Effects of the First World War

To those who lived through it, the First World War was known as The Great War. It touched every life in those countries that fought. Many people had a relative who fought in the war; some, of course, had to deal with the death or maiming of loved ones. Europe was a shattered continent after the war ended; its economies were heavily in debt, large parts of northern France and Belgium were a ruined wasteland, and many people were imbued with a horror of modern conflict. This reality shadowed much of what happened in interwar Europe.

The legacy of the war also included numerous social changes. In particular, the multinational empires of eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East – the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and German Empires – had been dissolved. Independent nation-states (and imperial mandates[1]) stood in their place. As these new countries tried to survive on their own, they faced numerous growing pains. In particular, they sought to deal with the legacy of multiculturalism that the dissolved empires left behind. How could one create a strong Poland, for instance, when one-third of the new country's population was not Polish?

Social Trauma

In many ways, the First World War was a collective trauma for European society. A whole generation of men was decimated; an estimated 16 million civilian personnel and soldiers died, and another 20 million were wounded. Many returned from war with psychological wounds that took years to heal. Some soldiers never recovered from the terrible experience of the war. Many soldiers returned home with varying degrees of shell shock, or what we know now as posttraumatic stress disorder. With only a rudimentary system of assistance available to these men, they were for the most part left to their own devices or to the care of their families.

For many people, the experience of war shattered any prewar illusions that war was glorious. Those soldiers who had lived in the muddy, rat-infested trenches often came to believe that war was to be avoided at all costs. This sentiment was expressed in many ways. On a societal and political level, the people of France and Britain in particular were eager to avoid another world war in the late 1930s, when German aggression made war seem more likely.

Many artists and writers also expressed their experiences of war in a variety of moving ways. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by the German writer Erich Maria Remarque, perhaps best depicts the terrible conditions of the war and the arbitrariness

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[1] When the First World War ended and these empires disintegrated, the victorious British, French, and Americans – the Allies – declared that all the national groups oppressed by these empires would be able to form their own countries. In theory this was true, but in practice the Allies believed that some ethnic groups were unready for statehood. As a result, they created mandates over these territories, which were chiefly in the Middle East and North Africa. In other words, the country would exist, but it would not be independent; for a time, the British or French (depending on who controlled the mandate) would be ultimately in charge. Formally, the mandates were supposed to be much different from colonies, but in practice the mandates became just another part of the British and French Empires.

of death for those who fought in it. Others felt motivated by their abhorrence for war to join pacifist societies or international organizations like the League of Nations that worked for peace.

Many who survived the war questioned the values that plunged the world into it. Patriotism seemed like an outdated notion, and many postwar artists questioned its value. This contrasted sharply with prewar modernism, which often embraced the purifying and strengthening qualities of violence and war. German painter Otto Dix was one of many to depict the horrors of war; Dix's *The Skat Players*, for instance, shows three men playing cards while sporting a number of grotesque artificial limbs.

The trauma of the First World War on society is still remembered today in many countries. In France and Belgium, the two countries that endured the most destruction as a result of the war, November 11 is a holiday to commemorate those who suffered or died during the war. In the countries of the British Commonwealth, November 11 is commemorated with ceremonies at 11:00 a.m., the precise time when the armistice began in 1918. In the days leading up to this day of remembrance, many people wear a poppy in honor of those who have died in war – all wars, but particularly the First World War. Throughout the world, the sacrifices of those who gave their lives in the First World War is commemorated in many ways – on countless statues, in monuments in prominent places, in churches and schools, and of course, in myriad graveyards in France and Belgium. Since the end of the war, these commemorative events and monuments have been of great importance to those affected by the Great War.

Minorities

The legacy of the First World War was positive for many countries, especially those in eastern Europe that gained their independence as a result of the fall of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman Empires. In general, however, the countries of eastern and central Europe reflected the mixing of peoples throughout history in those regions. As massive multinational empires gave way to nation-states, those new states had to deal with high proportions of minorities. In Poland in 1919, for instance, an estimated one-third of the population was not Polish. Rather, that remainder comprised a mix of Ukrainian, Jewish, German, Lithuanian, and Czech nationals scattered across the country. The situation was much the same across eastern Europe.

At the Paris Peace Conference, the British, French, and Americans forced Minorities Treaties on the countries of eastern Europe. They also ensured that there was a mechanism for complaints about the treatment of minorities at the League of Nations. By doing this, they hoped to avoid situations like that in prewar Romania, which at its creation in 1879 assured democratic Britain and France that it would care for its Jewish minority. Instead, Romanian Jews were harassed and intimidated for decades while the Great Powers did nothing.

The existence of the Minorities Treaties may have satisfied the British, French, and Americans, but the treaties did little to improve the plight of minorities in the interwar period. The treaties themselves had started the process off badly, as the countries of eastern Europe were offended that these treaties were imposed upon them.

Why should they have to obey such rules when the British, French, Americans, and Italians – all imperial powers – did not?

Discrimination against minorities took a slightly different form in each country. In Hungary, for instance, the people wanted revenge for the territory taken from them in the Treaty of Trianon. Many radical Hungarians decided that Jews were the reason for Hungary's shame, so they took action against them. They harassed, intimidated, and isolated the Jews, enacting *numerus clausus* regulations, or quotas, on Jewish admittance to professional schools, including medical and law schools. The Polish government also enacted *numerus clausus* laws to limit Jewish attendance at universities, where many believed the Jews were usurping places from Polish students. The Polish government also carried out a heavy-handed policing effort against Ukrainians in the east. Ukraine, which had existed for more than a year after the war until Russia conquered it, had fought a bitter war against Poland during its short life. Ukrainians in eastern Poland continued the struggle in the late 1920s.

Of all the countries of eastern and central Europe, however, it was Germany that most often used the Minorities Treaties and the League of Nations to its advantage. After Germany was admitted to the league in 1926, it took great care in representing the interests of German nationals in other countries. This advocacy continued into the late 1930s, when the Nazis developed a great interest in the fate of the two million Germans living in Czechoslovakia. Once the Nazis had conquered all of Czechoslovakia, they began to wage an international propaganda campaign to raise awareness of the "plight" of German citizens living in Polish-controlled Danzig. Hitler hoped that the campaign would help him annex the region without provoking war with Britain and France, who had agreed to come to Poland's defense in the Treaty of Versailles. Eventually, Hitler abandoned his diplomatic efforts and invaded Poland.

Women's Suffrage

The women's suffrage movement began before the First World War, but many of its successes can be traced to wartime promises and the debt that European states owed to their soldiers and soldiers' families. It was also because of political calculations. Belgium was one of several countries where the first women who were permitted the vote were war widows. While symbolically this is a nice gesture to those who lost their husbands in the service of their country, governments also calculated that war widows were more likely to vote for them – presuming, sometimes incorrectly, that the women agreed with the war in which their husbands had fought.

Many of the new countries of Europe also introduced voting for women after the war, including Czechoslovakia and newly democratic Austria and Germany. In Poland, women were allowed to vote and stand for office; eight women were elected to parliament in the country's first postwar election, in 1919.

Some European countries had introduced female suffrage at various points in their history. In eighteenth-century Sweden and Poland, some women were permitted to vote. In France, suffragettes were among the revolutionaries in the 1790s, though they were generally ignored. Women were allowed to vote in France during the brief Paris

Commune of 1870–71, but when the Commune fell, the privilege was not reinstated. French women did not regain the right to vote until 1944.

In Great Britain, the struggle for women's suffrage gained increasing attention after the turn of the twentieth century. In 1907, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies held a march in London in favor of suffrage; 3000 women attended what was dubbed the "Mud March" because of the conditions. Shortly thereafter, some women split from the NUWSS and continued the quest for suffrage in more radical ways. In 1908, suffragettes attempted to storm the House of Commons, and in 1909 they set fire to the country home of prominent cabinet minister (and later prime minister) David Lloyd George, even though he favored women's suffrage. The campaign ceased during the war, however. In 1918, Prime Minister Lloyd George oversaw the passage of the Representation of the People Act, which granted the vote and the right to stand for office to qualifying women. Those who were permitted to vote were women who were over the age of 30 and had owned property for six months, or who were married to someone who met those property qualifications. This comprised about eight million women and made women more than 40% of the electorate. (The Representation of the People Act also gave the vote to all men 21 years of age and older. Before this, a man had to own property in order to vote, but it was considered unjust to deny the vote to those who had risked their lives for democracy in the war but were not property owners.) In 1928, Parliament passed a law granting women the same voting rights as men.

Summary

- The shadow of the First World War afflicted much of interwar European culture and society. Hundreds of memorials were built in honor of the dead and wounded, while in popular culture the work of many artists and writers questioned the society that plunged into such a brutal war in 1914.
- The postwar peace left large communities of minorities scattered throughout central and eastern Europe. Though treaties protected the rights of these minorities, the treaties were seldom enforced.
- As the First World War drew to a close, in many countries women began to make genuine strides towards the goal of full suffrage. While France held out until 1944, other European countries – Great Britain and Belgium, among others – granted the vote to at least some women by the end of 1918.