Results of the First World War

1. Ravaged nations

France is proportionally the most affected country with 1.4 million deaths and losses, which represents 10% of the active male population.

The English losses (colonies included) rise up to 1.2 million deaths. This is accompanied by a considerable birth deficit.

The German deficit rises up to 5 436 000, the French deficit up to 3 074 000, the Russian deficit is the highest with 26 million deaths. The demographic stagnation in France is accompanied by the aging of the population, thus increasing the level of immigration. The latter participates to the reconstruction of a country of which the North is ruined. There is also the new phenomenon of the ‘facially disfigured veterans’, name given to the disabled veterans who survive thanks to the medical progress while maintaining serious physical consequences. The integration of these victims of war, in numbers to the society has to be made through new laws and organizations. In France, 10 000 to 15 000 injured veterans are count. In the UK, sculptors as Francis Derwent Wood make masks to give a human aspect to the injured soldiers. The societies after war will keep the marks of war alive for many years.

a. Genocides, occupations, deportations and atrocities

The First World War is also the first conflict to lead to the undertaking of planned extermination by a State, of a whole population belonging to a minority under pretext of revolt: The Armenian genocide was triggered April 24, 1915 by the young-Turk government in the Ottoman Empire, which officially was only a transfer of the Armenian population away from the front. Mainly between April 1915 and July 1916 800 000 to 1 250 000 Armenians were assassinated, almost half of the Armenian-Ottoman population. At the same time, 175 000 Assyrians were massacred in the East of the Ottoman Empire, in the same vein of ethnic cleansing. The Ottoman Empire committed another genocide during and after the First World War: the Pontiac Greeks. From 1916 till 1923, the massacre made almost 360 000 victims. The recognition of the Armenian genocide still poses a problem in the XXIst century,
although it is recognized as such by a number of countries. The Genocide of the Pontiac Greeks found a very limited recognition, just like the massacre of the Assyrians.

During the conflict, there were massacres as well in some countries, in particular in Belgium where the German army committed atrocities towards the civil population. The myth of the maverick from 1870 quickly made its appearances and in retaliation/out of revenge, the German troops would engage in the « deportation » as well as the execution of large numbers of civilians both in Belgium as in the North of France. The occupation of these regions was very hard for the people who initially had to provide the necessary provisions to the troops of occupation. Many civilians were conscripted for forced labor and many of them were taken prison and sent to Germany for example 1 500 inhabitants of Amien who were sent into labour camps. Some will remain prisoner until 1918.

The occupation and transfers of populations were accompanied by widespread destructions and executions, of which most took place in Belgium. In Taines, August 22, 1914, 422 people are executed, in Haybes, destroyed city, 61 civilians were killed and in Dinant, 674 civilians passed the firing squad. In Leuven, the German troops set fire to the city and 29 people were shot. Belgium and France are not the only countries to be affected. The city of Kalisz in Poland was bombed and burned by the Germans in August 1914, civilians were killed. In the ruins of the devastated city, where the majority of the population has left in exodus, there were no more than 5 000 inhabitants, while the city had 65 000 before the War.

b. Tributes to soldiers

In the immediate post-war, monuments to honor the fallen soldiers on the battlefield were popping up a bit everywhere. In France, there are approximately 36 000 monuments. In Germany, the communities and churches organized most often the construction of monuments. The latter usually consist of a list of fallen soldiers and there were few monuments that bear national symbols like the oak leaf, the iron cross or a Christian symbol since Germany had lost the war and the Empire had disappeared.

The soldiers of different nations rest in cemeteries and necropoles as the Douaumont Ossuary. Various organizations deal with the cemeteries and the memory of soldiers. For France, le Souvenir français, for Germany, the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge who deals with 192 places of memory in France, for Austria, l’Österreichisches Schwarzes Kreuz, for the UK and the countries of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. In different countries, the worship of the Unknown Soldier is established.

c. The material destruction

The agricultural and industrial productions have collapsed because of the imperatives of the war economy and the mobilization of a large number of actives: France lost 17,3% of the mobilized, the UK 5,1% and Germany 9,8%. The war causes a disruption of traditionnal
commercial circuits. It had to be rebuilt, restarting the activity and returning to a peacetime economy while facing a severe shortage of labor. In France, for example, 50% of farmers died; Thus increasing the problem of the reconversion of the war economy into a peacetime economy.

The destruction of properties was important and affected severely the homes, factories, farms and other communication infrastructure such as bridges, roads and railways and this mainly in France where a large ravaged area of 120,000 hectares is called the « red zone ». In the North and East of France, eleven departments will be classified in the red zone. Agriculture will be banned in many places before shell clearance and demining which will take several years, without even considering the treatment of munitions dumped by millions due to being judged too dangerous to dismantle or lack of financial means for storing and processing safely. Three million hectares of land are ravaged by the fights. Some villages along the Meuse, the Marne or in the North were wiped out and cannot be rebuilt at their site. Cities were bombed like Reims who saw its cathedral severely affected or London who received almost 300 ton bombs. Leuven in turn sees its library burned. In France, like in Belgium, a Minister of Reconstruction was installed. It’s a poor period in the archives where all the energy was
devoted to the reconstruction, with a first dark period where one involves the German prisoners of war, the Chinese workers saved from the Spanish flu and a hand of immigrant mainly for the shell clearance.

d. Consequences of the War

The aftermath of the War was important: the reconstruction had to be done on tens of thousands hectares physically devastated where the cities, the villages, the factories, the mine shafts and the farms were often literally erased from the landscape under polluted soils by thousands of human and animal corpses made dangerous by les sapes, the trenches and the thousands of shells and other unexploded or non tirées munitions (lost or dangerously stocked). Tens of thousands hectares were severely contaminated with heavy metals and some by chemical weapons which were dismantled or exploded without adequate precautions.

Geographical consequences

On the most disrupted sites, where explosives and toxics from combat are still too numerous in order to restore the soils for agriculture or for urbanization, war forests are planted like the forest of Verdun and the forest of the Argonne, which have grown on old fields riddled with shell holes and trenches. In these forests, some villages have not been rebuilt. These effects on land are known by specialists, in particular by miners, but it seems that the pollution released by tens of billions of lead pellets of shrapnel and bullets or the mercury of the primers is slowly capable to accumulate in the ecosystem and certain foods. This is a problem which hasn’t been treated by the historicists nor specialists in public health. Not one official study seems being interested in what will come from the heavy metals and combat toxics in the soils and the ecosystems in the red zone.

The marine aftermath, although concerns, seems to have been forgotten during 70 to 80 years. The Baltic countries saw the ecological situation in the Baltic sea collapse from 1990 till 2006, while rediscovering the tens of thousands tons of dumped munition from 1914 till 1918 and after (including chemical weapons some starting to leak. The fisherman got up sometimes yperite in their nets in the Baltic. In Belgium, in Zeebrugge, they incidentally found a deposit of 35 000 tons submerged shells buried there shortly after 1918 and then forgotten. Among these shells, 12 000 tons were charged with Yperite and still active chloropicrin, a few hundred meters from the beach and the mouth of the LNG terminal. Along the French coast, the number of submerged deposits is the largest and the most important. A hundred dead zones have been recoded in the sea by the UN, mostly matching with areas of ocean disposal of munitions, which raises the question to assess the environmental impact of toxic waste and/or dangerous immersions.
e. psychological consequences

Serious psychological and health consequences: «broken faces», psychological trauma, the shock and contra-shock from the Spanish flu that killed between 20 and 50 million people can be added to this.

There are also unspoken things in particular about the repression of riots in 1917 among the French, Germans and British as the mutiny of Etaples. In four years, 2 400 “hairy” have been sentenced to death and 600 executed, the others saw their sentences commuted to hard labor. Among these shot soldiers for example, some of which Felix Baudy were restored in their honor between 1920 and 1930. Without forgetting the fate of the deserters shot in the beginning of the war or deported to prison when they refused to submit. This global conflict leaves millions of orphans, unemployed and especially a spirit of hatred and revenge that is already preparing the Second World War.
2. A world redrawn by the Peace Treaties

Map of Europe in 1923

Four empires collapsed, which profoundly transforms the map of Europe redrawn by the peace treaties of 1919.

After the Treaty of Versailles, the German Empire lost 1/7th of its territory: besides the already returned to France Alsace and Lorraine and Eupen and Malmédy attached to Belgium, Germany lost Posen to the east and a part of East Pruisen to allow the recreation of Poland. Upper-Silesia is divided between Poland and Germany. The German territory was cut in two by the «Danish Corridor», demilitarized, seeing its colonies confiscated, monitored, sentenced to heavy repairs and held solely responsible for the conflict. These reparations, the amount is fixed until 1921, rise up to 132 billion gold marks, transferable in thirty annual installments (it does not pay the total 22.8 billion gold marks until 1932).
The Russian Empire, became a communist Russia, cannot find the ceded territories in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: The Baltic countries and Finland became independent. The West of Russia is assigned to Poland.

The Ottoman Empire was reduced to the current Turkey. Syria and Iraq became British and French mandates.

The Austrian-Hungarian Empire was in turn dismantled with the existence of Austria, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, later Yugoslavia consists of the union of the Kingdom of Serbia with the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs and the Kingdom of Montenegro. It brings together the Slavs of South-Balkan, but it must give Istria to Italy after the Treaty of Rapallo in November 1920.

All these States adopt a parliamentary system. Democracy finally settled in a good number of countries in Central and East Europe. However, in some of these countries, democracy cannot resist the rapid installation of authoritarian regimes.

The loss of prestige of European in the colonies and in the world is important. In Africa, the Franco-British took over the German colonies, the Japanese did the same in China, taking over the German colony of Tsingtao and in the Pacific, where they took several islands north of the equator that will form the mandate of the Pacific Islands. The Australians took the German New-Guinea and the New-Zealand German Samoa. The colonies provided food, raw materials and ‘Senegalese’ and Nord African sharpshooters who participated in all the ‘hard fights’ of the war. After the war, the colonized people no longer believed in what they inculcate – the natural superiority of the metropolis – and demand an improvement in their fate. At this first decline of European influence in the colonies the expansion of the United States, the biggest beneficiaries of the war and Japan, whose funds are now in London and Paris, is added.
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With the cooperation of the following National Agencies: