WORLD WAR I – THE AFTERMATH

This morning, we gave thanks for the Armistice which terminated the fighting a century ago; and paid tribute to all those from our country who served in the War – especially those who died or were wounded and maimed, and not forgetting the bereaved. And one should say that, given the fact of the War, it was necessary to fight and win it: the alternative would have been a Europe dominated by Imperial Germany and a triumph for the Prussian military tradition. There were some proposals for a compromise peace, notably from the US President and the Pope; but they did'nt get anywhere. So I am not going to argue that those who fought, suffered in vain.

But it's not enough to win a war: it's also necessary to win a lasting peace – and as we are all well aware, this was not achieved: just 21 years after the Armistice, a 2nd World War broke out – for many people, even more terrible than the First. So following on from commemorating the Armistice this morning, we should begin to reflect on that failure. In 1914, as the War began, the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey remarked: ' The lamps are going out all over Europe: we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime' – a remark which proved essentially correct.

The War was the greatest catastrophe – until then – in Europe's modern history, resulting overall in almost 9 million military dead, almost 6 million civilian dead, and many more wounded and disabled; also areas devastated by the fighting, especially parts of north-east France and Belgium, and Poland in the east. Inevitably it aroused very bitter feelings and produced highly disruptive consequences.

The bitterness was expressed (especially by the French) in the peace treaties which were imposed on Germany and her allies in 1919-20. In the case of the treaty of Versailles with Germany, they included among other things losses of territory, drastic restrictions on her armed forces, and payment of substantial reparations for the losses caused – based on the so-called War Guilt clause which ascribed responsibility for the War to Germany and her allies.

The terms were severe by the standard of the treaty which had ended the lengthy Napoleonic Wars a century earlier. But what is important for us is not so much an objective analysis of them, as how they were seen by the Germans in 1919 and after. They came as a shock, to a country which was psychologically unprepared – not least because until the summer of 1918, Germany seemed to be holding her own in the War; and had actually won it in the east, defeating Russia. The High Command did recognise the fact of military defeat in the autumn; but many patriotic Germans preferred the theory of 'the stab in the back': Germany had not been defeated in the field, but betrayed from within.

The terms were widely seen as a shameful imposition – and some of the shame rubbed off on the German government which was most reluctantly forced to accept them. And this government was no longer the Imperial regime of Kaiser William – the 2nd Reich – which had been overthrown in a revolution in November 1918 – but a centre-left coalition in what was now a liberal parliamentary democracy, known as the Weimar Republic. Perhaps the major mistake of the victorious Allies as they discussed the peace terms (among themselves) was their failure to recognise that the best hope for a lasting peace lay in bolstering this new liberal-democratic regime in Germany – by negotiating (not just imposing) terms which it could accept with some dignity; as the Allies had done a century earlier with the successors to Napoleon in France.

Realistically, the only alternative to terms which Germans could willingly accept was a total conquest of Germany (as was to happen in 1945); but given that Germany had agreed to an Armistice in the autumn of 1918, that was not an option.

Thus the Weimar Republic was handicapped from the start – especially as many who had been appointed to leading positions before the 1918 revolution – officials, judges, business-men, teachers, Army officers – and stayed in post, acquiesced in it, but without real commitment: being nostalgic for the 'good old days' of the powerful Empire.

Nevertheless, the Republic survived serious challenges and crises in the early 1920s, including the disaster of hyper-inflation. And it appeared to stabilise in the later '20s, moving towards reconciliation with Britain, France and Belgium – only to be hit exceptionally hard by the great Slump in the early '30s. The centre-left coalition could not agree on how to cope with this, which opened the way to a rapid rise of the Nazis led by Adolf Hitler. So the Republic collapsed through a combination of the impact of the Slump, the political culture of Germany inherited from the 2nd Reich, and the legacy of the Versailles Treaty: each of these 3 elements was needed.

To quote the leading historian of Nazi Germany, Ian Kershaw, in his book appropriately entitled 'To Hell & Back: Europe 1914-49' – 'Nazi agitators stoked the fires of elemental rage and hatred, drawing on disparate resentments and prejudice [but linked to] a vaguely couched, though extraordinarily powerful, emotional call for national regeneration and unity'; and many people were prepared to put up with the Nazis' violence for the sake of this prospect.

The Nazis never won an overall majority in the free elections of the early '30s; nevertheless they attained power in 1933 in coalition with a right-wing nationalist party. Then they were able to construct a totalitarian regime (the 3rd Reich) which at home persecuted especially Jews and any kind of Socialist, and abroad, prepared not just to free Germany from the constraints of the Versailles Treaty, but a war to conquer Europe – and subject it ruthlessly to the genocidal Nazi ideology: different in kind as well as degree from the aims of the 2nd Reich.

But of course the disruptive consequences of World War I were not confined to Germany. Her ally the Habsburg Empire, Austria-Hungary, disintegrated under the pressures of war; leaving what remained of Austria with little will to exist separately from Germany, and Hungary saddled with a peace treaty (in 1920) even more severe than Germany's Versailles. Not surprisingly, Hungary joined Nazi Germany in the late 1930s in a bid to overturn it. 2 new states – Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia – were formed out of the wreckage of Austria-Hungary, of which Yugoslavia was basically unstable: wracked by tension between Croats and Serbs, who expected to dominate it. An independent Poland re-emerged from the simultaneous collapse of the Russian, German and Austrian Empires; but its frontiers were contested and it was beset by internal disputes, political and ethnic.

And apart from Czechoslovakia, liberal democracy did not really take root in the east-central European states: sooner or later they succumbed to varying degrees of dictatorship – to authoritarian regimes. And they did not cooperate together – the nationalism which had wrecked the Habsburg Empire continued to be a problem for the region. This made them easy prey for resurgent Nazi Germany: Austria was annexed, Hungary, Bulgaria and (more reluctantly) Romania lined up as junior allies, Poland was conquered, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were smashed into pieces. And although these two came together again after World War II, they disintegrated finally in the early 1990s – in Yugoslavia's case, through a terrible civil war. On our fortunate island in the west, we tend to underrate the importance of east-central Europe; but it is where both the World wars and the Cold War actually started.

And it was not just Germany's allies which suffered greatly from World War I – Italy had joined Britain, France and Russia in 1915, but the stresses and strains proved too much for its rather fragile liberal democracy; which created an opportunity for Mussolini to establish the first Fascist dictatorship in 1922. Even in the United Kingdom, the War helped to precipitate the Irish nationalist revolt, which led to the partial breakup of the Union. (Not to mention serious nationalist unrest in Egypt and India).

But the major casualty on the Allied side was Russia, where the Tsarist empire collapsed under the stresses of the War and defeat. This enabled the Bolsheviks to seize power in the autumn of 1917, which they could not have done had it not been for the War. The consequences for Russia included the chaotic and horrific Civil War from 1918 to 1921, in which perhaps 20 million people died; and Stalin's totalitarian regime in the '30s, in which a further 20 million probably died – even before the Soviet Union entered the 2nd World War.

But the Bolshevik regime had important consequences outside Russia too: the rise of Soviet-style Communist parties split the Left, and greatly alarmed all holders of property – which enabled Mussolini, Hitler and others to pose as saviours from the menace of Bolshevism. Incidentally Bolshevism was often associated with the Jews, not only in Germany but elsewhere – notably in east-central Europe. But later, it was the Red Army which played the crucial role in the defeat of Nazi Germany during the 2nd World War – and in the process took control of the states of east-central Europe. The passage from Jeremiah which we heard as our first reading, referring to the time when Judah was crushed between the rival empires of Babylon and Egypt, expresses what many felt during World War II.

The Soviet victory set the scene for the Cold War, during which there was a real danger on at least two occasions of a nuclear war, which would have ended civilisation. So arguably Russia's Bolshevik Revolution is of more lasting importance even than Italian Fascism and German Nazism as an unintended consequence of the 1st World War.

Finally, and too briefly – the Middle East ,where the Ottoman Turkish Empire joined Tsarist Russia, Austria-Hungary and the 2nd Reich in a dramatic and unprecedented cascade of collapsing Great Powers – the mighty were indeed put down from their seats. This resulted in the emergence of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan as separate states – initially under British and French control, then independent after World War II. Wartime circumstances also impelled the British Government to issue the Balfour Declaration in November 1917, which laid foundations for the State of Israel in Palestine. I hardly need point out that this whole region has been highly unstable and problematic until this day. Indeed its recent history reinforces the main lesson that can be learnt from the end of World War I – it was easy to win the wars against Saddam in Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Gaddafi in Libya – but peace and stability in those countries has proved elusive.

So the catastrophe of World War I had consequences which were proportionately disastrous, in the short, medium and even long term. But few events are entirely lacking in a silver lining - the obvious one in this case being the League of Nations. It failed to prevent World War II, but served as a useful precedent for the United Nations, which has often

disappointed but nevertheless does valuable work in a variety of ways.

World War I also gave a boost to the process of democratisation – for example in Britain by the extension of the franchise to women; and in different ways in Germany, Italy and elsewhere. During that 'total war', vast numbers had been mobilised, to fight or to work on the home fronts, and people now expected that their voices would continue to be heard. Paradoxically this also created space for mass political movements – Fascism and Communism, which undermined democracy. And the leaders of Britain, France and Italy felt under pressure from much of public opinion as they considered the terms of the Treaties – and often not in a helpful way.

I'll end by suggesting, with due diffidence, some ethical and even theological conclusions. In many ways these events brought out some of the worst aspects of human behaviour: pride, self-righteousness, hatred, vengefulness, and a propensity to violence. The sinfulness of fallen mankind was all too evident, and not just among the leaders, but in public opinion too.

In fact among the leaders there were some who, in a very fraught atmosphere, genuinely sought a lasting peace. Britain's Prime Minister Lloyd George was one, and particularly in the later 1920s there were others in France and Germany. They are pointers towards achievements which became possible, at least in western Europe, after the 2nd World War. This was a further catastrophe – but from which the right lessons were learnt at last – most notably, under American encouragement, the need for Franco-German reconciliation: the basis for a lasting peace from which we have all benefitted hugely.

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