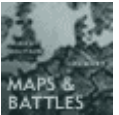


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THE GREAT WAR

And the Shaping of the 20th Century



THEN & NOW: The Shaping of the 21st Century

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Overview

The after shocks of the earthquake we call the Great War are still being felt today, in the 21st century

In countless ways, World War I created the fundamental elements of 20th century history. Genocide emerged as an act of war. So did the use of poison gas on the battlefield. The international system was totally transformed. On the political right fascism came out of the war; on the left a communist movement emerged backed by the Soviet Union. Reluctantly, but unavoidably, America became a world power. The British Empire reached its high point and started to unravel. Britain never recovered from the shock of war, and started her decline to the ranks of the second-class powers. At the peace conference of 1919, the German, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian empires were broken up. New boundaries were drawn in Europe and the Middle East, boundaries -- as in Iraq and Kuwait -- which were still intact at the end of the century.

Just as the war was ending, German Nationalists like Hitler gathered millions who rejected the peace and blamed Jews and Communists for their defeat. The road to the Second World War started there.

Even after Germany's second defeat in 1945, the shadow of the Great War was still visible. Then came the shock waves of 1989-91, ending the "short 20th century," an era that began with the great war and concluded with the collapse of communism and the reunification of Germany in a robust European community. The German problem -- so central to World War I -- appeared to be resolved. But other problems have emerged that are disturbingly similar to those that plagued the world in 1914.

World Terrorism

by Jay Winter, Historian

"Terrorism was born well before the First World War. But its effects became worldwide in 1914. The assassination of the heir to the Austria-Hungarian throne created the diplomatic crisis that ultimately led to the war. So it's the provocation effect of terrorism that I think was born in 1914.

In many ways the attack on the World Trade Center was a direct echo of that provocation. The intention was to bring about a military response that would in turn rebound against the power that responds. In 1914 that was the intention, the intention was to force Austria-Hungary into some kind of violent reaction that would ultimately be to its detriment. And that is indeed what happened.

Whether or not the war on terrorism as a response to the World Trade Center attack is detrimental to the United States, has yet to be seen. But there is an idea that terrorism's provocation was born on the 28th of June 1914."

Serbia Explodes Again 80 Years Later

by Jay Winter, Historian

"There is no way to understand what happened in Serbia and Bosnia [in the 90s] without going back to the extraordinary events on the 28th of June, 1914 when the heir apparent to the throne [Austria-Hungary], the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated.

A series of violent events followed that marked the civil war within the Balkan States becoming even more violent in the Second World War. And in turn, when the communist state of Yugoslavia unraveled in the 1990's, some cynical politicians like Milosovich tried to go right back to 1914. ... So the sequence of violent events in the 20th Century is like a fugue, with one instrument following another. And in the Serbian case, each one is worse than the one before."

Immigration

by Niall Ferguson, Historian

"The emergence of new members in the European Union has revived anxieties that would have been familiar to anybody a hundred years ago -- of migration of Eastern Europeans to Western Europe -- when many Polish and Russian based Jews and other ethnic minorities were seeking to escape from the relatively repressive regimes where they lived.

European politics are still in fact strongly influenced by hostilities to immigration... And whatever the rhetoric of European integration... the reality is that on issues like migration, national governments act with their perceived interests firmly in mind."

Bosnia and Rwanda Genocide

by Jay Winter, Historian

"There are two ways of looking at genocide. The first is in terms of international warfare. And the other is in terms of domestic murder on a grand scale. The murder of the Armenians is both in 1915. It occurred in the context of total war, but it was also the policy of an independent state to eliminate inhabitants of its own population.

Now this precedent of a state killing its own citizens is one that Hitler used quite openly. And it is clearly what happens in Rwanda as well.

What's missing, and why it is difficult to make the contrast directly is that the two genocides of the Armenians in 1915-16 and the European Jews in 1941 to 1945, both were in the context of total war. The two genocides of the 1990's in Bosnia and Serbia as well as in

context of total war. The two genocides of the 1990's in Bosnia and Serbia as well as in Rwanda, are not in the context of international war. But the first two -- the First World War and the Second World War -- provided the precedent for the elimination of neighbors, and for doing so in such a way as to make it impossible to live side by side in the future."

US Money Power

by Niall Ferguson, Historian

"1914-18 was one of the great watersheds in financial history. The United States emerged for the first time as the rival to Great Britain as a financial super power. Possibly even in some respects, the United States overtook Britain. ... It's the point at which the United States firmly ceases to be a debtor and becomes a creditor nation -- the world's banker.

The fascinating thing, of course, is that that's no longer true. We live in a time when the United States has ceased to be a creditor. It ceased to be a creditor in the 1980's and became a world debtor. It's reverted to its pre-First World War situation of being an importer rather than an exporter of capital. So the legacy of the Great War in that respect seems largely to have expired and been expunged by fundamental economic changes."

European Union

by Niall Ferguson, Historian

"The idea of European economic integration and even the creation of a European Federation were in fact much discussed during the Great War. ... The European Union we know today would not have surprised anybody who was seriously interested in the future of Europe in 1917. ... The idea that it would have to begin with a Franco-German pooling of economic interests, particularly in the Rhine rural area, the pooling of ore and coal, iron and steel interests, was in fact first floated immediately after the First World War by French policy makers and industrialists. ... But it took a Second World War to show that this was the only viable way forward for Western Europe."

Baghdad 2003 -- Making the World Safe for Democracy

by Jay Winter, Historian

"Baghdad 2003 has some shadows of the Great War... The first shadow is the belief that the victors carry democracy with them. This is an American idea from 1917-18. Woodrow Wilson believed that democracy was inherently peaceful and dictatorships, the kind that ruled in Germany in 1914, were inherently hostile and bellicose. By insisting that Germany change regimes, there was a better chance of guarding the peace of the world than if Germany had remained a quasi-military dictatorship.

The notion that you can create democracy and therefore peace is Woodrow Wilson's. And George W. Bush is a Wilsonian. ... one that harks back to a period in which armed force brings democracy to those who are suffering under dictatorship."

The Language of Mass Death

by Jay Winter, Historian

"The language used to describe a totally unprecedented vision of mass death is found in the Great War. Nobody had any idea what was going to happen once war between industrialized countries broke out. ... So the impossibility of understanding what was happening and the ways in which to refer to it in 1914-18 -- and for years after -- produced all kinds of poems, novels, memoirs ... September 11th is relatively close to us. It probably is going to take years for people to work out what it is that actually happened. ... Traumatic memories can't be configured right away. ... 10 years, 15 years, 20 years down the line, some great works of imaginative literature and art will come to tell us the meaning of these [9/11]

events."

Future Use of Military Force

by Niall Ferguson, Historian

"The world hasn't moved that far from the age of the Great War because, fundamentally, national interest is still paramount. But what has changed is that European politicians have radically thought through the way that they pursue the national interest.

And the biggest change ... is of course that military power is of far less significance in European politics than it was a century ago on the eve of the Great War. European politicians are exceedingly reluctant to use military power. ...that is one reason why these former empires like the French and Germans dislike the sight of other people -- namely the United States -- using military power as self confidently as the United States has done since September 11th."

What Did We Learn?

by Jay Winter, Historian

"I think we learned a great deal from the Great War. The first point is that as soon as international warfare is launched, nobody can predict the outcome. The second thing is that international war breeds civil war, and civil war is uglier than international war because there are no limits. We also learned that the technology of warfare expands much more rapidly than the capacity of political leaders to control it.

And I think the final thing that the First World War taught us is that the easy access of individuals to democratic procedures is very fragile. Warfare suspends democracy. How high a price is victory? That's a question we owe to the First World War. And the question is still with us today."

Top Photo: Berlin

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