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"The World the Great War Swept Away"

'In 1914, Europe was prosperous and what followed was unimaginable'

by Peggy Noonan

In this centennial year of the Great War some things have not been said, or at least I haven't heard them. Among them:

All the smart people knew the war would never come. The continent to which war came was on such an upward trajectory in terms of prosperity, inventiveness and political culture that it could have become—it arguably already was—a jewel of civilization. And the common man who should have wept at the war's commencement instead cheered.

John Keegan went into these points in his classic history "The First World War," published in 1998.

His first sentence is beautiful in its simplicity: "I grew up with men who had fought in the First World War and with women who had waited at home for news of them." His father and uncles saw combat, his aunt was "one of the army of spinsters" the war produced.

His overall assessment is blunt: "The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict." Leaders who lacked "prudence" and "good will" failed one after another to stop an eminently stoppable train of events that produced a conflagration. That was tragic not only in terms of loss of life, and psychological, physical, emotional and even spiritual injury to survivors, but because the war destroyed a rising, bettering world: "the benevolent and optimistic culture of the European continent." It of course also left "a legacy of political rancor and racial hatred so intense" that it guaranteed the world war that would follow 20 years later, which by Keegan's calculation was five times as destructive of human life. Auschwitz and the other extermination camps "were as much relics of the First as the Second world war." "They have their antecedents . . . in the fields where the trenches ran."

A park promenade at Boulogne Wood in Paris in 1900. Getty Images

World War I didn't do nearly as much material damage as World War II. No big European city was destroyed in World War I, and the Eastern and Western fronts ran mostly through forests and farmlands, which were quickly returned to use at the war's end. "Yet it damaged civilization, the rational and liberal civilization of the European enlightenment, permanently for the worse and, through the damage done, world civilization also."

Prewar European governments, imperial ones included, paid formal and often practical respect "to the principles of constitutionalism, the rule of law and representative government." Confidence in those principles all but collapsed after the war: "Within fifteen years of the war's end, totalitarianism, a new word for a system that rejected the liberalism and constitutionalism which had inspired European politics since the eclipse of monarchy in 1789, was almost everywhere on the rise." To Russia came communism, to Germany Nazism, to Italy fascism and Spain Francoism. All these infections spread from a common wound: the dislocation and death of the great war.

The world swept away had been a rising and increasingly constructive one, where total war was unimaginable: "Europe in the summer of 1914 enjoyed a peaceful productivity so dependent on international exchange and cooperation that a belief in the impossibility of general war seemed the most conventional of wisdoms."

Informed opinion had it that the disruption of international credit that would follow war "would either deter its outbreak or bring it speedily to an end." And the business of Europe was business. Industrial output was expanding; there were new goods and manufacturing opportunities, such as the production and sale of internal-combustion machines. There were new profit centers, new sources of raw materials, including precious metals. Populations were increasing. Steamships and railways were revolutionizing transport. Capital was circulating. "Belgium, one of

the smallest countries in Europe, had in 1914 the sixth largest economy in the world," thanks to early industrialization, new banking and trading methods, and industrial innovators.

Europe was increasingly international—independent nations were dealing and trading with each other. "Common Christianity—and Europe was overwhelmingly Christian by profession in 1914 and strongly Christian in observance also"—found frequent expression in philosophical and political pursuits, including the well-being of labor. Movements to restrict working hours and forbid the employment of children were going forward. European governments were spurred by self-protectiveness: Liberalized labor laws were a way to respond to and attempt to contain the power and appeal of Marxism.

"Europe's educated classes held much of its culture in common." They knew Mozart and Beethoven and grand opera. " Tolstoy was a European figure," as were Victor Hugo, Balzac, Zola, Dickens, Shakespeare, Goethe and Dante. High-school students in England were taught French, and French students German. Study of the classics remained universal, scholars from all the countries of Europe knew Homer, Thucydides, Caesar and Livy. All shared the foundational classics of philosophy, Aristotle and Plato.

Europe as a cultural entity was *coherent* and becoming more so. By the beginning of the 20th century tourism "had become a middle-class pleasure" because of railways and the hotel industry that followed.

But Europe was also heavily armed. All countries had armed forces, some large and costly ones led by influential, respected figures. What do armies in peacetime do? Make plans to kill each other just in case. Keegan: "[A] new era in military planning had begun; that of the making of war plans in the abstract, plans conceived at leisure . . . and pulled out when eventuality becomes actuality." What do soldiers who've made brilliant plans do? Itch to use them. Europe's armies came to see their jobs as "how to assure military advantage in an international crisis, not how to resolve it."

Soon enough they had their chance.

As you read of the war and its aftermath, you are always stopped by this fact: There is no recorded instance of masses of people gathering together to weep the day it was declared. They should have. The beautiful world they were day by day constructing was in jeopardy and ultimately would be consumed. Yet when people heard the news they threw their hats in the air, parading and waving flags in every

capital. In Berlin "crowds thronged the streets shouting, cheering, singing patriotic songs." In London the same. In St. Petersburg thousands waved banners and icons. In Paris, as the city's regiments pushed off, "an immense clamour arose as the Marseillaise burst from a thousand throats."

Western Europe hadn't had a big and costly ground war since 1871. Maybe they forgot what war was. Surely some would have liked the drama and excitement—the interruption in normality, the break in the boring dailiness of life. Or the air of possibility war brings—of valor, for instance, and shown courage. Camaraderie, too, and a sense of romantic engagement with history. A sense of something to live for—victory.

Once a few years ago a reporter who had covered wars talked about this with a brilliant, accomplished, famously leftist editor in New York. At the end of a conversation on a recent conflict the reporter said, quizzically: "Why *is* there so much war? Why do we do that?"

"Because something's wrong with us," the editor replied.

I told him it was the best definition of original sin I'd ever heard.

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