

“The first war seemed, perhaps was, more of a break in historical continuity, both as an end and a beginning. It came after a generation of European peace. Men did not know what to expect or, at any rate, the war turned out very differently from what they had expected. Their bewilderment had deeper causes. Many wars make sense, if the word can be used of such a senseless procedure. The great war which began at Valmy and ended at Waterloo (1792-1815) was predominantly a conflict between the traditional order and the revolution. The Second World War of the twentieth century was predominantly a war against National Socialism. But what was the First World War about? In essence it was a war against war, rather than a conflict of creeds. If victory had gone to the other side, the territorial arrangements would have been different. But would the character of the ensuing civilization have been much altered?” – A. J. P. Taylor, *From Sarajevo to Potsdam*

A Collage of Impressions about World War One -- From Voices from the Great War by Peter Vansittart

1914

“War might drive a man till he dropped; it could be a dangerous and bloody business; we believed, however, that it still offered movement, color, adventure, and drama.” -- J. B. Priestley

“My own attitude towards the conflict was simple and clear. In my eyes, it was not Austria fighting to get a little satisfaction out of Serbia, but Germany fighting for her life, the German nation for its 'to be or not to be,' its freedom and its future...I think with pride and sorrow of those days and back to the weeks of the beginning of our nation's heroic fight, in which kind fortune allowed me to partake.” -- Adolf Hitler

“All my Libido is for Austria-Hungary.” -- Sigmund Freud

“It is not good when people no longer believe in war. Pretty soon they no longer believe in many other things which they absolutely must believe in if they are to be decent men.” -- Thomas Mann

“I adore the war. It's like a picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I've never been so well or happy. No one grumbles at one for being dirty.” -- Julian Grenfell, killed May 26, 1915

“Julian's love of war he himself explained in terms of his being allowed to be dirty; he meant this physically, but psychologically it was relevant too. For the first time a generation brought up to be clean and bright and obedient could, without guilt, be fierce and babyish and vile...War was a freedom both from society and from social fantasies; it was the one area in which there were standards of excellence other than those of snobbishness, bitchiness and money.” -- Nicholas Mosley

1915

In 1914, the Russians averaged 300,000 loses per month. In 1915, The Russians lose one million men on the Eastern Front. The Turks deport 1,750,000 Armenians to Mesopotamian deserts, 600,000 die, another 600,000 vanish. The British, Australians and New Zealanders lose 252,000 at the Dardanelles between April and December.

“The trenches wound in meandering lines and white faces peered from dark dug-outs--a lot of men were still preparing their positions, and everywhere among them there were graves. Where

they sat, beside their dug-outs, even between the sandbags, corpses stuck out. Corpses jammed in among them. It sounds like fiction -- one man was frying potatoes on a grave next to his dug-out." -- Max Beckmann (German painter)

By the end of 1915, the French army had already suffered 1,961,687 casualties, of which 1,001,271 were killed or missing. In 1916, 1 Frenchman in every 25 became a casualty.

1916

Battle of Verdun -- lasting 10 months. -- 300,000 German and 315,000 French casualties. The Germans gain a few square miles of territory.

203 German U-Boats sank 5,408 ships

"To the women of France, the war had brought an emancipatory revolution. Never had they been so great a power in the country. At the outbreak of war, to a woman they had rushed off to become nurses, fill the administrative gaps left by the men, work in the munitions factories." -- Alistair Horne

The first signs of mutiny appear in the French Army.

Karl Liebknecht, German socialist politician, is sentenced to 2 1/2 years hard labor for anti-war agitation. 55,000 Munition Workers go on a sympathy strike.

The Battle of the Somme claims 57,470 British casualties on the first day.

Send for the boys of the old Brigade
To keep old England free!
Send for me father, me mother and me brother,
But for Gawd's sake, don't send me! -- Anonymous

Does it matter? -- losing your leg? ...
For people will always be kind,
And you need not show that you mind
When the others come in after hunting
To gobble their muffins and eggs.

Does it matter? -- losing your sight? ...
There's such splendid work for the blind;
And people will always be kind,
As you sit on the terrace remembering
And turning your face to the light.

Do they matter? -- those dreams from the pit? ...
You can drink and forget and be glad,
And people won't say that you're mad;
For they'll know that you've fought for your country,
And no one will worry a bit.

-- Siegfried Sassoon

The Scene of War: Fear

Fear is a wave
beating through the air
And on taut nerves impinging
Till there it wins

Vibrating chords.

All goes well
So long as you tune the instrument
To simulate composure.

(So you will become
A gallant gentleman.)

But when the strings are broken...
Then you will grovel on earth
And your rabbit eyes
Will fill with the fragments of your shattered soul. -- Herbert Read

In Russia, by 1916, more than one third of all men of working age had been recruited into the army of 15 million troops. A third of these had already been killed or wounded. Arms were in short supply. At one point, there was only one rifle to every ten soldiers and artillery guns were rationed to two or three shells a day. -- From John Robottom, Modern Russia

1917

The War that will end War--H. G. Wells

Recruited-Popular (March 1917)

They say --They say
(And that's the bugles going all the day
Past Cooper's Arms and round by Stepney way
Till you'll be mad for hearing of them play)
They say --They say
You were the finest stuff men ever had
To make into a soldier. And they say
They put the needed strength and spirit in you.
Straightened your shoulders, made you clean and true.
And fit for England's service -- I can say
They clothed you warm, and fed and worked you fair
The first time in your life, on Derby Day;
Maybe that did a little--Anyway
They made a man out of you this year, the sort
That England's rich and proud to own, they say
They say --They say
And so they went and killed you. That's their way. -- Margaret Postgate

*Russian Revolution -- Czar Overthrown -- Provisional Government in Power
Germany resumes unconditional submarine warfare.
United States enters the war
300,000 workers strike in Berlin
Germany Transports Lenin to Russia*

“I couldn't forget my crew, my friends going down out there, drowned like rats in a trap, with some perhaps left to die of slow suffocation. I could imagine how some might even now be alive

in the strong, torpedo compartments, lying in the darkness, hopeless, waiting for the air to thicken and finally smother them.” -- Kapitanleutnant Baron von und ze Peckelshaim

Canadian Troops Storm Vimy Ridge -- 1 1/2 miles taken; 158,000 British and Canadian casualties

250,000 Engineers strike throughout Britain

French mutinies begin. -- 22,385 found guilty of mutiny. 55 officially shot

American Espionage Act Passed -- used against pacifists, socialists, and anarchists

Lenin and the Bolsheviks Gain Power in Russia -- Pull Russia out of the War

1918

There had been 10 million European and Asiatic deaths, 30 million missing or wounded; another 10 million died of influenza in 1918-1919; 150,000 Serbs dead of typhus, seven times that number of Armenians massacred. America lost 800,000 and had 74,779 gas victims.

Britain continues the blockade of Germany after the Armistice is signed.

“The continuation of the blockade after the armistice was rapidly fulfilling the wish [of the French Prime Minister who said "There are twenty million Germans too many."]; within six months from the armistice it had achieved a casualty list of 700,000 children, old people and women...The German people, starved and dying by the hundred thousand, were reeling deliriously between blank despair, frenzied revelry, and revolution.” -- Otto Friedrich, *Before the Deluge*

“You see this child here...it consumed an incredible amount of bread, and yet it did not get any stronger. I found out that it hid all the bread it received underneath its straw mattress. The fear of hunger was so deeply rooted in the child that it collected the stores instead of eating the food: a misguided animal instinct made the dread of hunger worse than the actual pangs.” -- a story told by John Maynard Keynes, a member of Herbert Hoover's relief team in German after the war.” -- Otto Friedrich, *Before the Deluge*

'Peace upon earth!' was said. We sing it.

And pay a million priests to bring it.

After two thousand years of mass

We've got as far as poison gas.

Thomas Hardy, "Christmas, 1924"

As a small boy in Southsea, I saw streets disfigured by ragged, unwanted ex-soldiers, medalled, but ill, blind, maimed, selling matches, bootlaces, notepaper, trundling barrel-organs or standing with a melancholy dog or monkey beside a decrepit hurdy-gurdy. Whether they were pleading or abusive, resigned or menacing, they appalled me. Their wretchedness suggested that, in overthrowing Germany, they had earned some monstrous penalty now being inexorably exacted.

Peter Vansittart, recalling his youth in the 1920s.