‘In the trenches’

A century later, the First World War remains embedded in our imaginations

Bob Chodos

The Bishop tells us: “When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race.
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.”

“We’re none of us the same!” the boys reply.
“For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert’s gone syphilitic: you’ll not find
A chap who’s served that hasn’t found some *change.”*
And the Bishop said: “The ways of God are strange!”

— Siegfried Sassoon

Many years ago, as I was reading a book by the American diplomat and historian George Kennan, one sentence stopped me in my tracks. The First World War, Kennan wrote, was *the* great tragedy of the 20th century. For me, this assertion was not just startling but almost heretical. As a Jew born in the shadow of the Second World War, I took it as an article of faith that the great tragedy of the 20th century was what we have come to call the Holocaust. And yet, in the intervening years I have become increasingly convinced that Kennan was right.

It is not my intent to compare the horror of the trenches with the horror of the camps and attempt to weigh which was worse. That is not the point. But I've come to realize that the shadow hanging over my childhood was not just that of the Holocaust but that of the whole Age of Catastrophe, as the great historian Eric Hobsbawm called the period between 1914 and 1945. And the First World War was where it all began.

"The war changed everything," says a character in the British television series *Downton Abbey*, in an episode set in 1922. Certainly the war changed a lot. The old Europe of Empires was gone. The Tsar of Russia, the Kaiser of Germany, the Emperor of Austria and the Sultan of Turkey no longer sat on their thrones. What appears to us now as the naive faith in progress and the continued betterment of humanity that was so widespread in the 19th century had been shattered. Some changes brought about by the war were undoubtedly beneficial. Most countries in the West finally achieved universal suffrage in the years following the war as women gained the right to vote.

In many ways, however, the war did not change enough. The world did not create a stable international order after the war. The initial attempt at an international organization, the League of Nations, proved ineffectual. The short-lived economic boom collapsed dramatically in 1929. Authoritarian and in many cases Fascist rule gradually engulfed most of Europe: Italy under Mussolini, Hungary under Horthy, Austria under Dollfuss and Schuschnigg, Germany under Hitler, Spain under Franco. Communism in the new Soviet Union degenerated into Stalinism. An increasingly fragile peace gave way to a second and even more destructive war. It was only in the years after 1945 that efforts to create a supranational institutional structure to lessen the possibility of another European war – what has evolved into today's European Union – made slow and shaky but nevertheless real progress, and that constitutional democracy became the prevailing form of government in most of Europe.

Looking back, we can see that these changes needed to happen, but did they need to happen at the cost of so many lives and limbs, of so much grief, trauma, disillusion and despair? And did the outcome of the First World War

make a difference? Kaiser Wilhelm was a nasty piece of work, to be sure, but much worse was to come, and had there been no German defeat in the First World War, Adolf Hitler would almost certainly have remained a clown on the margins of German politics, and the horror of the camps might never have been perpetrated.

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As is well known, the proximate cause of the war was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, and his wife Sophie by a Yugoslav nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. The assassination precipitated a crisis in relations between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in which other countries soon became involved on one side or the other. By early August, Germany and Austria-Hungary were at war with Russia, France and Britain. By October Turkey had come in as well.

From a regional crisis triggered by an assassination to a war that claimed the lives of millions and brought down the entire architecture of prewar Europe is a large leap, and so historians have long sought deeper causes. The system of alliances that turned a small crisis into a big one and divided Europe into two armed camps. The naval race between Germany and Britain. The rigid military plans based on an offensive strategy. The illusion that the war would be brief and victory quick, and the almost complete failure to foresee the ensuing stalemate with its consequences for the war's duration, scale and horror. National rivalries. Economic competition. The authoritarian systems that gave far too much power to deeply flawed rulers such as Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. From another angle, the increasing influence of public opinion, and of the mass-circulation press that could manipulate it.

And yet, even these causes don't seem quite up to the job of explaining a catastrophe of the magnitude of the First World War and its aftermath. Beneath those causes there are others – some that may be fixable, others that may not. The absence of international institutions that can resolve disputes between

countries before they get out of hand. The very notion of force as an acceptable way of settling international disputes. Or perhaps something even more ingrained in the human species.

The historian Barbara Tuchman spent a professional lifetime approaching the mystery of the First World War from various vantage points. Her exploration began in 1958 with *The Zimmermann Telegram*, which examined an incident that was crucial in drawing the United States into the war. It was followed in 1962 by *The Guns of August*, an account of the outbreak and early days of the war. *The Guns of August* won the Pulitzer Prize and was read by President Kennedy, who – according to Margaret MacMillan, in some ways Tuchman's heir as a perceptive historian with a talent for reaching a mass audience – acted with restraint in the Cuban missile crisis later that year in part as a result of the book's influence.[1] Tuchman's *The Proud Tower* (1966) was a portrait of Western society before the war. *A Distant Mirror* (1978) was about the 14th century, but Tuchman's interest in that era came from parallels between the collapse of medieval civilization and the collapse she saw in our own time in the First World War. And the war was clearly still on her mind when she wrote *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984), in which she drew on examples throughout history to ask why governments so often persist in courses of action whose disastrous consequences should be foreseeable:

> *Why do holders of high office so often act contrary to the way reason points and enlightened self-interest suggests? Why does intelligent mental process so often seem not to function?*[2]

Then there is what Margaret MacMillan has described as "the most dispiriting explanation of all – that the war was simply a blunder that could have been avoided."[3] Did millions suffer and die for a mistake? MacMillan worries about parallels between today's international situation and conditions before 1914,

1. MacMillan, The War, p. 630.
2. Tuchman, The March of Folly, p. 4.
3. MacMillan, The Great War's Ominous Echoes, p. A23.

and warns against comforting nostrums like "countries that have McDonald's will never fight one another." She reminds us that Britain and Germany were each other's largest trading partners before 1914. Could a confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine, or between the United States and China over some islands in the South China Sea, lead to war? Unlikely, but no more so than a war over the assassination of an archduke. And what of runaway climate change, a looming catastrophe that requires no Sarajevo to set it off but simply a continuation of exactly what we are already doing?

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Whether consciously or not, the First World War remains embedded in our imaginations. First World War expressions survive in the language: *home front*, *in the trenches*, *over the top*, *no man's land*. The last First World War survivors have died, and Canadian veterans today are more likely to have fought the Taliban in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Canada still remembers its war dead on November 11, the anniversary of the Armistice that ended the First World War. And Canada's universal symbol of remembrance is still the poppy, inspired by the poem "In Flanders Fields," written by a soldier and physician who died at a Canadian field hospital in France in 1918, John McCrae (and widely recited at remembrance ceremonies):

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below....

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

The challenge that McCrae issues to us is a real one: How are we to remember the war and those who died in it? The longest battle of the First World War, the struggle over its meaning, is still not over.

For the government and the veterans' organizations, the way to keep faith with those who died, as manifested in the official remembrance ceremonies, is more or less as McCrae suggested: to take up their quarrel with the foe – to view the war in much the same way as the Bishop in Sassoon's poem. The poppy campaign, in the words of Canada's leading veterans' organization, the Royal Canadian Legion, is about showing our "debt owed to so many Canadians who gave their lives for our freedom." This theme, that they died so that we could be free, is repeated endlessly in countless variations. And yet, in implying that the loss of life was somehow commensurate with what was achieved, it fits uneasily into any clear-eyed remembrance of the First World War. At the heart of the tragedy of the First World War is its pointlessness.

This is not just a retrospective, revisionist view. In July 1917, in the open letter known as the Soldier's Declaration, Siegfried Sassoon, then a British officer, proclaimed that men were being needlessly sacrificed and that any legitimate war aims could be achieved through negotiation. For this act he was judged to be in need of psychiatric treatment and sent to the Craiglockhart War Hospital for shell-shocked officers. At Craiglockhart, he met a younger soldier with poetic aspirations, Wilfred Owen, and became his mentor. Together, Sassoon, who survived the war, and Owen, killed one week before the Armistice in 1918, are voices of sanity that speak to us from that mad world of a century ago.

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In Canadian war remembrance, the capture of Vimy Ridge in northern France by the Canadian Corps on April 9, 1917, looms large. Vimy Ridge Day, so declared by the Canadian Parliament in 2003, continues to be observed. Vimy Ridge is currently the site of a massive memorial to the Canadian dead of the First World War, dedicated by King Edward VIII in 1936. The memorial is pictured on the reverse of Canada's $20 bill, leading to suggestions that the

bill itself be nicknamed the "Vimy."[4] The statement that "Canada became a nation at Vimy" is heard almost as often as that the dead sacrificed their lives for our freedom.[5]

In the battle, the Canadians captured a German stronghold that had previously resisted French and British attacks. As Canada's leading popular historian, Pierre Berton, told the story, they were able to achieve this because they were not bound by Europe's rigid class system and outdated military traditions and because of the skills they had acquired on the Canadian frontier:

> *Trench life in France was appalling for everybody, but at least a good proportion of the men at Vimy had known what it was like to sleep out in the mud and rain, to eat a cold meal in the wilderness, and, in many cases, to knock over a deer with a rifle ... They had guts and stamina and, perhaps more important, a habit of self-reliance that would help to carry them through those weary months when the mud and the vermin were almost unbearable, and those tense few hours when the guns roared and the trenches ran with blood.*[6]

But if Vimy was an achievement, it was a limited one. It was part of a British operation, the battle of Arras, itself part of a larger Franco-British offensive intended to break through the German defences and end the stalemate on the Western Front. Despite tactical successes such as Vimy, the offensive failed in its objective and the war went on for another year and a half. Casualties in the offensive numbered in the hundreds of thousands, including the more than 10,000 Canadians killed and wounded at Vimy.

As for the statement that Canada became a nation at Vimy, what it turns out to mean, in Berton's account, is that Canadians of British stock – who made

4. Bank of Canada, General Public Series.
5. In *The Vimy Trap, Or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War* (Toronto 2016), Ian McKay and Jamie Swift examine the changing way in which Vimy has been remembered over the past century. See my review of the book (Chodos, Vimy and Vimyism).
6. Berton, Vimy, pp. 26–27.

up the vast majority of the Canadian troops at Vimy – henceforth tended to think of themselves less as British and more as Canadian. Vimy certainly did not unite Canada's English-speaking majority and its French-speaking minority, concentrated in the province of Quebec. Heavy losses at Vimy and elsewhere on the Western Front increased pressure on the government of Prime Minister Robert Borden to conscript Canadians for overseas service, to which it responded by introducing its conscription bill in Parliament just two months after Vimy. Conscription had broad support in English Canada but was strongly resisted in Quebec. This highly divisive episode culminated in riots in Quebec City in which five people were killed in April 1918.

Even in the hands of Berton, Canada's great mythmaker, the story of Vimy is dominated by the mud, the rats, the constant presence of death. "Was it worth it?" he concludes. "The answer, of course, is *no*".[7]

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Currently in Canada, many people wear poppies in November, and many others don't. People no doubt have thousands of individual reasons for deciding which way to go. I don't wear a poppy, but part of me is concerned that this could be seen as a sign of indifference. How to say that remembering the war and the dead means something, but doesn't mean *that*?

Various alternatives have been proposed. Some groups have promoted wearing a white poppy, a poppy of peace. I agree with the sentiment but, for reasons I can't quite pinpoint, draw back from the gesture. The veterans' organizations fiercely protect their hegemony over the meaning imputed to the war, but I don't think my reticence is due simply to fear of their wrath. That meaning, even if false, is the only thing that, in retrospect, makes the suffering and death bearable for many. Do I really want to make a public statement whose purpose is to try to take it away?

7. Berton, Vimy, p. 308.

And so my remembrance of the First World War and its dead is essentially a private one, sometimes shared with a friend whose sensibility about the war is similar to mine. My friend rekindled my interest in the war poets, and so my remembrance, like hers, centres on two slim volumes that I pull down from my shelves every November, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* and *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. One unseasonably warm November 11 she and I read poems from those books to each other in an open square in Waterloo, Ontario. A year later, in the snow, we went to the cenotaph in Waterloo after the official ceremony was over with the intent of enacting a ritual she had designed. But the freshly laid wreaths and the whiff of the earlier ceremony hanging over the cenotaph made it an inappropriate site, and we found a spot in a nearby grove to light candles, read poems and say prayers for peace to our respective deities.

Siegfried Sassoon began this article, so it is Wilfred Owen's place to close it:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

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