

Did the end of the Great War come too soon?

Had it lasted into 1919 the future of the world might have been very different

BY DAVID REYNOLDS, *NEW STATESMAN*, 31 OCT 2018

And so, in the fifth year of the Great War, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, the guns at last fell silent. That is how Britain will probably think of the centenary of 11 November 1918. As a clean, crisp end to the costliest war in this country's history. As an opportunity to remember the suffering of those who died and the pain of those who were bereaved. And a chance to tell poignant stories of the moment when the Great Silence finally descended.



At Malplaquet in Belgium, the 11th battalion of the Manchester Regiment had formed up at first light and marched to the front, ready to go over the top yet again. Suddenly the commander and senior officers ran up and down the line, talking to the men. Cheers rang out; caps were thrown in the air. As the Tommies returned to the village, firing off signal rockets, a squadron of British planes swooped over, looping the loop.

At other places on the front line, the mood was often one of anti-climax. “Here I was covering the greatest story in the world and nothing was happening,” moaned Webb Miller, an American war correspondent with a unit of US troops or “doughboys” near Verdun.

“The war just ended. The men stood talking in groups.” There was “less excitement, less emotion,” he complained, “than you’d find in a lively craps game.”

Wilfred Owen – the poet who lamented the “pity of war” but also won a Military Cross for frenziedly machine-gunning dozens of Germans – fell on 4 November 1918, leading an attack on the Sambre-Oise canal. The War Office telegram reached his mother just as the church bells in Shrewsbury rang out the joyous news of the Armistice. Owen’s death has become one of Britain’s best-known Armistice tales – because of its exquisitely painful timing and also because, since the 1960s, Owen and a handful of “war poets” have become Britain’s most trusted interpreters of the First World War.

In his now famous draft preface to a future book of collected poems, Owen insisted he was “not concerned with Poetry” – by which he meant grand ballads about “heroes” or “glory” – but with war in its modern reality: “The Poetry is in the pity.” Today, however, we might say, the War is in the Poetry – such is the hold exerted by Owen, Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas and a few others over Britain’s understanding of 1914-18. Somehow it is easier to feel, with them, the intimate pain of individual sacrifice rather than think hard about the historical meanings of a global conflict that defined the 20th century and still reverberates today.

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Anthem for Doomed Youth BY WILFRED OWEN

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

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What, then, of that history? For a start, the British view of the First World War is, frankly, still stuck in the trenches. Amid the mud and blood, with those “lions” led by “donkeys”: a *Blackadder* take on the war in which Grand Strategy is about little more than how to move Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig’s drinks cabinet a few inches closer to Berlin.

But, although the Western Front in 1915, 1916 and 1917 was indeed largely a story of trench stalemate or failed offensives, 1914 and 1918 were epic wars of manoeuvres for the highest of stakes. In the summer of 1914 the Germans just failed to get to Paris. In the spring of 1918

they again punched massive holes in the British and French lines. Yet this was done at huge cost in junior officers and ordinary soldiers – so that the Kaiser’s troops began to desert en masse. It’s a story graphically told by Alexander Watson in his prize-winning book *Ring of Steel* (2014).

So, fast-forward to the Armistice? “No, definitely not,” shout a recent generation of British military historians, led by Gary Sheffield, who have insisted that there is more to 1918 than the German army running out of steam. Equally important, they argue, the Allied armies achieved an unprecedented level of efficiency under – at long last – an undisputed supreme commander: Marshal Ferdinand Foch.

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was now entering the line in strength; the French, though sapped by the mutinies of 1917, were still a major fighting force; and the British had reached peak performance. Haig was now commanding the largest army that the British Empire ever put in the field, some 60 divisions – finally mastering the intricacies of “all arms” warfare in which infantry, tanks, artillery and aircraft worked in deadly coordination. Mounting an offensive such as Amiens in August 1918 was a far cry from the crudity of Loos in September 1915, let alone the sickening incompetence of the first day of the Somme on 1 July 1916.

Yet that “learning curve” – as revisionist historians like to call it – had been climbed at immense human cost. The historians describe the achievement; the poets evoke the suffering. Both have their place when adjudicating the wages of war.

Between March and June 1918, Field-Marshal Erich Ludendorff, effectively the Kaiser’s supreme commander, mounted four major offensives in four months in Flanders and Picardy – each of diminishing strength. At the end of September, by contrast, Foch mounted four offensives in four days, each equally huge, along the whole length of the Western Front. The American onslaught – the first big assault by General John J Pershing’s AEF – was the least successful, becoming quickly bogged down in the Argonne forest, where superior US artillery and airpower could have little effect. But the cumulative impact of the four offensives – vividly evoked by Peter Hart’s *The Last Battle* (2018) – was devastating for the Germans.

And particularly for Ludendorff. He’d gone for broke in the spring, after Bolshevik Russia had withdrawn from the war, because that allowed Germany to concentrate almost entirely, for the first time since war began, on the Western Front. His aim was a quick victory before American power could really be brought to bear. But Ludendorff’s gamble had failed and now, with the Allies attacking in overwhelming strength, his nerve broke. Germany, he told horrified staff at the end of September 1918, had no choice but to ask for an armistice.

Seeing Ludendorff’s face at that moment, one staff officer tearfully recalled the scene at the end of Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung* when the heroic Siegfried is stabbed in the back by Hagen’s spear. Yet there was calculation as well as emotion behind Ludendorff’s decision. An armistice would have to be negotiated by the new civilian government in Berlin. So they – not the army – would be blamed for the disaster.

This indeed proved the case. News that Germany was seeking an armistice came as a bombshell to civilians, soldiers and the navy. War news had been ruthlessly controlled and official propaganda kept trumpeting the imminence of victory, so many patriotic Germans

simply could not understand this appalling turn of events. After all, their army was still fighting in France and Belgium. How could the *Kaiserreich* be on the verge of defeat?

In such a mood, ordinary Germans were easy prey for politically motivated conspiracy theorists. The army, like Siegfried, must have been stabbed in the back, and the traitors seemed all too easy to identify: pacifists, Bolsheviks, Jews. That autumn revolution spread across Germany as the once-fearsome military machine crumbled within weeks and the Kaiser fled into exile. The Armistice was signed on 11 November by representatives of the country's new socialist-led government. Millions of Germans never forgave them.

Ludendorff, the architect of defeat, soon threw in his lot with Adolf Hitler, joining in the abortive Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. The budding Führer is now the most notorious of those who pedalled the stab-in-the back myth, but many other conservatives took the same line after the catastrophe of 1918: Germany hadn't been defeated; it was robbed. And its lost victory had to be redeemed. No wonder that next time round, during Hitler's war of 1939-45, President Franklin D Roosevelt demanded Germany's "unconditional surrender" and complete demilitarisation and democratisation. He wanted to rub German noses in the reality of Nazism's utter defeat.

Since we in Britain take the Armistice for granted, it is worth noting that some senior Allied commanders in November 1918 seriously pondered a similarly hard policy. The German army, though still on Allied soil, was now a shadow of what it had been and would probably not be able to resist. Foch sought armistice terms that required Germany to evacuate France, Belgium and Alsace-Lorraine and allowed the Allies to occupy the west bank of the Rhine and bridgeheads east of the river – from which they would be in a position to march on into Germany.

Pershing was even more extreme. He wanted to continue the offensive and compel what he explicitly called Germany's "unconditional surrender", rather than accept a ceasefire now and "possibly lose the chance to secure world peace on terms that would insure its permanence".

Some policymakers soon regretted not heeding Foch and Pershing. "Had we known how bad things were in Germany," mused the British politician Eric Geddes on 12 November, the day after the Armistice was signed, "we might have got stiffer terms." French prime minister Georges Clemenceau spoke in a similar vein the following year. Yet for the Allies to impose their will on Germany to such a degree would have required more fighting and more casualties. And most leaders in London and Paris considered this politically inconceivable at home after four years of the most appalling carnage.

A further thought nagged at their minds. President Woodrow Wilson had entered the war in April 1917 not as an "Allied" power but as an "Associate" power: a terminological nuance that really does matter. Wilson was aligning America with Britain and France in the immediate task of defeating German militarism but he was intent, once victory had been won, on establishing a new League of Nations to keep the peace and bring an end to the imperialist carve-ups, arms races and trade rivalries that seemed endemic in Europe. At root, he believed, all the European powers bore responsibility for this terrible war.

“If peace comes now, it will be a British peace,” Jan Smuts, the future South African premier, told the Imperial War Cabinet on 24 October 1918, “given to the world by the same Empire that settled the Napoleonic wars a century ago.”

But, he warned, if the war continued into 1919 “the peace which will then be imposed on an utterly exhausted Europe will be an American peace” and the United States would have “taken our place as the first military, diplomatic and financial power of the world”.

This fear of an American-imposed peace if the war continued into another campaigning season was one reason why British and French leaders were willing to accept an armistice. They hoped to gain by diplomacy at the peace conference what they had been unable to win on the battlefield.

So, fast-forward to the Treaty of Versailles? Well, yes and no. In Britain we’ve still not really escaped the mesmeric power of *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* – that wickedly brilliant polemic published by John Maynard Keynes in December 1919. His aim was to indict Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson for imposing a “Carthaginian Peace” on Germany – akin to that inflicted by Rome on Carthage after the Punic Wars. According to Keynes, in the cut and thrust of conference bargaining the Gallic nationalist and the Welsh wizard outwitted the rigid Presbyterian ideologue from the New World, reducing him to a “blind and deaf Don Quixote”, unable to see that they had turned his liberal vision into a “policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation” and thereby causing “the decay of the whole civilised life of Europe”. *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* was not merely a global best-seller in 1919-20; its message resonated anew in the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Yet, if we can escape Keynes’s seductive phrases, just how Carthaginian was that peace? The Treaty of Versailles actually reveals the *limits* of Allied power: indeed it was largely political theatre. In 1871, Louis XIV’s grandiose palace on the edge of Paris had been the scene of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s proclamation of the new German Reich, capping his triumph in the Franco-Prussian war. So in 1919 the French inflicted their revenge by staging Germany’s First World War humiliation in the very same Hall of Mirrors.

Yet a genuine turning of the tables would have required something different: a treaty stabbed into Germany at its own historic heart, at Sans-Souci in Potsdam on the outskirts of Berlin or in another of Frederick the Great’s palaces. Yet this was impossible in 1919 because Germany had not been invaded, conquered and occupied. That’s why Foch predicted darkly that Versailles was not a peace but merely an armistice for 20 years. It is no accident that in July 1945 Potsdam was the venue for Churchill, Truman and Stalin to decide the fate of Germany and the future of eastern Europe after imposing the Third Reich’s unconditional surrender.

So, the fact that in 1919 the Allies imposed a Treaty of Versailles on Germany, not a Treaty of Potsdam, highlights the incompleteness of their victory. This became all too apparent when America turned its back on Wilson’s internationalism in the 1920s and left the British and French to manage the peace themselves. The French wanted to enforce Versailles and keep Germany down; the British – themselves retreating into isolationism as the Twenties turned into the Slump – wanted to rewrite the peace and welcome

Germany back into the fold. From that power vacuum and policy vortex arose many of Europe's problems in the 1920s and 1930s.

Many, but by no means all. Another consequence of Britain's tragic-poetic view of the Armistice is a failure to recognise that, for much of Europe, 11 November 1918 has very different meanings.

Consider, for instance, the Poles. Far from being a sombre day for remembering loss and sacrifice, 11 November in Poland is National Independence Day – an occasion for rejoicing. After the partitions of the 18th and 19th centuries by Prussia, Russia and Austria, the Poles regained their independence when the Central Powers collapsed in 1918 and Józef Piłsudski set about creating a new Polish state. For Poles the First World War seemed a Good War.

This illustrates a larger point. In mainland Britain, the war had no effect on national boundaries (it did, of course, in Ireland – but, as Brexit has reminded us, the English love to forget Ireland). On the continent, however, the war transformed the map of eastern Europe. Its endgame in 1917-18 brought not only the demise of Bismarck's Reich but also the downfall of two great dynastic empires that had dominated Europe for centuries: the Romanovs and the Habsburgs.

From the imperial rubble was constructed a new architecture of small states. Finland and the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania date their independence from Russia to various points in late 1917 and 1918 after Lenin's seizure of power. They took advantage of the implosion of the new Bolshevik state in a civil war that proved far costlier for Russia than the conflict against Germany. In central Europe, the newly invented state of Czechoslovakia celebrated 28 October 1918 as the day of liberation from the Habsburg Empire, whose collapse also enabled Balkan allies of Britain such as Serbia and Romania to bounce back after a war that had proved immensely damaging to them when Berlin and Vienna were riding high. Across much of eastern Europe, remembrance of 1918 a century on is a time for pride rather than sadness.

Nor, in a further difference from western Europe, did the guns fall silent on 11 November 1918. Many of these new states had to fight desperately to maintain their independence, as Robert Gerwarth shows vividly in *The Vanquished* (2016). Latvia's war against the Bolsheviks lasted into 1920, as did Estonia's struggle against both the Red Army and German Freikorps units. Lithuania battled against the Russians in 1918-19 and the Poles in 1920. And Poland fought Russia in a particularly dramatic conflict that ebbed and flowed during the summer of 1920.

Polish troops thrust as far east as Kiev, only to be driven back 300 miles to the edge of Warsaw. The Polish Army "seems for the time being almost to have ceased to exist as a coherent force", reported the *New Statesman* on 31 July. Only a desperate surprise attack by Piłsudski into the rear of the Russian forces, celebrated in Polish national mythology as the "Miracle on Vistula", turned the tables once again and routed the Bolsheviks.

The Treaty of Riga in March 1921 left Poland with the western parts of Byelorussia and Ukraine – both hostages to fortune, which Stalin did not forget in the next European war. In 1944 there were no miracles on the Vistula when the Polish Home Army rose up

against the Nazis. Again the Red Army reached the gates of Warsaw but Stalin did nothing until the uprising had been suppressed by Hitler's SS. He had no intention of tolerating an independent Poland astride the main axis for a possible third German war.

Even where the fighting did cease in 1918, the end of the First World War contained the seeds of another conflict, because most of the new states that emerged from the debris of empires had two fatal flaws – disputed borders and oppressed minorities. For instance, the concept of Czechoslovakia made sense to the state's founding father Tomáš Masaryk – offspring of a Slovak father and a Czech mother – but it defied recent history.

For three centuries the Czechs (just over half the population of the new state) had lived under German rule, opening them up to Protestantism, the West and industrialisation. By contrast, the Slovaks (one-sixth of the people) had lived even longer under the Hungarians: their Catholic, largely rural society was intertwined economically with Hungary and Ukraine. Such fundamental differences could not easily be bridged after 1918.

As for the country's German population, regional top dogs in the Habsburg period, they now found themselves paying court to the Czechs. The large estates, mostly German-owned, were broken up – which Czechs applauded as long-overdue reparation for the Habsburg conquest of 1620 – and Czech culture and language were accorded paramount place. Yet Germans constituted nearly a quarter of the population, and their cause would be taken up by Hitler in 1938 – with fateful consequences.

In 1919, faced with this new patchwork of races and palimpsest of borders, the Paris "peacemakers" could do little. It was the last year of the war that had "made" the new Europe – not Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau. They could only hope to smooth some of the hard, frictional edges between far-away countries of which they knew little. On one occasion Edith Wilson, the American president's wife, entered one of the grand salons of the Hôtel Murat to find her husband and his advisers on hands and knees, poring over huge maps of Europe spread out across the floor. "You look like a lot of little boys playing a game," she laughed. The president looked up gravely: "Alas, it is the most serious game ever undertaken, for on the result of it hangs, in my estimation, the future peace of the world."

Indeed. The splinters of post-imperial eastern Europe provided the tinder for the next war, in disputed borderlands such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. The fire was then lit by Hitler's ambition to undo the diktat of Versailles and redeem the lost victory of his fevered imagination. Fuelling the conflagration was Stalin, whose pact with the Führer in August 1939 partitioned Poland anew and allowed the Germans to turn west with impunity.

When they did so in May 1940, luck – incredible luck – was on their side. Hitler's gamble of not invading France via Belgium, where he would have encountered the bulk of the Allied armies, but through the Ardennes and round the French right flank paid off spectacularly.

In little more than four weeks, this jumped-up Austrian corporal accomplished what Ludendorff and all the Kaiser's best generals had failed to do in four years – knocking France out of the war. This freed Hitler to turn east against Stalin, his erstwhile partner in crime.

In 1940, for the latest round of Franco-German theatricals Hitler staged the armistice negotiations on 21-22 June in the same railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne where

the French had imposed on Germany the Armistice of 11 November 1918. The Führer sat in the very chair used by Marshal Foch. The carriage was then taken triumphantly to Berlin and the site at Compiègne – previously a sacred French memorial – was blown up. Only a statue of Foch remained – presiding, as it were, over a wasteland.

What about the aftermath of that second war? In 1945 most of eastern Europe came under Soviet occupation. Poland and the Baltic states would not celebrate true independence again until the tumultuous years of 1989-91. Some found that independence hard to live with. After Prague's Velvet Revolution of 1989, the forced marriage of Czechoslovakia finally ended in a Velvet Divorce on New Year's Day 1993. And there was nothing velvet about Yugoslavia's post-communist transition. The state forged in 1918 broke apart in brutal ethnic wars and genocidal orgies whose legacies still poison the Balkans.

Even in relatively stable countries in the former Soviet bloc, the politics of memory remain bitter. People are still trying to come to terms with the last century of their national history – frozen, suppressed and distorted during communist rule. That's why 1918 is still alive and kicking across much of eastern Europe.

But post-1945, events in western Europe broke the bonds of history. We did not see yet another episode in the Franco-German theatre of the absurd. Three centuries in the school of war – culminating in France's "dark years" of 1940-44, Hitler's *Götterdämmerung* and the near-extirmination of European Jewry – had finally taught the French and the Germans a simple but profound lesson: if you can't beat them, join them. The signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which established the European Economic Community, was effectively the peace treaty in the west after the Second World War.

Britain, of course, did not join the EEC until 1973 and thereafter proved an awkward, uneasy partner. Yet this country benefited hugely from the Treaty of Rome. It drew a line under an era of two world wars that had sucked in Britain – despite its isolationist instincts – and cost more than a million British lives. It is no accident that the second half of the 20th century was a lot happier for Britain than the first half.

Some, of course, will say that this is ancient history, of little relevance to the brave new, British-shaped world now dawning as our country is freed from its own dark years of vassalage into the sunlit uplands of our glorious future.

I beg to differ. Pondering again the cease-fire of November 1918 in the context of 20th-century Europe's two great wars is a wake-up call. It underlines the perils of hyper-nationalism, the seductive power of quick-fix demagogues and the fragility of international institutions. Especially in the era of Trump, Putin and Brexitotoxicity.

"Lest we forget." Let us remember those who died. And let us understand the history that consumed them. Lest it also consume us.

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