

# The Impact of the First World War and Its Implications for Europe Today

By Fraser Cameron

## Introduction

The First World War was a calamity for Germany and Europe. The Second World War was an even bigger calamity for Germany and Europe. But without both World Wars there would be no European Union (EU) today. The EU has provided the essential infrastructure to deal with 'the German Question' – the role of the largest and most powerful state in Europe. When Europeans commemorate the Great War of 1914-18 this summer they should be reflecting not only on the diplomatic blunders and the enormous waste of lives but also the beginning of a new approach to international relations epitomised by the EU.

The First World War destroyed empires, created numerous new nation-states, encouraged independence movements in Europe's colonies, forced the United States to become a world power and led directly to Soviet communism and the rise of Hitler. Diplomatic alliances and promises made during the First World War, especially in the Middle East, also came back to haunt Europeans a century later. The balance of power approach to international relations was broken but not shattered. It took the Second World War to bring about sufficient political forces to embark on a revolutionary new approach to inter-state relations.

After both wars Europe was exhausted and devastated. The difference was that the second major internecine war in Europe in a generation led to a profound change in political thinking, at least in Western Europe, about how states should conduct their relations. *Die Stunde Null* was the backdrop to the revolutionary ideas of the EU's 'founding fathers,' statesmen such as Robert Schuman, Alcide De Gasperi, Jean Monnet who developed the novel idea of a community of states establishing a political system based on sharing sovereignty. This system has brought many benefits to Europeans but in recent years the system has been under challenge by the rise of Euroscepticism, populism and nationalism. As Europe reflects on the titanic struggle of 1914-18 it is important to recall the advances made since 1945 through European integration and redouble efforts to combat nationalist and extremist forces.

Responsibility for the Great War remains hotly debated today with very different dimensions of the war accentuated by the various combatants. What is incontestable, however, is the number of advances in science, technology and medicine, as well as the revolutionary changes in social behaviour that occurred as a result of the 1914-18 conflict. The aristocracy

was overthrown or its role greatly diminished. The socialist and labour movements seized the opportunity to make considerable advances; but so too did communism and fascism. Germany was at the centre of both failed experiments and was unable to achieve a peaceful unification as a democratic state until 1990. But Germany's neighbours have not forgotten Germany's role in both World Wars and hence the burden of history weighs more heavily on German shoulders than for any other nation in Europe. Yet Germany has dealt with *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* better than any state in history; certainly much better than Japan or the Soviet Union/Russia. Europeans should contrast and compare today's Germany with that in 1914 or 1939 when they look back on the two calamitous wars of the twentieth century. Today's Germany, embedded in the EU, is the most successful, progressive, democratic state in its entire history. All Europeans thus have a stake in the continued success of the EU as it provides a safe anchor for the most powerful state in Europe.

This paper considers how the 1914-18 war led to fundamental changes in European politics, economics and society, paving the way after 1945 for a historic new way of dealing with inter-state relations in Europe. It suggests that the horrors of the Great War remain alive in Europe today and colour the reluctance of most Europeans to resort to war to achieve political ends. It argues that the process of European integration has been extremely beneficial to Germany and that the German Question may finally be put to rest.

### **Who caused the war?**

Part of the debate in today's Europe about Germany goes back to the origins of both world wars. Many believe that because of Germany's role in both World Wars it is too big to act as an independent nation state and has to be embedded in structures such as the EU and NATO for its own good. Thousands of books have been written about the 1914-18 conflict with many seeking to apportion responsibility for the outbreak of war. The renowned German historian, Fritz Fischer, caused a sensation in the 1960s when he published a book *Griff nach der Weltmacht* claiming that Germany was primarily responsible for starting the war as it had secret ambitions to annex most of Europe. In more recent times, historians such as Margaret Macmillan *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War* and Christopher Clark *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* have adopted more nuanced arguments. Macmillan agrees that Germany should bear much of the responsibility as it had the power to put pressure on its Austria-Hungary ally and stop the drift to war. Clark argues that Germany, like the other major powers, sleep-walked into the war. Another famous historian, Neil Ferguson, has argued in *The Pity of War* that Britain should not have become involved as the stakes were too low and the ultimate costs too high.

What is perhaps more interesting is how the major powers involved have presented different narratives about their involvement in the Great War. In Germany the shame of the Nazi period including the Holocaust has meant that there has been little appetite to reflect about the 1914-18 conflict. For Russia, it has always been the heroism and sacrifice of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 that remain uppermost in the national psyche rather than the disasters of the First World War, including defeat and revolution. President Putin has recently lamented the changes after the First World War that left millions of Russian speakers in the Soviet Republic of Ukraine. The war also means different things to the constituent parts of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria looks back with regret tinged with nostalgia for its glory days. Hungary still finds it difficult to accept the injustice of the Treaty of Trianon. Czechoslovakia gained its independence only to be swallowed up by Germany twenty years later. France views the war as a tragic but massive endeavour to save the motherland from *Les Boches*. The First World War certainly plays better in the French national memory than the defeat in 1940 followed by occupation and collaboration. For Britain, the Second World War was the 'good war' whereas the rights and wrongs of Britain's participation in the First World War were less clear - and are still debated today.

Each year millions of Britons wear red poppies to commemorate Armistice Day and hold memorial services around war memorials on which the names of the dead in the First World War vastly outnumber those of the Second.

The controversies about the causes, strategies and consequences of the Great War remain matters of contemporary concern. In March 2014, the British education secretary, Michael Gove, tried to reclaim this year's commemorations for those for whom the war was a just cause fought for liberal values. He complained that for too long the conflict had been portrayed as a series of catastrophic mistakes by an aristocratic elite. The impact of the two world wars has been such that in other parts of the world politicians have been competing to draw analogies. At the World Economic Forum in Davos in February 2014, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe speculated that the Sino-Japanese territorial disputes over tiny rocky islands in the East China Sea might be analogous to the various crises that led to the outbreak of the First World War. German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton both likened Russian President Vladimir Putin's annexation of the Crimea to Nazi Germany's annexation of the former Czechoslovakia in 1938.

More recently Putin has spoken of the need to protect ethnic Russian minorities in the former Soviet republics including Ukraine. But Hitler had a geopolitical vision – the domination of Europe – and the reunification of German-speaking peoples was merely the means by which he could acquire the critical mass needed to attain that geopolitical end-state. Putin appears to want to restore Russia to a central global position in international politics, something the former Soviet Union enjoyed for much of the post-World War II era. It does not mean, however, that Putin seeks to restore the former Soviet empire. Surprisingly Putin's actions have found more sympathy in Germany than other European countries with at least two former Chancellors expressing understanding for Moscow's actions. German public opinion also seems to show more forgiveness to Russia's actions than in other European countries, perhaps reflecting some latent war guilt. Although politicians often use historical analogies to describe an unfolding situation it does not mean that analogical reasoning is not fraught with potential dangers. It is important to note that each situation is unique although some unscrupulous political leaders often exploit these opportunities for their own ends.

### **The changes resulting from the First World War**

The human cost of the First World War was horrendous. More than 16 million people, both military and civilian, died in the war. An entire generation of young men was wiped away. In 1919, the year after the war was over in France, there were 15 women for every man between the ages of 18 and 30. It is tragic to consider all of the lost potential, all of the writers, artists, teachers, inventors and leaders that were killed in 'the war to end all wars.' But although the impact of the First World War was hugely destructive it also produced many new developments in medicine, warfare, politics and social attitudes.

The First World War changed the nature of warfare. Technology became an essential element in the art of war with airplanes, submarines, tanks all playing important new roles. Mass production techniques developed during the war for the building of armaments revolutionised other industries in the post-war years. The first chemical weapons were also used when the Germans used poisonous gas at Ypres in 1915. A century later the international community was seeking to prohibit President Assad of Syria from using chemical weapons against his own people. The Great War also led to mass armies based on conscription, a novel concept for Britain, although not on the continent. It is ironic that the principle of universal military service was introduced in Britain without the adoption of universal adult male suffrage. The war also saw the first propaganda films, some designed to help enlist US support for the Allies. The Charlie Chaplin film *Shoulder Arms* offers a vivid

illustration of the horrors of life at the front. Propaganda films would later be perfected under the Nazis.

Modern surgery was born in the First World War, where civil and military hospitals acted as theatres of experimental medical intervention. Millions of veterans survived the war but were left maimed, mutilated and disfigured. These were the so-called 'broken faces' whose plight was often eased by the development of skin grafts. Blood banks were developed after the discovery in 1914 that blood could be prevented from clotting. The First World War also led doctors to start to study the emotional as opposed to the physical stress of war. Shell shock and traumatic shock were identified as common symptoms. But despite these insights and countless more sufferers in the Second World War, it was not until the aftermath of the Vietnam War that this condition was formally recognised as post-traumatic stress disorder. It was also found in troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan and was often cited as a cause for many gun killings in the US.

The war also had major implications for the class structures in Europe. The upper classes suffered proportionately greater losses in the fighting than any other class, a fact that ensured that a resumption of the pre-war status quo was impossible. The decline of the upper classes was further hastened by the introduction of broad universal suffrage in Europe. The extension of the franchise, coupled with an explosion in trade unionism, afforded the working classes greater political and social representation. The various armies had also to promote new officers from humble backgrounds who were not willing to continue the culture of deference to the upper classes.

The horrors of the Great War also gave an impulse to Christian socialism with the rally cry of 'never again'. It also forced women into jobs that had previously been a male preserve. Many of the women whom the war effort had forced out of domestic service and into factories found themselves unwilling to relinquish their new independence. The War thus gave a boost to demands for women's emancipation. The War also sparked a peace movement that had disarmament as its main aim. It flourished briefly in the inter-war years, was reborn during the Vietnam War and found many adherents in Europe e.g. the campaign for nuclear disarmament (CND). Although less formally organised than during the 1980s, the anti-war movement in Europe showed its strength in the mass demonstrations against the US led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The war also had major consequences for the European socialist and labour movement. Although well organised in many countries, including Britain, France and Germany, the socialist movement failed to stop the war in 1914. Initially skilled workers in the armaments industry were not only exempted from military service but also enjoyed higher wages and better food in return for the banning of strike action. But as the war continued living and working conditions for factory workers gradually declined. Socialist groups began to agitate for peace, a process that received a boost as a result of the 1917 Russian revolution. At the end of the war in 1918 the socialist and trade union movement was much stronger than in 1914.

The Great War also saw the introduction of the planned economy and a much bigger role for the state. Soon after the outbreak of war the German government took control over banks, foreign trade and the production and sale of food as well as armaments. It also set maximum prices for various goods. When the Bolsheviks took power in Russia in 1917 they embarked on a vast nationalisation programme and later a comprehensive planned economy. The planned economy also had its adherents in other countries, especially after the twin shocks of hyperinflation in the 1920s and the Great Crisis of 1929.

### **Foreign policy implications**

The 1914-18 conflict had a global impact. In the Middle East, for example, the British and French promised different things to the Arabs and the Jews in return for their support against the Ottoman Empire. Under the infamous Sykes-Picot agreement, London and Paris carved out respective spheres of influence in what was to become Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. But at the same time the British promised the Jews a homeland in Palestine under the equally infamous Balfour Declaration laying the foundations for the emergence of Israel and the world's most intractable contemporary conflict. When the British deceit was exposed it led to a permanent feeling of mistrust between many Arabs and European colonial powers. Many analysts point to the European carve up of the Middle East in 1918 with the many artificial borders as the root cause of the continuing turmoil in the region today. Ethnic, sectarian and tribal differences were of little concern to the colonial-era map-makers. Iraq was formed by merging three Ottoman provinces - dominated respectively by Shias, Sunnis and Kurds. It was also cut off from Kuwait – the genesis of trouble later. The biggest losers of the post-war lottery in the Middle East were the Kurds. Nowadays this still stateless people enjoy a high degree of regional autonomy – as well as relative peace – in federal Iraq while their compatriots in Syria and Turkey face challenges from Damascus and Ankara.

As regards the map of Europe, the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires were broken up and drastically shrunk, while Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were all born or reborn as nation states. Russia underwent the Bolshevik Revolution that would have a major impact on European and world history. Germany was reduced in size and forced to pay substantial reparations. The Kaiser went into exile, and Germany plunged into economic and political chaos that paved the way for the rise of Hitler. The new countries were poor and often in conflict with each other. US President Wilson had talked about transparent international agreements, unfettered access to the seas and the lifting of trade barriers. These would prove utopian as was his concept of borders based on ethnicity, a concept that would be the precursor to many conflicts. The biggest of the new countries was Poland, which had disappeared from the map for over a century after being partitioned in 1795. In 1923 when its borders were finally settled, Poland had relatively good relations with only two neighbours – tiny Latvia to the north and a distant Romania to the south. If the Treaty of Versailles was deemed harsh then the Treaty of Trianon was arguably much harsher, leaving Hungary as a much reduced state with millions of Hungarians outside its borders. These minority issues were suppressed during the communist era but resurfaced post 1989 causing major problems between Romania and Hungary and Slovakia and Hungary. Inevitably the EU was also drawn into attempts to resolve these minority issues. The Stability Pact, or Balladur Plan, was devised to provide EU guidance and support for the treatment of minorities.

The real winner of the First World War was the United States. It was late in entering the war, only in 1917, but emerged far stronger than most other nations as it had not suffered either the bloodletting or the wasted industrial effort of the major European nations. It became, almost overnight, the leading financial power in the world, elbowing Britain out of its way en route to becoming the world's banker. The war also involved hundreds of thousands of soldiers from the European colonies and British Dominions, including India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. Their experience and loss of life helped push demands for independence. India alone sent some 100,000 troops to fight for Britain. More than 10,000 never returned home. The First World War also heralded the birth of the League of Nations, a body of nation states to promote international peace and security. Regrettably its staunchest supporter, President Woodrow Wilson was unable to persuade the American Congress that the US should join. In 1945 the US would adopt a different approach.

The financial crash of 1929 brought misery across Europe. Adolf Hitler seized the opportunity to seize power, under dubious semi-legitimate circumstances, and start building up Germany's armed forces in contravention of the Versailles Treaty. Few in Western Europe believed that Hitler was deadly serious about creating a Greater Reich across the European continent. There were also concerns that the reparations that had been

demanded by France at Versailles had been too harsh, a view expressed eloquently in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* by John Maynard Keynes. When London and Paris finally awoke to the threat it was too late. By 1941 Hitler controlled half of Europe after a stunning series of Blitzkrieg victories. But Hitler over-reached himself by declaring war on the US before defeating the Soviet Union. In 1945, just thirteen years after the proclamation of the one thousand year Reich it was all over. Germany was divided and lay in ruins.

### **Changes from the Second World War**

The Second World War was directly related to the First World War. It was the greatest and deadliest war in human history, with over 57 million lives lost. In combat, approximately eight million Russians, four million Germans, two million Chinese and one million Japanese soldiers lost their lives. Britain and France each lost hundreds of thousands. The civilian toll was probably higher – an estimated 22 million Soviet citizens were killed, and six million Jews in the Holocaust. It would take a coalition of the UK, the US and the Soviet Union to defeat Hitler after six years of bloody warfare that again brought widespread death and destruction to Europe – and to many other parts of the world. The war was not confined to Europe. It affected the Middle East, Africa and Asia causing untold suffering, not least when atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

The war also increased demands for independence throughout much of the colonial empires still in European possession – the Dutch in Indonesia, the French in South East Asia, the Belgians in Central Africa, the British in India, etc. This was a particularly traumatic and drawn out process for the French, in Algeria and in Vietnam where they fought prolonged and bitter wars in an attempt to maintain their colonial control. The balance of global power moved from London, Paris, Berlin to Washington and Moscow. The defining paradigm for the next half century would be the Cold War. The Russian people had suffered immeasurably during the war, and western Russia was devastated by the land warfare which was primarily on Russian territory. But, in the process of defeating the Germans, the Russians had built a large and powerful army, which occupied most of Eastern Europe at the end of the war. The US economy was greatly stimulated by the war, even more so than in World War I. Spared the physical destruction of war, the US economy dominated the world economy by 1945. The US was also the major military power in the world and de facto 'leader of the Free World.'

Like the First World War, the Second World War also brought advances in medicine and technology. Vaccinations helped lower mortality rates and boosted population growth. Progress in electronics and computers fundamentally transformed the post-war world. The development of the atomic bomb by European and American scientists during the war, not only changed the nature of potential future wars, but also marked the beginning of the nuclear power industry. World War II also gave the impetus for the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, with the full backing of the US and other major powers. The US also helped establish the other multilateral organisations such as the IMF, World Bank and the GATT, the forerunner of the WTO. There was a determination to avoid the mistakes of the interwar years which had exacerbated the Great Depression.

One of the main results of the Second World War was the division of Europe. Huge armies stared at each other through an Iron Curtain that ran through the heart of Europe. The US marshalled Western Europe into a system of containment aimed at limiting and ultimately diminishing Soviet power. NATO was established in 1949 while a huge financial package (the Marshall Plan) helped Western European economies to recover. The division of Europe froze political change for several decades. Attempts by some Soviet satellite states to break free (East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968) were brutally suppressed by the Red Army. There was no possibility for the nations that had been bolted together in the state of Yugoslavia to establish their own identities. The pent up demand for

independence would later tear the Balkans apart in the 1990s after the death of President Tito. 1954 also saw Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gift Crimea to Ukraine, a move that would later come back to haunt the European body politic in 2014 when Putin reclaimed the territory in a bloodless coup.

By the 1980s it became clear that Soviet communism was failing to deliver the standard of living that most people enjoyed in the West. The appointment of a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in 1984, opened the path for a fundamental realignment of the European political landscape. His policies of glasnost and perestroika offered hope to the peoples of Eastern Europe and in 1989 he declined to send in the Red Army to suppress demonstrations for greater freedom in East Germany. In November that year the Berlin Wall came down leading to the swift unification of Germany and opening up the possibility of East European countries 'returning to Europe' by joining the EU.

### **The rise of the EU**

One of the strongest motivations for the birth of the EU was 'never again' should there be war in Europe, or at least not between the members of the EU. The prescient founding fathers took the highly symbolic coal and steel industries as the starting point for a new community method of government. If France and Germany shared responsibility for the industries that were at the heart of the armaments industry then there really could be no further war between these two rivals. This logic continued with the birth of the European Community in 1957. The desire to develop a new system of governance and avoid war as an instrument of policy was at the very heart of the discussions leading up to the Treaty of Rome. The EU was viewed then and continues to be viewed as a peace project. The EU has become a 'security community' in which the members eschew war or the threat of war in their inter-state relations. By building up a community covering most aspects of economic life, from trade to a common currency, the EU has achieved a unique model of regional integration.

The EU (and NATO) also provided the context in which Germany was able to return to a seat with the international community. Until unification in 1991 Germany was content to take a back seat to the US on security matters and to France on EU matters. Germany was a *Musterknabe* of the EU and one of the strongest supporters of a federal Europe. This approach began to change under the chancellorship of Gerhard Schroeder and accelerated under Angela Merkel. Germany began to play a more assertive role in defending its national interests. A further boost to Germany's leadership role was provided by the 2008-09 financial crisis that shook the EU to its foundations. It swiftly became apparent that only Germany had the financial and economic muscle to rescue the debt-laden members of the eurozone. But Germany received little thanks for its bail-out assistance. Indeed in Greece and other Member States there were open references to Germany throwing its weight around as during the First and Second World Wars. Anti-German sentiment was also to be found in many other countries, from Spain to Hungary. There was resentment at Germany forcing austerity policies on highly indebted countries and also resentment at Germany's huge export surplus which some economists considered was one of the causes of the euro's problems.

### **Implications for Europe today**

Even though Germany has become the undoubted leader of the EU it is still reluctant to play a dominant role in military matters. It contributes less to European security than Britain or France: in 2013 it spent 1.4 per cent of GDP on defence, while France spent 1.9 per cent and Britain 2.3 per cent. This reflects a continuing horror of war in general and a determination that German troops should never again be used for the purposes of aggrandizement. This had led to Berlin being at odds with its EU partners, especially France and the UK, over issues such as the intervention in Libya and the proposed intervention in Syria. The burden of the two world wars is much more obvious in Berlin than Paris or London. But the reluc-

tance to use force to achieve political aims is widespread in the EU. Only the UK and France, two members of the UNSC with a long tradition as military powers, regularly show a willingness to use force, whether in the Balkans or Africa. The US continually presses the Europeans to spend more on defence, a plea that usually falls on deaf ears. The bloody conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s, however, showed that war as a means to achieve political goals has not disappeared from the European continent. The Russian military intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014 showed that the Russian bear was also ready to use force to achieve its aims.

The EU response as a conflict prevention manager and peacemaker has been patchy. Tony Blair hoped that the Balkans tragedy would push the Europeans to do more. Together with Jacques Chirac he promoted a plan for the EU to have its own defence forces. Germany remained a reluctant follower although the SPD/Green coalition government did authorise German forces to be used in the NATO operation in Kosovo. The ambitious aims outlined in 1999, however, have never been realised. True, the EU has engaged in some useful peacekeeping operations in the Western Balkans and in parts of Africa. But overall the EU is not perceived as a hard security actor. This again reflects the deeply ingrained memories of the horrors of war on the European continent, especially in Germany.

The Russian de-stabilisation of Ukraine in the first half of 2014 has also brought challenges to Germany. Traditionally Germany has enjoyed a close and privileged relationship with Russia, partly due to historical ties (including war guilt) and partly due to economic and trade interests. Germany gets more than 30% of its energy from Russia. These economic ties led Germany to be very cautious about agreeing to pursue a sanctions policy against Russia. The group of *Russlandverstehers* crossed party lines epitomised by former Chancellor Schroeder greeting Putin with a bear hug in St Petersburg at his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday party. Merkel and Steinmeier, however, seem to have grasped the enormity of Putin's move against Ukraine and have sought to steer Germany into a middle position regarding EU policy towards Russia. Germany has also been to the fore in seeking a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis although it remains to be seen whether this will produce acceptable results.

## Conclusion

The shadow of 1914-18 (and 1939-45) is thus still present in Europe today. Perhaps the biggest change is that military power is far less significant in European politics than it was a century ago. There is little or no appetite for using force to achieve political goals. Defence spending remains low. The numbers in Europe's armed forces have been dramatically reduced since the end of the Cold War and despite Russian incursions into Ukraine there is little or no appetite to increase numbers. The rise of television and social media has brought the horrors of land wars and casualties instantly to a broad public. One has only to compare the public and media reactions to one soldier killed in Afghanistan to the huge numbers killed at the Somme.

But as the world moves from a hegemonic system based on the US hyper-power to a more multi-polar world this will have serious consequences for Germany and Europe. For Germany, will it be content to behave as a 'big Switzerland' or will it accept, as some politicians including President Gauck and Foreign Minister Steinmeier have argued, that Berlin should play a political/military role commensurate with its economic and financial power? For Europe, will it redouble efforts to deepen the European integration project, trying to ensure a closer connection between the EU institutions and European citizens? Or will it drift back into a system of nation states adopting beggar thy neighbour policies? As leader of Europe Germany again has a key role to play. It has also profited hugely from the EU and thus has a moral duty to ensure the continued success of the European project. Germany's European partners should also pause to reflect on how the EU has contributed to a resolution of the historic 'German question'. These gains should not be under-estimated.



The anniversary of the First World War should give us the occasion to reflect on what kind of Europe we want. A Europe dominated by populists and nationalists has never brought a more peaceful or prosperous Europe. It has only led to conflict. But as the results of the European Parliament elections in May 2014 demonstrated we cannot take the progress in European integration since 1945 for granted. We owe it to the fallen in both world wars to fight for a closer and more integrated Europe.



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