

## **The Second Great War, 1917-1923**

La segunda Gran Guerra, 1917-1923

Jay Winter  
*Yale University*  
[jay.winter@yale.edu](mailto:jay.winter@yale.edu)

**Abstract:** This essay presents a bifurcated interpretation of the history of the Great War, dividing it into two parts, the first lasting from 1914 to 1917, the second continuing from 1917 to 1923. In this way, I register developments in historiography in which two major changes have occurred in recent years: first, a shift of the geographical epicenter of the war from Paris to Warsaw, and secondly, a shift in the chronology of the war recognizing its failure to end in 1918.

The interpretation posits that there was a crisis in 1917 which separates the first three years of the conflict from the years that followed, and was largely the result of powerful economic and demographic pressures which destabilized all the combatants, but more so the Central powers than the Allies. This crisis abated somewhat in the west in 1918 but continued in an exacerbated form for the following five years. Hatred, hunger, and class conflict were radicalizing elements in the disorder of the post-Imperial world, set adrift by the collapse of the Hohenzollern, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires. Post-imperial violence was endemic in these regions, merging civil war, ethnic conflicts, and national conflicts which played out in this, the Second Great War. My claim is that the passage from wartime crisis to post-war and post-Imperial violence was seamless, and part of one complex but distinctive phase of European history, starting in 1917 and terminating more or less in 1923.

Thus among the legacies of the two Great Wars of 1914-17 and 1917-23 was the creation of an elision between war and civil war precipitating an avalanche of violence extending from one period of global conflict to another. The result was a degeneration of warfare from an institution bounded by political and legal limits into a field of force in which whole peoples could disappear from the face of the earth. Just as the Armenian genocide was the direct outcome of the logic of the total war of 1914-17, the Holocaust was the final statement of the ferocity of total civil war, that form of violence which emerged during the second Great War of 1917-23.

**Keywords:** Great War, second Great War, post-imperial violence, first European postwar.

**Resumen:** Este artículo presenta una historia de la Gran Guerra dividida en dos partes, la primera de 1914 a 1917 y la segunda de 1917 a 1923. En este sentido, me hago eco de los avances en la historiografía, en la que se han sucedido dos cambios de importancia en los últimos años: primero, un cambio en el epicentro geográfico de París a Varsovia, y segundo, una variación en la cronología de la guerra reconociendo que no terminó en 1918.

Esta interpretación plantea que se dio una crisis en 1917 que separa los tres primeros años del conflicto de los años siguientes, y que fue fundamentalmente el resultado de potentes presiones económicas y demográficas que desestabilizaron a todos los contendientes, pero más a las Potencias Centrales que a los Aliados. Esta crisis amainó en Occidente, en cierto modo, en 1918, pero persistió de una forma exacerbada durante los siguientes cinco años. Odio, hambre y conflicto de clase fueron elementos de radicalización en el desorden del mundo post-imperial, a la deriva por el colapso de los imperios Hohenzollern, Habsburgo y Otomano. La violencia post-imperial fue un elemento endémico en estas regiones, fusionando guerra civil, conflictos étnicos y nacionales que se desarrollaron en esta segunda Gran Guerra. Mi argumento es que el paso de la crisis bélica a la violencia de posguerra y post-imperial se produjo sin solución de continuidad, siendo parte de una compleja pero característica fase de la historia europea, que empezaría en 1917 y terminaría en torno a 1923.

Por ende, entre los legados de las dos grandes guerras de 1914-1917 y 1917-1923 estaría la creación de una elisión entre guerra y guerra civil que precipitó una avalancha de violencia de un periodo de conflicto global hacia el otro. El resultado fue una degeneración en la forma de hacer la guerra, de una institución delimitada por límites políticos y legales a un campo de fuerza en el que pueblos enteros podían desaparecer de la faz de la tierra. Tal y como el genocidio armenio fue el resultado directo de la lógica de la guerra total de 1914-1917, el Holocausto fue la última manifestación de la ferocidad de la guerra civil total, esa forma de violencia emergida durante la segunda Gran Guerra de 1917-1923.

**Palabras clave:** Gran Guerra, segunda Gran Guerra, violencia post-imperial, primera posguerra europea.

Para citar este artículo: Jay WINTER: “The Second Great War, 1917-1923”, <i>Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar</i> , Vol. 7, N° 14 (2018), pp. 160-179.
--

Recibido: 08/03/2017

Aprobado: 27/02/2018

## **The Second Great War, 1917-1923**

Jay Winter  
*Yale University*

**T**his essay aims to present a bifurcated interpretation of the history of the Great War, dividing it into two parts, the first lasting from 1914 to 1917, the second continuing from 1917 to 1923. In this way, I want to take advantage of developments in historiography in which two major changes have occurred in recent years: first, a shift of the geographical epicenter of the war from Paris to Warsaw, and secondly, a shift in the chronology of the war recognizing its failure to end in 1918.

The interpretation I want to offer suggests that there was a crisis in 1917 which separates the first three years of the conflict from the years that followed, and was largely the result of powerful economic and demographic pressures which destabilized all the combatants, but more so the Central powers than the Allies. This crisis abated somewhat in the west in 1918 but continued in an exacerbated form for the following five years. Hatred, hunger, and class conflict were radicalizing elements in the disorder of the post-Imperial world, set adrift by the collapse of the Hohenzollern, Habsburg, and Ottoman empires. Post-imperial violence was endemic in these regions, merging civil war, ethnic conflicts, and national conflicts which played out in this, the Second Great War. My claim is that the passage from wartime crisis to post-imperial violence was seamless, and part of one complex but distinctive phase of European history, starting in 1917 and terminating more or less in 1923.

### **From one war to another**

The illusion that the Great War ended on 11 November 1918 grew out of a Western-front myopia about the war, which I for one shared for all too long. Thirty years ago I argued that among the many reasons for war in 1914 was that Britain and Germany were engaged in armed conflict over control of north-western Europe. Britain could not allow a German victory over France, which would place the German navy in occupation of the Channel ports, and thereby in control of British trade routes providing 75 percent of the British food supply in 1914. That war, won by France, Britain and their allies, ended in 1918, and the Peace Treaty of 1919 put a seal on that victory, one which lasted until Hitler's rewriting of 1918 in 1940 twenty-one years later.

But all the other theatres of the Great War were left in a state of chaos and uncertainty made more threatening by the potential spread of the Russian Revolution throughout Europe. Who can claim that the period 1919-1923 was one of peace? Various white armies, supported by a mismanaged military expedition of the victorious Allies, tried and failed to overthrow the

Bolshevik regime. Civil war in Russia left only calamity in its wake, as did the Red thrust into Poland and its defeat not far from the gates of Warsaw. Italy lost the peace and her parliamentary regime collapsed, with a little help from Mussolini and King Victor Emmanuel. The states created out of the Austro-Hungarian empire were riven by class conflict and ethnic conflict, which overlapped in ways which made sure that the bloodshed would continue for a considerable period of time. And the collapse of the Ottoman empire produced anything but peace. In the aftermath of the first peace treaty of Sevres, elements of the defeated Ottoman army, reassembled and mobilized by Ataturk, reconquered their own soil, against Greek, British, French, and Italian forces which had occupied Anatolia after November 1918.

In effect, war bled into civil war, which transformed the face of Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe. One inevitable result of this shift of emphasis in violence from international to internecine was ethnic cleansing. One of the most terrifying instances of demographic displacement occurred in Turkey, where Christians by the millions moved west from Anatolia to Europe and Muslims moved east, from Asia Minor to what became in 1923 the Turkish Republic. When the Treaty of Sevres was scrapped and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, that process of the Turkification of the new nation was codified in international law. What had started in the Armenian genocide of 1915 was completed on the shores of Smyrna, burned to the ground in 1922. Christian Smyrna vanished; Muslim Izmir rose in its place. The euphemism of population exchange was coined to cover the nakedness of murder, rape, and pillage.

So my claim is twofold. We must change the chronological parameters of the war that began in 1914. But we must also register a change in the character of collective violence in the subsequent decade. My argument is that there was a fundamental difference in the way war was waged in 1914-17 compared to 1917-23.

What separates these two phases was that prior to 1917, war mobilization entailed the forced unification of social classes and ethnic groups behind the war effort. To be sure, this effort succeeded in a muffling or masking of internal conflicts in order to provide the armies with the men and materiel needed for victory. After 1917, internal conflicts reemerged, perhaps with added force because of their suppression over a period of three years, and turned a culture of war mobilization on both sides into a culture of war anxiety. The first aimed at unity; the second focused on internal divisions, hatreds, and resentments, some of long standing, some just invented.

In effect in early 1917, all combatants faced the emergence of a second war culture in addition to the mobilization effort of the first 20 months of the war. Alongside *l'Union sacrée* was a host of fractures, in which the suspicion or worse of one's fellow countrymen provided the basis for attacks, rhetorical or physical, which had focused in the first part of the war on the enemy. Now the enemy lived within, and posed a threat to the nation and the war effort. This was as true of Irishmen in revolt in 1916 as it was of Jews in Imperial Germany, whose supposedly low levels of military participation became the subject of a botched army Census which

wound up proving the opposite. Jews were disproportionately present at the front. The Jew Census was quickly shelved, but the sentiments behind it festered.

On the Ideas of March 1917, with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the old order on both sides faced a new menace: the prospect of social unrest leading to revolution and civil war. The spectre of class conflict intersecting with massive military conflict justifies our sense of rupture in the midst of the Great War. That threat fed the new culture of war anxiety, which emerged as the material and human toll the conflict exacted spiraled to shocking levels. What requires us to divide the war in two parts is this rupture, this sense that the bitterness felt about domestic traitors grew from early 1917 on and grew ominously after the Armistice of November 1918. The politics of domestic division and hared dominated political, economic, and social life for years thereafter.

By mid-1917 on both sides of the conflict there was a sea change in the framework in which contemporaries understood the war. They moved away from a culture of war mobilization, appropriate to what was essentially an imperial conflict, and moved towards a culture of war anxiety informing the revolutionary and post-revolutionary conflicts in 1917-18 and after.

This difference between imperial and revolutionary perspectives was made blindingly explicit, when in early 1918 the new Bolshevik regime in Russia published the contents of the Tsar's Foreign Ministry, producing undeniable evidence of the imperial future the Allies had in mind. These imperial ambitions became problematic when the United States entered the war. President Wilson's commitment to open diplomacy and to the principle of self-determination cut right across the imperial outlook of the other belligerents. If tens of millions of men had suffered and died on both sides so that imperial power could change hands, then those betraying these nations at war were those liars and hypocrites in power.

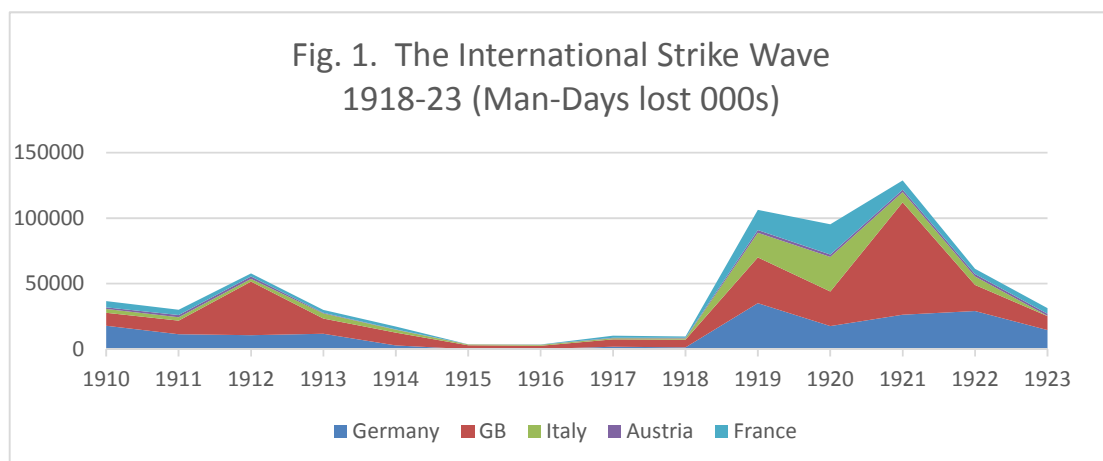


Fig. 1. The International strike wave, 1917-1923

Social divisions deepened in this first phase of the Second Great War on both sides. Independently of the Russian revolution, domestic conflict reemerged on the industrial scene.

After three years of industrial mobilization, the first stage of a series of strike-waves spread through Europe. This strike wave lasted until roughly 1923 (Fig. 1) The phenomenon was both war-related in the way it reflected both wartime inflation and inequality of sacrifice, and also followed secular trends. Since the 1880s, moments of major trade union growth were often followed by strike activity. The year 1917 presented no exception; there had been a massive influx into trade unions in all combatant countries after 1914. Furthermore, the intensity of the strikes in 1917 and after suggested that the postponement of workers' demands on wages and conditions of labour, which had occurred in all belligerent countries and some neutral ones since 1914, acted like the lid of a pressure cooker. Inflation fueled the fire, and trade unions and other social groups, in particular women protesting shortages and outrageous food and fuel prices, took to the streets or downed tools. They did so despite understanding the desperate needs of the war machine.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the March revolution in Russia was triggered by a women's protest over bread prices.

Furthermore, in 1917, the domestic political truce of the first half of the war came to an end. The German Social Democratic Party split in early 1917. Those wanting an end to the war met at Gotha on 6 April and founded the USPD, the Independent Social Democratic Party. Once again, women's groups were prominent in this radicalization of the political left. The British Liberal party split, in part over personalities, in part over conscription and the suppression of the 1916 rising in Ireland. In France, Georges Clemenceau, who became prime minister in November, was a divisive leader. He had his Radical colleague Joseph Caillaux arrested for advocating peace negotiations: Caillaux was convicted of treason in 1918.<sup>2</sup>

Wartime violence exposed violent internal conflicts within all combatant countries. In 1917, bloody race riots broke out in the United States in East St Louis, Illinois, and even more ominously in Houston, Texas, where 156 black soldiers mutinied. Sixteen civilians and four soldiers died during the riots. Subsequently, 19 soldiers were hanged and over 40 imprisoned for long terms.<sup>3</sup> In 1918, American socialist leader Eugene Debs went to prison for violating the Espionage Act by urging men to resist the draft.<sup>4</sup> One opponent of the war, Robert Prager, a German national and trade unionist, was lynched in Maryville, Illinois. His killers were acquitted.<sup>5</sup> The gloves were off in domestic as well as in global politics.

Polarization marked the advent of the increasingly strident political right as well. When the German *Reichstag* issued its peace resolution in July 1917, disgruntled deputies and

<sup>1</sup> Charles TILLY: *Strikes, Wars and Revolutions in an International Perspective*, Cambridge and Paris, Cambridge University Press and Éditions de la MSH, 1989; Leopold HAIMSON and Giulio SAPELL (eds.): *Strikes, Social Conflict and the First World War. An International Perspective*, Milan Feltrinelli, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Manuel GOMEZ-BRUFAL : *Joseph Caillaux: Traître our visionnaire*, Paris Dualpha editions, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Harper BARNES: *Never Been a Time: The 1917 Race Riot That Sparked the Civil Rights Movement*, New York, Walker & Company, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest FREEBERG: *Democracy's prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War and the right to dissent*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> E.A. SCHWARTZ: "The Lynching of Robert Prager, the United Mine Workers, and the Problems of Patriotism in 1918", *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 95:4 (2003), pp. 414-437.

their supporters set up the *Vaterlandspartei* (Fatherland party), with the notable support of Admiral von Tirpitz and the industrialist Alfred Hugenberg.<sup>6</sup> By then, the German war effort was almost entirely in the hands of a military industrial group that gave the army whatever it needed, but at the price of creating massive bottlenecks and shortages on the home front. Thus social protest intensified just as economic difficulties multiplied.

For the French, the war crisis of early 1917 antedated the Chemin de Dames offensive and the mutinies which followed its failure. There is no evidence that social agitation on France's home front influenced these mutinous soldiers, who refused to continue the futile and bloody offensive launched by General Nivelle on 16 April.<sup>7</sup> Instead both the mutiny and the existence of widespread unrest on the home front reflected the exhaustion and anger felt by most French citizens.

To them, as to many around the world, the war appeared to be endless. The global conflict – the war of 1914-1916 – had produced a massive stalemate. Neither side had a sufficient advantage to bring the warring parties to the conference table. And in 30 months of war, the two sides had lost perhaps eight million men killed in action or dead of wounds, and another 20 million wounded or prisoners of war. The giant campaigns of 1916, which we today call the battles of Verdun and the Somme, had not changed the strategic balance on the western front one iota. Fatigue, anger, suspicion, and social friction were evident everywhere.

For this reason alone, it makes sense to divide the Great War in two. The first Russian revolution may be taken to be a turning point, the moment that the political character of the war changed. I call it the 'climacteric' of 1917, both internationally and domestically.<sup>8</sup>

In France, the slow but palpable development in 1917 of a new set of revolutionary representations of war was hardly surprising. After all, it was only 46 years earlier – that is, within living memory – that a communist revolution in Paris had followed a failed war. Earlier traditions of revolutionary warfare in the 1790s were also a mainstay of the history taught in French schools. In 1917, alongside older images of the determination of the French nation to fight on until victory, there appeared a new and striking set of representations of *la Grande Guerre* as an apocalypse, as the end of one world and the beginning of another. For example, the winner of the Prix Goncourt in 1916, Henri Barbusse, ended his novel *Le Feu* with a post-apocalyptic scene of soldiers on both sides emerging from the trenches with a vision of a new world to build. Barbusse had been severely wounded in combat. He was not a pacifist, but a man who spoke for a growing number of people who believed that the war had to transform the international order that had precipitated the catastrophe.

<sup>6</sup> Richard BESSEL: "Mobilization and demobilization in Germany, 1916-1919", in John HORNE (ed.), *State, society and mobilization during the First World War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 50-67.

<sup>7</sup> André LOEZ and Nicolas MARIOT (eds.): *Obéir / Désobéir. Les mutineries de 1917 en perspective*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> On the use of the term "climacteric" in economic history, see Donald N. McCLOSKEY: "The British Iron and Steel Industry, 1870-1914: A Study of the Climacteric in Productivity", *Journal of Economic History*, 29:1 (1969), pp. 173-75.

The strength of the “imperial” war cultures of the 1914-1916 period was that they were dominated by compelling representations of war as a fight to preserve old and valued ways of life.<sup>9</sup> The new “revolutionary” war cultures of the 1917 and after period were marked by anger and a sense of injustice, as well as more than a touch of what Nietzsche termed *ressentiment*.<sup>10</sup> But they also gestured towards positive transformations, in part to ensure that something good would come out of the immense suffering. The two antipodes – imperial war and revolutionary war – were both visible from 1917 on. Given the military stalemate, it is hardly surprising that we can see the incomplete but striking emergence of what I term a culture of war anxiety, different in some important ways from the war cultures of 1914-16.

If I have persuaded you that the Great War fractured in 1917, then it still remains for me to persuade you that the new culture of war anxiety, with its emphasis on the enemy within, informed collective violence in Europe, in particular in Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe until 1923. If so, then it follows that the Second Great War may be dated from 1917 to 1923.

## Post-imperial violence

### a) *Violence against civilians*

The end of the war in 1918 meant the beginning of a war to determine the borders of post-imperial eastern Europe. When the nascent Polish army defeated Ukrainians and captured the Galician city of Lvov, there followed on 22-24 November an attack on Jews and Jewish property in the city. Approximately 150 Jews were killed and 500 shops destroyed.<sup>11</sup>

The Pilsudski-Paderewski government condemned the attacks, which they ascribed to bandits and others driven to violence by hardships and hunger. Hagen’s study of the violence shows the source of anger in the perceived difference between Jewish wealth and Polish poverty, so configured that the Jews symbolically or materially ‘owed’ their Polish attackers the goods (and lives) they took. Here is evidence of the breakdown of law and order in the aftermath of the Armistice, and the spillover of wartime hatreds into post-war violence directed against a Jewish minority whose ‘neutrality’ as between Ukrainians and Poles they saw as a smokescreen for betrayal. Violence, including murder, thus informed a kind of retributive justice in the eyes of the perpetrators.

There is substantial evidence of the unleashing of violence on class or national enemies throughout Eastern Europe in the first months after the Armistice. One case is now known as the Finnish civil war (Fig. 2) It started in February 1918, with an offensive by armed groups

<sup>9</sup> Stéphane AUDOIN ROUZEAU and Annette BECKER : *1914-1918 Retrouver la guerre*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Marc FERRO: *Ressentiment dans l’histoire: Comprendre notre temps*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> William W. HAGEN: “The Moral economy of popular violence: The pogrom in Lwów, November 1918”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 31:2 (2005), pp. 203-226.



supported by the new Bolshevik regime. Against them conservative forces were backed by the German army, whose military detachments were in Finland. Battles for Tampere and Helsinki were won by the White Guard and German forces. Plans to establish a German-backed monarchy in Finland were dashed only by the November defeat of Germany.



Fig. 2. Executions of “reds” during the Finnish civil war

What made this encounter significant was the use of terror not only during the fighting, but in its aftermath. Perhaps 12,500 Red Guards died in captivity at the hands of the Whites. Here is one case among many to suggest that when national wars bled into civil wars, the limits on the maltreatment both of civilians and of those in uniform disappeared.

The civil war in the Baltic states showed the same resort to indiscriminant violence. On 1 December 1918, Latvian territory was invaded by Bolshevik forces (Fig. 6) Riga fell to them on 3 January 1919. Thereafter an unstable alliance of Latvian and Estonian forces, alongside elements of German para-military groups pushed back, first against the Bolsheviks, and then against each other. German forces captured Riga on 22 May, but then refused to leave. They had their own agenda to create a German presence in the Baltic states. This mad idea vanished when they were expelled by their erstwhile allies in the combined Latvian and Estonian forces. Further fighting established Latvian independence, ratified by the Latvian-Soviet Treaty of 1920.

What happened in the Baltic states was a microcosm of the civil war that waged across Soviet Russia from 1917 to 1922. It is not my aim to give a full account of the dozens of civil wars going on within the greater struggle for mastery of post-imperial Russia. It is just to signal

that from Helsinki to Yerevan, sporadic to intensive explosions of violence marked the conflict for the future of what ultimately became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

My claim is twofold. First, these internecine conflicts were exercises in butchery and pillage under conditions of hunger bleeding into famine. And secondly, the civil war was deformed by the presence, albeit in relatively small numbers, of Western troops who initially took Bolshevik Russia's withdrawal from the conflict as treachery, and who were determined to reassert Western interests in Russia by the overthrow of the Bolshevik regime itself. Their failure and that of their many allies in the White armies to do so was as decisive in ending the second Great War as the Bolshevik revolution was in ending the first Great War in 1917.



Fig. 3. The Russian civil war

What was distinctive about the Russian civil war --alongside the Polish war of Independence and the Baltic civil wars-- was the extent to which civilians were caught up in the cross-fire in ways that made the first Great War in most instances look relatively polite and orderly. A taste of the cruelties of these civil wars may be gained by a perusal of Anna Akhmatova's poetry, Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* or Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*. (Fig. 3)

The exception to this distinction between before and after 1917 is the Armenian genocide. That crime provides the bridge between the first Great War and the second, since it announced a policy of war against a people not for what they were said to have done -- supported the

Russian war effort --

but for who they were. Biopolitics, in the form of the murder of a people, became a weapon of war in 1915. Here was a harbinger of terrible things to come, both in the Second Great War and after.

*b) Hunger and famine*

The second Great War, stretching from 1918-23, also resembles the first Great War with respect to hunger. Food shortages and the lack of basic necessities crippled the war effort of Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1917, just as they did in many parts of the Russian and Ottoman empires. Indeed, I have argued that these shortages were built into the way the war was waged within the Central powers. Among the Allies, it was possible to distribute goods and services needed by the armed forces without consigning your own people to hunger and disease. By 1917, and worse still in 1918, hunger was a major factor in exposing the fundamental weakness in the Central Powers' way of waging war. And the matter was less supply than distribution. The Allies controlled prices and profits, while in Germany, the worst price inflation in world history began in 1917 and abated only in 1923. Inflation destroyed savings, crippled markets and distribution networks, empowered a massive black market, and exacerbated internecine hatreds.

Worse was to come in the second Great War. Part of the reason was that the German military collapse left its forces deep within the old Russian empire. All the grain producing areas were sites of ongoing violence, and the power vacuum produced by the Armistice meant that 1919 was going to be a year of hunger for the bulk of the population living in the new Bolshevik Russia, assailed on all sides by counter-revolutionary bands and armies.

The Allies made things worse by continuing the blockade of German ports until the German delegation signed the Peace Treaty in June 1919. That sent hunger soaring in Vienna and Berlin, but also in the densely populated areas of the new Poland and adjacent territories. A demographic crisis followed, with outbreaks of typhus, dysentery, and even cholera made worse by the appearance of the worst influenza pandemic in world history.

American food aid began in the first Great War, to help the children of occupied Belgium and northern France. In 1919, the US Congress established the American Relief Administration. In the following four years, it provided food aid to 23 European countries and to Turkey and the remains of the Ottoman empire. One fifth of their aid went to Poland, certainly feeding Polish schoolchildren, and probably feeding Polish soldiers in the Polish-Soviet war.



Fig. 4. Camel convoy on the frozen Volga in Tsaritsyn

In 1921, famine of potentially catastrophic proportions impelled the Bolshevik government to work with the Hoover Food Aid program. It worked because Hoover realized that while agricultural production was crippled by war and civil war, the real problem of avoiding famine was the need to provide transportation through a chaotic and strife-torn rural landscape. That he did, using his expertise as a civil engineer with knowledge of the Russian terrain. He was not alone. There were many other European and local agents who made a difference. Together, they were able to save the lives of a generation of children in Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia (Fig. 4)

No one has been able to provide a demographic accounting of the loss of life which took place during the Russian civil war and the Polish-Soviet War. Demographer Boris Ulanis claimed that the figure of 300,000 was the best available for those who died in combat in the Polish-Soviet war; perhaps 175,000 of these deaths were suffered by the White armies and civilians; 125,000 by the Red armies. But ominously, he added a figure of 450,000 on both sides who died of disease. No one knows how many perished in the White and Red Terror in Russia, or in the countless skirmishes that marked the conflict. Caution suggests that the total number who died of disease, combat or execution exceeded one million in what became the Soviet Union. These losses crippled the new regime, and according to Orlando Figes, the industrial working class, in whose name the Revolutions of 1917 were launched, had disappeared five years later. The Soviet state took the place of this vanished class, and we all know the catastrophic consequences of this series of catastrophes –Figes calls it “A people’s tragedy”– when Stalin and his circle took over the Soviet state and waged war on his own people for nearly 30 years.

I am not one of those historians who believes in the concept of the Thirty Years War, from 1914-45. Hitler changed the meaning of war in 1941 when he invaded the Soviet Union and turned war as politics into war as racial extermination.

But one of the advantages of the notion that there were two Great Wars is that it provides us with clues as to what led from the First World War to the Second. The politics of hatred, of hunger, and of the maltreatment of civilians can be traced directly to what I call the first Great War from 1914 to 1917. But these vectors of violence were profoundly deepened and radicalized during the second Great War from 1918 to 1923. Anti-Semitism was alive and well before these dates, but it grew by leaps and bounds in 1918 and after. The viciousness of the confused fighting among different armies representing different national factions and ethnic groups only worsened when these conflicts were fused (and confused) with the Russian civil war.

It was in the period 1918 to 1923 that we can find abundant evidence of the process historian George Mosse terms brutalization. He used it in a different sense than I use it today. He believed that exposure to mass death in 1914-18 brutalized both the men who endured it and the societies for which they fought. I believe he is mistaken on this point. The shocking effects of the great battles of Verdun and the Somme can never be underestimated, but the overwhelming majority of the men who fought them returned either to combat or to their homes as recognizable human beings, with their commitments and values more or less intact. No, Mosse is wrong on the dating but right on the essence of the story. The evidence supporting the argument that there was a brutalization of norms—much more damaging than the brutalization of individuals—can be found in abundance in the period 1918-23 and after. Then economic and demographic disasters hit societies in a state of disorder and weakness that simply did not exist on the eve of the First World War. 1913 was a good year; 1919 was decidedly not. After 1918, civil war was fought out against the backdrop of famine, class conflict, and ethnic hatreds not unknown before 1918, but not mixed together in the same witches' brew.

In a nutshell, the passage I have tried to describe in this essay between an interpretation of total war, appropriate to the years 1914 to 1917, and an interpretation of total war bleeding into total civil war, a much more chaotic, vicious and costly configuration of violence which spread all over Eastern and Southern Europe in the period I term the second Great War.

And it is in this second Great War that the seeds of the radical conflicts of the 1930s must be sought, not in the first. The German army in 1914 to 1917 was in no sense a prototype of the Nazi armies under Hitler. But when Ludendorff and Hindenburg took it over in late 1916, they started a transition which slowly but surely prepared the way for the dark future ahead. The same is true for the Soviet Union. Civil war turned a regime with many facets, including lethal ones, into a monster. Without the intensification of class conflict in the immediate aftermath of the war, Mussolini had no chance of seizing power. Contingency matters. And the contingent processes that won out in the second Great War were hardly democratic. Despite a period of recovery in the later 1920s, the world economic crisis exposed the profound divisions which remained the ultimate legacy of the second Great War, that period of twentieth century history, from which all the rest followed.

## **From total war to total civil war**

In earlier publications I have outlined the salient characteristics of the phenomenon we now know as total war. First I will summarize what we mean by total war, before turning in conclusion to how total civil war flows directly out of it.

The five central features of total war are these:

- > 1. The fatal crossing of a military participation threshold;
- > 2. The expansion of the power and reach of the state;
- > 3. The creation of direct and ongoing linkages between front and home front; the redefinition of the military as the cutting edge of the nation at war;
- > 4. The mobilization of the imagination;
- > 5. The cultural preparation of hatred, atrocity and genocide.

Genocide is at the end of this path, but it traverses many other features of war which are physically remote from the slaughter of whole peoples. I raise these issues because they describe conditions of possibility, a context within which to set this transgression of the laws of humanity that occurred when total war turned into total civil war.

### ***a) Military Participation Threshold***

First, the military participation threshold. The Great War was a revolutionary conflict in part because between 1914 and 1918 the proportion of the male population aged 18-49 in uniform passed an arbitrary threshold: about 50 percent of the cohort. Once passed, that participation ratio stayed there or above for an extended period.

Among combatants in the 1914-18 war, France and Germany mobilized the highest proportion of the relevant male cohorts: about 80 percent of men aged 15-49 on the eve of the war were conscripted. Austria-Hungary mobilized 75 percent of its adult male population in the relevant age groups; Britain, Serbia and Turkey called up between 50 and 60 percent. The Russian case is on the lower edge of what I call 'total' mobilization, which is of course never literally total: approximately 16 million men or 40 percent of the male population aged 15-49 served during the war.

But even in this case, it is easy to see that total war meant a transformation of the age-composition and sex ratio of large parts of the home population. Not so in the United States, where in the brief space of 18 months, about 4 million men or only 16 percent of the relevant cohort served in uniform in the Great War. The United States, or at least its civilian population, neither fought through nor incurred the costs of total war, and its reaction to the conflict reflects this marginal participation.

Secondly, total casualties and losses as a proportion of those who served passed a threshold beyond previous experience: wherever the threshold is, the total of roughly nine million dead soldiers (according to varying estimates) is beyond it: this constitutes roughly one in

eight of the men who served. Adding statistics on other casualties, it is apparent that roughly 50 percent of the men who served were either prisoners-of-war, wounded, or killed.

Here again national variations must be noted: the most murderous theatre of operations was the Eastern front, where disease and enemy action described the course of a nineteenth-century war waged with twentieth-century weapons. Of all Serbs who served in the war, 37 percent were killed; roughly one in four Rumanians, Turks and Bulgarians also perished. On the Western Front, where the war was won and lost, combat was about half as lethal: German and French losses were about one in six of those who served; British losses were one in eight.

Another feature of total war may be more surprising. Initially casualties among social elites were higher than among the rest of the population. The longer the war lasted, the greater was the democratization of loss. The reason is that officer casualties were higher than those in the ranks, and the social selection of the officer corps mirrored inequalities in pre-war life. Consequently in its initial phases, the higher up in the social scale was a man, the greater were his chances of becoming a casualty of war. By 1917, elites were sufficiently decimated to require the armies to draw junior officers from wider social groups which in their turn suffered disproportionately higher casualties in the last two years of the war.

Among the poor and the under-privileged, the story is different. Prewar deprivation saved the lives of millions of working-class men and poor peasants, whose stunted stature and diseases made it impossible for them to pass even the rudimentary standards of medical fitness for military service during the war. In the British case, roughly 35 percent of the men examined for military service were either unfit for combat or unfit to wear a uniform at all. They were the lucky ones.<sup>12</sup>

### *b) Linkage*

Casualties on this scale tied front and home front together in new and complex ways. It is clear that total war went into high gear when all the combatants were either industrialized or part of a system of world trade based on industrialization.

But there is another level on which linkage war more than a metaphor; it was a palpable reality. In 1914-18, despite what many soldiers and journalists wrote, civilians knew how bad war was, even if they didn't see the landscape in which the fighting took place. From 1914 they saw millions of refugees streaming away from the fighting in Belgium, France, Serbia, Macedonia, eastern Germany, Russia; soon enough they saw the mutilated; they mourned the dead; they knew the pain of loss which by 1918 in one way or another hit virtually every household in the major combatants.

---

<sup>12</sup> For a fuller discussion, see Jay M. WINTER: *The Great War and the British People*, London, Macmillan, 1985, chapter 3.

c) *The cutting edge*

War efforts on this scale and duration required the recognition that armies were the cutting edge of the nation at war: well-being at home vitally affected the capacity of armies to go on, and thereby well-being at home directly affected the outcome of the war. This was true not only because armies of workers had to supply armies of soldiers, but also because war of this kind entailed hardship and sacrifice for the families of soldiers, an issue fundamental to *their* will to fight.

This is hardly a revolutionary finding, though it has led to massive misunderstanding about why the Allies won and the Central powers lost the war. The war came to an end when the morale of *both* the German army and the German home front crumbled in 1918; both front and home front came to see that the war could not be won.<sup>13</sup> The fact that they crumbled together is hardly surprising, though the linkage has been obscured by Hitler's claim that the reason the front soldiers had to surrender was because they were betrayed by cowards at home –the stab-in-the-back legend.<sup>14</sup>

What Hitler said was almost exactly the reverse of the truth: there was a stab in the back: the knife was wielded by the military leadership of Germany that led their country into a war they could not win and then brilliantly shifted responsibility for the disaster onto all shoulders other than those who really bore the blame. But Hitler's statement about linkage between front and home front did disclose a feature of total war of great importance, not only to the 1914-18 struggle but to later conflicts. Among the lessons the Nazis took from the Great War was that to undermine the material well-being of the civilian population was to endanger the war effort as a whole. That is one reason why the Nazis kept living standards relatively high for “Aryans” during the 1939-45 war and why they displaced the deprivation suffered by their elders in 1914-18 at home onto the backs of untermenschen: slaves, political prisoners, gypsies and Jews.<sup>15</sup>

For the Nazis, Aryans were entitled to a minimum standard of living, better than that provided in the 1914-18 war, when the official ration could not keep anyone alive. In the Great War, to avoid starvation, all Germans had to break the law: that meant recourse to the black market, and all the social tensions it entailed.<sup>16</sup>

Democracies were better at waging total war because they took seriously the consent of the governed. This is one significant element which has a bearing both on the way it was waged and on its outcome. While the Allies had a major advantage in aggregate supplies of essential

<sup>13</sup> See Wilhelm DEIST: *Militär Staat und Gesellschaft. Studien zur preussisch-deutschen Militärgeschichte*, Munich, Oldenbourg, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Adolf HITLER: *Mein Kampf*, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939.

<sup>15</sup> L. BORCHARDT: “The impact of the war economy on the civilian population”, in Wilhem DEIST (ed.), *The German Military in the age of total war*, Oxford, Berg, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> See A. OFFER: *The First World War. An Agrarian interpretation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.



goods and services, distribution mattered at least as much as supply. And distribution is a political issue, one that always entails the question 'to whom'.

In important ways the nature of citizenship helped determine the military efficiency of the war effort of the Allies and severely limited the war effort of Germany. This contrast, I argue, was visible on the home front, and operated through the prior existence of what the economist Amartya Sen has called a system of 'entitlements', a legal and moral framework upon which distributive networks rest.<sup>17</sup> In Paris and London the entitlements of citizenship – located in the right to a minimum level of subsistence– helped preserve communities at war by *enforcing* a balance of distribution of necessary goods and services as between civilian and military claimants. In Berlin, a different order of priorities existed. The military came first, and the economy created to service it completely distorted the delicate economic system at home. My claim is that Allied adaptation and well-being reflected a more equitable and efficient distributive system than existed on the other side of the lines. In both Britain and France civilians got more both because they had more and because their share of the national income was preserved, despite spiraling claims for men and resources from the generals. The Germans disregarded the need for such a balance and created the first military-industrial complex in history, and its record in waging war was an unmitigated disaster.

In 1915, when the Armenian genocide began, this political logic of military effectiveness was not yet evident. German authoritarian rule appeared to have the upper hand over democratic disorder. But it was only a matter of time before the fault lines appeared in the German war effort, and the Allies finally got their act together. Then the material advantages of the Allies were multiplied by their political strength. Democracies were simply better at waging wars than dictatorships.

#### *d) The mobilization of the imagination*

So far I have emphasized structural features of total war. But total war is incomprehensible without attending to its cultural history, its capacity to tap the loyalties and prejudices of the home population.<sup>18</sup> It is to this subject that I now turn.

Slaughter on the grand scale needed justification. To keep intact the domestic commitment to the war effort, an elaborate cultural campaign was organized in each combatant country. Of even greater importance than the proliferation of government agencies was the tendency for civil society itself to foster a cultural campaign with two objectives: steeling the will of civilians to go on; and stifling dissent and thereby making it impossible to think of any alternative other than total victory and total defeat. By and large this campaign worked. Anti-war sentiment grew as the conflict dragged on, but with the notable exception of Russia, anti-war activists were unable to shorten the war by one day or one hour.

<sup>17</sup> Amartya SEN: *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1976.

<sup>18</sup> See J.J. BECKER et al. (eds): *Guerres et cultures*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1994.

State-directed propaganda had only a minor role to play in this successful effort at cultural mobilization. It succeed only when it locked in to messages coming from below about the need to go on with the war. Big Brother did not create consent during the 1914-18 war. The truth is more frightening: the Great War provided much evidence of the propensity for populations to generate internally a commitment to carry on a war of unprecedented carnage.

Political and social elites tried to manipulate opinion; to be sure. Censorship and imprisonment operated, but neither had much force in formulating public opinion in wartime. The effort to mobilize the imagination in wartime came from below.<sup>19</sup>

#### e) *The cultivation of hatred*

In the effort of cultural mobilization, total war entailed the demonization of the enemy, right from the day war was declared. Some of this story is old --witness the wars of religion or the propaganda of the Reformation and Counter-reformation-- but aligned with the other elements of in this matrix, the cultural history of warfare entered a new and strikingly original landscape. It is a space in which what Peter Gay has called the cultivation of hatred<sup>20</sup> took place, an effort which provided the context in which war crimes of a revolutionary scale and character took place. I refer here to my central argument, that total war provided the space in which genocidal crimes could and did take place.

It is important to note the contingent nature of this argument. By no means did all nations engaged in total war commit genocide, but total war created the conditions which made it possible for such crimes to be committed with impunity. Total war entailed the brutalization of millions and thereby raised radically the tolerance of violence in societies caught up in armed conflict.

Consider this metaphor. Total war is like an infection; it has the capacity to infect many populations, but most --through their legal systems, education, religious beliefs, military traditions or other convictions and practices-- are inoculated against the worst effects of the infection.<sup>21</sup> Those not so fortunate, those (so to speak) without the antibodies, succumb to virulent forms of the infection, and then the innocent suffer. Under these conditions, and in the context of total war, war crimes of staggering magnitudes can occur. Genocide can occur. It did during both world wars.

---

<sup>19</sup> On this theme see Stéphane AUDOIN-ROUZEAU: *La guerre des enfants, 1914-1918: essai d'histoire culturelle*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Peter GAY: *The Cultivation of Hatred. The Burgeois Experience – Victoria to Freud*, New York, Norton, 1993.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this image to the late George Mosse. For a comparison which emphasises choice and contingency, see Jonathan STEINBERG: *All or nothing. The Axis and the Holocaust*, London, Routledge, 1990.

### **Conclusion: Total civil war**

Every one of the five features which together constitutes the new phenomenon of total war in 1914-17 prepared the ground for its continuation in the years 1917-23 as what contemporaries understood as a new kind of civil war, which took on the viciousness of total war without the restrictions imposed on military and international law.

The first feature, the unprecedented mobilization of the male population for military service in 1914-17 did not come to an end in a vast swathe of territory from Finland and Poland to Turkey. In some respects, Russian society remained mobilized for armed conflict of one kind or another, between 1914 and 1945. The extension of total war into total civil war, first against counter-revolutionaries and then against Soviet society itself, accounts for this lamentable development. In the surrounding countries of the former Russian empire, a kind of peace emerged from civil war, once again with violence a strong and chronic presence in the midst of the new order of nations. The Finnish civil war, and the violence in Poland and Ukraine left their nations with wounds that, in a way, have never healed. The same is true for the huge population exchanges between Muslim and Christian population in Asia Minor and in Anatolia. The wounds are still there today, as is certainly the case with respect to the Armenian genocide.

The new, successor states in Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and the Middle East suffered from the economic consequences of the passage from total war to total civil war. In this context, famine was a partner of epidemic disease in the early 1920s throughout the civil war regions of Europe and the Middle East. These chronic difficulties abated in the mid-1920s, only to worsen within the context of the world economic crisis of the early 1930s. The rise of fascism is inseparable from the braiding together of the politics of civil war, a post-1917 phenomenon, with the economic crisis of the interwar years. Students of the viciousness of the Spanish Civil and the cruelty of its aftermath have made us aware of what the new world of what I term “total civil war” looked like and felt like, especially to the Republican population and their families.<sup>22</sup>

As for the cultivation of hatred and the appearance of genocide as an option in such civil wars, there is hardly any doubt that the toxic admixture of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary warfare, racial and biological ideologies of different kinds, and profound economic instability enabled radical movements on the political right to emerge, gain mass support, and to find in the Third Reich after 1933 a champion and a vanguard. Thus there is a direct link between the kind of total civil war unleashed after 1917 and that unleashed by the Nazis and their allies in 1939 in Poland, and in 1941 in the Soviet Union and throughout Europe. The Holocaust is the logical and terrible destination of total civil war.

---

<sup>22</sup> Paul PRESTON: *The Spanish Holocaust. Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*, London, Harper Read, 2012.

Could it have been avoided? Yes, nothing in history is absolutely determined. But total civil war in 1917-23 created the conditions for the barbarization of both warfare and domestic politics in the two decades which followed. What the armed gangs and armies of 1917-23 sowed, the SS and their henchmen reaped in 1939-45.

Let me close with one of Anna Akhmatova's poems, which like the best of her art, captures the essence of this dolorous history in ways to which we historians can only gesture. Her poem is entitled "Why is this century worse?":

*Why is this century worse than those that have gone before?  
In a stupor of sorrow and grief  
it located the blackest wound  
but somehow couldn't heal it.*

*The earth's sun is still shining in the West  
and the roofs of towns sparkle in its rays,  
while here death marks houses with crosses  
and calls in the crows and the crows fly over:<sup>23</sup>*

This is the legacy the two Great Wars of 1914-17 and 1917-23 left to us: they created an elision between war and civil war under conditions of violence extending from one period of global conflict to another. Akhmatova was right. The "blackest wound" of the period 1914-23 was to create conditions which brought about a degeneration of warfare from an institution with political and legal limits into a field of force in which whole peoples could disappear from the face of the earth. Genocide is the final statement of the nihilism represented by total civil war.

---

<sup>23</sup> Anna AKHMATOVA: *Selected poems*, trans. by Richard McKane, London, Bloodaxe Books, 1989, p. 96.