

The Face of the War and its Impact on Modern Life

“War at last!” was the slogan that heaved through Europe like a sigh of relief in the summer of 1914. “War at last” were the words on the lips of young men spontaneously marching through the streets of Berlin or London, their faces radiating happiness and joy.

To our postmodern eyes and ears, these very words and displays of universal joy at the outbreak of a war that should later be christened *The Great War* are indeed very difficult to grasp. Consequently, we do ask ourselves why most people back then were so excited about the beginning of hostilities which should spin out of control and drag the whole world under in a whirlpool of destruction and misery. Of course, it is obvious that we know what was about to happen, whereas the people in 1914 did not. They firmly believed that the war would be over “by Christmas” and they were convinced that this war would not only change their own lives, but also a world they considered to have become too narrow and immobile. In Germany, for example, young people were taken in by the idea that this very war would bridge the gap between the rich and poor, the economy and politics, and society and the arts. In Britain and France, young people entertained similar notions and were ready to lay down their lives for the ideals of universal freedom and democracy. One important difference between Germany and the other European countries was that Germans associated one additional ideal with the war: namely the firm conviction of war eventually forging Germany into a truly unified national state, thus finishing what Bismarck had started in 1871. What all young men had in common, however, was the conviction that their respective nation would win the war and that adventure and glory were awaiting them on the battlefield.

At first everything seemed to go according to plan*. On 4th August, Germany attacked France via neutral Belgium – thus forcing Great Britain, which had guaranteed Belgium its neutrality, into the war – and, by September, German troops had already reached the Marne River*. Paris was within Germany’s grasp when the offensive was finally stopped by the French army. It was then (in September 1914) that the war changed its character. Both the Allies* and the Germans began digging trenches on the western front, which stretched from the North Sea down to the mountains of Switzerland, and engaged in a war of attrition*. As a result, it took only some weeks to shatter the very idea of chivalry and glory entertained by Allies and Germans alike. Soldiers realised very quickly that there was no glory at all, that – on the contrary – they were not even soldiers in the traditional sense, but rather workers of the war garbed in nondescript grey or khaki, operating machines of destruction which brought death to anonymous enemies. Gone were the ideals of honour, knighthood, and glory. Instead, there were trenches, poison gas (first used by the German army), and the machine gun – the most deadly weapon of all. In the Battle of the Somme* which was launched in July 1916, 60,000 British soldiers alone fell victim to that merciless weapon within the first 24 hours of the battle. Of course, there was also heavy artillery that had the power to change the landscape within minutes and made soldiers under attack feel completely helpless and lost. This was the experience shared by the French and German soldiers fighting at Verdun, in north-eastern France. This infamous place saw the death of about 780,000 soldiers within only six months and still today carries the visible scars of senseless destruction.

In addition, all the soldiers had to cope with the harsh weather conditions, excruciating hunger, endless mud, and the fleas, lice, and rats. The number of wounded and dying confronted the doctors and paramedics with insurmountable problems. Eventually, these conditions turned the initial enthusiasm into despair, and the soldiers were more and more obsessed with the question why they were fighting this abominable war in the first place.

While this “front experience” united the soldiers, life at home seemed to have remained the same; but underneath the veneer of normality, there ran a current of change. More and more women were dragged into the world of work formerly dominated by men. Not only did they work in ammunition factories, but they also operated the businesses while their husbands were away fighting at the front. Naturally, this new experience changed women just like the front experience changed their husbands. They were more self-confident and not the demure house-

wives any more who had handed flowers to the departing soldiers in 1914. When these estranged worlds met, silence ruled. The men did not talk about their lives at the front convinced that nobody could understand them anyway, and women and children bored them with their seemingly trivial problems. Women refused to surrender their newly-gained independence to their husbands once they were home again. The result was often discontent and misunderstanding.

These changes are reflected in art and literature. The “Dada poets,” for example, created a new kind of poetry consisting of random strings of syllables. They wanted to express that language was not an adequate means to express what had happened at the front. The war experience had disillusioned writers in general* and they were searching for new values to give meaning to life. Thus, some of them retreated into the “ivory tower”* and produced a highly stylized literature that was so saturated with imagery that it could only be fully appreciated by intellectuals. They also tried to offer a new perspective on the world by making use of a first-person narrator in their novels to uncover the inside of a character’s mind without passing judgement. One novel in particular: *Im Westen nichts Neues (All Quiet on the Western Front)* by Erich Maria Remarque, published in 1929, became a huge success. The reason for this was that Remarque not only gave his readers a very precise description of the horrors of war, but also insight into the protagonists’ feelings. They felt deeply uprooted by what they had experienced and embraced death as the only chance to come to terms with life. It was this particular feeling of loss, of being isolated from society, which worked its spell on so many readers. All of a sudden the war veterans could read about themselves – the members of a lost generation*.

This lost generation returned to a very different world. The ideas associated with the outbreak of the war in 1914 were nothing but shattered illusions by 1919. Instead of bringing equality and democracy to the world, the war had only managed to destroy ancient empires such as Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary, leaving nothing but chaos and turmoil in its wake. The veterans’ homecoming was dominated by problems such as unemployment, inflation, hunger and a ravaging flu epidemic that caused the death of about 20 million people – more than twice as many as the war itself. These were the inauspicious circumstances under which the leaders of the world met at Versailles in January 1919 to finally make peace.

Soon it became apparent that this peace conference was to be dominated by the ‘big three’* – George Clemenceau (France), Woodrow Wilson (USA), and David Lloyd George (GB). Representatives of the defeated nations (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria) were not even invited, but expected to sign the treaty that was to be drafted by the above named representatives of the victorious nations.

‘The big three,’ however, did not have a common attitude of how to come to terms with the results of the war. The French Prime Minister George Clemenceau, for instance, wanted to weaken Germany to such an extent that it should never again be able to pose a threat to France. The British Prime Minister Lloyd George was not quite so severe in his attitude, but wanted Germany to lose its colonies and navy. The American President Woodrow Wilson embodied hope for the defeated nations since he wanted a peace treaty based on justice and mutual acceptance. True to his speech to Congress in January 1918, in which he explained America’s war aims known as the “Fourteen Points,” his strategy for the conference rested on two main ideas: self-determination and the foundation of a league of nations. All nations would be represented in this organisation to settle future disputes by peaceful negotiations, thus making war redundant.

After months of hard negotiations, the treaty with Germany was eventually signed at Versailles in June 1919. (Separate treaties were made with each of the central powers: the Treaty of St Germain with Austria in 1919, the Treaty of Trianon with Hungary in 1920, the Treaty of Neuilly with Bulgaria in 1919, the Treaty of Sèvres and the Treaty of Lausanne with Turkey.) The Treaty of Versailles, which quite clearly bears Clemenceau’s mark, imposed very severe terms on Germany: territorial losses along its northern, western, and eastern borders* amounted to about thirteen percent. These losses significantly weakened the German economy since it lost 20% of its mining and iron industry and 15% of its agricultural output. In violation of President Wilsons’

idea of self-determination, almost seven million Germans were forced to become citizens of non-German countries.

Furthermore, Germany was only allowed to keep an army of 100,000 soldiers and it was banned from owning battleships, tanks, and submarines. In addition, Germany was not allowed to station troops on the east bank of the river Rhine, which was to be controlled by allied troops for an unspecified period of time.

The most difficult issue to explain to the German public was the fact that by signing the Versailles Treaty, Germany had fully accepted responsibility for starting the war. This meant that Germany alone was to pay for the damages that the First World War had caused. However, at that point, the Allies were unable to specify the amount of the reparations that would have to be paid in the future. It took the Allies another two years* to decide that Germany should pay the sum total of 132 billion Reichsmark, roughly the equivalent of 47 tonnes of pure gold.

Being fully aware of the fact that the Versailles Treaty would cause an outcry of rage at home, Foreign Minister Hermann Müller (SPD) and Minister of Transport Johannes Bell (Centre Party) still saw no other option than to sign the treaty since their government had unofficially been briefed by the German military that the resumption of hostilities was out of the question. However, the German generals had seen to it that the German public was not really aware of that fact. General Ludendorff, for example, had quite cleverly orchestrated a scenario in which elected politicians had to take full responsibility for the armistice negotiations and thus for the collapse of the German Empire. When the armistice was finally signed by Matthias Erzberger of the Centre Party in a railway carriage in Compiègne Forest, on 11th November 1918, public anger and revulsion were directed at the politicians rather than at the generals who were really responsible for the unexpected defeat, thus paving the way for the “stab in the back”* legend that should make life ever so difficult for the newly founded German democracy.

Besides all the provisions of the Versailles Treaty mentioned above, which was perceived as a “Diktat” in Germany, there was one glimmer of hope: the foundation of the League of Nations (28th April 1919). But, in March 1920, it became clear that America – although the initiator of the idea of the League of Nations itself – would not be a member of this organisation. Germany was not given a permanent seat in the League of Nations until 1926. The same fate befell the newly rising power in the east, the Soviet Union, which was not granted full membership until 1934. Thus, the League of Nations remained a rather blunt weapon in the realm of international relations.

Christoph Karch

Glossar

<i>Allies</i>	Refers to the <i>entente</i> : France, Russia, Serbia and Great Britain. Italy did not join the Allies until 1915.	
<i>Another two years</i>	According to the so-called London payment plan, April 1921.	
<i>Ivory Tower</i>	Refers to the world of intellectuals, namely the world of academia and the humanities departments of universities.	
<i>Lost generation</i>	Does not refer to the generation that was actually lost on the battlefield, but rather to the psychologically damaged young men who returned from the war.	
<i>Marne River</i>	A river in France in the area east and southeast of Paris.	
<i>plan</i>	Refers to the Schlieffen-Plan which had existed since 1905 to change a two-front war against Russia and France into a war that was to be fought on two consecutive fronts	
<i>Somme</i>	River in the Picardy region in the northern part of France.	
<i>'stab in the back'</i>	The German army, many Germans claimed, had not been beaten by the Allies, but by treacherous politicians at home. The army had been 'stabbed in the back'.	
<i>The "big three"</i>	Sometimes the Prime Minister of Italy, Vittorio Orlando, is included, thus turning the "big three" into the "big four." However, since he was only involved in negotiating those parts of the Versailles Treaty which concerned Italy itself, it seems advisable to stick to the term the big three, since the representatives of the USA, GB and France were ultimately responsible for the main body of the treaty.	
<i>War of attrition</i>		Zermürbungskrieg
<i>Western and eastern borders</i>	Meant are the following areas: Alsace-Lorraine to France; West Prussia, the Province of Posen and Upper Silesia to Poland; Hlučín area of Upper Silesia to Czechoslovakia; Northern Schleswig to Denmark; Eupen-Malmedy to Belgium	
<i>Writers in general</i>	Many intellectuals were among the first to volunteer for the war. Some of them became quite famous after the war was over (for example: Robert Graves, Siegfried Sasson, and Wilfred Owen). They are referred to as "war poets."	