

CURRENT HISTORY

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The Global Legacies of World War I

JOHN HORNE

World War I was the first mass episode of the twentieth century. The death of over 10 million soldiers, mostly Europeans, plunged entire societies into mourning. Millions of men from the colonies fought or worked in Europe or in other parts of the colonial sphere. Americans reversed the flow of immigration and came to Europe en masse as soldiers. Humans were not the only ones to travel. The war did not cause the influenza of 1918–19 but did help spread the H1N1 virus, making the pandemic global. It killed tens of millions.

In political terms, the war changed the face of Europe. Defeat curbed Germany's capacity to dominate the continent but did not remove it. As the former multinational dynastic empires—czarist Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman Turkey—collapsed in 1917–18, their place was taken by new nation-states. These countries struggled to reconcile peoples and frontiers in the ethnically mixed eastern half of Europe and in the Caucasus, turning state sovereignty and nationality into key issues.

The war ushered the United States onto the global stage as a major player for the first time. Rather than the reality of its military strength, it was the promise of unlimited soldiers that heralded the end of German military ambitions in 1918. This enabled Woodrow Wilson to preside over the attempt by the victorious Western powers to remake Europe at the Paris Peace Conference. Both the clarion call to “self-determination” and the first attempt to build some kind of supranational governance in the shape of the League of Na-

tions signaled a new departure. If American public opinion (unlike after 1945) refused to endorse the country's role in constructing the new order, the United States never entirely abandoned the world stage during the interwar period, remaining active in finance and diplomacy.

RADICAL CHANGES

Intellectually and ideologically, the war radicalized politics. Not only did czarist Russia dissolve into revolution, but the Bolshevik seizure of power in November 1917, and the ensuing counterrevolution and civil war, had by 1920 entrenched a socialist alternative to liberal democracy in a major state. Anti-Bolshevik hysteria swept conservative circles across Europe and North America. In fact, while the Soviet Union preached international revolution, it had to settle for “socialism in one country,” as Joseph Stalin proclaimed in 1924. Yet class ideology allowed it to preserve much of the czarist empire in a new form. The Soviet Union remained a great power, but its ideology meant that it could not be the same kind of diplomatic ally as czarist Russia.

Anti-Bolshevism contributed to another ideology incubated by the war—an authoritarian but populist nationalism that sought to invent a new politics and a new form of state in opposition to democracy as well as communism. As the old order crumbled, new men contended for power by combining military myth, political charisma, and paramilitary violence. As fascists, they achieved their goal in Italy in 1922. In Austria and Germany they linked the counterrevolutionary *Freikorps* (or paramilitary groups) of the early postwar years to the far right that triumphed over a decade later with the Nazis.

World War I redefined the balance of power between Europe and the wider world. This hap-

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pened not only with the emergence of the United States and the growing self-assertion of Japan in East Asia and the Pacific, but also through subtle transformations in the colonial domain. At one level, Britain and France engaged in the last great colonial “scramble” as they divided up the former German colonies in Africa and Asia as well as the Ottoman provinces in what we now call the Middle East, with the British sanctioning a “Jewish homeland” in Palestine. On paper, the two empires had never been stronger. Yet the war resulted in the first serious stirrings of anticolonial independence which, after another world war, would result in decolonization. The Bolsheviks, for their part, incorporated anticolonial revolts into their recipe for world revolution.

Finally, World War I sounded the death knell for nineteenth-century economic liberalism and a world economy based on the convertibility of gold and more or less free trade. The inflationary effect of war efforts funded by large-scale borrowing was deeply disruptive (as inflation always is) to established social hierarchies, as some forms of wealth (savings, pensions) lost out to others, such as industrial profits and wages. War debts, especially those owed by Britain and France to the United States, along with Germany’s burden of reparations payments to the Allies, distorted the postwar economy even if Germany ended up discharging relatively little of its financial obligation. Between a world based on the pound sterling before 1914 and one based on the US dollar after 1945, the interwar economy lurched rudderless into the 1929 Crash, causing further economic disruption, social distress, and political turmoil that compounded the effects of the war.

UNEVEN MEMORIES

In the light of this cursory inventory, it is easy to suggest that World War I had a pervasive impact on Europe and the world. Yet views on how it did so have varied considerably with time and place. Firstly, its effects were subsumed into later events that they partly caused, notably the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. After 1939, World War I ceased to be “current history” in the sense intended by the founders of this journal when they established it in response to the start of hostilities in 1914. Instead, 1945 became the starting point of a contemporary his-

tory arising from the outcome of World War II and shaped by the Cold War.

Second, neither the public memory of history nor the attention of historians ever proceeds in a straight line. Both reflect the periods and preoccupations that help produce them. Despite being a global phenomenon, World War I has always been remembered, and often studied, within the framework of the nation-states whose triumph, in Europe at least, it helped secure. In the colonial world, which only assumed a national form following decolonization, the experience of the war predated the nation and was mainly the “memory” of the colonizer. There is little current interest in the subject in Algeria or India, for example, despite both countries’ having been quite heavily involved.

This is true even for some of the successor states in interwar Europe, such as Austria or Poland, whose peoples participated in the war as part of a multinational empire—or rather three empires, in the case of four million Polish soldiers who fought in the opposing armies of Russia on the one side and Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other. While some Austrians are rediscovering their Habsburg past through the centenary of 1914, the conflict remains largely ignored in Poland. The Unknown Soldier in Warsaw comes not from World War I but from the conflict with Ukraine that helped confirm the borders of independent Poland in 1919.

Even among major protagonists whose memory clearly has been nationally defined, interest in the war is stronger in France and Britain (and its former dominions of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) than in Germany. Because World War II in Europe was largely an Eastern Front war, British and French military losses were a good deal higher in World War I, when the Western Front was the decisive theater. Awareness of the Great War remains correspondingly strong. Conversely, the much greater trauma of World War II for Germany—with its defeat, division, and higher casualties, not to mention the burden of the Holocaust—made World War I after 1945 merely the antechamber of the real tragedy.

The Soviet Union dismissed World War I as an “imperialist” conflict, significant for producing the revolution but marginal compared with

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the pivotal place of the “Great Patriotic War” of 1941–45. As for the United States, even if its casualties were dwarfed by those of the Civil War and World War II, the low visibility of World War I requires explanation. Perhaps its memory was lastingly tarnished by the political isolationism of the interwar years.

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Much about the current centenary commemorations can be understood in terms of this uneven pattern of national memory and interest in the war. Britain and France, along with Australia and New Zealand, have been to the fore in remembering their military dead and preaching a message both of peace and patriotism that sometimes seems anodyne when set against the turmoil of the war and its outcome. Renewed interest in Germany has caused some surprise. But this owes a lot to the runaway success in that country of Christopher Clark’s 2012 book on the causes of the war, *The Sleepwalkers*. For in a wide-ranging study, the Cambridge historian exonerates Germany from special responsibility for the outbreak of the war and thus reduces the overall burden of German historical guilt, as measured by a moral yardstick that is still rooted in World War II. Vladimir Putin’s Russia, by contrast, has rediscovered World War I as an episode of real Russian patriotism, though it remains to be seen how it will deal with the revolution’s centenary in 2017.

None of this should surprise us. Commemoration is about the present as much as the past. Yet, again, history writing itself evolves with the preoccupations and period of the historian. Scholarship on the war has in fact undergone something of a revolution in the last quarter-century, and this in turn suggests that new perspectives on the conflict and its legacy have opened up, sometimes conflicting with the national framework and message of the commemorators.

Oddly, the 75th anniversary of the war passed without much comment, the world having more important matters on its mind as the Cold War ended. Yet 1989 marked the beginning of a new era: 1945 was no longer viewed as the start of contemporary history, but the midpoint of what the British historian Eric Hobsbawm famously identified as a “short twentieth century” that began in 1914. It was not just that the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and a brutal artillery siege of Sarajevo from 1992 to 1996, brought a cycle of violence in the Balkans back to its origin in the June 1914 assassination of the Habsburg heir apparent in that same city. Europeans also remade their continent, and as they did so a lost *Mitteleuropa* resurfaced: The Europe of the early twentieth century came back into view. Yet in an era of renewed globalization, China and India emerged as economic powers that turned the focus away from Europe, a process already started by World War I.

THE SOLDIER’S SACRIFICE

So how might we trace the longer-term legacy of the war given that its immediate consequences have been well absorbed into the patterns of European and world history? What do historians or the public see as its main features today? The answer, in at least four different ways, lies in the violence of the war.

First, the ordinary soldier’s experience and the scale of death in combat dominate the current memory of the conflict. In the past decade, the last veterans have disappeared in all the countries involved, breaking a living link and posing the question of the war’s message as it becomes purely historical. This is a logical result of national memory frameworks based on the soldier’s sacrifice. Since the war’s outcome and meaning have long since faded for most people, its most tangible legacy remains the soldier’s tale and its memory in millions of families. The war memorials seem to say it all.

From *Current History*’s archives...

“The one danger before us that nothing can avert but a general raising of human character through the deliberate cultivation and endowment of democratic virtue without consideration of property and class, is the danger created by inventing weapons capable of destroying civilization faster than we produce men who can be trusted to use them wisely. At present we are handling them like children.”

George Bernard Shaw “Common Sense About the War,” December 1914



Yet there are good historical reasons to reemphasize the soldier's war. Even though it was not the first industrial conflict (that dubious honor goes to the American Civil War), World War I was the first global experience of an extended conflict that translated the technology of the second industrial revolution (steel, chemicals, high explosives, and the internal combustion engine) into combat. It did so, moreover, by means of siege warfare in which whole nations were mobilized behind their defensive lines in order to defeat the enemy, either by renewed offensive war or by the slow attrition of the enemy's will to fight. The trench systems, the failed attacks, and the Allied advance of the last hundred days are still etched in the ground. For all its violence, World War II produced no conventional battlefield more destructive than Verdun or the Somme.

We remain appalled by the human cost, and our moral sensibility in the face of this scale of loss is doubly shaped by the war. A striking feature of the response to mass death at the time was the insistence on naming the victims (without hierarchy of rank) in a geography of mourning that multiplied sites of commemoration at home and the front. New ways were found—the Cenotaph, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier—to remember those who had no known “resting place.” It was as if the anonymity of mass killing required the particularization of those who had been killed, something again anticipated by the American Civil War but which would shape responses to both smaller and greater disasters, including genocide, in the century after 1914.

Yet if the sensibility and rituals of commemoration have become part of our collective makeup, what also shocks us is the sheer scale of death (as in World War II) compared with more recent wars. The Cold War maintained the idea of national mobilization and the possibility of all-out conflict in Europe (it was, of course, a hot war elsewhere), and the long war between Iran and Iraq from 1980 to 1988 was the last to echo the combat of World War I. But in our era of asymmetrical warfare, polarized between terrorism and guerrillas on the one hand and high-tech weaponry deployed by professional soldiers on the other, the militarization of Western societies in the first half of the twentieth century has been decisively reversed. Even the French, who invented the “nation in arms,” have abandoned conscription. This makes the casualties sustained by the soldiers of World War I seem more remote

and their willingness to accept such sacrifice harder to comprehend.

CIVILIAN VICTIMS

The opposite, however, is true of civilian suffering, which is a second legacy of the war. Nowhere is the difference from national commemoration clearer than in historians' focus on topics such as war crimes, refugees, occupations, and mass murder. The viewpoint is transnational. It arises from a different kind of memory in which crimes against humanity and genocide have supplied a retrospective measure for understanding World War II (including the Holocaust), and also a framework of international law. Sidelined during the Cold War, this viewpoint was reinvigorated after 1989 and reinforced by a “second wave” feminism that looked at war in terms of gender, starting with the rapes committed by Bosnian Serbs in the early 1990s.

In fact, civilian suffering in World War I was not a new subject. Allied denunciation of German atrocities during the invasion of France and Belgium in 1914, German accusations that the so-called Hunger Blockade starved the populations of the Central Powers, Allied condemnations of callous U-boat warfare against innocent civilians—all were the subjects of wartime propaganda and moralizing rhetoric. But precisely for that reason, they were dismissed in retrospect as merely propaganda. Also, much of the violence in question occurred on the margins of the war—in occupied territories or colonies, in civilian and military prison camps, or among ethnic minorities. It did not fit a national memory based on the soldiers' sacrifice.

It is now clear, however, that like World War II and later conflicts, World War I eroded the distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Since each side mobilized its own population while trying to undermine its opponent's, the war generated violence against civilians, whether those of the enemy or suspect elements at home. The logic of a war of attrition meant directly targeting enemy civilians. The Allied naval blockade sought to deprive the Central Powers of food as well as munitions, while German unrestricted submarine warfare against the Allies had the same goal. Up to half a million German civilians perished from malnutrition, mainly in the second half of the conflict. Technical limits restricted aerial bombing of civilians. But the desire was there from the start, and practice had led to real progress by 1918. Contemporaries already imagined devastation on

par with Coventry in 1941 or Dresden in 1945. All they lacked was the means.

Targeting the “enemy within” meant persecuting civilians at home, usually ethnic or religious minorities. This was an innate tendency of national mobilization; the degree to which it unleashed physical violence depended on the societies involved and their recent history. All states confined what the British called “enemy aliens” in concentration camps, though this last term did not yet have its later connotations. But in many cases constraint turned into overt violence. The Russian army in retreat from Galicia in 1915 committed widespread brutality against ethnic minorities, including Jews, three million of whom were deported into the Russian heartland.

On an even larger scale, the nationalist government of the Young Turks deliberately exterminated two-thirds of the 1.8 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire when faced in 1915 with invasions in the Caucasus and at Gallipoli. The victims perished by murder, deportation, and death in the Syrian desert; many women were raped and forced to convert to Islam. What most (but not all) historians recognize as a genocide occurred at the heart of the Turkish war effort. Our sensitivity to civilian victims brings these aspects of the war closer to us than to previous generations.

GREATER WAR

The third aspect of the war’s legacy to consider is how its violence was transmitted to the postwar world. Some historians talk of a new Thirty Years’ War or a European Civil War from 1914 to 1945. Leaving aside the European specificity of such references to a global war, neither formulation takes account of the peace between the wars. Other historians suggest that wartime combat “brutalized” postwar societies. Yet combat was general while postwar violence was particular, affecting only certain regions or countries.

A more fruitful approach may be to suggest that World War I was the epicenter of a larger cycle of violence that lasted from 1911 to 1923. Beginning with the Italian invasion of Ottoman Libya, this cycle triggered the two wars of the Balkan powers over the crumbling remnant of Turkish power in Europe. It resulted in a strengthened Serbia that posed a nationalist threat to Austria-

Hungary, whose ethnic mix included other South Slavs. The tension between empire and nationality was mirrored by the arming of Irish politics at the other end of Europe. On this reading, World War I was triggered by the fateful interaction of regional nationalism with the continental balance of power, as Austria (backed by Germany) chose to crush Serbia at the risk of a European war.

The great accelerator, however, was the war itself, whose nature few had foreseen. All the European powers considered it a question of survival. Mobilizing the nation or empire against a demonized enemy, as siege war deepened and the casualties soared, tested social cohesion and political legitimacy, in many cases to destruction. By 1918, Russia and Eastern Europe had disintegrated into ethnic conflict and civil war, which was supercharged by Bolshevik class violence. Defeat in Austria-Hungary and Germany, and perceived defeat in Italy, prompted a surge of border wars and domestic social conflicts that was supercharged by the paramilitary violence of the radical nationalists. The victorious powers convinced themselves that war had ended in November 1918. In fact, it mutated through defeat and state collapse into ethnic and class violence, plus war between successor states, that only ended in 1923 after several million more deaths.

This “greater war” bequeathed a dangerous legacy to interwar Europe. It created a continent of nation-states. Yet especially in the east and also in Ireland, where ethnic and religious groups overlapped, this development led to bitter quarrels over minorities and borders that challenged national sovereignty and self-determination. The antagonisms of democracy, fascism, and communism compounded the tensions, while German military potential and the isolation of the Soviet Union rendered the balance of power deeply unstable.

Yet everything turned on how these unresolved outcomes were translated into politics. They formed the agenda of European democracies and the League of Nations in the 1920s, just as they fueled the radicalized politics of the 1930s, which eventually exploded into World War II. Indirectly, they inspired the supranational European project starting in the 1950s and the implosion of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It took a century to resolve the unfinished business of Europe’s “greater war” at the cost of even greater violence. But the result is

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a continent apparently immunized against solving its differences by military conflict.

PARALLAX ERROR

Finally, historians since 1989 have emphasized the global significance of a war that signaled the end of a Eurocentric world. Here the shift in perspective is spatial as well as temporal. Although the prestige of European “civilization” suffered a body blow in World War I, it took most Europeans longer to realize that their continent was not the center of the world, and longer still to think of a war fought mainly in Europe as a truly global conflict.

In part, the error was one of parallax. It was assumed that countries and regions on what, judged from Europe, was the periphery of the war must have been peripheral to the action. Yet whether or not Ottoman Turkey was marginal to the war’s outcome, the war was clearly central to Turkey and its violent transformation from a multiethnic empire into a modern republic. The same is true for Africa. Many of its fragile economies were devastated by their mobilization for the European war, not to mention the destructive campaigning in East Africa that cost the lives of more than 100,000 indigenous porters who provided the logistics for the clashing British and German forces. Yet the history of Africa in the war remains a colonial adjunct to a European story.

Correcting the error of parallax means constructing multiple histories of the war that start from the perspective of the regions concerned and measure the conflict’s impact and legacy in ways that differ from the European perspectives. Two examples must suffice. As the first modern Asian

nation, Japan fought against Russia in 1904–5. In many ways the Russo-Japanese War was Japan’s Great War, but Japan also joined World War I as a belligerent while refusing to fight in Europe. Tokyo studied the war at close hand and drew lessons (not least Europe’s loss of prestige and weakness in Asia) that radicalized its own imperialism. Culturally, World War I was decisive in the trajectory that led to Pearl Harbor.

Colonies (the British dominions apart) enjoyed no such independence of action. But the war brought many colonial men to Europe for the first time, and the intellectuals and activists among them borrowed the language of European nationalism to demand self-determination for their own lands, often using the argument of reciprocal rights for military service. They were rejected. Wilsonian ideas were never intended to apply beyond Europe.

Yet the paradox that mobilizing the empire generated demands for change while reinforcing the colonial project was one that the colonizers themselves would prove incapable of resolving. It eventually led to independent nation-states whose borders remained those bequeathed by the arbitrary decisions of the colonial era. Hence postcolonial nations after 1945 experienced tensions over ethnic and religious minorities similar to those of the new nation-states in Europe between the wars, producing conflicts that are still with us. This is nowhere clearer than in the Middle East. These pre-national histories are as integral to the contemporary legacies of World War I as those from the European or American perspectives. But it will take more than the centenary until they have been fully told. ■