

Lane Wagner

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The Impacts and Devastations of World War One

World War One was a time of intense suffering for soldiers as well as civilians. While many people knew that the outcome of the war would be bad, they could have never guessed the impact that it would have on Europe. World War One was fueled by nationalism, and this mindset brought about a total war mentality that when paired with the devastating economic downfall due to the Great Depression, inflation, and the severe lack of food and jobs, prompted European people to seek a radical change which came in the form of supporting political extremist, Adolf Hitler. While promising economic and political salvation, Adolf Hitler also claimed pure Germans to be a master race, and that the Jews had backstabbed Germany during World War One, which gave power to the already anti-semitic right wings of European politics, thus building up Adolf Hitler's popularity.

The rise of nationalist states and Austria's attempt to expand, caused tensions between Serbia and Austria. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1914, a Serbian nationalist assassinated Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne. This was the straw that broke the camel's back. Austria declared war on Serbia. The Triple Alliance, an alliance between Austria, Germany, and Italy was formed which supported Austria, while the Triple Entente, an alliance between Britain, Russia, and France, which supported Serbia, was formed in retaliation to the Triple Alliance (McKay et al. 825-826). Thus, World War One began.

Originally, the war brought a heavy sense of pride and nationalism. War was romanticized. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul seems excited to be doing his part to serve his country when he says, "We were still crammed with vague ideas which gave to life, and to the war also, an ideal and almost romantic character" (Remarque 21). The realization that going to war was encouraged by the older generation in order to promote their own nationalistic and patriotic views, is very quickly seen when soldiers get to the front lines of war. The feeling of

betrayal from the older generation can be seen when Paul says, “The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a more humane wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief” (Remarque 12-13).

While the tumultuous war waged on between countries, civilians in Europe were also dealing with the impacts of war. Total war, in which distinctions between soldiers on the battlefield and civilians at home are blurred, ensued (McKay et al. 830). With European governments focusing their efforts on the war, economic downfalls followed and countries such as Germany became a totalitarian society. Free-market capitalism was abandoned, and food was rationed between civilians, based on their physical needs (McKay et al. 837).

Europe encountered social changes as well. One of the largest transitions in roles, were the roles of women. With an increased production of ammunition and war materials, more labor workers were needed. An industrial job which would have normally been filled by men, were now being filled by women. This transition was short lived though, as men returning from war demanded their jobs back. This new-found freedom in gender roles though, was displayed in the way women wore their hair and shortened their skirts. Due to their efforts in the war, women were granted the right to vote after the war. Positive social changes impacted different classes as well. The definite lines of social classes were blurred as the war had everyone working together to improve the industrialization of war materials (McKay et al. 840). While these changes were positive for most people, this upbeat attitude did not last for long. Over in Russia, civilians were struggling just to survive.

By 1915, suffering from a lack of supplies and equipment, the Tsar, Nicholas II wanted complete control over Russia. The only way for him to do this was to neglect the lower Russian parliament and take over military control. This choice, however, did not go over well with the

Russian people. Plagued by food shortages and lack of necessities, the Russian civilians revolted as street demonstrations turned violent. The Tsar ordered the protesters to be shot, but instead, the soldiers joined the protesters. Feeling that power was being lost, a provisional government was set up by the Russian parliament, and on March 12, 1917, Nicholas II stepped down from his throne (McKay et al. 842). Nicholas II stepping down, provided the perfect opportunity for Vladimir Lenin to step into power.

Exhausted from war and eager for changes, the Russian people gladly accepted Lenin's viewpoints. Lenin believed that only a violent revolution could destroy capitalism, a socialist revolution was possible even in a country like Russia, and that human leadership rather than historical laws made real revolutions (McKay et al. 843). Some of the Russian people finally felt as if they were going to regain control of their country. When Lenin's political group, the Bolsheviks, did not win the free election in 1917 though, and the peasants' party did, Lenin ordered the Bolshevik soldiers to disband the party and by 1918, Lenin had created a one-party state (McKay et al. 845). Although the Bolsheviks were met by opposition and a civil war ensued until 1920, the Bolsheviks remained in control. During this time of chaos, however, the German army was able to conquer Russian territory in a short amount of time. Fearing a total overhaul, Russia offered Germany a treaty called the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in which Russia would drop out of the war if Germany retreated. In March of 1918, Germany and Russia signed this treaty (McKay et al. 845). Although this seemed like a victory for Germany, the feeling of success did not last for very long.

As the war carried on, the British, French, and American armies were closing in on Germany. Germany knew that the resources it would take to sustain the war on their end such as food and money, along with the casualties, was not worth it. On November 9, 1918, Germany

agreed to terms of surrender and on November 11, 1918, the war was over. Larger countries such as France, Britain, Germany, and the United States had suffered and lost a lot during the war. Looking to create peace agreements after the war, twenty-seven nations came together in Paris in January of 1919. One treaty, the Treaty of Versailles, looked to blame Germany for the war.

The negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles was dominated by Britain, France, and the United States. Many of the negotiations dealt with Germany, although Germany was not present during the negotiations. France was the most enthusiastic about punishing Germany since France had lost the most men and felt that they deserved something in return for their suffering. In the end, it was decided that German colonies were to go to France, Britain, and Japan, Alsace-Lorraine was to be returned to France, the German army was to be limited to 100,000 men, and Germany was to pay war reparation equal to all civilian damages caused by the fighting (McKay et al. 852). While the nations believed that this was the best course of action so that Germany would never be a powerhouse again, the Treaty of Versailles had deadly consequences for the German people.

Although Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, they refused to pay reparations to France in 1922, so in 1923, France and Belgian armies occupied Ruhr, Germany. Workers in Ruhr went on strike and to support the unemployed workers, Germany began to print money. This caused inflation which sent the prices of goods soaring while the value of German dollar decreased significantly. In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul brings home bread, butter, cheese, sausage, and rice. When he asks his mother if the food situation is bad, she replies with, “Yes, there’s not much” (Remarque 160). People would bring bags of money with them to the store, just to buy a few grocery items. The fall of the economy and the Treaty of Versailles agreement was seen as an embarrassment to German nationalists who believed that Germany

could have won the war. One man in particular, Adolf Hitler, took his nationalist mindset and his obsession with war, and looked to pin the blame on someone.

Despite Germany having many Jewish people, Germany was also filled with many anti-Semitic people as well. Adolf was convinced that the Jewish people had stabbed Germany in the back and that they were to blame for Germany's issues. After joining and eventually controlling an extremist party called the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or Nazis for short, Adolf was imprisoned for attempting to overthrow the Weimer Republic in Germany. During his time in prison, Adolf wrote a book called *Mein Kampf* or *My Struggle*. The themes in his book were anti-Semitism, Germans being the master race that needed to defend themselves from racial degenerates, and the necessity of a leader-dictator with unlimited power (McKay et al. 911). The celebration of violence and blatant racism can be seen in *Mein Kampf* when Adolf writes, "A thirty-centimeter shell has always hissed more loudly than a thousand Jewish newspaper vipers- so let them hiss" (Hitler, paragraph 21)! Blatant racism can be seen in *Mein Kampf* when Adolf writes, "The lost purity of the blood alone destroys inner happiness forever, plunge man into the abyss for all time, and the consequences can never more be eliminated from body and spirit" (Hitler, "Nation and Race").

After Hitler was released from prison, he started building up the National Socialist German Workers' Party again. In 1929, the Great Depression, a worldwide economic depression, hit. With countries, such as the United States, struggling financially, they withdrew their loans to Germany. The Great Depression sent Germany into an economic downfall. As bankruptcy and unemployment soared, the German people abandoned their more conservative views and supported the Nazi party because of Hitler's promise of hope on economic and political levels. During the 1930 election, the Nazi party won 6.5 million votes and 107 seats. In 1932, the Nazi

party gained 14.5 million votes which was 38% of the total. These numbers made them the largest party in the German parliament (McKay et al. 912). The rise of Adolf Hitler led into the start of the Holocaust, a horrendous, systematic effort to eradicate all European Jews as well as people that were seen as inferior (McKay et al. 924).

While each event during World War One was seen as troublesome on its own, combined, each event led to more frustrations between the European people after the loss of war caused inflation which led to the rising of prices and loss of jobs. Eventually, unable to put up with any additional economic and social devastations, Europeans turned their attention to a more radical change presented to them by Adolf Hitler, hoping that his promises would undoubtedly lead to a return in jobs and a more stable economy.

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