

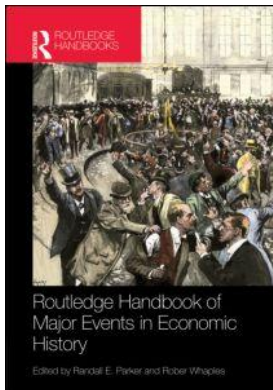
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Jari Eloranta

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8

WORLD WAR I

Jari Eloranta

But the study of history teaches us that all those States which in the decisive hour have been guided by purely commercial considerations have miserably come to grief. The sympathies of civilized nations are today, as in the battles of antiquity, still with the sturdy and the bold fighting armies; they are with the brave combatants who, in the words which Lessing puts in the mouth of Tellheim, are soldiers for their country, and fight out of the love which they bear to the cause.

(Crown Prince Wilhelm (son of the Kaiser) in 1913)¹

Introduction

In August 1914 crowds rejoiced in the streets of many European cities due to the outbreak of the war.² Despite the vision of some, like Norman Angell in his 1909 bestseller *The Great Illusion* (Angell 1972), the increased economic interdependence of the great powers did not make a major international conflict impossible, or even force it to a swift conclusion. It seems that militarism, as displayed for example by the heir to the crown of the German empire in 1913, prevailed over other considerations. The end result was World War I, a pivotal event in human history, for a variety of reasons. First of all, it resulted in human suffering unprecedented in prior centuries or millennia. Millions of people died and were left maimed by this industrialized version of total war. The concept and practice of total war had, of course, been around for a long time, although World War I brought it to a new level by combining industrialized, globalized empires with new types of weapons capable of mass killing. The combatants had to harness the entire society and economic resources to fight this war, as well as attempt to disrupt their enemies' trade and ability to mobilize. Moreover, colonies and neutral countries were also affected by this conflict. Second, it brought the first era of globalization to an end and initiated an era of instability and protectionism that lasted until mid-century. Conversely, it also was the beginning of the end for European empires and triggered a wave of democratization, at least in the long run. In the short run, however, the new borders and nations created in the aftermath of the war were unstable, just like the economic climate of the interwar period, and encouraged the rise of populist groups and radical elements in European societies.

Finally, World War I was a deathblow to the European alliance system that had prevented great power conflicts, and it initiated a new phase in the march toward modernity with its benefits and vices. Warfare had graduated to a brutal affair in the miserable Western European trenches and the burnt villages of Eastern Europe. Great power politics were freed from the bonds of gentlemanly rules – a process that had already started by the 1790s and the French Revolution – and the practice of twentieth century warfare now resembled an industrialized mission. Restraints had been removed, and even genocide was now tried to advance nationalistic goals.³ The war also upended the world economic system, with the European economic superpowers like Great Britain, France, and Germany deep in debt, and the United States now the new economic hegemon. However, the U.S. was not willing to play the role of the world's banker as Britain had, to coordinate the gold standard and facilitate the international trading system. Nor did it want to act as the arbiter of the post-war political settlements, at least after Woodrow Wilson's vision and membership in the League of Nations were rebuked soundly in the post-war presidential elections. The world after World War I was very different from the one that preceded it: alliances, international trade, European hegemony and colonialism, belief in short offensive wars, civilians as forbidden targets, and the gold standard were all casualties of the war, along with millions of human beings. This chapter will first examine the main causes of the war, especially the arms race that preceded the war. Then it will provide a macro-view of the costs, impacts, and outcomes of the war. It concludes with a discussion of the short- and long-term effects of the 1914–1918 world conflict.

The road to war

There were a plethora of causes for World War I. The list of explanations include (among other factors) alliances, nationalism, European imperialism, the (naval) arms race (Kennedy 1976, Modelski and Thompson 1988, Steiner 1977), shifting power balances (Geller and Singer 1998, Kennedy 1984, North et al. 1963a, North et al. 1963b), changes in strategic positions (Levy 1990–91, Mombauer 2001, Williamson 1988), diplomatic failures, Germany's perceived aggression,⁴ mobilization plans (Keegan 1999, Taylor 1969, revised in Trachtenberg 1990–91), imperialism overreach, agricultural dependencies, economic interdependencies (Ferguson 1999, 2001, Kennedy 1989, Offer 1989), specific domestic causes (Ferguson 1994), a cult of the offensive among the officer corps in the various countries (Offer 1995, Strachan 2011, Van Evera 1984), international arms dealers (Tooley 2005), escalation of ethnic and regional conflicts (see, for example, Ferguson 2006), and, finally, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. It is very difficult to assign a greater explanatory value to some of these causes over others (Gillette 2006); however, it can be argued that the most important factors were changes in the power balance between nations and the resultant out-of-control arms race, which increased the risk of a multi-state conflict (Eloranta 2007). Accordingly, this chapter focuses on empires, the arms race, and the failure of globalization in order to understand how the war came about.

In the nineteenth century the process of globalization and empires were linked. By 1913, Europeans were the greatest imperialists in the history of the world, with 30 percent of the world's population living in European colonies outside Europe (Eloranta and Harrison 2010). Moreover, according to some estimates, Europeans or the former colonies of Europe in the Americas controlled 84 percent of the earth's land surface in 1914 either directly or indirectly. As described by Samuel Huntington, “by 1910 the world was more one politically and economically than at any other time in human history.” Europeans were naturally

dominant economically as well, and comprised the majority of the world's military spending (Eloranta 2007, Huntington 1996).

The pursuit of colonies by the existing great powers (like Britain and France) and new powers (like the new nations of Germany and Italy) contributed to frequent crises in the global political equilibrium among the powers and was one of the causal factors in the onset of both the world wars. Colonial conquests had become a zero-sum game – almost all possible areas suitable for conquest and/or raw materials extraction had been exhausted by the early twentieth century, thereby increasing the tensions between the main international players. It was no longer possible to divert attention from domestic problems, such as unequal distribution of income and unemployment, by engaging in further colonial adventures.

Following critics of empire like Lenin (1963) and Hobson (1965 (reprint)), it has been fashionable to link world trade and world empires with the causes of the two world wars. The truth is more complex, however. Neither globalization nor imperialism was the only cause of war in 1914. The nineteenth-century wave of globalization was a revolutionary process, almost by any historical standard. The industrializing parts of the world, as well as the colonies they were attached to, experienced tremendous growth in trade, especially in primary products, something that was unheard of during previous periods of trade expansion (O'Rourke and Williamson 2002). Globalization also increased the interdependency of all the trading nations, thereby increasing the opportunity costs of the war. Specifically, increased openness had made the European states more vulnerable to the loss of imported food and materials. By raising wages, economic growth had made the maintenance of standing armies more expensive. Businessmen across Europe were not pushing for war and therefore its outbreak came as a shock (Eloranta and Harrison 2010, Ferguson 1999). Yet other factors, beyond imperialism, were stronger in pushing the great powers toward an intensifying arms race. One of the most important was the industrialization of warfare, which increased the destructive efficiency of military equipment and gave industrialized states a bigger bang for their bucks (Ferguson 2001, McNeill 1982). Finally, the very fact of increased vulnerability to economic disruption probably heightened the propensity of the likely participants to gamble on a rapid offensive, once war became probable (Rowe 2005).

John Keegan (1999) describes a Europe thrust into war by communication failures and irreversible war plans that were designed for the “age-old quest for security in military superiority.” To be sure, World War I was no accident, nor was it “caused” by the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. However, Archduke Ferdinand's assassination did launch into motion a series of diplomatic offensives, acting like trigger mechanisms for a larger contraption. As Keegan argues, the mobilization plans and military resources of the great powers differed greatly, which necessitated the playing out of a complex game. For example, Germany had precise timetables in place to carry out the Schlieffen Plan – the quick defeat of France to avoid a long two-front war – whereas most of the participants knew that Russia would take a long time to mobilize its forces. Therefore it was logical for both the Russians (to get anywhere in case a war started) and the Germans (to make sure they would get a head start on their war plan) to start early; something that triggered similar responses among the other great powers. Alliances were simply the shell that housed the realities of the mobilization plans, and would prove relatively unimportant in their decision-making on military spending levels prior to the war.

Historians have tended to hold Germany particularly accountable for the pre-1914 arms race and the subsequent diplomatic breakdown (e.g., Berghahn 1973). Niall Ferguson (1999, 2001) has noted that, having started the arms race, Germany was unable to compete against its rivals, and was led therefore to gamble on a preemptive strike in 1914. Thus, the prewar

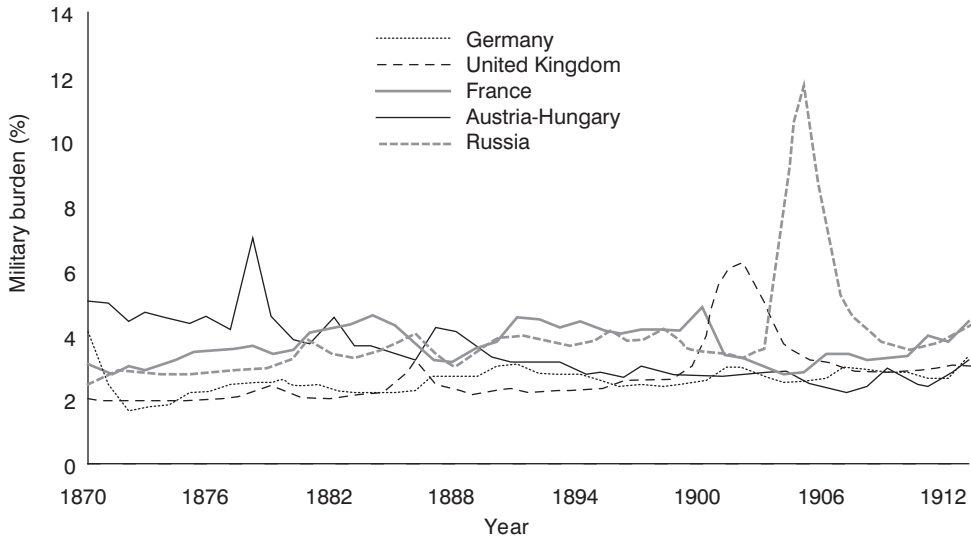


Figure 8.1 Military burdens of Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia, 1870–1913
 Source: Eloranta (2007)

arms race, stimulated by the competition for colonies, was one of the main causes of the war, whereas the industrialization of armaments production contributed mainly to the length and destructiveness of the war. This arms race was under control, relatively speaking, until the early twentieth century, when several events disrupted the precarious equilibrium that existed between the great powers.

On the whole, both the United Kingdom and Germany spent less on their armed forces than most great powers. In the French case, the defense share (military spending as a percentage of central or federal government expenditures) mean remained quite similar during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at little over 30 percent, whereas on average its military burden (military spending as a percentage of GDP) increased from 3.2 percent in 1815–1869 to 4.2 percent in 1870–1913, a higher share than most of its competitors. The British defense share mean declined about 2 percent to 36.7 percent from 1870–1913 compared to the early nineteenth century. However, the rapid growth of the British economy made it possible that the military burden actually declined a little to 2.6 percent, which is similar to what Germany was spending in the same period (as seen in Figure 8.1). For most countries the period leading to World War I meant higher military burdens than that, such as Japan’s 6.1 percent. The United States, the new global economic (but not political) leader, however, spent only 0.7 percent of its GDP on average for military purposes, a trend that continued throughout the interwar period as well. Furthermore, the aggregate, systemic (based on a 16-country total), real military spending in this period increased consistently.

Several shocks upset this balance in the beginning of the twentieth century. First, the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) exposed weaknesses in Russian military power, led many nations to underestimate its military and economic potential, and forced great powers to at least briefly consider Japan as a major player (Eloranta 2007). Second, the arrival of a new type of battleship, the dreadnought, typified the intensification of the industrialized arms race, and forced the great powers to compete even harder for new weapons and potential strategic advantage over their rivals. Third, many colonies were also getting restless, as symbolized

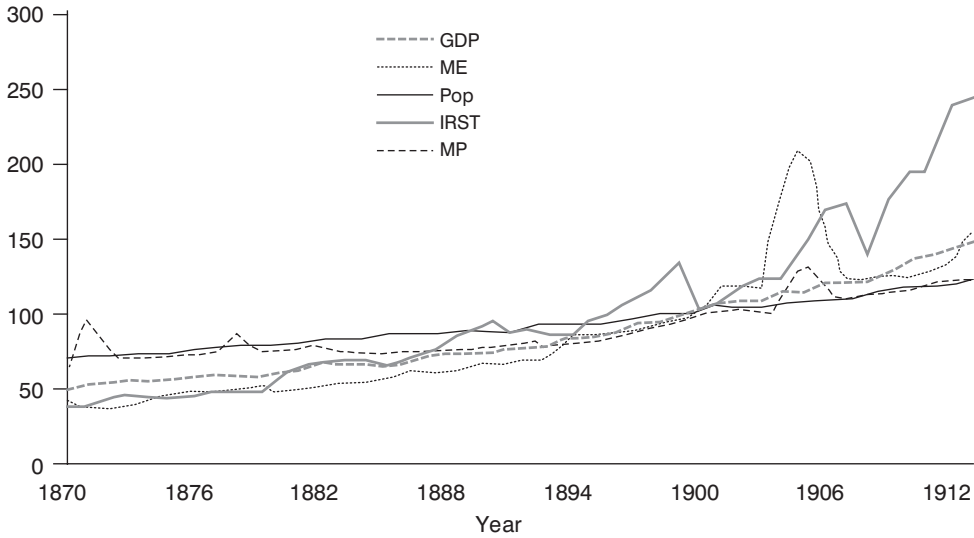


Figure 8.2 Indices of real GDP, real military spending (ME), total population (POP), iron and steel production (IRST), and military personnel (MP) as sixteen country totals, 1870–1913

Sources: Based on the sources listed in Eloranta (2007). GDP and military expenditure adjustments to real terms are also explained in the same article. The sixteen nations are: Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK, and USA

for example by the Boer War in South Africa and the Boxer Rebellion in China. Fourth, the Balkans and the complicated conflicts that arose from the multitude of nationalistic, religious, ethnic, and political groupings – as well as the decline of one empire (the Ottomans), the fracturing of another (Austria-Hungary), the aspirations of a divided empire (the Russians), and the dreams of yet another (Italy) – ultimately spiraled out of control and provided the spark for the war. As seen in Figure 8.2, the potential combatants had an expanded resource base with which to fight the war, including larger and more industrialized economies with the ability to produce more weapons than ever before, and they were also arming themselves at an accelerating pace. These structural forces were unleashed when the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip on June 28, 1914. The swift diplomatic responses by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the machinations of the other nations quickly put Europe on the path of war, which officially began on July 28, 1914, with the Austro-Hungarian invasion of Serbia and the subsequent German offensives in the West (Stevenson 2011).

Macro-economic view: costs, impacts, and outcomes

The war divided most of the world, well beyond the European continent, into three camps: the Central Powers, who consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy (only until 1915), the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria (1915 onward), as well as many of their colonies; the Allied Powers, comprising Russia, France, the UK, most of the Balkan states, Japan, Italy (from 1915 onward), Portugal (1915 onward), Romania (1915 onward), the United States (1917 onward), several Latin American nations (such as Brazil from 1917 onward), and many of

their colonies; and neutral nations like Sweden and Switzerland. All three groups became entangled in the war to some extent, even the neutral states, because of the battle for naval superiority by the combatants and the extant business opportunities that arose due to the almost unlimited thirst for resources. In the West, the war became a stalemate as early as September 1914, after Germany's initial attack through Belgium was halted before reaching Paris by French and British troops. After that, both sides settled into almost four years of trench warfare, with intermittent attacks and insignificant gains. The loss of life, however, was not insignificant. Both sides engaged in futile offensive campaigns to gain even a little ground, with mass casualties. For example, in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 the British forces lost almost 58,000 men during the first hour of the campaign, and close to half a million in total during the offensive (Keegan 1999). Germans had similar losses in their campaigns. The introduction of new weaponry – such as more potent artillery, the machine gun, barbed wire and land mines, and chemical weapons – contributed to the mounting death tolls. Germany was not able to make a sustained effort to gain ground towards Paris until Spring 1918, when the so-called Ludendorff Offensive began. At this juncture they were able to concentrate all of their resources to the fight in the West, and made some significant headway initially. Ultimately the effort stalled, partially due to American reinforcements, and Germany's downhill slide toward ultimate defeat had begun.

In the East, things were different. Germany's plan was to leave the fighting there to the Austrians; however, after the disastrous initial battles they had with the Russians, Germans had to send troops eastward to prevent collapse. In fact, Germany achieved great success in the East, driving through Poland in 1915 and conquering Bucharest in 1916, all of which put great pressure on Russia. Dissatisfaction grew with the leadership of Czar Nicholas II, which ultimately led to his abdication in March 1917. The Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 brought Lenin into power (although not conclusively until after the Civil War in 1922) who was willing to conclude a peace treaty with Germany in March 1918 in Brest-Litovsk. This treaty took Russia out of the war and ceded massive amounts of territory to Germany, thereby enabling them to concentrate their resources to the West, with aforementioned results (Keegan 1999).

The war was also fought in southern Europe, in the Middle East, and in the various European colonies. That meant that millions of people were directly or indirectly impacted by the war in places like Brazil, Liberia, Somalia, India, New Zealand, Australia, and so forth. Often the colonial military forces provided crucial military assistance and/or battlefield support in the European trenches. For example, close to 800,000 Indian fighters fought in World War I, with over 100,000 casualties in total. There also was a naval component to the war, something that was of great importance to the colonies as well as the European war economies. While big battleships that had been such a crucial part of the naval arms race prior to the war proved to be difficult to utilize in actual battles, both sides tried to impose blockades on one another to disrupt the enemy's war effort. The Germans tried to utilize their submarine fleet to sever Allied shipping lanes, and they escalated the use of U-boats almost every year of the war. From 1917 onwards they declared unrestricted submarine warfare the norm, in essence announcing that everything was fair game in their total war effort. Although they were unable to sink enough Allied ships to disrupt their supply lines, such efforts provoked the U.S. to enter the war eventually, and Britain still reigned supreme at sea (Davis and Engerman 2006).

Ultimately, World War I became a war that was decided by economic resources. As Niall Ferguson (1999) has pointed out, Germany did not mismanage its resources and thus lose the war. Quite the contrary: the Allies had massive advantages in terms of total GDP, population,

military personnel, armaments production, and food supply throughout the conflict; a situation that became even more pronounced when the U.S. finally entered the war on their side. In November 1914, the Allies had 793 million people under their control compared to 151 million for the Central Powers. By the end of the war, the Allies controlled 1,272 million in terms of population (or 70 percent of world total), whereas the Central Powers' total was still under 200 million. Or, in terms of GDP, the Allies possessed a combined GDP of \$1,761 billion (1990 Geary–Khamis dollars) at the end of the war, which was far superior to the less than \$400 billion the Central Powers had in 1915. The Allies had a massive advantage in population, territory, and GDP throughout the war; this advantage became even more disproportionate as the war went on (Broadberry and Harrison 2005).

Allied great powers were ultimately able to mobilize their resources more effectively during the war. Even though the Central Powers initially did quite well with the limited resources they had, the Allies were able to mobilize their far superior resources better both at the home front and to the front lines. Their more democratic institutions supported the demands of the total war effort better than their authoritarian counterparts. Therefore, the richer countries mobilized more men and materiel for the war, and their war industries proved quite capable of adapting to fulfill the needs of the war machine (Broadberry and Harrison 2005). Moreover, having a large peasant population turned out to be a hindrance for the production of food under wartime constraints. In poorer countries, and even in affluent Germany, mobilization efforts siphoned off resources from agriculture and the farmers preferred to hoard food rather than sell it for low prices. As Avner Offer (1989) has argued, food (or the lack of it) played a crucial part in Germany's collapse. As seen in Table 8.1, Germany's problem was not so much that it was unable to mobilize resources for the war,

Table 8.1 Economic capabilities and military mobilization of the Great Powers, in 1914 and 1918

<i>Year and Variable</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Austria-Hungary</i>	<i>Russia</i>	<i>USA</i>
GDP per capita						
1914	3,059	4,927	3,236	2,876	1,488*	4,799
1918	2,983	5,459	2,396	2,555	–	5,659
Military Burden						
1914	14.90	14.15	10.36	30.2	–	0.90
1918	38.80	27.00	59.39	17.2*	–	8.05
Defense Share						
1914	54.86	64.62	60.10	–	–	47.97
1918	51.61	54.89	77.65	–	–	48.50
Military Personnel (% of Population)						
1914	1.30	1.16	1.99	1.60	0.78	0.17
1918	13.70	9.10	13.59	1.54	6.12*	2.81

* in the absences of data, prior year's figure used to illustrate level of mobilization

Sources: See Eloranta (2007) and Eloranta and Harrison (2010) for details. GDP is expressed in 1990 Geary-Khamis U.S. dollars

but the fact that its main ally, Austria-Hungary, was a poor nation with limited resources and was plagued by the inability to mobilize effectively. The collective mobilization of resources by the Allies was too big an obstacle for Germany to overcome.

What about the total cost of the conflict? It has been estimated that about nine million combatants and twelve million civilians died during the so-called Great War, with substantial property damage especially in France, Belgium, and Poland. According to Rondo Cameron and Larry Neal (2003), the direct financial losses arising from the Great War were \$180–230 billion (1914 U.S. dollars), whereas the indirect losses of property and capital rose to over \$150 billion. According to the most recent estimates, the total economic losses arising from the war could be as high as \$525 billion (1914 U.S. dollars, Broadberry and Harrison 2005). The total of battle and non-battle deaths varied between the combatants. Countries that lost the most lives were those most directly involved in the fighting. For example, smaller nations like Serbia-Montenegro and Romania lost 5.7 and 3.3 percent of their overall population in the conflict. Turkey, France, and Germany also lost more than 3 percent of their population. The most battle deaths in absolute numbers were incurred by Russia, 1.8 million in total. Allied losses were more comprehensive than those by the Central Powers, 5.4 million compared to 4 million (Broadberry and Harrison 2005). An enormous amount of human capital was lost and an entire generation was scarred by the physical and psychological toll of the war.

The individual participants of World War I devised different solutions to pay for the enormous burden of war. Germany and France were less willing to tax their populations to pay for the war effort. Britain in turn funded the conflict by using a variety of different taxes, in addition to other means (namely, borrowing). The war was a huge shock to the Western economies in particular, since it shattered the international trading system and the gold standard. Inflation was also a big problem, and most of the participants imposed price and wage controls, as well as rationing systems (Broadberry and Harrison 2005, Webber and Wildavsky 1986). In order to maximize war production, once it became apparent that the war would last much longer than the generals had initially assumed, most nations brought businessmen into government service, usually to oversee supply chains and mobilization plans. The kind of corporatism that saw its inception in the 1920s with Mussolini's Italy was introduced already during the war in a more limited form, and big business gained a foothold in government acquisitions for some time to come. In a way, this was the beginning of the so-called Military-Industrial Complex in its modern form (Eloranta 2009, Koistinen 1980, McNeill 1982).

Aftermath of the war and conclusions

The Central Powers lost the war due to inferior resources and their inability to mobilize at a rate that would have overcome this gap. The aftermath was messy for all the participants for a variety of reasons. First of all, the Allies were set on punishing Germany for the war, and implemented harsh conditions and reparations on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Britain and France were also keen on having Germany pay them first, and only then would they pay back their loans to the only economic superpower left standing, the United States. This led to a series of negotiations and ultimately failure to pay back many of those loans once the Great Depression hit. Furthermore, Weimar Germany was almost predestined to an existence of uncertainty and political turmoil. Second, the demobilization after the war was difficult to implement, since the combatants really did not have a precedent for such a large-scale operation. Many women felt slighted for having to leave their jobs in the factories

to make room for the returning soldiers. Third, economic uncertainty was an inevitable outcome of the war, which the depression in 1920–21 drove home. Fourth, the apocalyptic legacy of the war was further reinforced by the devastating epidemic known as the Spanish influenza, which by some estimates killed more than 50 million people worldwide.

Among the losers of the war, in addition to the Central Powers, were globalization and international economic cooperation. Devastation also visited the countless families who lost members as a result of the war. Many economies now had to maneuver in an atmosphere of uncertainty and loss of human capital. The European alliance system, which was supposed to stop this kind of insanity, also crumbled. Certain ethnic communities that were wiped out by genocidal actions of nations and the rules of war of yesteryear, which protected civilians from harm and constrained warfare from encompassing societies as a whole, were scattered to the winds of history.

Were there any winners in this war? It is difficult to claim, for example, that Britain or France really “won” the war in the traditional sense. They incurred almost incomprehensible losses, and in the interest of quenching their sense of revenge they set into motion the machinery that would lead to World War II. Some of the new states that gained independence might be considered winners of the war, like Finland and Poland. But challenges remained for them as well, such as how to set up their governments and how to defend their borders against much stronger neighbors. Many of these new democracies were also very unstable, and would devolve into authoritarian and/or military dictatorships in the 1930s, especially in Eastern Europe. European colonialism now faced an uphill climb due to the economic costs of the war and contributions of the colonial troops, who expected reciprocity. Yet, instead of really attempting to assign “winners,” we should look at World War I as the beginning of an era of total war and instability.

Notes

- 1 Available from <http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/crownprincewilhelm1913.htm>. Accessed June 12, 2011.
- 2 Although, as Niall Ferguson (1999, Chapter 7) has pointed out, there was no uniform enthusiasm for war among those crowds. Some were quite apprehensive about the future.
- 3 An example of this was the Turks killing over a million Armenians, as well as other nationalities before, during, and after the war (Rummel 1998).
- 4 One of the points of contention is the famous Fischer debate, which concentrated on whether Germany had deliberately caused the war and had far-reaching war plans. See, for example, Fischer (1967), Langdon (1986), Ferguson (1994), as well as the discussion of the rationality of German military actions as a response to their inability to compete in terms of military spending in Ferguson (1999), and Germany’s perception of others’ weaknesses in Sagan (1986). See Kaiser (1983) for further discussion.

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