In the Aftermath of World War I, Nations Were Forever Changed

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German Johannes Bell signs the Treaty of Versailles in France. He is shown sitting in the front chair. The treaty had been drafted by the Allied powers and was unfavorable and harsh for Germany. Image from the public domain

World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918, was bloodier and more devastating than any war before it. It left Europe and the world greatly changed and set the stage for the violence and unrest that marked much of the 20th century.
A new great power

World War I changed the United States in two important ways. First, it turned the U.S. military into a large-scale, modern fighting force that clearly equaled the armies of Europe. Second, it made the United States a much greater global economic force, as many of the nations of Europe had been shattered and drained by the war.

However, these changes were not felt strongly at first. Decisions taken by U.S. politicians following the war caused the country to retreat from the world stage. This move was called "isolationism." Because of this, the country's growth in power would only truly bear fruit after World War II.

The United States' withdrawal from international engagement undermined the authority of the League of Nations. The League was established in 1919 to resolve disputes between countries and thus to keep the peace. It was later succeeded by the United Nations.

Socialism rises to the world stage

Russia collapsed under the pressure of the total warfare of World War I. This allowed communist revolutionaries to seize power there in 1917. The emperor, or "czar," and his family were killed and a new communist government was set up. The communists, led by Vladimir
Lenin, did not want a few individuals to own factories and land as private property. Instead, they wanted workers to have more power and better working conditions. The government took over the farmlands to manage them for the public.

Germany at first seemed to be headed in the direction of communism but instead formed a new social democracy. The new Weimar Republic combined democratic institutions with socialism. Germans could vote for their political leaders, and, although socialism was left-wing like communism, it was not as extreme. It did not attempt to completely change society by eliminating private property and allowed for much greater freedoms.

However, Germany's new government soon came under great pressure. It was eventually toppled by Adolf Hitler and his far-right Nazi Party. With Hitler in power, the stage for World War II was set.

The collapse of Central and Eastern European empires

The German, Russian, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires all fought in World War I. All were swept away by defeat and revolution.

The fall of Turkey, which was the heart of the Ottoman Empire, and Austria-Hungary were probably not much of a surprise. Turkey had long been regarded as the "sick man of Europe." Austria-Hungary appeared nearly as weak. Much more shocking was the fall of the young,
powerful and growing German Empire. Its collapse came after the population rose up in revolt and toppled Kaiser Wilhelm II from power. In all these countries the old order was replaced by a series of new governments, ranging from democracies to dictatorships.

**Nationalism transforms and complicates Europe**

Nationalism is the belief that people with the same culture have the right to their own independent, self-governing country. It had been growing in Europe for decades before World War I. However, the postwar period saw a major rise in new nations and independence movements. The fall of old empires gave nationalists the chance to declare new countries.

European nationalism was strongest in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes all emerged as new countries, along with several others.

However, the transition to nationhood was not a smooth process and did not occur successfully everywhere. Nationalism contributed greatly to tensions between different communities. Many countries were multi-ethnic, with different nationalities and ethnicities all living together within the same borders. Nationalism fueled the rise of sometimes violent independence movements, and at times made national minorities more loyal to a neighboring country than they were to their own.

**The myths of victory and failure**
At the end of World War I, German military commander Erich Ludendorff demanded that Germany reject the terms of the peace treaty, which he found much too harsh. Ludendorff claimed the army could and should fight on. However, the new German government overruled him and declared the war over.

This decision gave Ludendorff and other German military leaders someone to blame for Germany’s loss. Thus began the myth of the undefeated German army being "stabbed in the back" by liberals, socialists and Jews. These were groups that were heavily involved in politics right when Germany was suffering from its defeat. This myth severely damaged the power of the Weimar government and fueled the rise of Adolf Hitler.

Britain was also greatly reshaped by the war. Despite emerging victorious, it came to view World War I as a bloody disaster. This attitude affected Britain's response to international events during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1938, at the eve of World War II, it made Britain more willing to give in to Hitler's demands for new territories. This approach, called appeasement, was meant to keep the peace as long as possible.

A "lost generation"
Eight million people died during World War I, which was perhaps 1 in 8 of the combatants. Many other people were so physically or mentally damaged by the war that they took their lives. In most European countries, it was hard to find someone who had not lost a loved one to the war.