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Historical events

World War I and Its Century

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In his Age of Extremes, the great Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm marked the start of World War I in August, 1914 as the beginning of the “short twentieth century.”

In Hobsbawm’s account, that short century ended with the reunification of Germany and the breakup of the Soviet “East Bloc” in 1989-90. The “Great War” of 1914-1918, he argued, was the defining event of the century.

With the dismemberment of Yugoslavia underway in the early 1990s as he wrote, Hobsbawm observed that the inter-communal strife reignited in the “Balkan tinderbox” represented the “old chickens of Versailles once again coming home to roost” — meaning that the repercussions of the punitive peace imposed outside Paris in 1919 were reverberating over 70 years later. Were he alive today, he certainly would note how some of the wounds of that “war to end all wars” continue to fester.

The first generalized “total war” among industrialized imperial powers, WWI took millions of lives — estimates of total casualties, military and civilian, go as high as 40 million — injured far more and caused inestimable destruction. Soldiers choked to death or were crippled for life by mustard gas.

The war brought an end to centuries of dynastic rule by Kaiser, Czar, Emperor and Sultan in Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East; set the stage for the eventual demise of the British Empire; and further relegated France to secondary power status. It finished off the crumbling “sick man of Europe,” the Ottoman Empire at Constantinople which had once ruled much of southeast Europe, western Asia and North Africa. It furthered Japan’s aspiration to become East Asia’s dominant imperial power.

Imperial Rivalry at the Core

The war’s devastation created the conditions for Russia’s revolutions in February and October 1917, and the resultant first attempt to “construct the socialist order” as Lenin boldly proclaimed to the Congress of Soviets. Simultaneously it foreshadowed the coming of a new imperial order as the United States, already established as a powerhouse of productivity, transformed from being a debtor to a creditor nation set on its course to eventually replace Britain as capitalism’s reigning superpower.

If the spark that ignited it all was almost accidental — the assassination at Sarajevo of the heir to the Austrian throne, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, shot by an ultra-nationalist Bosnian Serb in late June, 1914 — the root causes of the war clearly went far deeper.

Primary was inter-imperialist rivalry, understood by Marxists as including, but also going beyond, a set of specific factors — the capitalist drive for markets, raw materials, cheap labor, outlets for static investment, or a solution to periodic overproduction crises.

That first global conflagration in some sense was indeed the result of uneven and combined capitalist development on an international scale. Both sides contained the most advanced capitalist societies. Foremost on the Entente or Allied side were Great Britain as well as France and Japan, later joined by the United States. Leading the Central Powers was a unified Germany, by 1914 the strongest, most advanced economy on the European continent.

The respective war coalitions also included semi-industrial old order regimes already penetrated by French, German and British capital. Russia joined the Allied side while Austria-Hungary and Turkey, already in imperial decline, aligned with Germany. Once underway, the war also provided opportunities, real and illusory, for lesser “sub-imperial” powers such as Italy, Serbia, Bulgaria and Rumania to assert their national identities and irredentist territorial ambitions.

At the war’s conclusion, in pursuit of punitive reparations the victors at Versailles in 1919 would force Germany to concede sole responsibility for the war, an imposition that led to the rise of the Nazis and Adolph Hitler. But there was plenty of “war guilt” to go around.

Ruling circles in pre-war Germany were certainly eager to expand the country’s Weltpolitik “place in the sun.” Already the Continent’s major military power second only to the United States in manufacturing might, Germany set out to challenge Britain, which was no longer “the workshop of the world” but still the reigning financial, commercial and insurance center of world capitalism.

Understanding that the key to Britain’s supremacy lay in its ability to “rule the waves,” not just Germany but the United States and Japan had already set to building their own navies as a way to project global power and prestige. Long underway, a major power scramble to take and hold formal and informal colonies, “spheres of influence” and previously partitioned or coveted territories also fueled a related “land arms race” and war plan contingencies among the contenders.

Importantly, imperial ambitions were propelled not just by economic imperatives but by strikingly symmetric nationalist ideologies — inflated notions of national superiority, “destiny” and god-ordained “mission.”

The age was rife with “scientific” racism — ideas regarding racial hierarchies of peoples and variants of Social Darwinism, that false doctrine (which Darwin himself never proclaimed) of the “survival of the fittest in the struggle for existence,” projected onto entire nations.

Each of the major belligerents had its own military establishment or “military caste” promoted, always in the name of “defense,” by imperial strategists, industrial “lobbies,” conservative political parties, a jingoist press and a masculinist mystique of militarism wedded to “manly virtues.”

The idea of war as a legitimate vehicle of statecraft and a purifying force vital for the health of the nation was disseminated through the schools and universities, popular culture and pulpit at a time when vast numbers still believed in the divine right of their royal rulers.

At one level, the war came as an attempt to settle old nationalist scores — like those of France in regard to resource rich provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, seized by the Prussians in 1871. At another, it became but one defining round in a longer succession of multi-powered contests for control of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Caucasus, and the Black and Caspian Sea regions — areas still coveted today for their geo-strategic importance, hydrocarbon wealth and other “vital” resources.

In some ways, the war also arose out of attempts by all the belligerents to resolve internal class antagonisms and social upheavals, at their base the result of capitalist transformations and increasingly severe cyclical crises. It’s not that the various ruling classes uniformly looked upon war as a pathway to national unity and social peace. But there certainly were those who conceived of imperial expansion as a remedy for class turmoil at home.

In addition, numbers of politically influential industrial and financial firms, unrestrained by national boundaries, played a hand in destabilizing long-established structures and norms of inter-imperial relations. As Hobsbawm put it:

“...The characteristic feature of capitalist accumulation was precisely that it had no limit. The “natural frontiers” of Standard Oil, the Deutsche Bank or DeBeers Diamond Corporation were at the ends of the universe, or rather at the limits of their capacity to expand.” (Age of Empire, 318)

The war came on the heels of two preceding Balkan wars and inter-imperial disputes in North Africa and elsewhere, which led to the formation of the power alignments of 1914. It also came in the wake of earlier conflicts and social upheavals that altered the perceptions and realities of power in Europe.

Most notably, Russia’s 1905 defeat at the hands of Japan and the resultant “rehearsal” for the Russian Revolution had emboldened Viennese ruling circles to assert Austrian regional power at the expense of Russia’s “South Slav” Serbian cousins “a key source of Balkan tensions.

Total War, Total Horror

Caught up in nationalist fervor and believing they would be “home before Christmas,” young middle-class men by the droves “readily rushed to enlist in August. Others, especially from the working classes, showed less enthusiasm, while in Russia and elsewhere, the mobilized cannon fodder was largely comprised of ill-equipped peasant conscripts.

By November 1914, as devastating land battles raged to the east, stalemated armies in eastern France had already entrenched, dug in for what became over four years of indecisive mutual slaughter.

The War exacted an increasingly horrendous toll, mainly among the popular classes. Certainly underestimated, the gross statistics convey some sense. Some 65 million men were mobilized to fight. Of those, some 6.8 million died from combat-related deaths while maybe another 3 million died from disease. Another 7.7 million went missing, presumed dead while approximately 8 million were left permanently disabled.

Interspersed by a succession of horrific but indecisive battles, the war on the Western Front became a living hell, what the German soldaten would come to call the “Blut Mühle,” (blood mill) and British “Tommyes,” the “great sausage machine.”

One victorless mutual slaughter alone, the First Battle of the Somme of July-November, 1916 resulted in an estimated 1.2 million casualties, dead and wounded. During the engagement’s first day, the Brits alone suffered some 60,000 casualties, a third of them dead, and the first of over 400,000 total. The Germans suffered some 500,000 casualties, killed and wounded.

Often overlooked, total numbers of casualties, military and civilian, in the East “Austria-Hungary, Russia, the Balkans and Ottoman lands” were even greater.

War State Capitalism

How does one begin to grasp the nature of that first truly internationalized “total war”? John H. Morrow, one of the best recent historians of the Great War, encapsulates it:

“The war engendered mass indiscriminate slaughter. The various fronts constituted the slaughter house; the military commanders, the butchers; and the civilian governments, whether authoritarian or democratic, the mobilizers of the fodder and the implements for the slaughter. The industrialists and masters of science and technology supplied and created implements of destruction in astounding quantity; intellectuals, the press, the cinema, and the arts prepared their subjects psychologically for the butchery. The eligible male population became the fodder; the rest of adult males, women and youth, the labor to manufacture the implements to kill them; and the children, potential participants in future wars to socialize through patriotic instruction. The war enmeshed entire societies.” (The Great War – An Imperial History, 72)

All belligerents resorted to some form of war state capitalism, where ownership of the means and forces of production remained in private hands but the state purchased war materiel paid for primarily through loans, credits and inflation, the costs of which were passed on to the popular classes during and after. With the economy on war footing, distribution was coordinated in varying degree either by the military or civilian-headed planning bodies, or both.

Militarized state capitalism harnessed all available technical, engineering and scientific expertise for the war. As a result and precursor of worse to come, state-subsidized research and development induced a rapid succession of technological advances in the era’s weapons of mass destruction – improved machine guns, long range artillery and firearms, the introduction of flamethrowers and tanks, war planes, the submarine and poison gas.

If imperialism by the early 20th century represented the most advanced stage of capitalism, then war state capitalism bred the highest stage of catastrophe.

Initially, war demands provided labor with new leverage, at least for those in war-related skilled and semi-skilled trades in Britain, France and Germany. In the United States, war production helped pull Black workers in “The Great Migration” to the northern industrial centers.

As the mass mayhem continued, millions of experienced industrial workers fell subject to the draft. Their places in the war plants were taken by unskilled, among them women, youth and older workers, war zone refugees, colonial conscripts and war prisoners.

All endured increasing rates of exploitation as the owners of increasingly militarized factories retooled and accelerated the adaptation of American-style mass production techniques, what Antonio Gramsci dubbed “Fordism.”

The war at home also imposed new disciplines on the population at large. All the belligerents legislated or decreed “homeland security” measures that criminalized dissent. Domestic surveillance and censorship proliferated – sound familiar? – as the state not only expanded its agencies and mechanisms of control and repression, but enlisted informants and patriotic groups to report “suspicious behavior” and impose conformity.

Attrition and its Costs

As another part of their “total war,” the British and French utilized troops and conscript labor from their colonies, men of color from across Africa, India, Indochina and the Caribbean, in their war for “civilization.”

At times used by French and British commanders on the Western Front as expendable assault troops so that white soldiers would not be “wasted,” such colonials in turn experienced levels of racism, segregation and discrimination at the rear, whether they were fighters shipped by the hundreds of thousands from French colonial Africa or an estimated 1.2 million Indian combatants and *corvée* labor who served the British in every theater of operations.

Colonial troops also paid the price as the French and British moved to seize German holdings across Africa. Britain also sacrificed men from what were then its “White Dominions” — Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

With neither side able to win a decisive “breakthrough” battle, the total war became one of attrition aimed at eroding the enemy’s capacity and will to fight. As such, the war on all fronts often obliterated distinctions between combatants and non-combatants as civilians came to be targeted, if not directly then by the deprivations and hardships that resulted.

Early on, the British admiralty imposed a blockade of Germany’s North Sea ports, in part to hem in the German war fleet, but more so to halt the import of any war-related materiel, including foodstuffs. The Germans responded with submarine warfare on British merchantmen, but the ability of the western Entente to draw from the immense resources — in finances, raw materials, agricultural products and person power from all their possessions and the United States — ultimately provided the material advantage.

The blockade’s attritional effect deepened as large numbers of rural males and draft animals, especially horses, were conscripted. Their absence contributed to dramatic declines in overall agricultural production, especially grain, throughout Central and East Europe. What remained available was prioritized for the armies busy laying waste to whole farming regions East and West.

With food supplies diminished in the industrial cities crucial to war production, rationing was imposed. Black markets flourished as price inflation by 1916-1917 eroded the purchasing power of the popular classes.

In the War’s third year, weekly per capita consumption of basic foodstuffs plummeted across Germany. As a result, the mortality rate for women and small children went to 50%; deaths attributed to tuberculosis increase by over 70%. The birth rate declined by 50% and the German Health Office attributed some 730,000 deaths to the “Hunger Blockade.” And conditions in Austria, especially in Vienna, were far worse.

Malnutrition became widespread and starvation not unusual while contagious diseases, typhus and cholera, mowed down the vulnerable across Eastern Europe — over three million in Russia and additional millions in Rumania, Poland, Serbia and Asia Minor.

As many as five million people in the Ottoman Empire, 25% of the population, perished. The overwhelming majority were civilians, killed by disease or starvation; among them were millions of Armenian, Assyrian and Greek victims of Turkish ethnic cleansing.

Revolutionary Consequences

As conditions continued to deteriorate, threats of conscription or imprisonment could no longer deter strikes and mass demonstrations, increasingly led by hard pressed and underpaid working class women, often lone family providers forced to spend additional hours each day in search of food.

A nationwide mass strike that started in Berlin in late January 1918 involved over a million people demanding not just food, but peace and political change – the precursor of things to come. Such home front unrest came to parallel sizable mutinies by war weary soldiers, described as the mass strikes of industrialized warfare

One of these in April 1917, informed by word of Russia's February Revolution, a collective refusal to continue further murderous senseless offensives involved troops in 44 divisions, half the French army, and demands for "an end to the butchery," "justice," and "peace."

Historians argue that the arrival of large numbers of fresh U.S. troops and materiel on the Western front proved decisive in Germany's defeat. But the linchpin Central Power was already exhausted. The actual refusal of soldiers on all fronts to endure the slaughter, and tandem civilian strikes for bread and peace across Europe, clearly played their historic role. This was especially important in what occurred as the armies in Russia and Germany collapsed from within and the war weary "voted with their feet" in 1917-1918.

The War's unimaginable hardships and mass mayhem ushered in the Russian Revolution of February, 1917. With Russian absolutism dead and a Provisional Government in place willing to continue the war, Allied rhetoric changed as Woodrow Wilson redefined the purpose of the war to "make the world safe for democracy." Then came the Bolshevik seizure of power in October, 1917.

Already faced with an enormity of revolutionary challenges and determined to save the young revolution, the Bolsheviks in March, 1918 concluded a costly separate peace with Germany at Brest-Litovsk. While the dispossession of Russia's ruling class sent messages of revolutionary hope to oppressed peoples worldwide, that agreement in tandem with the revolution's expropriation and nationalization of private property simultaneously evoked the eternal enmity of war-time Russia's capitalist allies.

The October Revolution immediately and ever after made counterrevolution the paramount goal of ruling classes everywhere as a key Allied goal immediately became the war to make their world safe from the Bolshevik "bacilli."

Inspired by the Revolution's promise, but also propelled by both the horrific conditions and the historic conjuncture of possibilities, class conflict ignited across the globe in 1918-1919. To a large extent spontaneous risings catalyzed by the War's devastation, all were beaten back by the forces of reaction. Most disastrously, that was the fate of the German revolution of 1918-23. (That story is obviously too complex to detail here. For some background see Charlie Post's review essay on the writings of Paul Levi, <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4075>.)

Certainly, the world would have been a different place if the German Revolution and working class upheavals in Italy, Hungary and elsewhere had succeeded in providing some breathing room for the Russian revolution. In their place, however, came counterrevolution and the seeds of Italian Fascism and German Nazism, the latter nurtured by the resentment and protracted social, political and economic crises assured by the vindictive conditions imposed at Versailles.

Meanwhile, the Allies' armed intervention in the Russian civil war of 1918-20, aided early on by covert U.S. funding, gave the lie to Woodrow Wilson's wartime rhetoric of self-determination and made Soviet concerns with hostile "encirclement" an issue that still resonates in post-Cold War U.S.-Russian relations.

Meanwhile, new nations rose or old ones revived out of the rubble in Eastern Europe, among them Poland, Lithuania, Finland and inherently unstable Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. An estimated 30 million people wound up on the wrong side of newly drawn frontiers, a source of friction for decades to come.

World War I and Its Century

The victors, France and especially Britain worked to reorder imperial holdings and redraw the map, not just of Europe but in the Middle East, Africa and beyond.

Denying the Arab peoples the nationhood they had been led to expect for their wartime efforts, they divvied up the Ottoman Middle East. Defining the boundaries of what would become today's Syria and Iraq, Lebanon and the eventual "mandates" of Palestine and Trans Jordan, they gave no regard to the ethnic, confessional or communal concern that remain at issue today.

The seeds of the region's key antagonism had already been planted with the wartime Balfour Declaration, the British promise to facilitate "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," provided that "...nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine..."

The War's lessons informed ongoing struggles to end European colonialism as troops from India, Africa, southeast Asia and the Caribbean returned home to demand rights and "self-determination." Among those who came way from Paris schooled by the gulf between liberal democratic rhetoric and imperial realities were a young Vietnamese militant Ho Chi Minh and members of the Pan African Congress of South Africa, ignored at Versailles.

Entente ally Japan, rebuffed by Britain and France in its attempts to include a clause condemning racial discrimination in the League of Nations Covenant, abruptly left Versailles. Having seized Germany's Chinese concessions during the war, it soon would look to expand imperial interests on the mainland. Italy, denied the territory promised for joining the Entente, also left the conference, and soon turned to Mussolini to "right the wrongs" of Versailles.

The United States, ascendant in the wake of the war, turned to economic measures that assured future global financial instabilities. Very briefly put, in the mid-1920s it provided loans to Germany in an effort to stabilize the postwar economic crisis convulsing the young Weimar Republic. Berlin used the money to pay reparations owed France and Britain. Those payments were then used by the latter to pay down massive wartime U.S. loans.

With interest accruing all along the way, relative stability and confidence was restored as gold moved across the Atlantic and direct investment flowed into Germany. That "Dawes Plan" worked – that is, until 1929 when the U.S. stock market crash forced banks to call in their loans, countries defaulted, and international credit dried up.

The rest is history, as they say.

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