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Essay

“The War That Made Our World”

‘World War I began 100 years ago this month, and in many ways, writes historian Margaret MacMillan, it remains the defining conflict of the modern era.’

By Margaret MacMillan



A raiding party from the Scottish Rifles waits for the order to attack, near Arras, France, March 24, 1917. One captain said, "The waiting was always the hardest part of all." National Library of Scotland

A hundred years ago next week, in the small Balkan city of Sarajevo, Serbian nationalists murdered the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary and his wife. People were shocked but not particularly worried. Sadly, there had been many political assassinations in previous years—the king of Italy, two

Spanish prime ministers, the Russian czar, President William McKinley. None had led to a major crisis. Yet just as a pebble can start a landslide, this killing set off a series of events that, in five weeks, led Europe into a general war.

The U.S. under President Woodrow Wilson intended to stay out of the conflict, which, in the eyes of many Americans, had nothing to do with them. But in 1917, German submarine attacks on U.S. shipping and attempts by the German government to encourage Mexico to invade the U.S. enraged public opinion, and Wilson sorrowfully asked Congress to declare war. American resources and manpower tipped the balance against the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and on Nov. 11, 1918, what everyone then called the Great War finally came to an end.

The cold numbers capture much of the war's horror: more than 9 million men dead and twice as many again wounded—a loss of sons, husbands and fathers but also of skills and talents. Graves in the north of France and Belgium and war memorials across the U.S. bear witness to the 53,000 American soldiers who died. Thousands of civilians died, too, during the war itself, whether of hunger, disease or violence. And then, as the guns were falling silent, a new pestilence struck humanity in the shape of a virulent influenza. As troops returned home, they unwittingly helped carry the disease around the world. It has been estimated that 50 million died.

Through a Soldier's Lens



In World War I, for the first time, some officers and soldiers brought small, hand-held cameras to the battlefields. Images taken by the troops themselves provide insights into their daily lives, generally outside of the battle zones. Lucien Charpeine/europeana1914-18

Many of the now-familiar political boundaries in Europe and the Middle East still reflect the peace settlements that followed the war. These resulted in a smaller Russia and Germany and wound up the great multinational empires of Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans. New countries appeared on our maps, with names such as Yugoslavia and Iraq.

What is harder to pin down and assess are the war's long-term consequences—political, social and moral. The conflict changed all the countries that took part in it. Governments assumed greater control over society and have never entirely relinquished it. Old regimes collapsed, to be replaced by new political orders. In Russia, czarist autocracy was succeeded by a communist one, with huge consequences for the rest of the century.

The scale and destructiveness of the war also raised issues—many of which we still grapple with today—and spread new political ideas. President Wilson talked about national self-determination and making the world safe for democracy. He wanted a League of Nations as the basis for international cooperation. From Russia, Lenin and his Bolsheviks offered a stark alternative: a world without borders or classes. The competing visions helped fuel the Cold War, which ended just 25 years ago.

Before 1914, Russia was a backward autocracy but was changing fast. Its growth rate was as high as any of the Asian tigers in the 1960s and 1970s; it was Europe's major exporter of food grains and, as it industrialized, was importing machinery on a massive scale. Russia also was developing the institutions of civil society, including the rule of law and representative government. Without the war, it might have evolved into a modern democratic state; instead, it got the sudden collapse of the old order and a coup d'état by the Bolsheviks. Soviet communism exacted a dreadful toll on the Russian people and indeed the world—and its remnants are still painfully visible in the corrupt, authoritarian regime of [Vladimir Putin](#).

The war also destroyed other options for Europe's political development. The old multinational empires had their faults, to be sure, but they enabled the diverse peoples within their boundaries to live in relative harmony. Both Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans were trying to work out ways of encompassing the demands of different groups for greater autonomy. Might they have succeeded if the war had not exhausted them to the point of collapse? We will never know, but since then, the world has suffered the violence and horrors of ethnic nationalism.

The armistice of 1918 ended one gigantic conflict, but it left the door open for a whole host of smaller ones—the "wars of the pygmies," as Winston Churchill once described them. Competing national groups tried to establish their own independence and to push their borders out at the expense of their neighbors. Poles fought Russians, Lithuanians and Czechs, while Romania invaded Hungary. And within their borders, Europeans fought each other. Thirty-seven thousand Finns (out of some 3 million) died in a civil war in the first months of 1918, while in Russia, as many as a million soldiers and many more civilians may have died by the time the Bolsheviks finally defeated their many opponents.

The war had brutalized European society, which had grown accustomed during the largely peaceful 19th century to think that peace was the normal state of affairs. After 1918, Europeans were increasingly willing to resort to other sorts of force, from political assassinations to street violence, and to seek radical solutions to their problems. The seeds of the political movements on the extremes of both the right and the left—of fascism and communism—were sown in the years before 1914, but it took World War I to fertilize them.



A British soldier with a fixed bayonet. More than nine million men died in the war; twice as many were wounded. SSPL/Getty Images

The war aided the rise of extremism by weakening Europe's confidence in the existing order. Many Europeans no longer trusted the establishments that had got them into the catastrophe. The German and Austrian monarchies were also overthrown, to be succeeded by shaky republics. The new orders might have succeeded in gaining legitimacy in time, but that was the one thing that Europe and the world didn't have. The Great Depression at the end of the 1920s swept the new regimes away and undermined even the strongest democracies.

The war had made many Europeans simply give up on their own societies. Before 1914, they could take pride in Europe's power and prosperity, in the knowledge that it dominated the world through its economic and military strength. They could boast that European civilization was superior to all others. Now they were left with a shattered continent that had spent down its wealth and weakened itself, perhaps mortally. As the great French thinker and poet Paul Valéry said in 1922, "something deeper has been worn away than the renewable parts of the machine."

Church attendance plummeted, but night clubs were jammed by those who could afford them. Cocaine stopped being a medicine and became a recreational drug along with alcohol. Before the war, a new generation of writers and artists had already been mocking the old classical traditions and inventing their own. Now, in the 1920s, the jumbled perspectives of the cubists, the atonal compositions of new composers such as Arnold Schoenberg or the experimental poetry and prose of writers such as Ezra Pound or Marcel Proust seemed prescient—new forms that captured the reality of a fractured world.

While the Europeans were coming to grips with what they had done to themselves, the rest of the world was drawing its own lessons. The European empires had called on their colonial possessions to support the war effort, but in so doing they had hastened the coming of their own end. Empires had always rested on a giant confidence trick—where the ruled agreed, or at least didn't actively dispute, that their colonial rulers were more civilized and advanced and thus entitled to rule.

The soldiers from Africa, Canada, India, Australia or New Zealand had now seen for themselves what their European masters were capable of. The waste, the muddle, the brutality with which Europeans fought each other and the sheer incompetence of much of the European war effort exploded the old myths of European superiority. Throughout the empires, assertive and impatient national movements—often led by those who had returned from the war—pushed the empires toward their end. Mohandas Gandhi, who in the South African War of 1899-1902 had set up an ambulance corps to support the British, now led a movement to oust them from India.

The end of hostilities in 1918 also brought the challenge, one we still face, of how to end wars in ways that don't produce fresh conflict. The first World War didn't directly cause the second, but it created the conditions in which it became possible. President Wilson was for a peace without retribution and a world in which nations came together for the common good; his opponents, such as Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, thought that only a decisive victory over Germany and its allies would lay the groundwork for a lasting peace. They may have been right. Certainly after 1918, Germany's right-wing elites and many ordinary Germans persuaded themselves that Germany hadn't really lost the war.

In fact, Germany had been defeated on the battlefield in the summer of 1918, and, as its allies fell away, a panicked German high command had demanded that the civilian government in Berlin ask for an armistice. The war had stopped before Germany itself was invaded, however, so few Germans behind the lines experienced defeat firsthand. The German army had marched home in good order. "We greet you undefeated," said the German president, while members of the high command such as Gen. Erich von Ludendorff hastened to spread the poisonous myth that the army had been stabbed in the back by traitors at home, whether Jews, socialists or liberals.

As a result, the Treaty of Versailles—which imposed a whole range of penalties on Germany, from the loss of territory to reparations for war damage—was widely held by Germans to be illegitimate. The promise to break it apart became an important part of the Nazis' appeal. In World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had been in Wilson's government as assistant secretary of the Navy, was determined that this time there should be no doubt about the outcome of the war. The Allied policy for the Axis powers was a straightforward "unconditional surrender."

Even on the winning side, the peace settlements after World War I bred resentment. Italians complained of "a mutilated peace" because they didn't get all the territory they wanted. Like Hitler, Mussolini found a handy grievance to help him and his black-shirted fascists on the road to power. The French felt they had sacrificed much—the country had lost 40% of its industrial capacity and suffered the highest proportion of casualties of all the powers—and gained little. To their east, the French saw a Germany relatively unscathed by war, with a larger economy, and a bigger population.

Britain and the U.S. had promised to guarantee France against German attack, but, as rapidly became clear, the guarantee was worthless. So France looked for allies in the center of Europe, but countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia weren't strong enough to counterbalance

Germany. French attempts to build alliances there merely fueled German fears of being encircled. As for Britain, it had more than enough problems trying to manage its vast empire with its depleted resources, and so it withdrew, as it had so often done before from entanglements on the Continent.

In the Far East, nationalists in Japan, which had been on the Allied side, felt their country had been used and then contemptuously scorned by the "white" powers who refused to write a clause on racial equality into the Covenant of the League of Nations. That helped to propel Japan down the road of militarism and imperialism, and eventually to confrontation with the U.S. at Pearl Harbor.

Of equal significance for the future was the growing disillusionment with the West in China. China, too, had been an ally, supplying more than 100,000 laborers for the Western front. Two thousand of them lie buried in France. Yet when the powers met in Paris, they didn't give China what it most wanted—Germany's territorial and other concessions in Shandong province—but handed them over to Japan, another ally. It was cynical power politics: Japan was stronger and therefore more important to the West.

In the resulting nationalist fury, key Chinese liberals gave up on the West and Western-style democracy. "We at once awoke to the fact that foreign nations were still selfish and militaristic," said one student demonstrator. As fate would have it, an alternative model now presented itself—in Russia, where the new communist leaders were promising to build a new, fairer and more efficient society. The Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1920, and many of those who had demonstrated against the West in 1919 became members. The consequences of that turn are still with us today.

On the other side of the world, the U.S. now challenged a declining and divided Europe for leadership of the world. In the course of the war, financial dominance had moved across the Atlantic from London to New York, as the U.S. became the world's largest creditor. It was also much more powerful in other ways. The war had boosted American industry and speeded up the conversion of U.S. economic strength into diplomatic and military power. By the end of the war, the U.S. was the world's largest manufacturer and had the largest stock of gold to back its dollar. Its navy rivaled the British, up until then the world's biggest.

American exceptionalism—that sense of being both different and better than the rest of the world—had also been reinforced. As Wilson once said, "America is an idea, America is an ideal, America is a vision." In his great speech to Congress in April 1917, when he asked for the declaration of war on Germany, he made it clear that the U.S. wanted nothing for itself from the war, that its goal was to defeat militarism and build a better world. He would, he repeatedly said, do his utmost to move international relations away from the sort of secret diplomacy and deals that the European powers had engaged in for centuries and that, in his opinion and that of many Americans, had led to the war. The U.S. was entering the war as an "associate" and not as an "ally." Its war aims were different from those of the Europeans: to build a peaceful and just international order, not to acquire territory or other war booty.

The U.S. delegation came to the postwar peace conference with a contempt for old Europe and a sense of moral superiority. That was only reinforced when the making of peace proved difficult. The protracted and bitter battle between Wilson and his opponents resulted in Congress rejecting the newly founded League of Nations and heartened those who wanted the U.S. to stay out of foreign entanglements.

As postwar problems mounted in Europe, many Americans reacted with dismay, anger and a feeling that somehow they had been suckered into the wrong conflict. That in turn played into the isolationist impulses of the 1920s and the 1930s, again with dangerous consequences. We can never know, but it remains at least an open question: If the U.S. had joined the League and been prepared to work with other democracies against the aggressive and undemocratic powers, could World War II have been averted?

Such questions about alternate paths that might have been followed in the past century make World War I of enduring interest. We should not see it merely as something of historical interest, a series of sepia photographs showing people who are quite alien to us. We are still living with the results of that war, and we face similar concerns. How, for example, does the world deal with powers whose leaders feel they must have their place in the sun? For Germany then, read Russia now. Or how can we rebuild societies after deeply damaging conflicts—in Europe then, but in Central Africa, the Middle East or Afghanistan today?

A century after the assassination of an Austro-Hungarian archduke in the streets of Sarajevo, it may be that looking back to World War I can still help us toward a more peaceful future.

—Dr. MacMillan is the warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford University, and the author, most recently, of "The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914."

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