



No. 159 / 2014
28'02'14

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

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The year 1914: the German Narrative

The Memory of the First World War, which the contemporaries referred to as the Great War of 1914-1918, has always divided countries of Europe and beyond. Little has changed in that respect to this day. The brunt of the burden of this war, the bloodiest fighting and the biggest casualties were brought to bear on the Western part of Europe and the French-Germany frontline rather than the East as in the case of the Second World War. Hence, remembrance has been marked predominantly by the Western experience, mainly that of France, the UK and the US as well as Germany. It is in Western Europe that mass military graves were first established with soldiers buried collectively not in their home country but rather near the sites where the most fierce fighting took place. It is no accident that the idea of the tomb of the unknown soldier was conceived simultaneously in France and the UK only later to be adopted by other European countries. While war memorials commemorating fallen rank-and-file soldiers had already been known, it was not until after the First World War that massive cemeteries of such soldiers appeared. Contrary to Eastern Europe, Western Europe abounds with monuments to the First World War with much fewer dedicated to the Second. A.J. Taylor wrote years ago: "If magnitude of an event is to be gauged by the number of memorials dedicated thereto, then the Great War, as it was called, has been the biggest event ever" (A.J.P. Taylor, "From Sarajevo to Potsdam", London 1966, p. 57). The day most celebrated in France and England, is Armistice Day of November 11, 1918 rather than the day of signing the Versailles Treaty on June 28, 1919. In England, Remembrance Day is held in November rather than May 8, 1945, the day Germany surrendered to end World War II.

In Western Europe, World War I was perceived as a civilizational turning point, the collapse of the world which was then seen as particularly prosperous and, since the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), a rather peaceful one or at least characterized by the unchallenged global primacy of Western Europe. Those days are over. Although still significant, England's role in World War II was no longer decisive, whereas France discredited itself in its inability to stand up to German aggression, created the Vichy Regime and had to be liberated by the Anglo-Saxons. The day of the Normandy landing by the Allied Forces (June 6, 1944) is indeed occasionally celebrated by France and its allies of the time albeit with mixed feelings. France prefers to recall its role in World War I and merge the two war disasters into a single event. General Charles de Gaulle recommended in his memoirs: "Generally speaking, we should spread the idea that the present war is only an episode of the world war begun in 1914. The involvement of France in the common struggle for freedom in that war is measured by the contributions she had made since 1914" (Charles de Gaulle, "Pamiętniki wojenne" ("War Memoirs"), vol. 1, Warsaw 1967, p. 377). In the Soviet Union, the memory of the Great War never played a particularly important role. The Tsar-ruled Russia lost the war and had no victories to celebrate and no human losses (approximately 1.8 perished soldiers) it wished to mourn. Russia has no Great War memorials, which Taylor saw as indicative of having severed its ties with the western world. All celebrations in the Soviet Union were overshadowed by the commemoration of the Revolution of 1917 and the incredibly massive celebrations of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). On the other hand, neither event was ever marked, unless vestigially, in the West.

In Germany, the memory of the Great War was highly multilayered and complex from the very start, overcome by the sense of huge human losses which never produced the desired victory. War was perceived as an utterly senseless affair. While France and England emerged with a certain sense of victory, Germany was overwhelmed by the trauma of defeat. It had no reason to celebrate Armistice Day of November 11, 1918 just as it never felt compelled to mark the surrender of the Third Reich on May 8, 1945. There has hardly been any overlap between the German and European remembrance of these events. Germans looked for compensation seeking to shirk responsibility for starting the war in 1914 (Schuldfrage) by proving that the military defeat of their "invincible" army resulted from betrayal (Dolchstoßlegende) and that the Peace Treaty of Versailles was exceedingly prejudicial and unfair and carried the seeds of a future conflict (Versailles Diktat). World War II was seen as a direct consequence of World War I. The resulting narrative began with the imposed war and continued to emphasize the brutal peace treaty, Hitler's rise to power and World War II. The design collapsed after the publication of two monumental works by Fritz



Fischer in the 1960s which blamed predominantly Germans for starting World War I and which revealed Germany's monstrous ambitions for the new post-war world order. As could only be expected, Fischer was hatefully attacked, his assertions being undermined to this day. The memory of World War I is awkward for Germany and difficult to reconcile with that of Europe. In the popular sentiment, the memory has been overshadowed by that of the Holocaust and the "displacements" of the German population.

A problem arose on the eve of the centennial of the breakout of World War I whose celebrations understandably needed to focus where the fighting had been the fiercest, i.e. in Belgium and France. The French and the English had long been developing a detailed program of the celebrations which, although focused on 2014, extends to the following four years and includes a commemoration of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles (2019). The plan (Joseph Zimet Report, 2011) was for the French celebrations not only to bring home the realization of the sheer magnitude of the war casualties but also to strengthen the national identity and remind the heroism and effort to defend the invaded country. Contrary to the commemorations of World War II, which divide the French and remind them of certain inglorious moments in their history, the memory of the First World War has the potential of joining them together and helping to build up France's very shaky national unity. The UK celebrations are being prepared in a very similar spirit. The British War Museum has assumed patronage of sorts over the main celebrations as well as many of the side events. Similar preparations have been launched in Canada, New Zealand and Australia (the Battle of Gallipoli!), Belgium (the fighting in Flanders!), the United States (which entered the war in 1917!), the Czech Republic, Serbia and other countries, this time including Russia. A praiseworthy effort is under way, especially in France, to digitize period documents and make them available online for public viewing. In February 1990, an international website at www.europeana1914-1918.eu was launched with a massive amount of documents of varying types and value. The first anniversary-related Great-War-related exhibitions in Germany have been established as early as 2013. According to estimates, 2013 saw the coming out of over 180 various German-language publications dedicated to the war.

Germany's main challenge was to find the leitmotif for its World War I narrative. In a November 14, 2013 meeting in the Auswärtiges Amt with 20 representatives of such institutions as Deutsches Historisches Museum, Goethe-Institut, Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge, Minister Guido Westerwelle told a story starting with a horrible greedy war and ending with reconciliation in the European Union. Germany placed clear emphasis on the number of victims (15 million) and suggested refraining neither those responsible for the war nor the victors and the defeated be explicitly named. This approach was adopted by the new CDU, SPD and CSU government. Chancellor Angela Merkel concluded her expose



of January 29, 1914 by saying: “This year marks the First World War Centenary. This was the first major disaster of the 20th century soon to be followed by another: the civilizational collapse which came with the Shoah and the breakout of World War II 75 years ago. From that perspective, the ensuing European unity, which has brought us peace, freedom and prosperity, appears to be a true miracle. Today, unlike years ago when a handful would determine the fate of Europe by engaging in secret diplomacy, all 28 equal member states work together with European institutions to shape the course of events for the benefit of the citizens. The European Parliament, to be elected again in May by approximately 375 citizens of Europe, as well as the national parliaments, are there to safeguard legitimacy and transparency. The Federal Republic of Germany goes back 65 years. The Berlin Wall collapsed 25 years ago. The EU began its eastward enlargement 10 years ago. This allows of the dismantling of further borders in Europe. We, Germans and we, Europeans, have become happily reunited”.

As suggested in Angela Merkel’s narrative, the year 2014 will mark the celebration of the following key dates: the 100th anniversary of the breakout of World War I in 1914, the 75th anniversary of the breakout of World War II in 1939, the 65th anniversary of the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, the 25th anniversary of the East German “peaceful revolution” in 1989, the 10th anniversary of the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. The celebrations will be arranged into a clear sequence of parallel events of European and German significance, both optimistic and presented as a progression from evil to good. The tale of Europe begins with the collapse of the glorious pre-1914 world, the European proto-disaster, the start of the second thirty-year war followed by the atrocities of World War II (the Holocaust!). All ends well, however, with European integration and the remarkable accomplishment which is the European Union. All ends well despite Mephisto’s repeated evil plotting. Moving backwards (Nietzsche), one starts with the glorification of the European Union and accordingly shapes the past. The narrative is unlikely to be welcome by e.g. the British. On the German side, the beginning of the story has a few twists which require making the responsibility for starting World War I at least strongly relativized, whereas the “Versailles Injustice” may be kept in albeit without being overstressed as not to irritate European Union partners. The tale’s focus moves on to the Nazi period and World War II clearly assessed as the end of the German “disaster” and of the collapse of civilization. What is most important is the story’s finale: the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany, the “peaceful revolution” in East Germany and the reunification of East and West Germany to form a state which, as Merkel often remarks, is ruled perfectly in all respects, strong and model. With its upbeat strands, the tale makes one feel good.



It is nevertheless highly doubtful whether the two threads of the German narrative will be well received by other European countries. The drawback is that the story is exceedingly up-to-date, overly simplified and unbearably educational, not to mention that political writers enhance it with digressions reminiscent of Weimar Republic and the subsequent propaganda (reviving the discourse of the Schuldfrage and the Versailles Diktat). By all indications, another relativized version of history has been added to the opinion-making mainstream. One might nevertheless presume that the story will be poorly received in such countries as France, the UK and Belgium. It is hard to imagine seeing the German narrative embraced by Poland where World War I is associated mainly with the defeat of the hated invaders and with an opportunity to restore the Polish state. There is no reason in Poland to deplore the terms of the Armistice of November 11, 1918 or the Treaty of Versailles of June 28, 1919. The downfall of multicultural and multinational empires so regretted by Germans (who claim it gave rise to nasty East-European nationalism) was salutary from the Polish perspective. The Polish experience differs markedly from the German – rather than mayhem, the war brought about liberation and hope for a better future, a hope crushed again in 1939 with the aggression of the Third Reich. The Polish celebrations of the 1914 anniversary as well as the following war years, should therefore focus not as much on commemorating its road to freedom and independence but rather on incorporating that strand into Europe's collective memory. There is nothing here to be ashamed of.

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The statements expressed in this text exclusively reflect the views of its author.

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