

BLACKWELL COMPANIONS
TO WORLD HISTORY



A COMPANION TO
WORLD WAR I

EDITED BY
John Horne

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Editor's Acknowledgments

It is perhaps not surprising that a volume with thirty-nine contributors has taken a long time to produce. It is even less surprising that as editor, in completing it, I should be acutely aware of just how collaborative such an undertaking is and how much I owe to the many people who have helped me. Christopher Wheeler first proposed the idea. It seemed exciting to me then, as it still does now, and I thank him for it. My thirty-eight fellow authors have been a model of tolerance, good humor, and collegiality. I have been acutely aware of the responsibility of editing and publishing their work, and I hope they feel that the finished volume is adequate reward for their patience. The price of inviting the top scholars in a truly international field to contribute to a book such as this is translation. But the price of translation is skill and fluency so that the reader should have the impression of reading native English. Twelve chapters were translated, nearly a third of the total, from three languages, and I would like to acknowledge the abilities and dedication of my fellow translators, Heather Jones, Mark Jones, Helen McPhail, and Paul O'Brien. I should also like to thank the Grace Lawless Lee Fund of Trinity College Dublin, which helped fund the cost of the translations. Chartwell Illustrators were painstaking in their production of the maps and must be thanked too. I have been fortunate since the outset in my editors at Wiley-Blackwell - Tessa Harvey, Gillian Kane, Helen Lawton, and Hannah Rolls. However, over the last year, my production editor, Tom Bates, and my copy editor, Juanita Bullough, have been truly outstanding. They have thrown me more life-lines than any editor or author has a right to expect and always showed me exemplary courtesy and understanding. If they feel the result is worthwhile, I shall be very gratified. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Michèle, and my daughters, Alannah and Chloë. Their love and support made the *Companion* possible, as so much else.

John Horne
Dublin, February 2010

Introduction

JOHN HORNE

From the moment it broke out, World War I proved something of an enigma. Few in 1914 doubted that it was an epoch-defining event of a kind not seen since the French Revolution. It was a European War, a “Great War” and even, for the Germans, a “World War,” since it promised to make Germany a world power. Yet it was all these things and more in ways that confounded contemporary ideas of what *war* actually was – of how it should be waged and its likely results. The nature of that enigma and its implications for the societies concerned is the subject of this *Companion*. It is what made the Great War the seminal event of twentieth-century history.

In the European tradition, war was a powerful instrument of political change in which military campaigns and climactic battles produced results that bore some relationship to the intentions of those who fought them, endowing commanders with martial glory and giving warfare as an activity both cultural prestige and an aura of heroic masculinity. In the nineteenth century, an entire genre of military painting that drew approving crowds at art exhibitions and graced the pages of the illustrated press testified to this view of war. Even if European general staffs by the early twentieth century knew that industrialization had begun to reshape warfare, from logistics to firepower, they subordinated that knowledge to a view of battle in which the infantry still conducted victorious offensives and wars themselves remained relatively short. But the Great War spread to Africa and the Middle East and was fought across the oceans of the globe. It was ultimately determined by prolonged siege warfare on the western front and it killed between nine and ten million soldiers, the bulk of them Europeans. The shock was profound.

The shock came not only from the transformation of war, with which the industrial age seemed at last to have caught up, and of the place of warfare in European culture, it also arose from the rupture between intention and outcome. The disparity between what caused the war (however this was viewed) and what the war in turn caused was the heart of the matter. In a previous climacteric of the European state system from 1789 to 1815, revolution was the explosive charge that altered war along with so much else. In 1914–18, by contrast, war was the great transformer that reshaped everything in its image, including revolution. In many respects war *was* the revolution, and this helps explain the gulf between intention and outcome. Those who led their states into the conflict were often conservatives who sought to shore up a dynasty and social system – sometimes by defending the

diplomatic status quo, sometimes by changing it, but with the aim of preserving the world as they knew it. It is not just that defeat saw them ousted or exiled but that their worlds were shattered. Tsar Nicholas II and his family were shot in a sordid cellar by the Bolsheviks. Kaiser Wilhelm II fled ignominiously to Holland leaving Berlin in the throes of revolution. The young Karl I, last Habsburg emperor, slipped into exile as the Dual Monarchy dissolved into the nation-states it had been designed to avoid. And this time, unlike in 1815, there was no Restoration. The gulf between intention and outcome has rarely been greater.

With hindsight we can identify deeper patterns that connected cause with effect in ways that begin to make sense of the enigma. The process by which nation-states became the organizing unit of European politics culminated in World War I – which is why the current map of Europe looks rather similar to that of the 1920s (with some obvious exceptions). Nation-state formation had accelerated in the wake of the French Revolution and supplied some of the key events (and wars) of nineteenth-century Europe, notably the unification of Italy and Germany and the emergence of successor states to the Ottoman Empire – Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia. The Great War was triggered by the conflict between a small but expansionist Serbia and the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, which since 1867 had been organized around the containment of nationalist aspirations within the Habsburg territories. Russia, despite being a multiethnic empire that found it hard to reconcile nationalism and democracy with the Romanov dynasty at home, championed “Slav” nations like Serbia abroad and was drawn into the quarrel. Germany since 1871 had become the most powerful nation-state in Europe. It made the survival of the Dual Monarchy the key to its diplomatic and military plans, and played a pivotal role in July 1914.

At this level World War I enacted the final, doomed defense of the dynastic multinational empires, all of which (Austria-Hungary, Tsarist Russia, and Ottoman Turkey) were defeated and replaced by nation-states. In fact, by an irony of history, the creed of the proletarian revolution, Bolshevism, provided the new bond to maintain the bulk of the Romanov lands in a federation of nations around their Russian core. But as that example shows, the war represented much more than the completion of an essentially nineteenth-century process. The war itself helped redefine the nation where it existed as well as where it was coming into being (as in Ireland and Eastern Europe). One revelation of the conflict was the potency of national identities and national communities. To be sure, this was well known in the longest established nations, such as Britain and France, but even there universal literacy, the mass press, electoral politics, and more inclusive notions of what it meant to be a subject or citizen were relatively recent and evolving processes. Elsewhere, as in Russia, Austria-Hungary, or even Germany, such developments were seen by many in power as potentially subversive. Yet identification with the nation explains why the outbreak of war in 1914 was not met with the protest and obstruction that Socialists and labour militants had long predicted but rather with a surprising degree of cohesion, though this was far removed from the mindless chauvinism of subsequent myth.

National cohesiveness could not be sustained in that form. The war forced societies into unprecedented and largely unanticipated patterns of activity and organization. Prewar opinion had in the main held that the sheer disruption occasioned by a war (as economic production halted and the bulk of adult men left for the armies) was one good reason why it could not last very long. But as it turned out, societies displayed a remarkable capacity to improvise and adapt. Women replaced men in many functions while continuing to sustain the couple and the family through the trials of separation. The mobilization of industry for war production reconstituted the working class (including skilled workers summoned back from the front) and pioneered new relations between

the state, organized labor, and business. Food had to be farmed more intensively than ever or substitutes found abroad to sustain both soldiers and civilians, while the essential fuels without which neither war production nor daily life could continue also had to be secured. In World War II, the lessons of the earlier experience were there to be drawn on. But in World War I the need to harness society and the state to war on the scale that became necessary was one more disjuncture between anticipation and reality.

Each of the adaptations in question held major implications for the communities fighting the war since they raised issues of equity and sacrifice and affected relations between different social groups. Conflicts arose along lines of class as workers gained unlooked-for strength, and ethnicity as national groups related variously to the war, especially within the multinational dynastic empires. Gender was also affected as women consciously assumed a role in the national effort while men faced the ultimate sacrifice of death from battle. This multiple effort shaped the nations that fought the war or resulted from it. As a community of experience and as a source of political legitimacy, the nation-state in Europe was transformed by World War I.

Nowhere was this truer than in relation to the core experience of the conflict, industrialized warfare. For the enigma within the enigma was the discrepancy between the requirement of victory and the means of achieving it. Not only was the prewar conception of battle profoundly at odds with the force of modern firepower that resulted in a million dead on all fronts by early 1915, but the warfare that emerged in response to this was marked by the superiority of the defensive over the offensive. Solving the conundrum took the next four years, and the answer that emerged was a matter of trial and error in a thousand different ways rather than one grand plan or a decisive technical transformation. Historians still debate what caused the collapse of the Central Powers (Germany and its Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, and Ottoman allies). But the dominance of the defensive proved the distinctive experience of World War I in the sense meant by Carl von Clausewitz in his classic work, *On War*, when he noted that “every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions.”¹

It is important not to reduce this characteristic of the Great War to the western front as such, and to the all-too familiar images of trench warfare and bloody futility that have provided some of the most enduring stereotypes of the conflict. The war was fought on other fronts, between the Central Powers and Russia in the East (Galicia, Poland, the Baltic states, and the Ukraine), between Russia and Ottoman Turkey in the Caucasus, and between the Western Allies and the Turks in the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign of 1915. The French and British confronted the Bulgarians on an immobile front in Macedonia. Italy entered the conflict against Austria-Hungary in 1915 (precisely to complete the nation forged in the wars of unification) and opened up a front around the rim of the Alps and on the plains of the Veneto that cost 600,000 Italian dead by 1918. Romania joined the Entente in autumn 1916 but was rapidly subdued by the Central Powers. Moreover, as a global and imperial conflict, the war spawned secondary theaters in Africa (where the German colonial empire was eventually liquidated) and in the Ottoman Middle East (Mesopotamia and Palestine). Deep in the background, the maritime war was a relentless struggle for control over international supplies of war materials and food that pitted the British blockade of German-occupied Europe against German efforts to break Allied supply lines by means of the U-boat campaign. Along with the birth of aerial warfare, which provided a “third dimension” to the battlefield and an independent arm as bombing the enemy’s homeland became possible, these theaters and forms of combat were all part of the “kind of war” 1914–18 turned out to be.

Yet the deadlock of trench warfare and the costly experimentation with ways to break it constituted the heart of the conflict in military terms. It found its most chronic expression in France and Belgium, where three major powers, Britain, France, and Germany (and the colonial contingents of the former two), suffered the bulk of their casualties. But it was replicated in near-identical forms on the Austro-Italian front and in distant Gallipoli and Macedonia. On the eastern front sparse communications and vast distances made sudden breakthrough more likely (leading to the massive capture of prisoners); but even here, new trench lines restabilized and the decisive battle proved as elusive as elsewhere.² More mobile warfare in Africa and the Middle East was a refraction of the deadlock in Europe – either allowed by the latter (as with the conquest of Germany's African colonies) or an attempt to unlock it, as with the efforts to eliminate Turkey and take the Central Powers by the back door.

In the end, the defensive advantage of the enemy could only be resolved in Europe and, after Bolshevik Russia quit the war in 1917, on the western front. While High Commands innovated and learned from each other, the process was hesitant and hampered by the weight of traditional thinking on strategy and tactics. Consequently, the soldiers experienced a mix of growing mastery of the battlefield, continued high casualties in many sectors of the front, and catastrophic episodes when a predicted successful offensive subsided yet again into a brutal logic of attrition. We must be careful not to attribute our own sensitivities to a different age: it is hard to imagine a current western public accepting a daily death-rate of 1,306 for four and a half years, as was the case in Germany, or 881 and 582, respectively, for France and the British Empire. But contemporaries knew that they faced mass death, and even if the exact figures were secret this was both novel and traumatic. As Freud (with two sons and a son-in-law at the front) put it in 1915: "Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it. People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands, in a single day."³

Making sense of death on this scale was thus a further enigma of the Great War that continued for at least a generation. Both at the time, for soldiers contemplating the losses incurred in proportion to the results gained, and also afterward, when whole societies engaged in the reckoning, this was the most general yet also the most personal measure of the gap between intentions and outcome. Not surprisingly, all the social and cultural resources of the countries concerned were deployed to give the sacrifice meaning and to make the war worthwhile.⁴ The focus everywhere was the ordinary soldier and above all the war dead. The sole exception was Russia, swept up in revolution and civil war, where the Bolsheviks rejected the Great War as an "imperialist" conflict.⁵

The Great War was not the first in which soldiers were individually honored by the fatherland for which they died. Already the French inscribed the names of the fallen on the battlefield monuments of the Franco-Prussian War while both sides after the American Civil War devoted considerable effort to identifying bodies and creating suitable monuments for the three-quarters of a million war dead.⁶ The idea that the ordinary soldier's death in battle was the crucible of the nation was perhaps born with Lincoln's address on the battlefield of Gettysburg, but as in so many other ways, the American conflict was not widely understood by Europeans as a harbinger of things to come. Hence, the cult of the millions of dead of the Great War was by its scale and import a new experience for European nations. Nothing speaks more eloquently to the way in which the war transformed nationhood than the geography of collective mourning and commemoration that was organized in the decade that followed it, with local monuments complementing the vast cemeteries along the former fronts. The Unknown Soldier emerged as a new

embodiment of popular sovereignty, at once anonymous and individual, the democratization of death.

Yet the ability to make sense of the sacrifice also turned on victory or defeat. Whereas the Western Allies (and the “victorious” successor states in Eastern Europe) invented national rituals to sanctify the sacrifice by the result achieved (the defense or creation of the fatherland, the “war for civilization”), this was impossible in the face of defeat or a “mutilated victory,” such as that condemned by Italian nationalists. Here “sacrifice” underlined the impossibility of accepting the outcome of the war or of a postwar politics that seemed to do so. The shame of defeat, the burden of an unfulfilled sacrifice, and a political activism that drew on the idealization of the “front soldier” were vital ingredients in the fascism that formed immediately after the war both in Italy, where it began in March 1919, and on the nationalist right in Germany.⁷ In both cases paramilitary formations inspired by the war expressed the sense of grievance through violent combat in civil and class war and in frontier conflicts.

Perhaps the ultimate explanation of the discrepancy between anticipation and outcome lies here. The scale of the effort and the size of the sacrifice inclined many who fought in the war to believe while it lasted that such an experience must have a decisive result, a closure that would be worthy of the conflict. That was one reason why it proved impossible to arrange a compromise, negotiated peace in 1916–17. But such a clear-cut diplomatic and political outcome was just as elusive as a decisive battle had been during the war itself. World War I was not an end, but rather a beginning, and the forces and quarrels that it unleashed – and transformed – continued to destabilize the world. The consequences seemed greater and more unmanageable than the origins, and the outcome, in retrospect, ever more disproportionate to the causes.

This was shown by the way peace was made in 1919–20. While the Western Allies dated victory precisely to 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918, the moment when the guns fell silent along the western front, ambiguity surrounded both the timing and the terms of the ending of the war. An expansionist and military-dominated German government had already imposed a harsh treaty on Bolshevik Russia in March 1918 that stripped the former Empire of the bulk of its non-Russian borderlands. Yet in 1919, the new German government (along with much of German opinion) believed that the Armistice was rather less than a defeat and entitled Germany to be part of the peace conference in the tradition of European diplomacy going back to the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The Allies, by contrast, and especially the French, who had borne the worst physical devastation of the war, assumed they were unilaterally imposing peace terms on a defeated and guilty adversary in what had been a war of survival. The gulf was fundamental. In 1945, in reaction against the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies would impose just such a peace on Nazi Germany after insisting on “total surrender.” But in 1919–20, peace was transitional in its very form, and the misunderstandings on which it was based accentuated the feelings of dissatisfaction on both sides. Meanwhile, Russia was doubly absent – excluded as a great power and as the source of the revolution spawned by the war – while in a series of aftershocks, the borderlands of the former dynastic empires sank into conflict and civil strife until the early to mid-1920s.

In another sense, too, the war’s consequences seemed to bear little relation to its origins. While the ascendancy of the nation-state was a long-term trend, the explosion of an ideological conflict that would reshape national politics and the European balance of power in the interwar period was altogether more unexpected. Of course, the struggle between democracy, communism, and fascism had deep origins in nineteenth-century political thought and movements. But the war itself – not its origins but the internal