

We Are Heading for Another Tragedy Like World War I

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We are now before the 100th anniversary of World War I, the war that was supposed to end all wars. While honoring the 16 million who died in this conflict, we should also condemn the memory of the politicians, officials and incompetent generals who created this horrendous blood bath.

I've walked most of the Western Front of the Great War, visited its battlefields and haunted forts, and seen the seas of crosses marking its innumerable cemeteries.

As a former soldier and war correspondent, I've always considered WWI as the stupidest, most tragic and catastrophic of all modern wars.

The continuation of this conflict, World War II, killed more people and brought more destruction on civilians in firebombed cities but, at least for me, World War I holds a special horror and poignancy. This war was not only an endless nightmare for the soldiers in their pestilential trenches, it also violently ended the previous 100 years of glorious European civilization, one of mankind's most noble achievements.

I've explored the killing fields of Verdun many times and feel a visceral connection to this ghastly place where up to 1,000,000 soldiers died. I have even spent the night there, listening to the sirens that wailed without relent, and watching searchlights that pierced the night, looking for the ghosts of the French and German soldiers who died here.

Verdun's soil was so poisoned by explosives and lethal gas that to this day it produces only withered, stunted scrub and sick trees. Beneath the surface lie the shattered remains of men and a deadly harvest of unexploded shells that still kill scores of intruders each year. The spooky Ossuaire Chapel contains the bone fragments of 130,000 men, blown to bits by the millions of high explosive shells that deluged Verdun.

The town of the same name is utterly bleak, melancholy and cursed. Young French and German officers are brought here to see firsthand the horrors of war and the crime of stupid generalship.

Amid all the usual patriotic cant from politicians, imperialists and churchmen about the glories of this slaughter, remember that World War I was a contrived conflict that was totally avoidable. Contrary to the war propaganda that still clouds and corrupts our historical view, World War I was not started by Imperial Germany.

Professor Christopher Clark in his brilliant book, 'The Sleepwalkers' shows how officials

and politicians in Britain and France conspired to transform Serbia's murder of Austro-Hungary's Crown Prince into a continent-wide conflict. France burned for revenge for its defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War and loss of Alsace-Lorraine. Britain feared German commercial and naval competition. At the time, the British Empire controlled one quarter of the world's surface. Italy longed to conquer Austria-Hungary's South Tyrol. Turkey feared Russia's desire for the Straits. Austria-Hungary feared Russian expansion.

Prof Clark clearly shows how the French and British maneuvered poorly-led Germany into the war. The Germans were petrified of being crushed between two hostile powers, France and Russia. The longer the Germans waited, the more the military odds turned against them. Tragically, Germany was then Europe's leader in social justice.

Britain kept stirring the pot, determined to defeat commercial and colonial rival, Germany. The rush to war became a gigantic clockwork that no one could stop. All sides believed a war would be short and decisive. Crowds of fools chanted 'On to Berlin' or 'On to Paris.'

Few at the time understood the impending horrors of modern war or the geopolitical demons one would release. The 1904 Russo-Japanese War offered a sharp foretaste of the 1914 conflict, but Europe's grandees paid scant attention.

Even fewer grasped how the collapse of the antiquated Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires would send Europe and the Mideast into dangerous turmoil that persists to our day. Or how a little-known revolutionary named Lenin would shatter Imperial Russia and turn it into the world's most murderous state.

This demented war in Europe tuned into an even greater historic tragedy in 1917 when US **President Woodrow Wilson**, driven by a lust for power and prestige, entered the totally stalemated war on the Western Front. One million US troops and starvation caused by a crushing British naval blockade turned the tide of battle and led to Germany's surrender.

Vengeful France and Britain imposed intolerable punishment on Germany, forcing it to accept full guilt for the war, an untruth that persists to this day. The result was Adolf Hitler and his National Socialists. If an honorable peace had been concluded in 1917, neither Hitler nor Stalin might have seized power and millions of lives would have been saved. This is the true tragedy of the Great War.

Let us recall the words of the wise **Benjamin Franklin**: 'No good war, no bad peace.'

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