

The impact of war on Europe: the situation in 1919

The human cost of war

The death toll for the armed forces in World War I was appalling. Around nine million soldiers were killed, which was about 15 per cent of all combatants. In addition, millions more were permanently disabled by the war; of British war veterans, for example, 41,000 lost a limb in the fighting. In Britain, it became common to talk of a 'lost generation'. Such was a particularly appropriate phrase for the situation in France, where 20 per cent of those between the ages of 20 and 40 in 1914 were killed.

Although civilians were not killed on the scale that they would be in World War II, populations had nevertheless become targets of war. In addition to the civilians killed directly in the war, millions more died from famine and disease at the end of the war and at least a further 20 million died worldwide in the Spanish flu epidemic in the winter of 1918–19.

Economic consequences

The economic impact of war on Europe was devastating. The war cost Britain alone more than £34 billion. All powers had financed the war by borrowing money. By 1918, the USA had lent \$2,000 million to Britain and France; U-boats had also sunk 40 per cent of British merchant shipping. Throughout the 1920s, Britain and France spent between one-third and one-half of their total public expenditure on debt charges and repayments. Britain never regained its pre-war international financial predominance, and lost several overseas markets.

The physical effects of the war also had an impact on the economic situation of Europe. Wherever fighting had taken place, land, and industry had been destroyed. France suffered particularly badly, with farm land (2 million hectares), factories and railway lines along the Western Front totally ruined. Belgium, Poland, Italy, and Serbia were also badly affected. Roads and railway lines needed to be reconstructed, hospitals and houses had to be rebuilt and arable land made productive again by the removal of unexploded shells. Consequently, there was a dramatic decline in manufacturing output. Combined with the loss of trade and foreign investments, it is clear that Europe faced an acute economic crisis in 1919.

Political consequences

The victorious governments of Britain and France did not suffer any major political changes as a result of the war. However, there were huge changes in Central Europe, where the map was completely redrawn. Before 1914, Central Europe had been dominated by multi-national, monarchical regimes. By the end of the war, these regimes had all collapsed.

The war led to a triumph of republicanism undreamt of even in the 1790s

-Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*

Germany

Even before the war ended on the 11th of November 1918, revolution had broken out in Germany against the old regime. Sailors in northern Germany mutinied and took over the town of Kiel. The action triggered other revolts, with socialists leading uprisings of workers and soldiers in other German ports and cities. In Bavaria, an independent socialist republic was declared. On the 9th of November 1918, the Kaiser abdicated his throne and fled to Holland. The following day, the socialist leader Friedrich Ebert became the new leader of the Republic of Germany.

Russia

Russia experienced two revolutions in 1917. The first overthrew the Tsarist regime and replaced it briefly with a Provisional Government that planned to hold free elections. This government, however, was overthrown in the second revolution of 1917, in which the communist Bolsheviks seized power and sought to establish a dictatorship. In turn this, and the peace of Brest-Litovsk that took Russia out of the war, helped to cause a civil war that lasted until the end of 1920.

Double Monarchy of Austria-Hungary

With the defeat of Austria-Hungary, the Habsburg Empire disintegrated and the monarchy collapsed. The last emperor, Karl I, was forced to abdicate in November 1918 and a republic was declared. Austria and Hungary split into two separate states and the various other nationalities in the empire declared themselves independent.

Turkey

The collapse of the Sultanate finally came in 1922, and it was replaced by the rule of Mustapha Kemal, who established an authoritarian regime.

The collapse of these empires left a huge area of Central and Eastern Europe in turmoil. In addition, the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia encouraged growth of socialist politics in post-war Europe. Many of the ruling classes were afraid that revolution would spread across the continent, particularly given the weak economic state of all countries.

Impact of war outside of Europe: the situation in 1919

America

In stark comparison to the economic situation in Europe, the USA emerged from the war as the world's leading economy. Throughout the war, American industry and trade had prospered as US food, raw materials, and munitions were sent to Europe to help with the war effort. In addition, the USA had taken over European overseas markets during the war, and many American industries had become more successful than their European competitors. The USA had, for example, replaced Germany as the world's leading producer for fertilizers, dyes, and chemical products. The war also led to US advances in technology – the USA was now the world leader in areas such as mechanization and the development of plastics.

Woodrow Wilson hoped that America would now play a larger role in international affairs and worked hard at the peace conference to create an alternative world order in which international problems would be solved through collective security. However, the majority of Americans had never wanted to be involved in World War I, and once it ended they were keen to return to concerns nearer to home: the Spanish flu epidemic, the fear of communism (exacerbated by a series of industrial strikes), and racial tension, which exploded into riots in 25 cities across the USA. There was also a concern that America might be dragged into other European disputes.

Japan and China

Japan also did well economically out of the war. As in the case of America, new markets and new demands for Japanese goods brought economic growth and prosperity, with exports nearly tripling during the war years. World War I also presented Japan with opportunities for territorial expansion; under the guide of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, it was able to seize German holdings in Shandong and German-held islands in the Pacific, as well as presenting the Chinese with a list of 21 demands that aimed for political and economic domination of China. At the end of the war, Japan hoped to be able to hold on to these gains.

China, which had finally entered the war on the Allied side in 1917, was also entitled to send delegates to the Versailles Conference. Their hopes were entirely opposed to those of the Japanese; they wanted to resume political and economic control over Shandong and they wanted a release from the Japanese demands.

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