

Commentary...

An End To War, An End To Peace

By **Jim Cornelius**
Editor in Chief

Take some time this Sunday, November 11, to reflect upon a moment that occurred exactly 100 years ago. It made the world we live in.

In November 1918, at the 11th hour* of the 11th day of the 11th month, an Armistice went into effect between the Allied powers of France, Great Britain and the United States and the newly-formed German republic. The guns that had thundered for four years, raining unprecedented death and destruction down on millions of men, suddenly fell silent.

The Great War had come to an end. Except that it hadn't — not really. While the cataclysmic fighting ended on the Western Front — which ran from Belgium in the north, cutting across France to the Swiss border in the south — wars and revolutions, pogroms and ethnic cleansing would flare and burn in central and eastern Europe and across Anatolia for another five years. Historian Robert Gerwarth says that a conservative estimate puts the death toll for the wars after the Great War at some four million. And that's not counting the Russian Civil War of 1918-1922, which took something like eight million lives.

In a very real sense, the Armistice that ended the First World War ended peace in the 20th Century. As the extraordinary German soldier and writer Ernst Junger said, "This war is not the end but the beginning of violence."

The Armistice itself looks like a mistake through the backward-looking lens of history. A number of military leaders, including American General John J. Pershing, thought so at the time. The German Army had been badly battered by the combined arms offensives of the British Army in August and September, and there's no way it could have survived hammer blows from a massive and newly-proficient American Expeditionary Force, which had swung into action in earnest in the late summer of 1918.

Pershing thought the Allies should march on to Berlin, utterly crushing

the German military. The Armistice let the German Army claim that it had never been defeated on the battlefield, that revolution on the home front was a "stab in the back." That toxic myth would be exploited by Adolf Hitler and helped carry the National Socialists to power in Germany in 1933.

Of course, it is easy to judge in the luxury of hindsight. It would have been very difficult indeed for Allied leaders to continue a war that was crushing the victors as well as the vanquished when the opportunity to end it was on the table.

The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires under the strain of war poured out a devil's brew of competing ideologies and blood-and-soil nationalisms, as the peoples of those empires strove to establish ideologically or ethnically "pure" territories, usually at the point of a bayonet.

And there was plenty of armament around in the wake of the war to contest a claim with. Everybody was armed to the teeth.

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The new Polish nation repelled a Bolshevik invasion from the Soviet Union as Communist revolutions broke out across the continent, even in Germany — to be crushed under the hobnailed boots of right-wing paramilitaries. Victors executed the vanquished in windrows. In the newly freed Baltic states, who had lived under the once and future dominion of Russia, those German paramilitary Freikorps marched across forest and fen with fire and sword like medieval freebooters.

The Greeks and Turks fought a savage war in Anatolia over the ashes of the Ottoman Empire that ended with ethnic cleansing and mass migration — and the formation of the modern Turkish state.

Gerwarth — whose excellent history "The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed To End" explores this dark territory — writes:

"As civil wars overlapped with revolutions, counter-revolutions and border conflicts between emerging states without clearly defined borders or internationally recognised governments, 'postwar' Europe between the official end of the Great War in 1918 and the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 was the most violent place on the planet."

By the early 1920s, the flame conflict and violence in Central and Eastern Europe had guttered and died down as an exhausted population simply could no longer sustain the intensity. But the demons unleashed by the First World War and its aftermath have never been fully banished. The baleful consequences of unleashing unchecked violence on ethnic and religious minorities would come again to Europe in the Second World War, and yet again in the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

The jihadi terrorism and the response to it that has shaped the first two decades of the 20th century also have roots in the era of the First World War. The Ottoman Empire issued the first modern call to jihad to undermine the Allies, and the victory of the Allies ended the Ottoman Caliphate, as well as establishing the states of the modern Middle East. Jihadis from al Qaeda to ISIS have expressed their commitment to reversing the consequences of the Great War. And their profound violence, directed at civilians, hearkens back to that dark age.

Indeed, the great guns fell silent on November 11, 1918, but they did not fall silent everywhere — and their thunder echoes still.

** You'll have to be up at 4 a.m. to commemorate the 11th hour, which in 1918 was seven hours ahead of PST under Paris/Greenwich Mean Time.*



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