

**11 November 1918: Memory and War** by Dr Keith Huxey, PhD, American History, George Washington University, Washington, DC. Published NOV 2018

“As Americans celebrate Veteran’s Day, it is necessary and appropriate that we should pause to reflect on the historical occasion and circumstances of this day of honor and remembrance for those who serve in our Armed Forces.

At 11:00 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the guns on the Western front finally fell silent after over four long years of war. The Great War was a global conflict that consumed the lives of over 10 million soldiers killed and another 20 million left wounded. Final judgments and evaluations of the ultimate causes of the conflict remain murky even to this day.

What was certain was that the war had unleashed violent bloodshed on a scale the world had never seen until that time, and the violence lasted right up until the last minute of the war. Before 11:00 a.m. that morning, over 10,000 men on the Allied side were either killed, wounded, or missing in action from operations ongoing through the morning hours of November 11, 1918. The last man killed in the war was American Private Henry Gunt[h]er, shot at 10:59 a.m. [1]

The armistice was a cease-fire, but not a peace. Out of this war emerged the crucial crosscurrents that would dominate the 20th century.

Four empires that had survived centuries and seemed impregnable facts of political life in 1913 no longer existed by the end of the war: the German, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires all disintegrated.

The Great War, which had begun as some sort of accident in Sarajevo with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by the disgruntled Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip, had devastated all the certainties upon which Western civilization had rested beforehand.

The war itself was supposed to be over by Christmas 1914; it was supposed to uphold national honor and be an exhibition of the great virtues of Western civilization.

Instead, the war wreaked upon European civilization a cost in death that the living in November 1918 demanded that the terrible event could not be some sort of grand historical tragedy, a cosmic joke played upon so many innocents swept up in the maelstrom.

Out of this Great War some greater meaning for humanity must emerge, there had to be reason and purpose in this catastrophe, and a better world had to be achieved to justify the cost in blood.

Figures familiar to us today would quickly move to supply new meanings, and sought to deliver the desired better world through the means that had been mastered in the war: force.

The right of the individual to follow and determine his or her own pathways to happiness, knowledge, and inner peace was completely subordinated to the prerogatives of the collective and the state.

In Russia, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were pioneering the first totalitarian state based upon Marxist utopian thinking. In Italy, Mussolini and the Fascists would soon emerge to promote a better future based upon extreme nationalism. And in Germany, where war socialism had forged the concept of the supreme effort of a people in wartime, a young corporal gassed on October 13 lay in a hospital bed in Pasewalk, where the hospital chaplain informed him that for Germany the war was over and lost. Adolf Hitler later claimed that it was this moment that made him determined to become a political leader and stirred his poisonous brew of racism, conquest, war, and revenge into a formula for a better world—for Germans.

For France and Great Britain, the end of the war meant an exhaustion with the burdens of empire, and a retreat into an extreme pacifism. For the United States, President Woodrow Wilson sought to bring about the better world promised in his 14 Points but would see his own nation reject his handiwork and refuse to join the League of Nations. The deeply flawed Treaty of Versailles was the seedbed of international discontents that would overflow into a Second World War within 20 years.

In this continuation, over 60 million people were killed worldwide. Europe and Asia were smoking ruins at the conclusion. Horrors birthed in the first war for bringing indiscriminate death and organized murder were now brought to frenzied climaxes in the second war.

Since 1945, we have not seen a Third World War. The generation that fought and won the Second World War saw over 418,000 American veterans make the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in service to their country.

The veterans and survivors of the Second World War then set about facing new challenges: rebuilding a smashed world into a prosperous and good future, standing up again for the values of individual freedoms against communist totalitarianism, and most of all caring for and providing their progeny the better world that was denied to the generation left standing on Armistice Day, November 1918.

Today, the greatest generation that won victory in the Second World War is passing from our lives. The world they built has provided a measure of security and stability to succeeding generations that does not resemble the post-November 1918 world they experienced in their youth.

Most of today's youth cannot imagine or conceive of the possibility of a third world war, much less their roles within such a future. The world we inherit remains a dangerous and fragile place; it could be said that such is the state of human beings at all times in all places in history, as human nature has not substantially altered. But speaking to the meaning of an earlier, perilous war in our history, President Abraham Lincoln alluded to the "better angels of our nature."

On this 100th anniversary of the Armistice that ended the Great War, this spirit is what we citizens must render to all of our military veterans and especially those veterans of the Second World War, who made our own freedoms and futures possible, and who are our living spiritual connections to the unforgotten Great War veterans of November 11, 1918."

[1] The death toll would continue to rise as it took several days for the news of the armistice to reach distant theaters of war.



<<<>>>