



WORLD WAR II · TIME-LIFE BOOKS · ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

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W118

BY ROBERT T. ELSON
AND THE EDITORS OF TIME-LIFE BOOKS

PRELUDE TO WAR

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ON THE COVER: Members of the infant Nazi party jam a battered truck that will take them to a rally in the Westphalian town of Herne. Impoverished as they were in the '20s—the swastika is crudely painted on pieces of cardboard—these Nazis, and others throughout Germany, already displayed the swaggering military bearing that many of their countrymen found both reassuring and compelling.



PRELUDE TO WAR



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WHEN THE SHOOTING STOPPED



The shell-blasted moonscape of a World War I battlefield lies silent and deserted after the 1918 Armistice emptied the trenches.

DISQUIETING SIGNS AMID THE CELEBRATIONS

At work in her Paris apartment on November 11, 1918, American novelist Edith Wharton heard the bells of nearby Saint Clothilde ring at an unfamiliar time. Soon they were joined by the chimes of Saint Thomas d'Aquin, Saint Louis des Invalides, Notre-Dame, the Sacré-Coeur—then all the city's bells. As she later wrote, the message of the ringing took a moment to sink in: "We had fared so long on the thin diet of hope deferred," she noted, speaking for everyone in the city that day, "that for a moment or two our hearts wavered and doubted. Then, like the bells, they swelled to bursting and we knew that the War was over."

In the trenches of the Western Front, there was, at first, no sound at all—and very little afterward. When the word came down from headquarters, most men could not seem to comprehend right away that the killing had really ended. Then a few of the victors cheered. Here and there soldiers on both sides climbed from their trenches and apprehensively approached one another. Some simply stared; others shook hands and exchanged souvenirs, though the supply-starved German soldiers in the sectors opposite British and American lines had little to offer in exchange for the cigarettes pressed on them. Then the troops headed home.

Out of the silence of the battlefield, and the joyous clamor in Paris—and London and New York—there came a great surge of hope that for a brief time seemed to envelop much of the world: perhaps, in the wake of four years of unprecedented destruction, mankind would at long last learn to live in peace, forever. As farmers returned to their fields and refugees to their homes, the leaders of the victorious nations met to hammer out the shape of a world without war.

Reasonably enough, the defeated shared little of this optimism. For them, the long war and its shattering denouement brought chaos and hunger and despair. Among many returning veterans, especially in Germany, it brought something worse. In spite of their terrible casualties, they refused to accept the fact of their battlefield defeat. Almost before the ink was dry on the treaty of peace, they were looking for ways to redress the blow to their warriors' pride.

Reprieved by defeat and lucky to be alive—the War had cost Germany 1.8 million men—this teenage German soldier was typical of those surviving.





Joyful citizens of London, festooning a double-decker bus, celebrate the news of peace with what Winston Churchill called "triumphant pandemonium."





French refugees and demobilized soldiers trudge homeward toward Sedan—a garrison town on the Belgian border—which was devastated by shell fire.





German warplanes, stripped of their wings and stacked on end in a jumble of useless weaponry, await the torch demanded by the terms of the Armistice.