

World War I Talk

Europe was at its zenith at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1900 three-fourths of the world was under European control, and the global economy fed the industrial furnaces of the Great Powers. European military might went unchallenged and European culture and intellectual achievements were admired the world over.

Beneath this veneer of triumph and domination were deeply destructive forces waiting to explode. An impoverished working class agitated for social change while a declining aristocracy clung stubbornly to power; nationalism quickly devolved from a creative act into a destructive force focused on competition and contempt for others; and a dysfunctional balance of power forged militarized alliances supported by million-man armies led by general staffs infinitely more powerful than their civilian counterparts. On June 28, 1914, an assassin's bullet plunged Europe into the war that changed everything. Four short years later Europe was a shell of its former self, dependent on outside aid for mere survival and unable to reclaim its former glory. The Second World War completed the process of dissolution and dependency begun during the First.

The fighting was horrific. Even after observing the carnage of the American Civil War and experiencing the sting of modern warfare in Crimea and during three wars of German unification, Europe gleefully marched to battle confident that moral forces could defeat material ones. Instead, the inventions of machine guns, air power, poison gas, and ever more lethal artillery ushered in an age of industrialized killing. Hitler himself was a victim of a poison gas attack and famously promised that if he ever was in charge he would ban the use of gas in war. Apparently he did not feel the same about gassing civilians. The total number of war deaths includes 10 million military personnel and about 7 million civilians. The British suffered 60,000

casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme; in that same battle the remains of 72,000 British soldiers were never recovered. (To put these casualties in perspective, between 1956 and 1975, 58,195 U.S. servicemen died during the Vietnam Conflict.) The Battle of Verdun killed approximately 262,000 German and French soldiers between February and December of 1916. The total number of U.S. deaths during the Second World War in both theaters was 416,800. Of course, this sort of carnage does not reflect the permanent physical and mental injuries inflicted on another 20 million men who returned home shattered and, like Europe, shadows of their former selves.

Aside from the human cost, the First World War disintegrated three great multi-ethnic empires (Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia). The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was a product of the war: the disciplined and organized Bolshevik party took advantage of the chaos of total war, just as Germany intended when it packed Lenin into a sealed train and sent him deep into the heart of czarist Russia. Fascism was also a legacy of the war. Millions of veterans returned armed with the belief that politics was nothing more than the continuation of war by other means. The sustained economic crisis that plagued both the defeated and victorious powers managed to radicalize the middle class and scapegoat vulnerable minorities. The Treaty of Versailles sacrificed reason and reconstruction on the altar of revenge, guaranteeing the failure of Germany's first democracy and the newly created governments in Eastern Europe.

Historians often refer to the world wars as a thirty-year war, so interconnected that maybe someday we will cease to distinguish between the two. I disagree. "Auschwitz," Omer Bartov writes, "could neither have been imagined, nor constructed and set to work, without the experience and memory of the Great War."

The advent of industrial killing, the desire to subject future enemies to similar treatment, and the loss of a world once filled with optimism and grandeur set the tone for the rest of the century. Through these poems we can hear the voices of the Lost Generation and begin to understand what was truly lost.