

World War One: a “Good War”?

This interview of Dr Michael Childs, recently retired professor of History at Bishop’s University, and Dr Claire Grogan, professor of English, covers material presented in his plenary address at a symposium to mark the centenary of the end of World War One, held November 9th 2018.

Childs: At my age, I have experienced something that fewer and fewer people have: I’ve spoken with veterans of World War I, and in important respects, the war still resonates for me on a personal level because of that. That doesn’t make my understanding of the war better than that of younger people, but it does make it different. My grandfather was a trench soldier, who left one of his kidneys, part of his calf muscle and a bit of his skull in Northern France, and though he lived to the ripe old age of 93, he still died more than a decade before most of the students at Bishop’s were born. But I knew him well and loved him very much. He came from the same small village – Melbury Osmond in Dorset – as the mother of the novelist Thomas Hardy, and they shared many ancestors, including several Childs. In the 1850s Hardy as a youth heard stories told around the winter fire by veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, and he used these as a basis for his epic drama *The Dynasts*, written a century after Napoleon’s campaigns. For Thomas Hardy, then, the men who fought Napoleon were real, flesh and blood souls, but for the soldiers of World War I who read Hardy avidly, including my grandfather, they were ghosts of a century past. And now, a century after 1918, the memories of World War I are also receding into the mists, and within another generation no one will be alive who ever met or talked to a living survivor of the Great War. In the process, the First World War will in its turn become like the Napoleonic Wars, or the 100 Years War, or the campaigns of Caesar: certainly

of interest, and historically important, but not something that touched the lives and deeply affected people who anyone actually knew and loved.

And that might have important consequences for the meaning of the war, because perhaps the most salient reaction to World War I for most people is precisely the sadness and pity it evokes, with its rituals of poppies, cenotaphs, wreaths and its moment of silence for the fallen. What will happen when that moment is used to commemorate people who no one will ever have known? Whether World War One can still perform its major function of recalling to us the bitter waste of all war, when it becomes Napoleonic in its distance to us, remains to be seen.

Grogan: I agree that most of us understand war through personal and familial connections. How else might we remember or connect with it?

Childs: I want to explore some other possible meanings of World War I as the war reaches its 100th birthday and its causes and effects come into a different sort of focus – a longer term one which is not tied to personal loss or memory. I think a common misconception about history is that it has some single meaning, which often leads to the opposite fallacy that if in fact history has multiple meanings, it is useless as a branch of human inquiry. The meaning of World War I to a woman who lost her son or husband is patently different from the meaning of the war to, say, Ho Chi Minh, for whom it opened up sparkling new possibilities for the freedom of his country. Is only one of these meanings valid? Obviously not – the tragic loss on one hand, and the widening prospects on the other are each true and real, both in that time and historically.

Grogan: How do you want to challenge our understanding of World War I?

Childs: I think it is true to say that in the west for most of the last century, the meaning of World War I in the popular imagination has largely been encompassed by the concepts of meaninglessness and waste. World War I has been made to stand as the archetypical example of purposeless and senseless slaughter, in which a group of powerful older white men sent their sons into the hell of trench warfare to fight for the false gods of king and country, and then they messed up the peace so badly that it all had to be done over again 20 years later. So against the figure of the doomed youth of the Great War stand the opposing figures which such high drama demands: the bone-headed and callous general, and the greedy war profiteer. From the vantage point of 2018, I wish to question that meaning to some extent; and to be perhaps deliberately provocative in doing so. I wish to make the case that World War I, a century after its ending, should be de-mythologized if possible, so that it can be treated historically and not have this burden placed on it of being a metaphor for the horrors of all wars. I would argue that in a longer term perspective World War I was a “Good War” in its own way. By that I certainly do not mean that it was a “good thing”: no war is good; it was just as awful as we imagine it to be; and it was devastating in its impact. No, I mean merely that if the far more horrible World War II is held to be a “Good”, i.e. necessary or just, or excusable war, then much the same could be argued about World War I. The war was about something real, and about something vitally important to people at the time; its outbreak presented people with a stark choice in which the sacrifice of war was seen to be better than the alternative, and it can best be seen, not on its own, but as an important episode of a larger struggle in Europe that stretches from the late 19th Century to the end of World War II.

Grogan: To effectively position World War I along a continuum with World War II rather than in stark contrast to or distinct from it?

Childs: Exactly. What was World War I about? Here again we need to critically examine past interpretations. In the interwar years, in Britain and the US – but significantly neither in France nor in Germany – the answer was that it was a struggle of equally guilty imperialist powers. It was about control of global trade networks, access to colonies, market share, etc., made all the more fraught by the industrial revolution which transformed the world's economy. The willingness of the combatant populations to endure such slaughter was due to the intense nationalism taught in the schools of the time, and fostered by the new tabloid press, pumping out their fake news and stoking fear and resentment in their populations. The final major ingredient was the emergence of the modern bureaucratic state, which enumerated its citizens, formed them into mass conscript armies and organized the logistics of their deployment. If one combines these big structural factors – the new nation-state, an industrialized mass army, global economic rivalry – you inevitably get factory-level killing of youth, who go to their deaths willingly for false idols.

This understanding certainly contains some important truths about modernity, but in the end it is better at providing the **context** of World War I – especially why it was such a horrible stalemate – than it is in providing the explanation of why it broke out. Moreover, it led in the interwar years to the very questionable conclusion that if World War I was really everybody's fault, then in the end it was nobody's fault – especially not Germany's. It was due to large impersonal forces, and insofar as it was the product of individuals, there were equally guilty men on both sides.

Grogan: What are the shortcomings of such a view of World War I?

Childs: The trouble with this interpretation is that it doesn't address the inconvenient fact that 20 years after 1918, Germany went to war again, and this time there is very little doubt about who started it and for what reason. The "World War I as senseless" school of course had an answer to this as well: World War II was provoked by the vindictive and short-sighted Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I: the war guilt clause imposed on Germany, its loss of territory, and especially the reparations charged to Germany led to economic meltdown in Central Europe, gave fascist demagogues like the Nazis a list of grievances to exploit, and paved the way both for Hitler and the war of revenge launched by Germany in 1939. Under this reading, World War II was also, in some way, then, the fault of the western powers: by treating Germany so harshly, it forced Germany to radicalize and then to invade, enslave and kill its neighbours! According to this way of thinking, World War I is doubly damned as an unnecessary war which then caused the necessary and "Good" Second World War. And yet somehow, although Germany was supposedly treated so badly by Versailles, it still managed to rebuild armed forces sufficient to conquer Europe 20 years later. There's something wrong with this picture. In effect, although everyone knows that the Treaty of Versailles did not **conciliate** Germany, the corollary is usually forgotten – it didn't **constrain** Germany either.

Grogan: What would you like to suggest to counter this view?

Childs: An alternative view then, which other historians also have argued, and which I think is closer to reality, is that World War I was fought for substantially the same reason as World War II - to try to rein in an expansionist Germany and preserve the independence of the nations of Europe. And thus the tragedy of

World War I was not that it was unnecessary, but that the war and the subsequent peace didn't do their job sufficiently, and did not restrain Germany from arising quickly from its defeat and once again imposing another, even worse war on the world. The two wars therefore should be seen as a continuity: two phases of a single history that was addressing the same issue. Just as it took several wars to check Spanish Habsburg power in the 16/17th Centuries, and just as it took many wars to block France from controlling Europe from the time of Louis XIV to Napoleon, so it would take two terrible wars to block a Germany which, long before Hitler, was intent on European hegemony and territorial expansion. If this is so, then World War I, fought for substantially the same reason as the Second World War, has an equal claim to be considered a "Good War", and the fact that the Allies were far from angels themselves does not damage that claim, any more than the fact that the chief opponent of Hitler in the "Good War" of World War II was the mass murderer Stalin. This doesn't make World War I and its consequences any less of a tragedy, but it does restore its combatants to their proper place of agency: as people confronting a *real* danger and forced to make a *real* choice, and as people whose sacrifice was not, in the end, in vain.

Grogan: A compelling argument. So how would you lay out the specifics?

Childs: Firstly by addressing the sequence of events from the prewar period to the 1930s fairly rapidly, at all times with this argument in view. In regard to origins, below the level of those structural factors I've mentioned earlier lay a series of specific alliances in the pre-war period. Briefly, by 1900 Europe had split into two diplomatic/military camps, with Germany and Austria-Hungary on one side and France and Russia on the other. Great Britain was increasingly leaning

towards the France/Russia side due to Germany's decision to challenge its dominance at sea, and due to the fact that both France and Russia worked hard to smooth out their colonial conflicts with Britain. These alliances did not necessarily mean war was likely: instead they were in many ways a good guarantor of peace, because they reflected a real Balance of Power: with each side cancelling each other out, war became much more of a risky gamble. One important thing to note for later is that it takes Russia, France and potentially Great Britain collectively to offset Germany, allied only to the weak and disintegrating Austro- Hungary.

Nonetheless, each side was ready for war if necessary, with very intricate mobilization timetables and plans to get its regular army and especially its reservists off the street, into uniform, armed, into trains and up to the frontier. That was the situation in late June 1914 when the heir to the Austrian throne, Francis Ferdinand, was assassinated at Sarajevo by a Bosnian Serb nationalist. Everything that we have learned since that day has underscored that war came that summer because, although both Russia and France (and especially Great Britain) understood that Serbia would have to make serious amends to Austria, German leaders deliberately pressured Austria into making claims against Serbia which would inevitably lead to war between the two (Austro-Hungary and Serbia). What Germany wanted in summer 1914 was not, however, world war, but a limited, local, Balkan war in which Austria would defeat Serbia and in doing so, damage the prestige of its supporter, Russia. But German leaders knew perfectly well that such a course might very well lead to a general European war, and they were, from the beginning, willing to accept and even welcome that risk, as it seemed to Germany in 1914 that there was a window of opportunity open which

might lead to its hegemony over Europe; and that window might close in the near future.

This decision by Germany to force its ally into a Balkan war is particularly important, because of the nature of Germany's war plans, in two ways. First of all, alone of all these countries, the mobilization of the German Army meant war. This is because its mobilization plans involved the invasion of other countries even before the mobilization was completed. By which I mean that German troops would be over the borders and already at war before the last train of reservists was due to move. No other country had such a hair trigger plan. Second, which borders are we talking about? Before 1914, Germany had asked itself: if a general war comes, where do we deploy our troops? Russia is a bigger danger, but is much harder to defeat quickly. So if war comes, we will defeat France quickly, and then turn and face the much slower Russians. But the only feasible way to defeat France quickly enough was to go through Belgium, use its excellent railways to swing around Paris and crush the French between the hammer of the right wing and the anvil of German troops in Alsace-Lorraine.

Thus, the logic to the rulers in Berlin is this: IF it looked like a war between Austria and Serbia was even likely to turn into a war between Austria and Russia, then it was imperative for Germany to immediately attack Belgium and France! And just as it was Germany's leaders who created this logic, so they fanned the flames in 1914 which made its operation unavoidable. Although Germany wanted a local war in 1914, its own planning made an escalation of such a war almost inevitable. So the Continent went to war, and Germany's invasion of neutral Belgium brought in the British as well. It should be noted that France in 1914 was

going to be invaded no matter what it did – even if it declared itself neutral. So was Belgium.

The subsequent war was so horrible partly because the diplomats had got it right: there was indeed a balance of power between the two sides, with the Allies more or less cancelling out the states of the Central Powers. For three years or so, the two sides were like sumo wrestlers of equal weight, except that mud wrestling might be a better metaphor. Another reason for this stalemate was that the defensive power of trenches, barbed wire and machine guns vastly outweighed the offensive capacities of armies at this period. The only real solution to this was massive artillery barrages before an offensive, but preparing such a battle did two things: it warned the enemy exactly where the offensive would occur (and they would then just build another reserve trench line out of range) and it churned up the ground so much that even if the offensive was successful, it couldn't be sustained with artillery support, which could not be brought forward over the moonscape it had just created.

So for years the misery continued, and the verdict was open right to the end. World War I was very unlike World War II in this respect: in World War II, by late 1942/early 1943 it was clear the Allies would win *eventually*. In the First World War, Germany VERY nearly won the war in early 1918 and it was only in the fall of 1918 that it became obvious it would lose. In fact, by early 1918 Germany had knocked Russia out of the war, and had forced it to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. This is a largely forgotten treaty because Versailles annulled it, but it repays attention. By its terms, German and Austrian control of Eastern Europe up to the Baltic States, Ukraine and Poland was assured. Russia lost a quarter of its citizens, 70% of its industry and 90% of its coal mines. It also was to

pay 6 billion gold marks in reparations. You might say that Brest-Litovsk is the *beta* version of Hitler's *Lebensraum*, and just like it, it was meant to be a first step only. Anyone who thinks that Versailles was exceedingly harsh should look at Brest-Litovsk for the alternative outcome of a German victory in World War I. Although Hitler was on a very different level in his treatment of his eastern conquests, in basic foreign policy aims he was a traditional German expansionist. Again, then, World War I was fought to prevent a "lite" version of the same fate Hitler had in store for Europe, at a time when no one could have ever predicted what the difference between the "lite" and the Nazi version would look like. World War I was about something real and important.

In any case, though Russia was gone, the US was now in, and the prospect of millions more fresh men arriving in France made Germany realize the game was up in fall 1918. The US, though a late entrant, had enormous influence due to its role as banker and supplier of the Allies, but it also had enormous prestige due to President Wilson's principle of national self-determination and his idea of a League of Nations enforcing collective security in the future. This seemed to answer two of the big problems of the prewar world: the presence of multi-ethnic empires like Russia, Austro-Hungary and the Ottomans, which controlled subject nationalities like Croats, Slovenes, Czechs, Poles; and secondly the Balance of Power, which many felt had been the cause of the war to begin with. Thus, these empires were mostly broken up into their constituent ethnic parts, while the League of Nations Covenant, instituting collective security, was integrated into the Treaty of Versailles. A far more controversial element of the treaty was of course reparations. In many ways they were a bad idea, but they were not limited to World War I by any means – even after 1945 the Allies demanded and

received reparations from Germany. Most significantly, no fighting had taken place in western Germany: all the fighting had taken place in France, Belgium, etc. And the US insisted on its war loans being repaid. Was it therefore feasible for France to reconstruct its devastated northern areas by itself, pay back its war loans to the US and not get a cent for the huge amount of damage – much of it deliberate – inflicted by the Germans? That would be very hard to see. Moreover, if there were no reparations, Germany would be economically stronger **after** its defeat than the countries which had fought it. And this is in fact what happens anyway: most people do not know this, but Germany actually made money on reparations. It continually defaulted on its payments, then got loans from US and GB, then defaulted again, and finally in the 1930s, Hitler repudiated both reparations and the loans. If one adds all this up, Germany made about 17 billion marks out of this scam – more in fact than the Marshall Plan provided after WORLD WAR II. Reparations, then, had almost nothing to do with the economic problems of Europe in the interwar period. The real reasons were the huge damages incurred and enormous cost of the war itself (generations of wasted capital, lost human talent, pensions for widows and orphans, etc.) along with the protectionism of the new nation-states and of US after 1929.

Collective security, meanwhile, could well have worked, but as we know, the US Senate refused to ratify the Treaty and thus the US never became a member of the League. Collective security immediately became a hollow phrase and therefore a dangerous illusion. Everyone now looked to Britain and France to take the lead in preserving peace. As the interwar years went on, it became clear that they couldn't. Remember what we saw in 1914-18: it took a combined Russia, France, Great Britain and Italy to balance and hold Germany. Russia

collapsed with the effort; it takes the remaining countries, plus the huge resources of the US to actually complete the job. Now, in the interwar years, one has a France bled white, a Russia pushed back **away** from Germany's borders, Italy under a fascist, Great Britain doing an early version of Brexit and the US going into isolation. Instead of the menacing Russian Empire in Eastern Europe, Germany is bordered by a host of small, weak, squabbling states in the east that provide it with a diplomatic playground for divide and rule. In other words, strategically, Germany won World War I, since in many ways it was in a better strategic position in 1919 than in 1914 and had far weaker enemies to worry about. And since it is clear as daylight that Great Britain and France could **never** have beaten Germany by themselves in World War I, what possible hope did they have of restraining Germany in the interwar period? This inability to restrain Germany would become obvious by the mid-1930s, and it leads directly to appeasement.

If collective security was unworkable without the US - because it would simply mean Britain and France getting into an unwinnable war with Germany - then what about resurrecting the Balance of Power to preserve peace? Great Britain was very loath to do so, and in any case, this would only work if the Western democracies could come to terms with Soviet Union. Alliances by then had a bad name, as most think they actually caused the First World War. The diplomatic situation was almost impossible. The point is that – again – the Treaty of Versailles's problem is not that it is too harsh, but that, once the US bows out of the League, the Treaty proposes an unworkable system of preserving peace while preventing the emergence of any other, more effective one.

In combination these factors indicate that World War I was fought for real reasons, not for false ones, by people who knew what they were fighting for and accepted the cost. The alternative in 1914 was not peace, but a Europe dominated by Germany, which although not as frightening a prospect as Hitler would be twenty five years later, was not a pretty sight either. It was a bloody conflict because of the nature of warfare at that particular time, not primarily because of another myth, that of idiotic and callous generalship. Nearly eighty British generals were in fact killed during the war – they didn't just stay in their chateaux and send men to their deaths. The Treaty that ended the war made some serious errors, but the real problem was not its inherent unworkability; its real problem was that it had been constructed on an assumption of American commitment to international affairs and collective security that ceased to apply only months after its signing. And no other system of effectively restraining Germany would be found until Hitler himself, by invading the Soviet Union and declaring war on America, recreated the old anti-German alliances of thirty years before.

Here we are, 100 years later. The US seems poised to gradually withdraw from its postwar commitments and head into a new version of isolationism and protectionism; and Britain once more withdraws from its own European commitments. New and old major powers begin to flex their muscles, so we should be particularly careful that we **realistically** analyze the mechanisms for maintaining peace in a world in which one method of international security, based on credible alliances like NATO and rules-based trade, seems to be breaking down, and nothing viable seems to be emerging to replace it except naked power politics driven by national interest alone. One thing is for sure: noble principles

alone are as unlikely to do the job of maintaining peace as they were in the 1930s, and the failure to recognize what is really going on is likely to eventually have a high cost. The real lesson of World War I is not the waste and the sorrow of war, which frankly is too clear and obvious a lesson to argue about, but that to avoid that terrible waste, and to ensure a safer world, high principles must always be wedded to a credible system of deterrence and defense against aggression. The democracies of today need to start working on that problem, because it's likely to be a difficult one to solve.