

Remembering World War I and What it Means

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I am supposed to talk about remembering World War I and what it means.

We talk about World War I. But, as Joseph [Gerson] mentioned in his introductory remark, in the cemetery in France he visited it says “la grande guerre,” the Great War. It is interesting that most people have forgotten that the official history of World War I as written both by Britain and France is called the ‘History of the Great War,’ not the ‘History of World War I.’ In England, it only really became World War I after 1945, in other words, after World War II.

If you go back and look at how the war was actually talked about at the time, it was either talked about as the ‘Great War’ or the ‘Great European War,’ not the ‘World War.’ The fact of the matter is that even calling it the ‘Great European War’ is a bit of a misnomer. If you think about it, Spain wasn’t involved. Poland wasn’t involved. The Scandinavian countries weren’t involved. The Swiss weren’t involved. When you think about who else wasn’t involved in World War I—and that brings us where we are today—most of Asia wasn’t actually involved. Neither was Latin America. There was a bit of fighting in Africa but actually not that much.

The vast majority of humanity wasn’t actually involved in the fighting, even though, you know, as Erhard Crome said, there were 50 to 60 million people who got involved in the fighting in one way or another. Altogether, an estimated 20 million civilians and soldiers were killed. Another 20 million were injured. It was huge, but it wasn’t a world war. It wasn’t even a European war.

So, how do we see it in hindsight as a World War? Erhard Crome was right to say that once the war started and colonial powers began bringing in troops from their colonies, it looked like a world war. But it was actually a war of European empires, because lots of European countries that weren’t empires or would-be empires weren’t actually involved in fighting it.

At the same time, if you look at it from the viewpoint of international structure as opposed to geography, it was a World War in the sense that Europe by some measures was the center of the world in 1940. Europe and especially Britain was the financial and commercial center of the international system. It was also the center of empire and

colonialism. European power embraced the world and brought the world into Europe. British sterling was the global currency of finance in the same way that the dollar is today. London dominated world trade in the same way that the United States does now.

But there were large competing empires. There was the British empire, the French empire, the Russian empire, and the Ottomans, who entered the war later on. Some of these were settler empires with settler colonialism, where, like, the French especially and some parts of the British empire in Africa, the colonists actually stayed. In other parts, like in India, it was actually an administrative empire, not a settler empire.

There are no settler empires today. The United States may rule large parts of the world, but it governs and administers their affairs through indirect mechanisms, not by having millions of Americans living in those countries, unlike the French in Algeria and the British in Kenya and so on.

So, when you think about the interests in play at the time of the Great War, it was a combination of politics and economics that only made sense within an imperial setting. If you look at the war aims of the people that actually went to war, they were about protecting their colonies, capturing new colonies, and the way the war was conducted was possible only through the existence of these colonial structures. Eric Hobsbawm, when he writes about World War I, says that unlike earlier wars, which were typically fought for limited and specific objectives, World War I was waged for unlimited ends. And the nature of the unlimited end was a consequence of the imperial ambition.

Today, there is some element of the unlimited end. What we see, as you know, is that the United States has a notion of itself as a global force, which is unlimited in the sense that it has claimed for one hundred years to offer a political model to the world, as well as a social model, an economic model, and a cultural model. If you carry the American imperial project to its conclusion, it would Americanize the world to the extent that it could.

We all know that the Great War when it came was appalling. As a consequence, the 19th century world order collapsed, and with it the traditional notion of empire. Some empires weakened. Others simply collapsed and disintegrated. You know, it's almost impossible to imagine now the Austro-Hungarian empire as a giant power in the world.

The empires collapsed in different ways over different times. But they were all put into the position of collapse by the war. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russians, and the Ottomans collapsed much more directly as a consequence of war; in part through the process of ethnic nationalism and of the rise of self-determination politics. In other places like in Russia, it came about through a different kind of social transformation, not an ethnic nationalism, but a different kind of revolutionary change. It was only a matter of time before the British and the French also fell because the processes that were unleashed by the Great War, processes that so weakened them that it became impossible to continue.

In terms of what they went to war for, these great empires, Hobsbawm writes "The first World War solved nothing for them." He says, "The past was beyond reach." It was

impossible to reconstruct the imperial order. “The future was postponed.” “And the present was bitter.” Entire generations of men were lost. There was no settlement that came out.

Christopher Clark has a similar conclusion. He says, “None of the prizes for which the politicians of 1914 contended was worth that cataclysm that followed.” It wasn’t worth it. But both of these are judgments after the fact, and at the time it wasn’t so clear that it wouldn’t solve things and that it wasn’t going to be worth it.

And so let me turn to that briefly for a second.

If you think about how they got into the war, not why they got into the war, the how they got into the war is scarily relevant to where we are today. The first thing is, and as Christopher Clark begins his book about the Great War—*Sleepwalkers*—it was about suicide bombers. The guys in Sarajevo who triggered the Great War were suicide bombers. They had suicide vests. And that was how they were going to make their point.

Clark actually frames his book in the context of in the post-9/11 world, and when we think about what happened back then, there are lessons we can learn. What you had was a group of revolutionaries, radicals engaged in suicide bombing, assassination for political reasons, and they were supported covertly by intelligence agencies and governments. And then things ran out of control.

It wasn’t that there was a straight line connecting people to war. What there was, as Clark puts it, were “short term shocks” to the international system. It wasn’t that war was inevitable, even though you had empires and military alliances and blocks—they’d been around for a while. That didn’t automatically lead to war. But each thing that happened led to a set of decisions that led people to do things that then led to this. So, it’s a series of “short term shocks.” But the fact that those shocks led to war was a consequence of military alliances and empires and their interests.

If you look around today and ask, so what’s the analogy to Sarajevo, and the path to great power war, one obvious analogy that comes to mind are the jihadist groups backed by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. If you wanted to write a scenario that tracks 1914, you might imagine a repeat of the 2008 attack on Bombay by Islamic fighters backed by Pakistan’s ISI. They go, they blow stuff up, and this time the Indian government says “We have to do something.” So they do something. The Pakistanis then overreact. Pakistan is China’s ally so China then comes to their aid. Then what does the United States do when it’s ally, India, which it is now committed to in a strategic partnership, is in a crisis with China. The United States says “We are with India.” And so there we are.

M.V. Ramana, will talk more about this later. We’ve just written a paper on the US-China-Pakistan-India relationship called “Asian War Machines.” It’s about how this structure acts as a machinery that can generate wars. It takes one decision and suddenly we’re in a terrible place. And it’s not as a direct result of war-planning. War-plans exist, but what brings war-plans into movement are a set of other decisions that no one necessarily

controls.

Let me now start to wind up. One of the things that I want to take away from a discussion of 1914 and the war is that there was opposition to the war at the time. There were liberals, there were socialists, there were progressives, and there were religious groups who were opposed to the war. We had trade unions, we had new political parties. We had all kinds of people passionately opposed to both militarism and the war. They were opposed to the whole idea of going to war. But that opposition proved to be negligible in practice. When governments in all of these countries decided to go to war, there was no effective resistance by any of these forces.

In fact, if you go back and look at the social histories of the countries that went to war in 1914, what you find is that war was met with enthusiasm. The fact is that Britain, France, Germany, etc. were able to mobilize millions of young men to go off and fight wasn't because of forced conscription. They volunteered. Hobsbawm in *The Age of Extremes* says, "In 1914, the peoples of Europe went light-heartedly to slaughter and to be slaughtered." This is ordinary people, not generals and politicians but the people who actually went and did the fighting and the dying.

One thing that we need to think about then is the failure of the peace movement and the fact that there was such a gap between what the movement thought made sense as a reaction to militarism and war and what ordinary peoples' reaction was. Hobsbawm, you know, is hopeful. He said that after the war, this was never going to happen again. That people would sort of light-heartedly go to slaughter and be slaughtered. It may be that in some countries the idea of not going to war is now part of the common sense of people. But it's not clear to me that it's the common sense of people in lots of other places.

What did we, as peace activists, take away from World War I? One thing was the realization that there are new technologies of industrialized mass murder: machine guns, tanks, chemical weapons and so on. This was seen as so appalling that it had to be controlled. So we got the Geneva Conventions. It was an attempt to discipline or restrain the conduct of war. A lot of the peace movement has focused on continuing that tradition of trying to discipline and limit the effects of war to a point where we want a ban on nuclear weapons, because that would make war so terrible. This doesn't actually deal with the problem of war itself.

At the time, lots of people recognized that the problem was war, not just the conduct of war. And this is one reason why there was a League of Nations. It was an effort to try to move beyond great powers forming alliances to manage the international system and instead to actually form a collective mechanism for managing the international system.

But the reaction went beyond that. One of the things that is really interesting in its absence from the contemporary literature is the fact that, in 1928, politicians actually agreed that war shouldn't be an acceptable resort by states. This was the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, also known as the Pact of Paris. It is named after Frank Kellogg, the Secretary of State of the United States and Aristide Briand, the French Foreign Minister. Its full name is the "General

Treaty for the Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy.”

The Treaty has only two main articles.

In Article 1, the countries that sign “solemnly declare, in the names of their respective peoples, that they condemn resort to war for the solution of international controversies and renounce it as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another.” They renounce war as an instrument of policy.

In Article 2, these countries “agree that the settlement or solution of all disputes or conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin which may arise may never be solved except by peaceful means.”

This 1928 international treaty banning war was signed by the United States, Britain, France, and other countries. Eventually, it was signed by most of the established countries in the world. It was ratified by the United States Senate overwhelmingly. It is international law because it has not been revoked. It is also the basis of the United Nations Charter, which begins, as you know, by declaring states shall not resort to war or threaten the use of war.

When we remember World War I and what it means, we know World War I was terrible, and that it was made possible by a system of empires. The empires are gone. We decided that leaving things like war and peace in the hands of states was a mistake so we created international organizations. In 1928, we even agreed to ban war! And yet, none of it has worked. The question we need to ask ourselves is what did we do wrong?