

REFLECTIONS ON THE GREAT WAR, 1914-1918

The British have long remembered World War I for its terrible human losses. Within years of the war's end, the country came to a standstill at 11.00 every 11th November to commemorate the dead and reflect on the service of those who survived, many with life-long injuries to mind or body. There was little sense of triumph or even victory. Regret figured more than rejoicing. Later generations even came to view Britain's involvement in the war as a mistake and its military contributions to the war as blunders. Why was this?

Britain went to war in 1914 for reasons which strike many people as very tangled or even obscure. No British territory was invaded; no British trade route was attacked; no British subjects were seized or savaged or slaughtered.

Events in the Balkans triggered the crisis leading to war. The countries in that region had been formed during the previous eighty or so years with artificial borders and disputed territories. Some of them wanted lands and peoples belonging to their neighbours. There were two wars in the region in 1912-13 and in 1914 Serbia, with under three million people before 1912, challenged the right of Austria-Hungary, with 49 million people, to rule over Serbs within its empire. Austria-Hungary sought to crush Serbian agitation and attacked that tiny kingdom in July 1914. Serbia was not an innocent victim. It had doubled its territories and added 1.5 million to its population in the war of 1912-13. It would not have played a high-risk game with Austria-Hungary without the backing of its sponsor, Russia. Russia supported Serbia while Germany supported Austria-Hungary. Once fighting began and Russia was attacked, its own ally, France, was at war with Germany.

This chain reaction happened very quickly and it is easy to say that more vigorous diplomacy might have slowed the rush to a general European war. The crunch point for Britain was its alliance with France and its treaty commitment to defend Belgium. When the Germans attacked France through Belgium, the Liberal Government would have needed very ingenious arguments to avoid war. Regret existed from the very beginning. The Foreign Secretary famously said that the lights had gone out all over Europe. When the German ambassador in London and his wife met the Prime Minister and his wife to bid farewell, tears flowed.

But British participation was correct. Whatever the rights and wrongs of what happened in and to Serbia, the German response was disproportionate and menacing. The German army had detailed plans for an invasion of France through neutral Belgium. The German government ordered the attack. It clearly used the crisis triggered in Serbia to smash the French army and add French territory to the areas stripped from France in 1871. From late 1914 to 1918, Germany controlled Belgium and much of north-east France. These were among the world's most advanced industrial areas. Germany gained over 60% of France's iron and steel, mining and manufacturing resources and 50% of its coal by seizing this small region. The Germans did little or nothing to win the hearts and minds of the 8.5 million Belgians and French people they now ruled. In the very first few weeks of the war, they treated property and people alike with disdain and even brutality. Over the longer term, the conquered populations often served as virtual slave labour for the German war production

machine. Conditions were particularly bad in areas taken from Russia, where Germany ruled another nine million people by the end of 1916.

Of course, all wars lead to ugly episodes but Germany eagerly used force to expand its territory and economic power. This was legally wrong. Moreover, an aggressively expansionist Germany threatened Britain's long-standing and intricate economic links with Western Europe. If America had not entered the war and if the German spring offensive of 1918 had succeeded, a peace settlement forced on the allies in June 1918 would have doubled the size of pre-war Germany leaving a vast swath of northern Europe from the Ukraine to outside Paris under a regime which celebrated military power.

The British contributed to victory in four main ways. The least important in defeating Germany, though significant locally, was in Africa where lengthy campaigns deprived Germany of its colonies, which later became Tanganyika and Namibia. The white South African government and many black African soldiers participated in this effort. Second, the second largest campaign waged by British forces in World War I occurred in the Middle East. The British attacked Germany's ally, the Ottoman Empire, whose core was in Turkey. They eventually advanced along the Mediterranean coastal belt to Jerusalem and Damascus and they pushed, with great difficulty, through what today is Iraq. Most of the troops deployed were raised in British India, which contributed to the Empire's manpower the largest volunteer army ever recruited up to then.

These were the main military examples of how Britain engaged in a world-wide war. The third main British contribution to overall victory combined two further global themes. Britain depended for food, financial credit, munitions, weapons and fighting personnel on its empire overseas and the wider world more generally. Argentina, outside the empire, supplied food. America provided much more. None of that could have happened without the Royal Navy which guarded the sea routes from German U-boat warfare. Without the Royal Navy, over one million American troops would not have arrived on the Western Front to provide that vital extra boost to the Allies in 1918.

The most important British contribution remained on the Western Front. This sector has always dominated British reactions to the war and here regret has often boiled into recrimination. Many popular accounts of the battle of the Somme of July 1916 assert that the British blundered into trench warfare. In fact, the Germans and French created the appalling and bloody stalemate of the Western Front in September-November 1914 when the grand German offensive failed to reach Paris and when the French failed to drive the Germans from France. The Germans dug in and the allies could not batter them out. In August and September 1914, France suffered 420,000 casualties on the Western front. Across all fronts, the total German casualties in the five months of fighting in 1914 reached 800,000. Of those casualties, 250,000 were dead and about the same number were permanently wounded. In 1916, the failed German effort to seize Verdun cost 700,000 Franco-German casualties. The British scarcely invented the crippling offensive. Their role was essentially to help prop up the Western Front and ensure it held from 1916.

The war in the West hinged on the Eastern front. The Germans defended their Western lines in the expectation that they would defeat Russia in the east and then release additional troops for a knock-down blow against the French. They stuck to that strategy through thick and thin until Russia indeed collapsed in early 1918 but Germany's opportunity came too late. The allies in the West were by then reinforced from the British Empire, including India, and from America. The French and the British continued to shoulder most of the burden, but hundreds of thousands of fresh troops contributed greatly to victory. The last months of the war saw hard fighting on the Western Front. Few forecast an end in 1918. But the British armies played a full part in keeping up the pace of the counter-attack. The retreating Germans were not allowed to rest long enough to re-group. They lost 800,000 casualties from mid-July to 1 November, but battle losses were now matched by unprecedented numbers of Germans who surrendered. Morale on the home front sank and forced the government to resign and its successors to seek an armistice. The allies never invaded Germany itself.

The war was on a scale unimaginable in 1914. Before World War I, Waterloo was the last great continental battle in which the British played a leading part. It involved about 28,000 British soldiers. The first day of the Somme involved over ten times that number.

The scale of the war drew in resources and human effort throughout the empire. The Australians lost as many men killed or dead from wounds and illness on active service as the Americans lost in Vietnam. Yet the Australian population in 1914 was only 2.5% of the American total in 1970.

At home, the war effort affected the entire nation. The impact in Sheffield alone was unparalleled. 50,000 men from the Sheffield region joined up. The new college on Eccleshall Road, built to accommodate a few hundred trainee teachers, became a hospital which took in 64,000 servicemen during the war. The region's steel industry was transformed to cope with unimaginable demand for weapons and munitions. All this required mass mobilization, endless planning, and exhaustive organization. Despite regrets and occasional recrimination, the Great War lasted for four years because so many willingly did their bit. There are sound if disputed reasons for saying they were right to do so.

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