

6. World War One : Human Costs

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"The war had lasted for four years. It was responsible for the death of eight million men and the wounding of sixteen million more. It caused universal desolation and distress without bringing any compensating advantages to any one of the belligerents. A war which settled nothing and in which all concerned came out losers."

Lord Gowrie, VC, Australia's Governor-General, speaking at the opening of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Armistice Day 1941 (*The Canberra Times*, November 11, 1941) (LG)

A. Overall Human Costs of WWI

These costs were horrifyingly great, though of course facts and figures (even if we could portray them all) cannot give anything like an adequate idea of what it was 'really like'. There is a vast literature to draw on. It may be beyond us, yet some feeling for what it meant to be involved as front-line soldier - or nurse tending the wounded - can be gained from works such as Erich Remarque's "*All Quiet on the Western Front*" (ER), Wilfred Owen's letters to his mother (WO2) his poem's (WO1) the poems and other works of Siegfried Sassoon, and Vera Brittain's "*Testament of Youth*." (VB) Here all I can hope to do is give a rather sketchy and necessarily inadequate overview. But first one of Wilfred Owen's poems.(WO1, 99)

Dulce et Decorum Est

*Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marching asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.*

*Gas! Gas! Quick boys! An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;*

*But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime....
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.*

*In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.*

*If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
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.***

Wilfred Owen, (1893-1918) October 8, 1917

(*from Horace, *Odes*, III, ii, 13 - 'sweet and proper is it to die for one's country.')

It has to be stressed that while the war's strategists, its planners regarded human sacrifices as 'necessary', 'inevitable' and 'justified', even 'glorious', on neither side did they anticipate the scale of the war's ultimate costs. Notwithstanding Churchill's insightful warning in 1901 (MG1, 51-2), although aware of their own modern technologically-advanced weaponry, they had no experience of its effects in a full-scale European conflict in which combatants were more or less evenly matched. Since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the European powers had avoided major wars with one another in favour of sectionally-profitable Colonial enterprises in Africa and elsewhere. Controlling 'dissident natives', Afghan or Iraqi tribesmen was one thing, dealing with other modern industrial powers quite another. Yet Europe's leaders were imbued with the obsession that 'the coming war' with their opponents was not only inevitable but the *desirable* way of resolving differences, since it would demonstrate their 'moral superiority'! (MH, 63; BT1, 249-50)

And victory was seen as not only possible but, with the 'correct' attitude, altogether attainable, strategic planners just 'knowing' that the key to sure success was a certain combination of speed and 'spirit' - what the French termed 'elan'. Hence the widespread view that the war would be settled within a few months, the troops 'home by Christmas'! So, still intending to use cavalry (for extra speed) and other measures of the past, the planners grossly underestimated the effectiveness of their newer technologies for the *defence* - even the simplest, - acres and acres of barbed wire entanglements. Nor did they realise the blocking power of the machine gun or that of mortar and artillery

barrage.

The modern machine gun, developed by an American, Hiram Maxim in 1885, had been used with great 'success' against 'the natives' in Africa, Tibet and elsewhere, for there it was that,

*"Whatever happens we have got
The Maxim gun and they have not."*
(Hillaire Belloc)

In these early stages it was widely marketed through Britain's Vickers company, its manufacturing rights sold to Germany's Krupps and many other European arms makers.(AA, 56-7) But weighing some 20 kilograms, it was seen as too heavy for the rapid forward movements planned, so not highly regarded by British strategists. Thus while at the war's outset Britain was armed with but a few hundred of these weapons of mass destruction, Germany had some 12,000 - later expanded to 100,000.
(<http://www.firstworldwar.com/>)

Now understandably that very weapon altered all the confident expectations, for even a few 600-rounds-per-minute machine guns set within pill boxes or other protected sites could block tens of thousands of men attempting to advance across open ground. Notwithstanding that, for some 2 months the generals persisted with their 'lightning advances', though inevitably at terrible human cost, the loss of one million lives including the deaths of four fifths of the original British Expeditionary Force, the BEF. (GD, 80; BT2, 487)

In territorial terms, however, all this sacrifice had been of little avail because although the enemy gained much ground during Germany's early push for Paris, a great deal of that was then recovered in the Battle of the Marne. After this came the race for the Channel ports, the fall of Antwerp and the Battle of Ypres. And by then the losses were such that the generals were forced to have their troops dig in. So at that stage rapid advances at ridiculous cost were replaced by stagnant fronts, men embedded in vast trench lines, the Western Front.(BT2,484; GD,80)) As Barbara Tuchman described it, *"...with the advent of winter, came the slow deadly sinking into the stalemate of trench warfare. Running from Switzerland to the Channel like a gangrenous wound across French and Belgian territory, the trenches determined the war of position and attrition, the brutal, mud-filled, murderous insanity known as the Western Front that was to last for four more years.....Sucking up lives at the rate of 5,000 and sometimes 50,000 a day..."* (BT2, 487-8)

Throughout, the machine-gun continued to play a key role in blocking attempts at troop forward movement, and thus a key role in maintaining the front's essential stagnation. And adding to the impasse was the blocking effect of that other modern 'weapon of mass destruction', the high-explosive (HE) artillery shell, fired in continuous or intermittent barrages into the entrapped men's lines. Day and night, anywhere they were gathered, whether sleeping, standing, resting or assembled ready to attack would

come the whistle and shattering 'crump' of HE shells. The result was the unremitting horror of massive human disintegration, hideous maiming, terror, sleeplessness, exhaustion, demoralisation and, in many survivors, insanity.

Gwynne Dyer indicates that over half the casualties were caused by shellfire. It became the prime approach to 'winning' by attempting to exceed the enemy's rate of killing using the same means. By 1915 all combatant countries were unable to keep up with the front's huge demand for shells. And notwithstanding the escalating production records, such demands continued to mount throughout the war. The numbers used were staggering. For example, in 1917 during the Third Battle of Ypres, a 19-day British bombardment used 4.3 million shells (107,000 tons), a year's production by 55,000 workers.(GD,82)) No wonder, quite 'magically', there was full employment at home.

Yet despite the destructive effect of shells in such numbers, the infantry could not break through the trench lines ahead of them because these were *multiple* defence lines, up to three thousand metres deep - "...*though they died in their millions trying.*" Although numerous shell barrages could destroy most machine guns in the enemy's trenches and much of the artillery behind, enough survived to block a total breakthrough. As described by Henry Williamson, a 19-year old, "...*We come to wire that is uncut, and beyond we see grey coal-scuttle helmets bobbing about.....and the loud crackling of machine-guns changes as to a screeching of steam being blown off by a hundred engines, and soon no one is left standing. An hour later our guns are 'back on the first objective,' and the brigade, with all its hopes and beliefs, has found its grave on those northern slopes of the Somme battlefield.*" (GD, 82)

As Gwynne Dyer then went on to explain this new lesson of modern warfare - "*That was the real meaning of battles like the Somme. The point was not that the British captured only forty-five square miles in a five-month battle at a cost of 415,000 men - over 8,000 men for each useless square mile - but that the Germans were also compelled to sacrifice men and equipment at a similar rate. Battles had become an industrial operation in reverse, in which the rates of destruction at the front matched the rates of production in the industries at home.*"(GD,83) And the industrial power of both sides was so closely matched that "*For over three years, no offensive succeeded in budging the Western Front as much as ten miles.*" (GD, 82)

So, from very early in the war, the strategies of the red-tabbed Staff Officers, the Field Marshals and Generals, had been reduced to a macabre 'calculus of attrition' designed to effect levels of mass-destruction killing that in the long term, would out-match those of the enemy. *At the behest of their political masters at home*, that remained the approach throughout the four agonising years of the war. And in the end, 'winning' depended on that very formula, the fact that although the Russian collapse made it a very close go, with late help from America's men and resources, the Allies ultimately prevailed in this 'attrition competition', since it was they who succeeded in destroying *more* men of the other side while still having yet more men and resources to continue. Thus, finally, one side, 'our side' prevailed in this tragic gamble we may call the 'sacrifice the young' competition.

B. Some Bottom Lines

Fully reliable military and civilian casualty figures for WWI do not exist. Overall estimates of 'approximately 10 million' military deaths are often quoted but the figure is altogether uncertain. On the Western Front half a million Frenchmen were lost in the first 4 months, 5 million by 1918. Two and three quarter million Germans were killed, missing or wounded in the first 8 months. Gwynne Dyer gives a total for Germany's military dead as 3.5 million.(GD,89) According to Australian author Phillip Knightly, the Allies lost 600,000 men in one battle, the Somme. On the Eastern Front, the German commander, Hindenburg, estimated Russian military casualties at 5 to 8 million. None of us can properly comprehend the meaning, the real significance of such figures. (PK, 108-9; see also Appendix B pp. 7-8)

At no stage of the war did the public, whether British, French, German, Italian or Russian, know the full extent of their own casualties. The Germans began to fake their figures in 1916. And as Lloyd George commented privately, "*If people really knew the war would be stopped tomorrow. The correspondents don't write and the censorship would not pass the truth*". The true figures will probably never be known, the oft-quoted figures of 10 million war dead, 20 million wounded clearly being considerable underestimates.(PK,108-9)

In any case, to these military losses must be added the collateral damage, the civilian casualties on all sides, including those resulting from the naval blockade of Germany. Understandably these civilian casualties arose not so much from enemy fire as from forced displacement, exposure, starvation and disease. The resulting toll was particularly heavy in Germany and Russia, both during and after the war. Resulting from blockade-caused under-nourishment, Dyer quotes "*...an excess of 800,000 civilian deaths in Germany over the peacetime mortality rate.*" (GD,83) Phillip Knightly gives the Russian civilian casualties from WWI, their Civil War, the economic blockade, famine and disease as close to 14 million.(PK,138)

But whatever the figures, such statistics take no account of the terror, the horror, the agony of the wounded, the dying, the anguish of next of kin, the blighted lives of survivors, the human and material opportunity costs of such a vast disaster, the inequity and utter waste of it all.

Understandably, the war left a deep impression, feelings of great disillusion (let-down, betrayal, etc), and a strong popular determination that it must never be allowed to happen again, a view shared by nearly everyone who had any experience of it, direct or indirect. Unfortunately there were some influential exceptions. (see 7(c) & 8A,B) below).

As a possible guide to a better understanding of current world issues, it seems important that we learn something of what went wrong in human thinking and planning, - how such a clearly man-made, massively counter-productive event was allowed to occur. Based on historical data, the following sections, dealing with subsequent wars in which Australia has taken part, may give us some insights on the processes involved in

such decision making, insights that might help us prevent similar disasters in future, - including within our own life-times. But before that lets consider a further consequence of 'The Great War'.

C. Some Sequelae of Russia's Revolution - A Relevant Aside

Finally erupting in November 1917, this Revolution was to have profound effects not only on the conduct of the war, but on subsequent events across the world – extending through to WWII and well beyond. At the outset, however, by bringing the Eastern Front war to an end and thus allowing large numbers of Germany's troops to be transferred to the Western Front, it went close to causing the defeat of the Western Allies in mid 1918, Germany's forces reaching to within 45 miles of Paris.(MG1,499) As already mentioned it was an extremely close call, the balance finally tipped only by the arrival of American troops in force.

Because the Revolution was coupled to the Bolshevik revolutionaries' determination to withdraw from the war, they regarding it as an ignominious struggle between the Imperial Powers, it nevertheless meant Russia's defeat with the loss of many resource-rich assets. Indeed Germany's far-reaching demands for 'spoils of war' under the imposed Treaty of Brest Litovsk (March 3, 1918) included cession of 7 of the territories of Czarist Russia - the Baltic provinces, Poland, White Russia, Finland, Bessarabia, Ukraine and the Caucasus, areas containing a third of Russia's population, a third of its arable land and (no accident) some nine tenths of its coal and oil deposits.(MG1, 488; 507-8)

These far-reaching claims were imposed on a people who had long suffered greatly under corrupt rulers and land owners (c.f. Count Leo Tolstoy's and Spring Rice's testimonies (LT; SG)) - as well as from the extreme horrors of the war.(PK) Yet such claims were consistent with the aims of all the 'Imperial Powers' - all expecting to maximise their economic gains by the war. Thus when Britain sent a military force via Persia to southern Russia, arriving in Baku on August 17, 1918, no surprise the German fear for the inevitable consequence and Martin Gilbert's comment that "*..the principal oil resources of Russia were suddenly in the hands of the Allies.*" (MG1, 507-8) – or, more to the point, one of them.

In "*The Aftermath*", Churchill's sequel to the "*The World Crisis*", we can gain valuable insights as to what lay behind such Allied thinking.(WC2) For here we learn that on December 23, 1917, shortly after Russia's Revolution, an Anglo-French Convention was agreed in Paris to regulate "*..the future action of France and Britain in southern Russia.*", thus to divide their future "*spheres of action*". While the French zone was to include Bessarabia, the Ukraine and the Crimea, that of Britain covered the Cossack territories, Armenia, Georgia, Kurdistan and the Caucasus. Churchill soon goes on to elaborate, "*In consequence the British landed at Batum and rapidly occupied the Caucasian railway from the Black Sea to the Caspian at Baku.*""*The British forces, about 20,000 strong, were by the end of January, 1919, in possession of one of the greatest strategic lines in the world, and both flanks rested on superior naval power*

on the two inland seas.” (WC2, 166) Churchill then continues, “*What the British Government was going to do with it was never clearly thought out.*” (WC2, 166-7)

Of course, representing its nation’s ‘special interests’, the British government knew exactly what to do with the oil-rich Caucasus, namely, to supply both its naval and industrial needs - as indicated by Admiral Fisher’s letter to Churchill of January 1915 (see 4B(b)) and by Britain’s subsequent control of Mesopotamian (Iraqi) oil at war’s end. So it wasn’t a question of what Britain would do with such oil, but rather whether it *could* gain and retain control of that vast oil-rich Caucasian region. Towards this task, Britain was not alone in supporting the White Russian troops in their attempts to ‘strangle the Revolution at its birth’. Indeed as Gilbert points out, in 1919 there were more than 180,000 Allied troops in Russia on that mission - British, French American, Serbian, Czech, Greek, Italian, Finnish, Polish, Korean and Japanese.(MG1, 561) Quoting Churchill, “*...the United States have maintained ...over 8 thousand troops in Siberia, Japan has an army of between 30 and 40 thousand strong in Eastern Siberia ...*”, these supported through huge financial outlays, including Churchill’s testimony that “*Britain has contributed the nominal value of nearly 100 millions, France between 30 and 40 millions,....*” (WC2, 256)

However, notwithstanding all these outside forces, there was much local resistance. For example, when the French with 2 divisions, supported by a powerful fleet and 2 Greek divisions, landed at Odessa, their attempts to enlist local assistance came to nothing. As Churchill explained, “*The foreign occupation offended the inhabitants: the Bolsheviks profited by their discontents. Their propaganda, incongruously patriotic and Communist, spread far and wide through the Ukraine. On February 6, 1919, they reoccupied Kiev, and the population of the surrounding districts rose against the foreigners and capitalists.*” Further, for the French government it was worse than that for as Churchill went on, “*The French troops were themselves affected by the Communist propaganda and practically the whole of the fleet mutinied.*”, plus more in that vein. Indeed, as he reported, a ‘shock’ was sustained in Paris and on April 6 both the French and the Greek divisions were evacuated via Odessa. (WC2, 167-8)

Since on January 14, 1919, Churchill had become Secretary of State for War, he was in the midst of similar decision-making for Britain. It was not just that foreign intervention was rejected by the Russians for, as he wrote, “*The British people would not supply the men or the money for any large military establishment elsewhere than on the Rhine. It was highly questionable whether any troops raised under compulsion for the war against Germany would consent to fight anybody else in any circumstances, or even to remain long in occupation of conquered territory.*” (WC2, 169) Thus the British were in essentially the same position as the French. And so, backed by Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir Henry Wilson, it was agreed “*...to wind up the Batum-Baku adventure in the Caucasus and bring our substantial forces out of danger and responsibility without delay: secondly, to make a peace with Turkey that would show her that England was her friend: thirdly, to discharge our pledges faithfully and fully by arming and equipping the anti-Bolshevik forces from our own immense surplus of munitions, and help them with expert officers and instructors to train efficient armies of their own.*”

Naturally it followed that we should try to combine all the border States hostile to the Bolsheviks into one system of war and diplomacy and get everyone else to do as much as possible.” (WC2, 169)

It was the same sort of fall-back policy any invading super power might adopt today, entrusting the effort and sacrifices to other powers (“*everyone else*”) - all proclaimed with the same degree of moral vacuity and pretense. Russia, of course, had no democratic tradition whatever. Indeed if in the past it had, it might (through much needed social and economic reforms) have avoided going down the revolutionary path in the first place. But instead it was destined to erupt, as long before had England, France and America, in their revolutions. At all events, given the on-going civil war and foreign intervention, what eventuated was not likely to be greatly modified by democratic processes – even though the Bolsheviks had introduced the practice of local control through district councils - their ‘Soviets’. But what with the military interventions of outside governments (the last of whose forces did not leave Russia until 1920) followed by the unrelentingly hostile attitudes and actions of these outside Powers, such could only mean that the finally victorious Bolshevik leadership would adopt a thorough on-going siege mentality - with the near-inevitable consequence of a strong centralised government, such working against the development of popular (decentralised) democracy.

Hence, what *might* have been a highly instructive experiment in social and economic reform for a world beset with ‘poverty in the midst of plenty’ and other economic absurdities to take note of and, while integrating the best of Adam Smith’s equitable market ideas(AS; IB) experiment with elsewhere, was instead treated with the greatest hostility. It was (and is) as if we (the well-to-do) knew all the answers, had solved all the problems, had reached ‘the end of history’ as far as human cultural and economic evolution was concerned.(see essay 5B) It was a ridiculous mind-set that was to influence profoundly the tragic outcomes of the 1920s and ‘30s (see below) including the descent into WWII and its ever-so-unnecessary insanely dangerous sequel, the Cold War - and beyond.(c.f. Essays 9,10,11,12 below)

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