World War I as a Historical Divide

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While World War I certainly represents a historical rupture in Europe and many parts of the world, there are diverging views in scholarly literature and broader historical discourse regarding its character as a dividing line between historical periods. The essay identifies three main positions within the debate and elaborates on the broader consequences of these interpretations. Several scholars consider World War I as the end of an earlier, longer historical era. According to another periodization, the two World Wars and the two decades separating them make up an era together, which is distinct from the pre-1914 and post-1945 periods. Finally, a third major current interprets World War I as the overture to a new epoch. Each of the three approaches can be relevant to research on World War I and the twentieth century, but there are considerable divergences between the interpretations thus produced. If we regard World War I as the endpoint of the previous era, then great emphasis should be placed on the road leading up to the war. If we conceive of the two World Wars and the decades between them as a single unit, then we should focus on violence as a defining feature of the periodization, and short-term factors should be highlighted. Finally, if we understand the Great War as the beginning of a new period which lasted until the end of the twentieth century or beyond, World War I will be seen as the *Urkatastrophe* (primordial catastrophe) that set the stage for World War II and, indirectly, for the Cold War, while also generating seminal long-term processes in politics, society, and the economy.

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From the 1880s onwards, well before the actual outbreak of World War I, several leading personalities of the age began expressing their views on the character of a future war to be fought by the European great powers. Helmuth von Moltke Senior, the victorious German commander-in-chief of the Prussian-French war, warned the Reichstag in 1890 that if a war were to break out in Europe, neither its duration, nor its end could be foreseen. The losing great powers would not accept defeat or the peace terms. This situation would soon generate another, prolonged conflict, Moltke Senior predicted, which could last for seven years or even 30.[1]

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1   Krumeich, "The War Imagined: 1890–1914," 5.

Other predictions were made in a similar vein, but it would be highly misleading to consider these seemingly prophetic insights as universally shared. In fact, many contemporaries, although they feared a potential war, hardly shared anything resembling the aforementioned Moltke's views, nor were they in any way able to foretell the specificities or significance of any impending conflagration. Quite symptomatically, instead of heeding Moltke's admonition, the German military leadership relied on the somewhat modified version of Alfred von Schlieffen's notorious plan, which anticipated a brief conflict. This plan entirely miscalculated the importance and the limits of contemporary innovations in the field of transport and military technology, which provided a much wider range of options for the defenders against the attackers than in earlier or subsequent wars. But Germany was not the only country to cherish such unrealistic ideas about the war. Ferdinand Foch, who eventually became the commander-in-chief of the Allied troops in France in 1918, published books in 1903 and 1904 that were reprinted several times over the course of the following years. In these works, Foch voiced his conviction that the future war would be a tremendous clash that could and would be decided swiftly, i.e., in a single gigantic battle.[2]

When the war broke out, it quickly became evident to contemporaries that it was a conflict of special intensity and significance corresponding much more to the vision of Moltke Senior than to the ideas of Schlieffen or Foch. This dawning realization turned out to be all the more valid when it came to the consequences of the war.[3] Although Europe and the world were affected by numerous other major events throughout the twentieth century, the Great War constituted a significant caesura in European history. The present study explores the specificities as well as the long-term effects of World War I to determine the place occupied by the war in historical periodization.[4]

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2 Ibid., 7.

3 Winter, "Historiography 1918–Today"; Borodziej and Górny, *Forgotten Wars*; Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora;* Gyáni, "A Nagy Háború: Kinek a háborúja?" 82–91; Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*; Horne, "Introduction," xvi–xxviii; Winter, *The Legacy of the Great War;* Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction;* Braybon, *Evidence, History and the Great War;* Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *1914–1918*; Chickering and Förster, *Great War, Total War;* Winter et al., *The Great War and the Twentieth Century;* Keegan, *The First World War;* Horne, *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War;* Winter and Baggett, *1914–18: the Great War and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century;* Geyer, "The Militarization of Europe, 1914–1945"; Winter, *The Experience of World War I.*

4 The literature on historical periodization is rather scarce: Karner et al., *Epochenbrüche im 20. Jahrhundert;* Stearns, "Periodization in Social History"; Koselleck, *Zeitschichten: Studien zur Historik;* Jordanova, *History in Practice*; Green, "Periodizing World History"; Besserman, "The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives."

World War I can be regarded as a global conflict for several reasons. The origins of the war can be traced back to the unparalleled surge of globalization in the last third of the mid-nineteenth century. Europe was in the center of this process, and the European colonial powers controlled massive overseas territories, which made it nearly inevitable that a conflict involving them would reach a global scale. Thus, the actual hostilities stretched well beyond Europe, with crucial battles taking place in the Atlantic, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Moreover, during the war, the mobilization of human, natural, and other resources took place in a global dimension. In particular, the Allies relied on their overseas colonies in that respect, but other nations, such as the United States, also marshalled overseas resources. In addition, the war had an impact on international trade and other global connections even in areas such as Latin America, which did not take part in the actual struggle. Finally, the war was a series of global events that were intensively covered, debated, and analyzed by the media all over the world.[5] Admittedly, this paper mainly focuses on the war and the historiography of the war in Europe, and thus it cannot do full justice to the global dimension of the war. Since there is no full congruence between national, continental, and global chronologies, and in Africa and the Far East, World War I constituted a less important rupture than it did in Europe, I cannot claim global validity for the results presented here, even if Europe was epicenter of the conflicts leading to the war and the major theater of warfare.[6]

While World War I undoubtedly represents a historical rupture in Europe and many parts of the world, there are diverging views in scholarly literature and broader historical discourse regarding its character as a dividing line between historical periods. There are three main currents within the debate. According to the first school of thought, World War I meant the end of an earlier, longer historical era. This interpretation prevailed, for instance, in the interwar French and British historiography, while today, some authors regard World War I as the end point of the "long nineteenth century."[7] According to another periodization practice, the two World Wars and the two decades separating them make up a single period which is distinct from the pre-1914 and post-1945 periods.[8] Finally,

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5 On the global dimension of the war, see Winter, "General Introduction"; Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History;* Gerwarth and Manela, "The Great War as a Global War"; Janz, "Einführung: Der Erste Weltkrieg in globaler Perspektive"; Lakitsch et al., *Bellicose Entanglements.*
6 Segesser, "1918, a global caesura?"
7 Blackbourn, *History of Germany 1780–1918.*
8 Wehler, "Der zweite Dreißigjährige Krieg," 32.

a third major current interprets World War I as the overture to a new era.[9] One idea that is frequently ventured is that the latter historical epoch came to an end in 1991, i.e., with the fall of the European Communist regimes. This notion is also captured by the concept of the "short twentieth century," but there are some who would argue that we still live in the age that began with World War I.

Drawing distinctions between these periodization efforts and their analyses is not a self-serving exercise. As I shall show, a preference for one over another has serious implications for an interpretation of the entire twentieth century, as proponents of the varying periodizations lay emphasis on different elements of the period.

End of an Era

The first periodization, according to which the war was the end of a historical era, recognizes the extraordinary importance of World War I because it brought about new dimensions of violence in both qualitative and quantitative terms. However, changes of such historical significance usually do not result from a single event or series of events, i.e. they are not determined by short-term factors. According to this approach, the roots of the violence seen in the war went back to distant times.[10]

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Europe was the stage for comprehensive structural and ideological transformations which triggered changes in the nature of political violence manifested in a spectacular form during World War I. New forms of state power emerged, and this power began to penetrate geographical and social spheres where, earlier, it had had only moderate influence. In other words, governments exercised more and more control over their citizens and their citizens' everyday lives. There were substantial shifts in the power relations of the individual European states, especially in the eastern and southeastern part of the continent. The Ottoman Empire was dwindling, and its place was taken over by new, virulent nation states in the Balkans. This launched a new wave of ethnic and diplomatic conflicts that had a strong impact on Central and Western Europe. Forms of mass politics also began to evolve

9   Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes,* ix.
10   Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht;* Reimann, "Der Erste Weltkrieg." For interpretations claiming that the Great War constituted the end of an era, see Osterhammel, "In Search of a Nineteenth Century"; Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt;* Leonhard, "Legacies of Violence."

in Western and Central Europe. As a result of this, the masses ceased to be an occasional force in political processes and started to be a major determinant.[11]

These political changes were accompanied by economic and social transformations. Industrialization strengthened the abovementioned administrative and military capacities of the state everywhere, and the organization of industrial workers into a social class also posed a threat to the ruling elites. Urbanization also facilitated the emergence of mass politics. The uneven pace of economic development decisively contributed to shifts of power among the European states.[12]

As researchers of political violence have pointed out, the general attitude toward violence had begun to change well before the war in Europe and elsewhere. The American Civil War was a totalizing war, as it blurred the borderlines between the military and the civilian population, warfare and the home front, and it also advanced the concept of unconditional surrender.[13] A conspicuous sign of this change was the widespread conceptualization of war as a desirable and noble activity, a phenomenon also referred to as the glorification of violence. The intensification of political violence in the first decades of the twentieth century can be put down to numerous sources. In particular, three major political-ideological currents of the nineteenth century contributed to the explosion of political violence: nationalism, colonial imperialism, and communism.[14]

The most significant factor was the linkage of popular sovereignty and nationalist ideology.[15] This became a quintessential force primarily in contested regions with heavily mixed ethnic compositions, most notably the Balkans and East Central Europe. As the emancipatory character of nationalism began to fade, the subordination of ethnic minorities increasingly came to be coupled with aggression at the end of the nineteenth century.[16] The primary catalyst of violence was the Eastern Crisis, which began to flare up in the mid-1870s and which involved an intricate web of international, imperial, and ethnic conflicts. It was followed by outbreaks of brutal ethnic violence in the Balkans up until 1914.

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11   McMillan, "War."

12   Carreras and Josephson, "Aggregate Growth, 1870–1914"; Halperin, *War and Social Change in Modern Europe,* 51–143.

13   Leonhard, "Legacies of Violence," 321.

14   Kershaw, "War and Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe," 112.

15   Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1870,* 22, 84; Mann, *The Sources of Social Power,* 730–32; Mann, "A Political Theory of Nationalism and its Excesses."

16   Kershaw, "War and Political Violence," 111.

These bursts of violence were not entirely new, but the arsenal of the opposing parties became more powerful and the actors more intransigent. As has been noted by scholars of late nineteenth century political violence, "[t]he pattern of state oppression, terrorism, revolt, ethnic conflict, international intervention, forced resettlement of populations and ethnic cleansing and genocide was one that had already been established in Europe long before 1914."[17]

From the end of the nineteenth century, radical national groups gained ground in Western and Central and Eastern European states as well. They not only put pressure on their own governments to force them to take more aggressive stances in international politics, they also intimidated foreign governments and public opinion in other countries. The diplomats closely monitored the radical nationalist demands and the xenophobic articles published in the press. The French and the Russians feared the Pan-German movements, while the Germans were alarmed by the Pan-Slav initiatives. The activism of the nationalist agitators produced arguments for similar groups in other countries and contributed to the development of an atmosphere of distrust in international politics.[18]

Another important political-ideological current which influenced the dynamics of political violence was colonial imperialism.[19] The governments of colonizing countries could be relatively nonviolent when it came to domestic affairs but repressive and even brutal when it came to colonized populations. Clearly, several factors were at play, including racism, the effort to spread Christianity, and the pursuit of imperial territorial expansion. Material interests played a secondary role in colonization efforts. Most the colonies, with India being the most important exception, demanded more investment from the colonizing country than the revenues produced. This was true even when the balance was positive for certain business groups which tried to drive imperialist policy forward. Richard Findlay and Kevin O'Rourke also emphasize that in the globalizing world economy at the end of the nineteenth century, there were no antagonistic conflicts between the great powers that would have demanded a military solution.[20] Therefore, colonial imperialism can be traced back primarily to ideological and political factors. Nonetheless, the imperialist attitudes were quite clearly detectable in the European escalation of violence after World War

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17   Bloxham et al., "Europe in the world," 39.
18   Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War,* 233–234; Rauchensteiner, *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1914–1918,* 34–35.
19   Dwyer and Nettelbeck, "'Savage Wars of Peace'."
20   Findlay and O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty,* xxiv–xxv.

I, too. It was with reference to the British and Belgian colonies that the Nazis demanded similar territories outside Europe and on the old continent as part of their project to create a so-called "living space" for themselves, one that would clearly be based on racial discrimination.[21]

Finally, communism and bolshevism can also be classified among the key ideological sources of violence.[22] Where authoritarian regimes blocked the gradual emancipation of the working class (particularly in Russia), revolutionary ideas in the labor movement became dominant. Long before the Russian revolution of 1917, Lenin and other Bolsheviks were of the view that profound social change could be achieved in Russia only by unrelenting terror.[23] The Russian revolution, which broke out after three bloody years of war, turned into a brutal civil war which soon exported revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence beyond Russia's borders.[24]

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to regard the pre-1914 period as a mere prelude to World War I. The war was not inevitable. International relations of the time were not characterized exclusively by conflict, and significant efforts were made to maintain peace. It is no accident that after 1871, Europe experienced one of the longest periods in its history without wars between the great powers. There were several factors that prevented the outbreak of major armed conflicts. Most of the statesmen knew that a war would cause social upheaval and revolutions, and they were also aware of the additional political, financial, and economic risks. Although the military leaders of the great powers had called for an armed solution on several occasions before the World War, they were always restrained by the politicians, who knew that wars needed justification and that waging a comprehensive modern war was only possible with broad social support. The biggest political parties in Europe, the German Social Democratic Party and the British Labour Party, were unambiguously anti-militarist. Radical nationalism was an important factor, but it was hardly the only factor that influenced foreign policy in the countries of Europe.[25]

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21 Kershaw, "War and Political Violence," 112; Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence.*

22 Ryan, "'Revolution is War': The Development of the Thought of V. I. Lenin on Violence, 1899–1907."

23 Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century,* 8–10.

24 Kershaw, "War and Political Violence," 112; Beyrau, "Der Erste Weltkrieg als Bewährungsprobe."

25 Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War,* 227–29.

Era of World Wars

Moving on to the other periodizations of the twentieth century, works that consider World War I not as the endpoint of one era but rather as the beginning of a new one are in fact more common in the historical literature. As noted above, the decades between 1914 and 1945 were a period which was referred to as "another Thirty Years' War" (Winston Churchill), the "Thirty Years' War in the 20th century" (Raymond Aron), "the age of the European civil war" (Ernst Nolte), or simply "the era of violence" (Ian Kershaw).[26] These decades were connected by the explosion of violence: well over 100 million people perished in wars, civil wars, Nazi extermination camps, and Soviet labor camps.[27] According to the advocates of this type of periodization, this era differed fundamentally, at least in Europe, from the previous decades and especially the second half of the century, which brought a longer period of peace again.

Within the immense literature dealing with the causes of World War I, the revisionist approach that evolved around the turn of the millennium calls into question the idea that the outbreak of the war was somehow inevitable or highly likely because of the prewar tensions, crises, and pressures created by nationalist agitation. Instead, this approach assigns a greater role to the contingent incidents or unfavorable coincidence of specific events, especially during the July crisis. It accepts, however, the crucial role of World War I in the long-term escalation of political violence.[28]

World War I not only increased the number of the victims of political violence, it also signaled the beginning of a new quality of violence. This novel quality was the result of the combination of modern industrial technologies with the new conception of war, one that was reminiscent of the sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century wars of religion. Such clashes were conceptualized as battles between "good" and "evil." Unlike the conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which had comparatively limited aims (for instance, the preservation or fall of a given dynasty), the aim of the major powers in World War I was to destroy the enemy utterly.

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26   Churchill, *The Gathering Storm,* 12; Aron*, Peace and War,* 297; Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg, 1917–1945;* Kershaw, "War and Political Violence," 112.

27   For different estimates, see Leitenberg, *Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20th Century,* 3–15.

28   Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War,* 16–17.

The new culture of war involved, first, the cultural mobilization of the population for violence and, second, the changing practice of war.[29] On all sides, the dehumanization of the enemy was a primary tool of cultural mobilization (some refer to this as psychological mobilization).[30] This was greatly facilitated by the fact that, in the age of mass media, the governments had efficient tools at their disposal to distort information and widely disseminate such news reports. Initially, they exercised censorship only over news directly related to the military situation.[31] Later, however, information regarding prevailing general sentiment and especially views of the war and also critical remarks made by politicians and politically exposed persons were also considered relevant from the perspective of military considerations, so they too were submitted to censorship. Accordingly, while in 1914, there was only one press officer in the German army, there were more than 1,000 of them by 1916.[32] The expansion and modernization of the propaganda activities are demonstrated by the fact that, in early 1917, a Photo und Film Office *(Bild- und Filmamt, BUFA)* was set up within the military department of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in early 1918, Great Britain set up a Ministry of Information.[33] Priority was accorded to the presentation of sexual violence perpetrated by the enemy.[34] Serbian newspapers contained reports concerning rapes allegedly committed by members of the Austro-Hungarian army, and the Austrian press provided broad coverage of the atrocities allegedly perpetrated by Russian troops against women in Galicia. The aim was not simply to report on the assaults committed against women. The propaganda suggested that if men were unable to defend their women (and by implication their country), their masculinity itself would be endangered.[35]

However, the demonization of the enemy was not simply the product of censorship and propaganda. As recent research on World War I has pointed out, civil society also took an active part in this campaign.[36] In October 1914, 93 prominent German intellectuals, including Max Weber and Albert Einstein, published a manifesto entitled "Appeal to the Civilized World." In it, they rebuffed all accusations against the German army, from the violation of

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29   Becker, "Faith, Ideologies, and the »Cultures of War«," 234.
30   Wehler, "Der zweite Dreißigjährige Krieg," 32.
31   Demm, "Propaganda at Home and Abroad".
32   Kruse, *Der Erste Weltkrieg,* 84.
33   Tworek, "Bild- und Filmamt (BUFA)"; Kruse, *Der Erste Weltkrieg,* 87.
34   Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction,* 244–46; Morrow, "A Theory of Atrocity Propaganda."
35   McMillan, "War," 62; Steffen, "Othering/Atrocity Propaganda."
36   Purseigle, "Warfare and Belligerence."

Belgium's neutrality to the cruelties allegedly committed by German troops, and insisted that the German army was, in fact, the defender of German culture and, hence, the culture of the world. Attacks on the German army, they contended, were also attacks on German culture. In response, French scholars published a manifesto in which they argued that German culture and military aggression were closely related: the former bred the latter. As Henri Bergson, perhaps the most renowned philosopher in France at the time, put it, war was "the fight of civilization against barbarism."[37]

As these examples make clear, the basic function of the culture of war was the creation of an antagonistic opposition of collective identities. Although critical voices eventually became louder, a markedly antiwar attitude was characteristic only of a rather small fraction of intellectuals throughout the war. These opinions were expressed most noticeably in Russia, Great Britain, France, and to a lesser degree in Germany and Austria-Hungary.[38]

Two important elements of the other key component of the new war culture, the change in the practice of war, merit particular emphasis here. Over the course of the war, military actions against civilians and the destruction of the memorial sites crucial to the cultural identity of the enemy became an increasingly standard tool in the arsenals of the opposing armies.[39] To cite one example, one might think of the act of arson committed in Leuven in the first weeks of the war. The University of Leuven Library, which held a collection of precious codices and incunabula, was set aflame by the German army, an act without military justification.[40] The tremendous fire power in the battlefields was another major element of the new practice of war which, not surprisingly, shaped the culture of war.

As the above makes clear, the war was waged not only in the battlefields by soldiers but also on cultural fronts involving the civilian populations, which is why it has come to be referred to as a total war in the historical literature.[41] Since the conflict was a war of nations and empires with the participation of entire societies, acts of violence could be perpetrated in the name of the people, and violence could be deployed against the civilian populations. In other words, the

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[37] Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War,* 4; Irish, "Petitioning the World."

[38] Kramer, "Recent Historiography of the First World War. Part II," 169.

[39] Kramer, "Combatants and Noncombatants"; Watson, "'Unheard-of Brutality': Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914–15"; Gumz, *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918,* 44–59.

[40] Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction,* 6–30.

[41] Strachan, "Total War in the Twentieth Century."

enemy was no longer states and their armies, but the entire populations of other countries.[42] The totalization of the war led to brutalization both in the ranks of the military and within the wider society, because it made ever increasing levels of aggression socially acceptable, arguably preparing the way for World War II.[43] This process can be described not only as a transformation of the culture of war but also as a change in the prevailing political culture.

The use of physical violence evolved into an intrinsic instrument of partisan actors in the new order of the interwar decades, in which physical assaults were considered a legitimate means of political struggle. Therefore, the formal end of World War I did not mean an end to political violence. On the contrary, between 1917 and 1923, revolutions, counterrevolutions, civil wars, and violent ethnic conflicts shattered many parts of Europe.[44] The process of brutalization was especially striking in Russia during the revolution and civil war and in Germany in the revolutionary period and during the moments of diffuse political violence of the 1920s and 1930s.[45] In Russia, World War I was instrumental in the brutalization of politics, but often in a more indirect way. Violence did not simply originate on the battlefield. Rather, it had a more complex genealogy. The institutional weakness of the state had permitted cultures of violence to flourish before the Great War. The war destroyed the old state structures and state authority, releasing the preexisting propensities for violence, which started to feed on themselves. Many instances of violence (White, Green, criminal, and mob violence) were devastating but were employed mostly tactically. In contrast, the Bolsheviks practiced violence and the threat of brutality in a strategic way to transform society and create a new state. The strategic use of force helped them defeat their opponents, and it also led to the institutionalization of violence in the newly established communist state.[46] Central and Eastern Europe was also highly affected by political violence after the war. In Hungary, the revolutionary

42   Horne, "War and Conflict in Contemporary European History, 1914–2004," 5.

43   Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars,* 162.

44   On the conflicts in the immediate post-war years, see Böhler, *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland*; Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*; Gerwarth and Horne, *War in Peace*; Révész: "Post-war Turmoil and Violence (Hungary)"; Balkelis, *War, Revolution, and Nation-Making in Lithuania, 1914–1923*; Bodó and Prónay, *Paramilitary Violence and Anti-Semitism in Hungary, 1919–1921*; Wilson, *Frontiers of Violence;* Stephenson, *The Final Battle;* Hart, *The IRA at War, 1916–1923*; Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star*; Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires.*

45   Jones, "Political Violence in Italy and Germany after the First World War."; Voigtmann, "The Baltikumer."

46   Beyrau, "Brutalization Revisited."

and counterrevolutionary terror and the intense everyday violence that evolved in the early 1920s (which included, for instance, the beating of Jews at universities) were all manifestations of the above. However, compared to Russia or Germany, the situation was consolidated relatively soon, within a few years.[47]

The revolutions, counterrevolutions, and paramilitary violence showed that although Europe was exhausted by 1918, there was no general cultural demobilization after World War I.[48] Not even the Paris Peace Treaties managed to lay down the foundations of an enduring peace or an era without violence on the continent. This failure should be put down less to a lack of wisdom among the diplomats and more to the fact that "the war in people's heads" continued, i.e., wartime attitudes continued to live on in broad spectrums of European societies, even if significant differences could be observed across Europe. Mobilization for political violence began to decline in the 1920s, especially in the victorious countries (such as Great Britain and France), but demobilization was hardly complete there either.[49] The change is well illustrated by the transformation of depictions of war in France. While before 1914, images of war were dominated by heroic cavalry attacks and the figure of the noble and self-sacrificing soldier, after the mid-1920s, heroism disappeared for the most part from these depictions, and war was often presented as a filthy and vile act. Thus, it has been suggested that the increase in political violence as a formative experience of the post-World War I order depended less on the experiences of the war and more on how a specific country had fared in the peacemaking processes after the war. Accordingly, recent studies underline the confusion and humiliation brought about by defeat, which played a key role in the eruption of violence in Germany, Austria, and Hungary. Here, a "culture of defeat" emerged which, as a symptom of enduring cultural mobilization, prevented many war veterans and civilians from coming to terms with the war's outcome and demobilizing themselves internally.[50] However, even in the "cultures of victory," political violence was an essential constituent of the interwar order. The task of securing the new borders in the context of ethnically and religiously diverse societies created considerable

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47 Gerwarth, "The Central European Counterrevolution."; Gerwarth and Horne, "Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War: An Introduction."; Sammartino, "Paramilitary Violence."
48 Geyer, "The Militarization of Europe, 1914–1945."
49 Laurence, "Forging a Peaceable Kingdom"; Schumann, "Europa, der erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit."
50 Schievelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*; Edgecombe and Healy, "Competing Interpretations of Sacrifice in the Postwar Austrian Republic."

conflicts and violent excesses in countries as such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Ireland.[51]

In addition to this absence of cultural demobilization, the two World Wars were also connected to each other by the armed conflicts that broke out shortly after the end of World War I. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931, Italy launched an attack against Abyssinia in 1935, the Germans and the Italians intervened in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, and war broke out between Japan and China in 1937.

Beginning of a New Era

There is another widespread position concerning World War I as a historical divide which considers the Great War as the overture to a new era that lasted not simply until the end of World War II, but much longer than that. Reference has already been made to the well-known concept of the "short twentieth century,"[52] meaning the period between 1914 and 1991, but several works have chosen World War I (its beginning or its end) as the starting point, and they trace historical trends which lasted until the turn of the millennium or up to the present day.[53] According to these works, the twentieth century was essentially a period of historical continuity, as the historical trends sparked or ignited by World War I were decisive even after World War II.[54]

According to historians who see World War I as the beginning of a new period stretching until 1991 or beyond, this continuity can be detected with regard to violence as well. Once the war culture and other characteristics of World War I have been acknowledged, and in particular the practices of demonizing the enemy and committing acts of violence against civilians (such as shelling and aerial bombardment, U-Boat attacks, requisition of food and labor, mistreatment and abuse of allegedly suspicious members of minority communities, etc.), these phenomena lose their distinct quality and become integral elements of war.[55] The conscious application of this type of periodization to European history

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51 Eichenberg, "The Dark Side of Independence"; Kučera, "Exploiting Victory, Sinking into Defeat."

52 Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes,* ix.

53 Krüger, "Der Erste Weltkrieg als Epochenschwelle."

54 James, *Europe Reborn: A History, 1914–2000.*

55 For contributions that in specific aspects consider World War I a precursor to World War II, see, for example, Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*; Winter, *America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915*; Prusin, *Nationalizing a Borderland*; von Hagen, *War in a European Borderland*; Liberman, *The Holocaust and Genocides in Europe*; Wróbel, "Foreshadowing the Holocaust."

acknowledges the key importance of World War I and the extreme brutality of World War II, but it also points to widespread political aggression in the second half of the twentieth century. Globally, many wars were fought after 1945, and European powers were directly involved several of them. The colonial wars offer an obvious example, but the export of violence from Europe can be observed in other respects as well. The two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) and their allies often instrumentalized local conflicts in the third world for their own purposes and clashed with each other in proxy wars.

Moreover, political violence, though it may have lost some influence and resources, never ceased to exist entirely in Europe itself. From the 1960s, terrorist movements repeatedly committed violent acts, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s involved mass violence and ethnic cleansing again, and recently, Russia has come into armed conflict with its neighbors on several occasions, disregarding international law time and again. In the decade after the turn of the millennium, nationalist mobilization took place in several other countries as well, such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania.[56]

For decades after World War II, the threat of political violence was moderate. Underlying factors included the ethnic homogenization of the nation states resulting from large-scale forced resettlements and assimilation. The threat of mutual nuclear destruction as a deterrent during the Cold War and the process of European integration were even more important reasons for the absence of major wars in Europe. Today, however, tensions are no longer bottled up by the logic of Cold War, and European integration is affected by centrifugal forces more than ever. The reappearance of security issues invites interpretations that draw connections between the current era and the age of the World Wars and promotes the related historical periodization.

However, World War I ushered in a long-term transformation that stretched beyond the mid-twentieth century not only in terms of political violence, but in international politics, social and economic affairs and ideologies. A crucial international and geopolitical consequence of the war was the termination of the classic European pentarchy. The empires of Central and Eastern Europe disintegrated, and the borders drawn by the peace treaties stabilized for the most part in the long run. The colonial system was seemingly only restructured, but the imperial overstretch of the British and the French accelerated the emancipation of their colonies. The imperial state as a form of territorial governance came

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56   For example, see Feischmidt and Majtényi, *The Rise of Populist Nationalism.*

under attack and began to retreat as the concept of the nation state continued its advance across the globe. Several decades and another brutal war between 1939 and 1945 were necessary to accelerate the course of imperial decline, but World War I was the starting point of this process and, thus, a global watershed.[57]

The victory of the Bolshevik revolution kicked off the evolution of the communist world system, and the rivalry between communist and capitalist countries left its mark on international relations throughout the century.[58]

Among the economic changes, increased redistribution and state control of business stands out.[59] Government agencies and other authorities appeared in each belligerent European country. These bodies oversaw the allocation of raw materials, controlling finances and distributing food and other everyday necessities. As the war progressed, they became more and more powerful, indicating that the government had acquired competencies that would have been inconceivable previously and that they had undertaken a degree of responsibility for the living standards of citizens that had been essentially unheard of. After the war, these authorities were only partially eliminated, as illustrated, for instance, by the continued operation of the Center of Financial Institutions *(Pénzintézeti Központ)* in Hungary.[60]

The use of war loans to finance the war and precipitous inflation caused by the manipulation of state finances devastated the economies of the belligerent countries, but a similar fate awaited pre-1914 international commercial and financial relations as well. In some areas, war damages already hindered economic performance, and reconstruction also demanded considerable resources. Overseas investments had to be sold to finance the war. The bulk of the wartime investments flowed into the armaments industry, which later became redundant. There were excess capacities in other branches, too, and the human capital suffered heavy losses. These factors contributed to the Great Depression and thus to the political instability of the 1930s.[61]

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57   Gerwarth and Manela, "The Great War as a Global War."

58   On the social consequences of the war, see Marwick and Purdue, "The debate over the impact and consequences of World War I"; Wall and Winter, *The Upheaval of War*; Winter and Robert, *Capital Cities at War*.

59   Winter, *War and Economic Development*; Hardach, *The First World War 1914–1918*; Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation*; Wrigley, *The First World War and the International Economy*; Strachan, *Financing the First World War*.

60   Tomka, *A magyarországi pénzintézetek rövid története, 1836–1947,* 81.

61   Jolanta and Harrison, "War and disintegration, 1914–1950"; Capie, "Inflation in the twentieth century," 164–66.

The economic weight of the United States and Japan grew in the west and in the east, respectively, with long-term consequences. This was clearly indicated by the fact that while before 1914, the key currency of the international capital markets had been the British pound sterling and Great Britain had been the leading international creditor, insurer, and investor, after 1918, these functions began to be filled by the United States and the US dollar.[62]

As far as the broader social implications are concerned, it deserves to be mentioned that World War I brought a breakthrough in the development of mass democracies. In the previous era, parliamentary systems existed all over Western Europe, but only a small percent of the population had voting rights. However, during the war, the biggest sacrifices were made by the excluded groups, so they demanded their political rights. The introduction of women's suffrage also picked up speed. This was due in no small part to the ever-larger presence of women in the workforce and, notably, in positions requiring forms of skilled labor. This process accelerated over the course of the twentieth century, becoming perhaps the single most important factor in women's growing political and economic emancipation.[63] However, the large-scale extension of the right to vote and the simultaneous spread of parliamentary systems also created some measure of political turmoil in the short run. While Great Britain managed to stabilize its democracy in the 1920s, most liberal democracies collapsed or had been overthrown by the early 1930s, and this contributed decisively to the escalation of international conflicts.[64]

With regards to long-term social processes, the war did not so much bring about a breakthrough as act as a catalyst which accelerated shifts already underway. The working class continued to grow during the war. In some countries, it increased by one third over the four years in question. Parallel to the expansion of the economic role of the state, social policy was also given greater emphasis. The war uprooted millions, thus contributing to the spread of new habits and attitudes. Relatively insulated peasant communities were increasingly exposed to urban values. The changes which took place to the roles that were played by women in society (particularly but not exclusively with regards to the presence of women in the workplace) are also a significant indication of changes in and challenges to social values. In the 1920s, the sight of a woman on her own in a cinema and another public place of entertainment became customary

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62   Broadberry and Harrison, "The economics of World War I: an overview."

63   Grayzel, "Women and Men," 263.

64   Reynolds, *The Long Shadow,* 39–83.

in European cities, while only a few decades earlier it would have constituted a rare incident.[65]

All in all, each of the three approaches presented above can be relevant for research on World War I and the history of the twentieth century, but there are considerable divergences between the interpretations they produce. If one regards World War I as the endpoint of the previous era, then strong emphasis should be placed on the road leading up to the war, or in other words the conflicts in Europe and the prevailing ideologies of the last third of the nineteenth century: how were the structural and cultural preconditions created that eventually led to the outburst of violence in 1914?

If one conceives of the two World Wars and the decades between them as a single unit, then the focus shifts to violence as a defining feature of the periodization, and emphasis falls on short-term factors. War is traced back to war in many respects, with World War II being seen as a consequence of World War I. This approach furthers an understanding of the dynamics of violence. It also highlights the relative peace prevailing in Europe for several decades after World War II and encourages one to explore the reasons for this peace. At the same time, this interpretation is Eurocentric and can barely account for long-term social and economic changes.

Finally, if we understand the Great War as the beginning of a new period lasting until the end of the twentieth century and even beyond, emphasis is placed on World War I as a defining watershed—even in comparison with World War II—which generated massive long-term political, social, and economic processes. Thus, World War I is to be seen not only as the prelude to World War II, but as an *Urkatastrophe* (primordial catastrophe) or "the great seminal catastrophe of this century," (George F. Kennan) which triggered a series of conflicts.[66] From the perspective of Central and Eastern Europe, this approach is particularly relevant, as World War I initiated the breakup of empires in the region and the rise of a new system of nation sates, and the common thread of the ensuing short twentieth century for Central and Eastern Europe was the dominance of authoritarian systems.

In contrast with total war, total history is unfeasible, as historians cannot consider the all the existing sources and research findings in their works. The

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65 Marwick and Purdue, "The debate over the impact and consequences of World War I," 113–21.

66 Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order,* 3; Schulin, "Die Urkatastrophe des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts"; Mommsen, *Die Urkatastrophe Deutschlands.*

approaches discussed above cannot be merged into one seamless narrative either. Instead, we see changing foci in the historiography of World War I, and this affects the assessments of the place of World War I in any historical narrative of the time.

Between the two World Wars, historians paid greater attention to the events leading up to World War I than they did to its immediate consequences, but they usually focused on relatively narrow issues. They were intrigued by the question of war guilt, in particular the responsibility of governments, which corresponded to the traditional view that placed the nation at the center of its narratives.[67]

In the 1950s and 1960s, concern with the events of World War II among both historians and the general public largely overshadowed interest in the Great War. Still, several excellent scholarly works were written on World War I in which the focus shifted to the masses affected by the war on the front and in the hinterland. This contributed to discussions of the long-term effects of World War I and new considerations of how the war had arguably shaped the whole of the twentieth century (some of which have been presented above).

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the new Europe was born and the interpretations of international relations based on the nation state principle seemed narrow or even obsolete, the concept of a "European civil war" gained popularity. As we have seen above, this notion included World War I. One of the key promoters of this idea was the Museum of the Great War, which was opened in 1992 in the Château de Péronne in the town of Péronne, France (the site of the Somme battles).[68]

This proved to be a temporary change. The centenary of the outbreak of the Great War coincided with growing international instability, which once again encouraged a search for correspondences between the age of World War I and our own days and thereby placed emphasis on long-term perspectives. But the larger framework for understandings of past events has not changed: interpretations of World War I continue to be shaped by historians, members of the public, and their broader social contexts.[69]

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67   Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*.

68   For recent examples of this view, see several contributions to Pennell and de Menese, *A World at War, 1911–1949*.

69   Brandt, "The Memory Makers."

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