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

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World War I was fought from 1914 to 1918 and saw slaughter on an unprecedented scale. It left Europe and the world greatly changed and set the stage for the violence and turmoil that marked many of the remaining years of the century.
A new great power

Before its entry into World War I, the United States was a nation of untapped military potential and growing economic might. The war changed this in two important ways. First, the U.S. military was turned into a large-scale fighting force with experience of modern war and was clearly equal to old European powers. Second, the balance of economic power started to switch from the drained nations of Europe to America.

However, U.S. politicians made significant decisions following the war. These caused the country to retreat from the world stage, initially limiting the impact of these changes. The country’s growth in power would only truly bear fruit following World War II. This initial isolationism undermined the League of Nations, which had been founded in 1919 to resolve disputes between countries, as well as the political order that emerged following World War I.

Socialism rises to the world stage

The collapse of Russia under the pressure of total warfare allowed communist revolutionaries to seize power there in 1917. The czar and his family were killed and a new communist government was set up. The communists did not want elite individuals to own factories and land as private property. Instead, they wanted workers to have more power and better working
conditions. The new Russian government took over the farmlands to manage them as a form of public property. Still, the revolution did not spread globally, as Russian communist leader Vladimir Lenin hoped would happen.

The existence of a huge and potentially powerful communist nation changed the balance of world politics. Germany initially seemed to be headed in the direction of communism, but instead formed a new social democracy. Its new Weimar Republic combined democratic institutions with a less-extreme form of left-wing politics known as socialism.

Germany’s new government would soon come under great pressure and it was eventually toppled by a right-wing assault. As Adolf Hitler and the far-right Nazi Party took over, the stage was set for World War II. Russia, meanwhile, became increasingly repressive and authoritarian.

The collapse of Central and Eastern European empires

The German, Russian, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires all fought in World War I. After, they were all swept away by defeat and revolution. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary were probably not much of a surprise. Turkey, which was the heart of the Ottoman Empire, had long been regarded as the "sick man of Europe," and other European countries had been circling its territory like vultures for decades, waiting to take its land.
Austria-Hungary appeared nearly as weak. Much more shocking was the fall of the young, powerful and growing German Empire, which came after people 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 democratic republics to socialist dictatorships.

**Nationalism transforms and complicates Europe**

Nationalism, the belief that people of the same culture have the right to their own independent, self-governing nation, had been growing in Europe for decades before World War I. However, the post-war period saw a major rise in new nations and independence movements. In part, this was an outgrowth of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's commitment to national "self-determination." Perhaps more essentially, the destabilization 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 other new nations.

However, the transition to nationhood was not a smooth process and did not occur everywhere. Nationalism contributed greatly to tensions in the region, as 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.
At the end of World War I, German military commander Erich Ludendorff first called for a peace treaty and then demanded that Germany reject its terms, which he found to be much too harsh. Ludendorff claimed the army could and should fight on, but the new civilian government overruled him and declared the war over.

This decision gave Ludendorff and other military leaders someone to blame for Germany's loss. Thus began, at the very close of the war, the myth of the undefeated German army being "stabbed in the back" by liberals, socialists and Jews, who were blamed for the poor government of the time. This myth damaged the Weimar government and fueled the rise of Adolf Hitler.

Britain, despite emerging on the side of the victors, came to view World War I as a bloody catastrophe. This attitude affected Britain's response to international events during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1938, at the eve of World War II, it might have made Britain more willing to give in to Hitler's demands that Germany obtain large portions of Czechoslovakia. This policy, known as appeasement, was meant to preserve the tenuous peace for as long as possible.
A "lost generation"

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