

## The Disturbing Relevance of World War I

*By Klaus Wiegrefe*

**It has now been 100 years since the outbreak of World War I, but the European catastrophe remains relevant today. As the Continent looks back this year, old wounds could once again be rubbed raw.**

Joachim Gauck, the 11th president of the Federal Republic of Germany, executes his duties in a palace built for the Hohenzollern dynasty. But almost all memories of Prussian glory have been eliminated from Bellevue Palace in Berlin, where there is no pomp and there are no uniforms and few flags. The second door on the left in the entrance hall leads into a parlor where Gauck receives visitors.

In the so-called official room, there are busts of poet Heinrich von Kleist and Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert, the first German president after Kaiser Wilhelm II fled the country into exile, on a shelf behind the desk. There are two paintings on the wall: an Italian landscape by a German painter, and a view of Dresden by Canaletto, the Italian painter.

Gauck likes the symbolism. Nations and their people often view both the world and the past from different perspectives. The president says that he doesn't find this disconcerting, because he is aware of the reasons. In 2014, the year of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, the eyes of the world will be focused on Germany's head of state. It will be the biggest historical event to date in the 21st century.

And Gauck represents the losers.

More than 60 million soldiers from five continents participated in that orgy of violence. Almost one in six men died, and millions returned home with injuries or missing body parts -- noses, jaws, arms. Countries like France, Belgium and the United Kingdom are planning international memorial events, wreath-laying ceremonies, concerts and exhibits, as are faraway nations like New Zealand and Australia, which formed their identities during the war.

Poles, citizens of the Baltic countries, Czechs and Slovaks will also commemorate the years between 1914 and 1918, because they emerged as sovereign nations from the murderous conflict between the Entente and the Central Powers.

### Unthinkable in Germany

In the coming months, World War I will become a mega issue in the public culture of commemoration. The international book market will present about 150 titles in Germany alone, and twice as many in France -- probably a world record for a historic subject. The story of a generation that has long passed on will be retold. New questions will be asked and new debates will unfold. British Prime Minister David Cameron is even making funds available to enable all children attending Britain's government-run schools to visit the battlefields of the Western Front.

A response of this nature would be unthinkable in pacifist Germany.

But Western Europeans paid a higher death toll in World War I than in any other war in their history, which is why they call it "The Great War" or "La Grande Guerre." Twice as many Britons, three times as many Belgians and four times as many Frenchmen died on the Maas and the Somme than in all of World War II. That's one of the reasons, says Gauck in his office in the Hohenzollern palace, why he could imagine "a German commemoration of World War I as merely a sign of respect for the suffering of those we were fighting at the time."

The "Great War" was not only particularly bloody, but it also ushered in a new era of warfare, involving tanks, aircraft and even chemical weapons. Its outcome would shape the course of history for years to come, even for an entire century in some regions.

In the coming weeks, SPIEGEL will describe the consequences of World War I that continue to affect us today: the emergence of the United States as the world's policeman, France's unique view of Germany, the

ethnic hostilities in the Balkans and the arbitrary drawing of borders in the Middle East, consequences that continue to burden and impede the peaceful coexistence of nations to this day.

Several summit meetings are scheduled for the 2014 political calendar, some with and some without Gauck. Queen Elizabeth II will receive the leaders of Commonwealth countries in Glasgow Cathedral. Australia, New Zealand, Poland and Slovenia are also planning meetings of the presidents or prime ministers of all or selected countries involved in World War I.

### **'A Different Nation Today'**

August 3 is at the top of Gauck's list. On that day, he and French President François Hollande will commemorate the war dead at Hartmannswillerkopf, a peak in the Alsace region that was bitterly contested by the Germans and the French in the war. The German president is also among the more than 50 heads of state of all countries involved in World War I who will attend a ceremony at the fortress of Liège hosted by Belgium's King Philippe. Gauck, a former citizen of East Germany, sees himself as "the German who represents a different nation today, and who remembers the various horrors that are associated with the German state."

The 73-year-old president hopes that the series of commemorative events will remind Europeans how far European integration has come since 1945. Gauck notes that the "absolute focus on national interests" à la 1914/1918 did not lead to happy times for any of the wartime enemies.

But he knows that the memory of the horrors of a war doesn't just reconcile former enemies but can also tear open wounds that had become scarred over. In this respect, the centenary of World War I comes at an unfavorable time. Many European countries are seeing a surge of nationalist movements and of anti-German sentiment prior to elections to the European Parliament in May 2014.

In a recent poll, 88 percent of Spanish, 82 percent of Italian and 56 percent of French respondents said that Germany has too much influence in the European Union. Some even likened today's Germany to the realm of the blustering Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Last August, a British journalist emerged from a conversation with the press attaché at the German Embassy in London with the impression that Berlin, in the interest of promoting reconciliation, wanted to take part in commemorative ceremony in neighboring countries. This led to an outcry in the British press, which claimed that the Germans were trying to prevent the British from celebrating their victory in World War I.

### **Source of Apprehension**

Such episodes are a source of apprehension for Gauck. "One can only hope that the voice of the enlightened is stronger today than it was in the period between the two wars."

And if it isn't? "Europe is too peaceful for me to consider the possibility of wartime scenarios once again. Nevertheless, we saw in the Balkans that archaic mechanisms of hate can take hold once again in the middle of a peaceful decade," Gauck warns.

Such "yes, but" scenarios on World War I are often mentioned. In the era of NATO and integrated armed forces, hardly anyone can imagine a war between Europeans. Still, it is possible to sow discord in other ways in the 21st century. Today's equivalent of the mobilization of armed forces in the past could be the threat to send a country like Greece into bankruptcy unless its citizens comply with the demands of European finance ministers. Historians of different stripes note with concern that the course of events in 1914 are not that different from what is happening in Europe today.

Even a century ago, the world was globalized after a fashion. Intercontinental trade was booming, and export quotas were higher than they would be until the era of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Germans wore jackets made of Indian cotton and drank coffee from Central America. They worked as barbers in London, bakers in St. Petersburg and maids in Paris, while Poles slaved away in Germany's industrial Ruhr region.

Those who could afford it, traveled around Europe, without requiring a passport. Professors corresponded with their counterparts in Oxford or at the Sorbonne, in English and French. The ruling aristocratic families were related to one another. In fact, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Britain's King George V and Czar Nikolai II were cousins. They called each other Willy, Nicky and George and saw each other at family events, including the wedding of the Kaiser's daughter in Berlin in 1913.

## **A Debate over the Beginnings**

This raises the question of why, despite the many trans-national connections and interactions, the German attack began on Aug. 4, 1914, when a group of mounted lancers crossed the Belgian border. What was wrong at the cabinet tables of the day? Why did this war claim such horrendously large numbers of victims? And why did it drag on for four long years?

The calamity began when, on June 28, 1914, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was visiting the Bosnian city of Sarajevo. A group of Serbian assassins, outfitted by Serbian government officials, was waiting for him.

The young men dreamed of a Greater Serbia that would include the Serbs living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time. When Archduke Franz Ferdinand's driver had to turn his car around after taking a wrong turn, 19-year-old student Gavrilo Princip fired into the open vehicle. His wife, Duchess Sophie, was hit in the abdomen and died on the way to the residence, while the heir to the throne was hit in the neck and bled to death. Three of the conspirators were executed, while others were sentenced to long prison terms.

The assassination is not among the glorious deeds of Serbian history, and at first the mourning Habsburgs had the sympathy of other European leaders. In happy times, the majesties would have gathered at the funeral of the murdered couple and exchanged pleasantries

But the 83-year-old Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph, the uncle of Franz Ferdinand, decided to attack Serbia and wipe out the Serbian nationalism that had become a threat to his ailing realm. The monarch, who had been on the throne for 65 years, had already considered waging a war against Belgrade several times in the past. The assassination seemed to confirm the warnings of those advisers who believed that accommodation with Serbia was impossible. World War I "was unleashed, and it was Austria-Hungary that had unleashed it," writes Viennese historian Manfred Rauchensteiner.

## **Not Just Germany**

Words like Rauchensteiner's have revived a debate that had seemed settled long ago. In the 1960s, Hamburg historian Fritz Fischer shocked Germany more than any other historian before or since. Fischer claimed that Berlin's "grasp for world power" was the main, if not the only, reason for the great massacre. After a heated debate among historians, Fischer's claim became the established view.

But just in time for the centenary, new research has raised fundamental questions about this view of events. Historians are not exonerating Kaiser Wilhelm II, who alternated between public bluster and anxious restraint. But they also stress the failures of Russia (US historian Sean McMeekin), France (German historian Stefan Schmidt), Austria-Hungary (Rauchensteiner) or all the major powers combined (Australian author Christopher Clark).

Two ostensibly solid blocs were pitted against each other: the German and Austro-Hungarian empires on one side, and the so-called Entente, consisting of the French Republic, the Russian Empire and the British monarchy, on the other. Even this constellation shows that in 1914, democracy and human rights were not at issue, but rather capitalism and the planned economy.

Although neither of the two sides was planning an attack in the spring, all the major powers viewed war as a legitimate tool of policy and even considered an armed conflict unavoidable in the medium term. The main parties feared for their standing, influence and even existence. France, believing that it had lost the arms race against Germany, urged Russia to exert pressure on Germany from the east. German military leaders assumed that they would be inferior to the Russians on the long term, which suggested that striking quickly would be the best approach. The czar, propelled by the fear that Great Britain could change sides,

decided to build up his military strength. And in London, there were fears that the dynamic German Reich would outstrip the British Empire.

Meanwhile, smaller countries like Serbia sought to play off the major powers against one another.

It was a fragile, highly complex system, and controlling it required prudence and foresight. Historian Clark estimates the number of decision-makers in 1914 at several hundred, including monarchs, ministers, military officials and diplomats. They were overwhelmingly older men, and most were aristocrats.

### **'Quick Fait Accompli'**

Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph did not fail to recognize the danger that Russia would come to the aid of its Slavic brothers in Belgrade in the event of an Austrian attack on Serbia. He asked his German allies for support, and on July 5, 1914, the Austrian ambassador called on Kaiser Wilhelm II at the New Palace in Potsdam, outside Berlin.

It's a scenario that often repeats in world politics: For egoistic reasons, a relatively weak country -- Austria-Hungary -- tries to draw a major power and ally -- the German Reich -- into a regional conflict. It wasn't the first time, either, but the Germans had always stepped on the brakes before 1914.

And this time? The Kaiser recognized that Russia was "by no means ready for war." He and his advisers felt that the risks involved in an Austrian blitzkrieg against Belgrade were manageable. "A quick fait accompli and then friendly to the Entente -- that way the shock can be endured," noted Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg.

The liberal-conservative lawyer from Brandenburg was a key figure in the so-called July crisis. Contemporaries describe the former civil servant as a conciliatory person and not an agitator. But in the summer of 1914, he agreed with the assessment of German military leaders. If the czar did not flinch, they preferred to attack, as long as St. Petersburg hadn't completed its military buildup. "Better now than later," was the motto of Helmuth von Moltke, chief of staff of the Prussian Army.

Today we know that the haste was unfounded and the Russian Empire was a giant with feet of clay. But over lunch with the Viennese ambassador, Wilhelm II issued the so-called blank check, saying that Vienna could count on his "full support," and that Franz Joseph should proceed with his attack on Serbia.

The Kaiser's blank check transformed a local crisis into a European conflict. It was the German Reich's decisive contribution to the "seminal catastrophe" of the 20th century.

### **Demands of an Angry Public**

When Italian columnists like Eugenio Scalfari claim today that Germany threatens to ruin the continent a third time with the euro crisis, his count is based on the assumption that the blank check led to war in 1914. From this perspective, some observers could even view the economic reforms Chancellor Angela Merkel demanded for Southern Europe as a continuation of Wilhelmine power politics with different means -- the tools of economic policy.

However, in 1914 the members of the Entente could also have stopped the escalation at any time, especially the czarist regime -- which took Serbia's side, because an angry public demanded it and because the Russians hoped that by aligning themselves with a strong Serbia, they could wage a war on two fronts against Austria-Hungary.

French President Raymond Poincaré, a lawyer from the region near Verdun who pursued a rigidly anti-German course for fear of the Reich, also believed that war was unavoidable. At the height of the July crisis, when Poincaré visited St. Petersburg and gained the impression that fickle Czar Nicholas II was considering relenting on the issue of Serbia, the French president urged the czar to remain steadfast.

There is little for which the British can be reproached. Before 1914, at least at times, they sought to maintain a good relationship with the Reich -- albeit for strategic reasons rather than out of a love of peace.

Their position led Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg to assume that London would remain neutral in a war, and No. 10 Downing Street allowed him to cling to that belief for much too long.

A few weeks before the Sarajevo assassination, Europe was on the brink of disaster. The events of 1914 were not unlike events in the euro crisis today, argued historian Clark in his bestseller "The Sleepwalkers." According to Clark, everyone knew that they were playing with fire, and yet everyone tried to exploit the general threat to his own advantage.

In late July Wilhelm II, at any rate, was overcome with doubts over the wisdom of his policy. The Kaiser was giving "confused speeches, from which the only clear conclusion to emerge is that he no longer wants the war," noted a minister in Berlin. Wilhelm II was now calling on his ally in Vienna to take a more restrained approach toward Serbia. But he did not take back the blank check, which was critical.

## **The Great Plunge**

On July 29, the Austro-Hungarian Danube flotilla opened fire on Belgrade. A day later, Czar Nicholas II ordered the general mobilization of the Russian army.

From then on, the logic of the so-called Schlieffen Plan shaped the fate of Europe. Germany feared a war on two fronts, and because the Russian army required months to fully mobilize its troops, the German General Staff in Berlin wanted to use the time to score a quick victory over France. The German army would then march eastward.

The plan had been conceived by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, the famous chief of the General Staff, who died in 1913. Its disadvantages quickly became obvious. The generals had anticipated a war without Great Britain, even though the concept included overrunning Belgium, whose neutrality Great Britain had guaranteed since 1832.

The time pressure resulting from the plan also proved to be fatal. As soon as the Russian mobilization was underway, the German Empire had to attack in the west -- or abandon the idea of victory. Schlieffen's plan did not envision a diplomatic approach to managing the crisis.

Faced with the choice between war and political defeat, the leaders of the Reich, caught up in the notions of power and prestige of the day, chose to attack. The "leap into the dark," Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg said with regret, was his "gravest duty."

In early August, Germany declared war on Russia and then on France. Great Britain chose sides on Aug. 4, after the German invasion of Belgium had begun.

One domino after another was falling, and yet there was no recognizable benefit. There had been countless wars in human history, wars motivated by the desire for freedom or revenge, or for economic reasons. But the war that erupted across Europe in the summer of 1914 could hardly have been more senseless.

## **Germany's Left Joins the Cause**

Kaiser Wilhelm II is said to have had tears in his eyes when he signed the order to mobilize the German army. Soon afterwards, he traveled on a special train to German military headquarters, which were initially established in the western city of Koblenz. The monarch had little say there, with Bethmann Hollweg and the military leaders determining the course of the war.

They were deeply concerned about the working class, which stood at the workbenches in the weapons factories and made up the majority of soldiers. In the last days of July, several hundred thousand people had attended anti-war demonstrations sponsored by the Social Democratic Party (SPD), where they protested the "criminal activities of the warmongers."

Would they refuse to play along?

The SPD leadership feared that the Kaiser would unleash the police and the army on the Social Democrats, and Wilhelm and his generals did in fact consider arresting top SPD officials.

But the situation changed when Russia began mobilizing its forces. Since the days of Karl Marx, the German left had detested the repressive czarist regime, which was now being painted as the aggressor. On Aug. 4, SPD Chairman Hugo Haase declared in the Reichstag: "We will not desert our fatherland in its hour of need."

After that, SPD lawmakers approved the war credits, without which the war could not have been funded. According to the minutes of the Reichstag session, there was "repeated fierce applause and clapping." Today its approval of the war credits is seen as the darkest hour in the long history of the SPD.

Of equal importance, of course, was the failure of the German middle class, which produced the students and other ardent patriots who were depicted in many photos from the summer days of 1914 -- photos of beaming young men with flowers stuck in their gun barrels, and of cheeky sayings painted on the railroad cars ("Excursion to Paris").

### **'Like a Big Picnic'**

In those weeks and months, artists, professors, pastors and intellectuals supplied the necessary slogans. Sociologist Max Weber called the war "great and wonderful," economist Werner Sombart dubbed the Germans "the chosen people," and poet Thomas Mann noted that a "purification" of mankind was about to occur. Suddenly it became apparent that right-wing nationalist groups had been banging the drums for the fatherland in Germany, but also in Great Britain and France, for years, and that significant portions of the European youth belonged to paramilitary organizations. In St. Petersburg, a mob stormed the German Embassy, and in London the workshops of German craftsmen were ransacked. European societies, writes Berlin historian Christoph Nübel, were "militarized societies," in contrast to present-day Europe.

There was a great willingness to go to war for one's country. In England, more volunteers reported for duty than the army could equip. Letters suggest what motivated the men, who were often spurred on by the thirst for adventure or the desire to prove their manhood in a seemingly noble struggle. "I think the war is magnificent. It's like a big picnic, but without the superfluous trappings that normally come with it," noted a British officer.

This notion began to dissipate within weeks. As in the days of Napoleon, the men stormed ahead, cheering all along -- and encountered the weapons of the 20th century. Machine guns spat out up to 600 bullets a minute and field artillery fired shrapnel grenades in rapid succession, mowing down the infantrymen. "When a machine like that hit its mark, there was nothing but minced meat left over," a German soldier wrote in a letter to his family.

The dynamics of the industrial revolution had once brought Europe control over a large portion of the world, and now it was striking back at the old continent. A gigantic killing machine ensured that an average of 6,000 soldiers a day were killed.

A French infantryman noted: "The hill is like a fire-spitting volcano: shrapnel smoke; yellow, red and green rocket flares to signal to the artillery to either open or hold fire; flares that bathe the entire 'canyon of death' in pale magnesium light, blinding the advancing troops; shells exploding everywhere, leaving behind a fiery glow and black smoke. There is an infernal noise, with the sounds of wailing, singing, whistling and shouting in front of us and behind us, as the iron explodes. The number of dead bodies lying on the ground is horrifying."

### **Surprising Resistance**

That was what the battlefields of the new war looked like.

To their surprise, the Germans encountered fierce resistance in Belgium, and the war crimes associated with the fighting remain unforgotten to this day. The occupiers reacted with draconian severity to real or alleged partisan attacks. Villages were looted, houses burned down and about 5,500 civilians shot to death, including women and children.

In the venerable university city of Louvain, soldiers with the German 1st Army killed 248 civilians, expelled about 10,000 residents and burned down part of the city, including its famous library. Hundreds of thousands of Belgians fled to neutral Holland, crossed the English Channel or escaped to France.

Now the war was becoming ideologically charged. The Allied propaganda castigated the "Huns" for their crimes. In Germany, artists and intellectuals, such as the painter Max Liebermann, theologian Adolf von Harnack and theater director Max Reinhardt issued an "appeal to the cultural world" that sought to justify the attack on Belgium. German "culture" was being pitted against French "civilization," and duty, order and *Volksgemeinschaft* against individualism, democracy and human rights.

Reports of success inflamed the mood. In late August 1914, the German army, under Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, won a battle near Tannenberg, about 100 kilometers (63 miles) south of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad). The czar, whose army had invaded East Prussia, was forced to retreat.

In early September, the war in the West seemed all but won, when German troops were at the gates of Paris, the French government fled to Bordeaux and the city commandant began preparations to blow up the Eiffel Tower.

But then came the "Miracle on the Marne," an event every schoolchild in France learns about to this day. The Germans, exhausted after their hasty marches and fighting in the hot summer sun, were unable to encircle the French army.

### **The Great Turning Point**

The French commander-in-chief, Joseph Joffre, drummed up all available reserves. The son of a vineyard owner in southern France and veteran of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, Joffre even commandeered Paris taxis to transport soldiers to the front.

The nightmarish fighting lasted five days, until Helmut von Moltke, the chief of the German General Staff, interrupted the battle on Sept. 11 and ordered his troops to retreat behind the Aisne. To this day, experts argue over whether this decision was premature. Whatever the case, Moltke suffered a nervous breakdown and was replaced.

The Battle of the Marne marks the great turning point in World War I, because it meant that Schlieffen's plan to achieve a quick victory over France had failed. Both sides now attempted to encircle each other, but at the end of the so-called race to the sea, the front extended from Switzerland to the Channel coast.

The German Reich was now forced to wage the war on two fronts that its military leaders had been determined to avoid. In the west, it turned into trench warfare, which became emblematic of the years between 1914 and 1918 -- and a nightmare for the soldiers.

Plagued by rats, lice and bedbugs, the infantrymen crouched in trenches, tunnels and dugouts, the bottoms of which were often filled with groundwater. In many places in eastern France, such as the Hartmannswillerkopf in Alsace and in Vauquois near Verdun, the remains of kilometers of trench systems can still be seen today. They consisted primarily of barbed-wire barriers and head-high barbed-wire abatis, followed by three rows of trenches for the sentries, the main combat force and the reserve troops, separated by several hundred meters and often arranged in a zigzag pattern to minimize the potential targets for French or British soldiers who might gain access.

A few kilometers farther back, there were two additional lines with more trenches, dugouts, machine gun positions and embrasures. Ammunition was brought in and soldiers were replaced through so-called connecting trenches. To avoid losing their way, the soldiers assigned names to the bunkers and dugouts, names like "Bremer Ratskeller" and "Berthalust."

### **Contempt for Death**

The men had to endure hours of shelling. "Everything around us is flying through the air," noted a French soldier. "It's a constant rolling thunder. Clods of earth and rocks hail down on our backs and shrapnel is

constantly whistling by." The explosions hurled fractured tree trunks, gun parts and human bodies high into the air. Experts estimate that artillery was responsible for about 60 percent of the military casualties.

A French lieutenant shouted to his comrades that his nerves were at an end and that he had to get out of the trench. They tried to stop the crazed man but failed. "He had hardly reached the edge of the trench when an exploding shell ripped his head off," a fellow soldier reported. "I stared in a daze at the piece of his lower jaw that was still attached to the body, while blood and bone marrow flowed into the trench from his neck."

Other soldiers surrounded themselves with a shield of apparent contempt for death. The most famous example was the writer Ernst Jünger ("Storm of Steel"). Jünger's voice was that of a wounded soul. On Oct. 17, 1915, he wrote in his diary that he had found pieces of bone from a hand. "I picked them up and had the tasteful plan of having them made into a cigar holder. But there was still some decaying, greenish-white flesh stuck between the joints, so I abandoned my plan."

Experts still argue over whether the trenches saved or cost more lives. They protected the soldiers, but they also made it possible for hostile troops to come within a few dozen meters of each other, facilitating the mutual killing.

World War I should have come to an end when trench warfare began. Before 1914, the German generals had insisted that a war on two fronts was unwinnable. And indeed, Moltke's successor, Erich von Falkenhayn, contemplated the possibility of peace talks, at least to take the Russians out of play at first.

But there were no promising negotiations until 1917, neither in the east nor in the west.

There are several explanations for this. One was the extremely large number of casualties. To this day, Aug. 22, 1914 is the bloodiest day in French military history. Some 27,000 soldiers died on that day. By the end of 1914, Germans and Belgians had lost about half of their field armies, and the number of dead, wounded and captured soldiers exceeded the one-million mark in the armies of Russia and Austria-Hungary.

## **No Search for Compromises**

Such sacrifices couldn't have been in vain. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg expressed the prevailing German view when he said that "abandoning the country that was captured with so much blood" would be a "violation of our duty to the fallen." The Allies used similar arguments.

The governments of all the major powers were politically weakened when they entered the war, which made it all the more difficult to admit that they had not achieved victory. The czar and the two emperors of the Central Powers even feared revolutions if they failed to return home triumphant.

Instead of searching for compromises, the leaders on both sides added to their wish lists in the event of victory. Bethmann Hollweg aimed to annex substantial portions of France and Belgium, along with Luxembourg, control Central Europe and set up bases on the Faroe and Cape Verde Islands -- such claims were even considered moderate in Berlin.

French President Poincaré would have preferred to divide up the German Reich into individual states. He demanded Alsace and Lorraine, which had been part of the Reich since 1871, as well as the Saarland and territories west of the Rhine. He even wanted to dominate Belgium.

The czar's list and that of some of his advisers included Constantinople, the Dardanelles, large parts of Eastern and Central Europe and even southern Silesia and East Prussia.

Only the British exercised restraint. In their view, no one was to dominate continental Europe, including the Allies. London wanted to preserve the option of assuming the lucrative role of conflict arbitrator.

Because the balance of power was roughly equal, both sides were still hopeful of achieving victory -- if only the next attack were a success. But until 1917, all major offensives quickly became bogged down.



## **'Fatal Indifference'**

This became especially apparent in the four-and-a-half month Battle of the Somme, in which the British and the French managed to capture only 10 kilometers of German-held territory -- and paid for it with the loss of 600,000 men. Some 300,000 soldiers died at Verdun, and yet the front was relatively unchanged when the battle was over. And some two million Russians died, were wounded or were taken prisoner in the so-called Brusilov Offensive east of Lviv, in which between 50 and 125 kilometers of territory was captured.

The attacking generals had great difficulty controlling their large armies. Sometimes it took days for orders to reach the front. Most of all, however, the elaborate defensive positions resisted constant artillery fire.

At Verdun, German gunners fired two million artillery shells in the first eight hours. Today, almost 100 years later, the site of the battle remains a cratered moon landscape, covered with only a light coating of bushes, trees and shrubs.

When the Germans advanced after artillery fire, they were horrified to encounter surviving French soldiers, who continued to fight bitterly.

The Battle of Verdun is the most famous example of how both sides increased their efforts and encountered the suffering of their own troops with "fatal indifference," as historians Gerhard Hirschfeld and Gerd Krumeich write.

For strategic reasons, it made little sense to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of soldiers to capture the fortifications around Verdun -- and it was equally pointless to defend them at all costs.

The war became all-encompassing by 1916. In Germany, France and Austria-Hungary, about 80 percent of men fit for military service were sent to the front or to sea. An entire generation was shaped by the experiences on the battlefield. It included Charles de Gaulle, Winston Churchill, Ludwig Erhard, Adolf Hitler and, after the United States had entered the war, Harry Truman, the later president and founder of NATO.

To keep the massive machinery of death running, tracks were laid, roads built and ammunition depots constructed behind the front lines. Logistics experts calculated that at least 120 trains of daily supplies were required in major battles.

## **Celebrating Life**

The spread of violence was reflected in weapons technology. Engineers developed flamethrowers, tanks and fighter planes. Even poison was used, first by the Germans and later by the Allies.

In this time of total war, victories and defeats were no longer decided by the genius of generals, but by economic and military mobilization strength. In 1917, Russia was no longer able to keep up -- ironically, it was precisely the power that the German Kaiser, his chancellor and the generals had once feared the most. The Russian economy collapsed, the czar abdicated and the prospect of land reform led to mass desertions by soldiers, most of them farmers.

Lenin, the new man in charge, wanted peace at any cost, and in December talks with Berlin's envoy began in Brest-Litovsk. Lenin eventually gave up a quarter of his European territory, including the Baltic states, Poland and Finland, which all yearned for independence.

After the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Central Powers could finally wage the single-front war Schlieffen had envisioned. But by then, the United States had already entered the war. It marked the "decisive strategic turning point," as historian Gerhard P. Gross puts it.

The largest industrialized nation on earth had already been energetically supporting England with food, raw materials and ammunition since 1914. In the belief that the British Empire would come to the negotiating table if its supplies were cut off, in early 1917 the Kaiser and his advisers launched unlimited U-boat attacks on freighters, including US ships.

It was probably Kaiser Wilhelm II's biggest mistake. The total U-boat war did not achieve the desired success, and it also brought the United States into the war, against the Central Powers.

### **Meeting in a Rail Car**

By July 1918, a million well-rested GIs had landed on the old continent. The Allied forces were soon pushing back German divisions along a broad front. The war was lost even before it had reached German territory.

On the evening of Nov. 7, 1918, a German column of three vehicles crossed the front near Chimay, Belgium. Engineer units had cleared away all land mines along the route. A large white flag was displayed on the first car and a trumpeter blew short signals, so that no one would inadvertently open fire. The German delegation had come to sign a ceasefire agreement.

French military vehicles took the group, led by Matthias Erzberger, a Catholic member of the Reichstag, to a train that stopped the next morning near Compiègne in northern France.

The mood was icy when French Marshall Ferdinand Foch, who had recently been named the supreme commander of Allied forces, and three British officers received the Germans in one of their rail cars.

Erzberger signed the ceasefire on the morning of Nov. 11. "A nation of 70 million can suffer, but it cannot die," he announced dramatically. "Très bien," Foch replied. The parties chose not to shake hands.

The guns fell silent at 11 a.m.

### **A Dented Helmet**

The survivors of World War I included Franz Warremann, a journeyman bricklayer from the northeastern German city of Rostock, whose grandson, Joachim Gauck, is Germany's president today. Warremann brought home a helmet from the front that had been dented when it was grazed by a bullet just above his left temple. He had apparently been extremely lucky.

The dented helmet has since been lost, says Gauck in his office at Bellevue Palace in Berlin, but the sight of it created such a strong impression on him that he could "still draw it" today.

When his grandfather got together with other veterans in the evening and they talked about the war, young Joachim was always surprised at how exuberant they seemed. How could they be so happy after those harrowing experiences?

Only much later did he understand that the men treasured spending time with fellow soldiers who had also looked death in the eye in the trenches. Only they could understand what it meant.

And that was why they were celebrating life.

*Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan*