism, cynicism, alienation, anger, nationalism, isolationism, withdrawal, political rancor, racial hatred. All came out of World War I. It led to the Red Scare, the Holocaust, and the push towards nuclear proliferation. Everything in the Middle East today can be traced to World War I and its
Chorus:
Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
It's time to lay the sword and gun away.
There'd be no war today,
If mothers all would say,
"I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier."

The U.S. was slow to enter the war and reluctant to assume international leadership afterwards.
aftermath. Even the civil rights movement in the United States grew out of the disappointment of African American Leaders with their experiences in World War I. They became convinced that other means would be necessary to achieve equality.”

Former Congressman Hamilton concluded with his very personal impressions of the lessons we should still be learning from the war:

“I have several impressions of World War I that really stand out in my mind. One is how easy it is to slip into war. It could happen again maybe in Gaza or Syria or Ukraine, or someplace that barely makes the news. I can’t fail to see the tragedy of our failure to achieve the ambitious and idealistic goal of World War I, the war to end all wars. Another impression I have is what an awful way war is to settle disputes, the sheer futility of it. Multiple American lives lived in the shadow of that war for a very, very long time with heartbreak and anguish for what might have been.

“Still another impression is how we have struggled after the failure of the League of Nations to create United Nations and other international organizations, and how hard we have worked unsuccessfully to make them effective. The awfulness and futility of the war makes me aware of how very important it is to differentiate those interests from lesser interests, how very important it is to get the best information you can, and how hard that can be in times of conflict—and always to look for a way, any way, to solve a problem before going to war.

“I am impressed with the importance of statecraft as I listen to these experts on World War I. World War I came about, it is clear, because of the failure of statesmanship, the failure of leadership. War was not inevitable. War could have been avoided. The choices led us to catastrophe. The war itself led us to other catastrophes down the road. And finally it comes to me just perhaps, just perhaps, peace is possible. If bad decisions can lead to war, then maybe good decisions can lead to peace.”

Information about World War I 100 Years, IU’s on-going series of exhibits and events commemorating the First World War, can be found here: rememberingworldwari.indiana.edu.

A full webcast of the World War I roundtable is available here: Broadcast.iu.edu.

Participants in the roundtable included, in alphabetical order:

- Philipp Ackermann, minister and deputy chief of mission, Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany
- Giorgio Aliberti, counselor and head of political affairs, Embassy of Italy
- Kim Beazley, ambassador of the Commonwealth of Australia to the United States of America
- Stephen Bridges, consul general, British Consulate General in Chicago
- Marc Calcoen, ambassador and consul general, Consulate General of the Kingdom of Belgium in New York
- Vincent Floreani, consul general, Consulate General of the French Republic in Chicago
- Lee Hamilton, professor of practice, Indiana University School of Public and Environmental Affairs
- Richard Lugar, professor of practice, Indiana University School of Global and International Studies
- Hans Peter Manz, ambassador of the Republic of Austria to the United States of America
- Elena Poptodorova, ambassador of the Republic of Bulgaria to the United States of America
- Dejan Radulovic, acting consul general, Consulate General of the Republic of Serbia in Chicago

Images from the collections of the Lilly Library. Some were featured in the exhibition, “Over Here and Over There: Places of World War I.” The sheet music is from the DeVincent Collection at the Lilly Library. The tank image is from The Western Front, by Muirhead Bone (1917). The photograph of the biplane is from a photo album of Lance Sieveking (1916–1917). The other contemporary photographs are from The War of the Nations, 1914–1919, by William Le Queux and others.