

WWI's Devilish Cocktail Is Mixed Up Again

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The centenary of World War I naturally leads us to wonder: Why did this catastrophe, which caused the deaths of millions and destroyed great empires, occur? It's especially interesting to consider now, when, as if by prior arrangement on the eve of this anniversary, two military superpowers — the U.S. and Russia — have entered into a conflict that some are even calling a "hybrid war" or the precursor to a new world war.

Europe watches with growing concern as the military and political crisis on its periphery gains momentum. But reading the current analyses of World War I is still an exercise in boredom because it seems to me that they focus on the wrong question. Historians and others discuss how the war started and how the military encounters played out.

But the main issue, I believe, isn't how that war began or continued, but why it grew into a catastrophe. It started as an ordinary conflict between two great powers, so the beginning of the war wasn't especially dramatic.

The heads of empires, the traditional nobility and the new capitalist leaders planned to kill as many hundreds of thousands of their subjects as necessary to determine which nation was stronger and rearrange the map of the world in accordance with that determination.

But what followed was not an ordinary, if large-scale, war, but a catastrophe that swept the old Europe into oblivion, along with millions of people and empires. Why?

I believe it was due to the fact that those who organized the war could not have foreseen the unexpected consequences of technological development. Everyone thought they understood the impact of new inventions like the steam engine and more powerful artillery, but taken together, they were something much different, a devil's cocktail of technology.

The war took on an entirely unanticipated aspect because of innovations on the periphery of military technology. Let's examine the factors that turned an imperial war into an imperial catastrophe.

The empires involved gathered enormous armies and planned to attack, but in this new world, defense was much more advantageous. Barbed wire, intended initially to pen large herds of cattle in America's wide open spaces, turned out to be the ideal barrier against advancing troops. Then machine guns mounted behind that barbed wire made it possible for a dozen men to defend against hundreds and even thousands of attackers. So each army was forced into a defensive position in the trenches because it became almost impossible to go on the offensive.

But it wasn't just guns that made the war different, but how each army was supplied. Canned food made it possible to feed the millions of soldiers in these trenches and therefore maintain their position for months or even years. Railroad travel then enabled the transport of the necessary amounts of goods to armies in the field.

Mass production, meanwhile, made it possible to arm millions and send them to the trenches. There they stayed for three years, with minimal changes and maximum losses.

The warring empires had to feed these millions for years, putting pressure on their citizens; unlike the dictatorships of World War II, they weren't able to force their countries into complete mobilization. As a result, the empires simply fell apart. They exhausted their economies and their legitimacy. They prepared for war and got total war, without the social instruments necessary to conduct it. That was the three-year lead-up to this drama's final stage.

By 1917 the world was divided between splintering empires that had completely discredited themselves with their inability to either win the war or stop it, and a newly emerging mass society watching from the trenches. This very mass society, as philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset described so well, created totalitarian regimes 10 to 20 years later.

So empires created mass societies, armed their members to the teeth, and placed them in unbearable conditions, destroying the legitimacy of traditional imperial institutions. But they did not create instruments capable of managing a mass society.

A general uprising of the masses became only a question of time. And that was a particularly

pressing question for those in charge: Whose army would rebel first? As Napoleon wrote, battles are won by the army whose soldiers flee the field 20 minutes later than the opposing force.

Thus, World War I was won by those countries whose armies rebelled a little later.

But victory in this catastrophe for a particular nation was already of less importance for European society at large. The issue of importance was that the destruction of the old Europe gave birth to a mass society at a social impasse.

Does this viewpoint have implications for us today? A few. I was recently surprised to learn that for a long time now, computer programs, not people, have been in charge of buying and selling on the stock market.

Just as in World War I, new technologies are on such runaway trajectories that it would take an extremely powerful social science to keep track of the ways in which they might be combined or interact. We can only hope that matters of state remain in the hands of presidents, not crowdsourcing.

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