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Europe and the World: World War I as Crisis of Universalism

Kai Evers and David Pan, eds.

Europe and the World
World War I as Crisis of Universalism

Edited by Kai Evers and David Pan



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Universal Expectations,
Particular Experiences:
The First World War in Perspective

Jörn Leonhard

1. Introduction: Two Beginnings of War in Africa and Europe

Kande Kamara's family came from Kindia in French Guinea in West Africa. Since he could neither read nor write, his war experiences were recorded by the BBC in 1976. When the war broke out in August 1914, Kamara worked as a truck driver in Guinea's capital, Bamako. When the first French recruiting officers arrived, many young men immediately fled to their villages in the hinterland. Kamara as well returned to his native village, where most young men of his age cohort were hiding. Kamara's father forbade his son to join the army voluntarily, "for he thought it was stupid and ridiculous to go to a war I didn't understand and to fight in another country." Despite his father's resistance, Kamara eventually joined the French army. Many young men who came from families with a considerably lower tribal status had already enlisted because they were promised a better status after the war—and Kamara reacted jealously and felt uneasy about this. And the new uniform, a rifle, money, and food seemed very attractive: "I felt that, as I was one of the elder children of a chief, it was one of my responsibilities to go to war, if [the white man] needed us.... They had already noted down that every slave who went to war would become a

chief on return. I was jealous of that and this was one of the reasons I joined the army. I thought it would be insulting to be ruled by a slave when he comes back from war."¹

Nearly at the same moment, but thousands of kilometers away, the Prague author Franz Kafka experienced the beginning of war. His famous diary entry from August 2, 1914, which read "Germany has declared war on Russia.—Swimming lessons in the afternoon," reflected a somehow unrelated presence of historical watershed and daily routine—a presence that was much closer to the concrete experience of August 1914 than the numerous idealizations of the beginning of war that were the result of retrospective logic, arguing from the knowledge of the consequences of war that no one could have on August 2, 1914.²

Both Kande Kamara and Franz Kafka were now men in war. They came from radically different backgrounds in Western Africa and Prague: one an indigenous inhabitant of a French colony, socialized in his local tribe, his village, and his family; the other a representative of the Jewish bourgeoisie of the multi-ethnic Czech capital, working as a lawyer for an insurance company in the morning, and in the evening focusing on his manuscripts, which were to change forever twentieth-century world literature. But despite these differences of geographic, social, and linguistic origin, they had one thing in common: the outbreak of war was to change their lives, and it marked for both a watershed; it defined "before" and "after."

Already this micro-constellation reflected a basic characteristic of human experience since summer 1914: The war was a global phenomenon, not only from February 1917 onward but from the first day on. If the complexity of war was based on this global structure and the imagination of war as a worldwide interconnection of men, capital, and resources, the concrete experience of war was still very local—be it in the West African village of Kamara or in the Prague swimming school

1. Quoted in Svetlana Palmer and Sarah Wallis, eds., *Intimate Voices from the First World War* (New York: W. Morrow, 2003), pp. 213, 215.

2. Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller, and Malcolm Pasey, in *Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe: Kritische Ausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990), 1:543.

on the afternoon of August 2. The tension between global imagination and local experience was to become a leitmotif of the "glocal" war.³

What was the First World War? In retrospect and judging from its consequences, the war seems to mark the beginning of an elementary crisis of a century that still seemed young in summer 1914.⁴ But we must not judge the past future of contemporaries in 1914 by the outcome in 1918. Our wisdom is the wisdom of those who know about the consequences of history, which no one could foresee in the summer of 1914. There is a retrospective logic that makes the progressive art prior to 1914, from expressionism to Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps*, a seismographic prelude to the apocalyptic collapse of the world. But the past future of 1914 was open, it was not determined, and the outbreak of war did not fulfill a law of history. For every author anticipating the Great War, there was an author, including many best-selling writers, anticipating an era of peace, because highly industrial and progressive societies could not afford the price of a modern war.

However once the war had started in August 1914, the contemporaries were confronted with an explosion of experiences that transcended all their plans and scenarios, all expectations and anticipations. Soon they began to search for adequate concepts to denote the radically new dimensions—the numerous victims, the spatial dimension that soon went beyond continental Europe, the way in which the war necessitated the development of a home front. The British soon spoke of the "Great War," the French of "la grande guerre," the Belgians of "de grote Oorlog," the Germans of a "Weltkrieg." And the German

3. Jörn Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs*, 5th ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014), pp. 160–204; an English translation is forthcoming from Harvard Univ. Press in 2018.

4. Marc Ferro, *Der Große Krieg 1914–1918* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988); Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York: H. Holt, 1994); Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Great War 1914–1918* (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2001); Hew Strahan, *The First World War*, vol. 1, *To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001); Niall Ferguson, *Der falsche Krieg: Der Erste Weltkrieg und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999); David Stevenson, *1914–1918: Der Erste Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf: Artemis und Winkler, 2006); Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War One: The Global Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2011); Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014).

author Ernst Jünger, himself a young officer in the trenches in France, spoke of the war as the “first fact of the revolution—nobody can avoid the war, every existence is dictated by the war, whatever the ideological origin is.”⁵

This world war not only marked a new quantitative and qualitative experience of war with 17 million soldiers and civilians killed—an unknown dimension of violence in previous history. It also meant a new mobilization of war societies and economies for the war, of media, of arts, of ideological utopias and political explanations.⁶ And it marked the beginning of a new relation between the continents and world regions, a new position of European powers vis-à-vis their colonies and other societies outside Europe. If European states and societies during the long nineteenth century between the French Revolution and the shots of Sarajevo in June 1914 had still symbolized political and social, economic and scientific, artistic and aesthetic progress, this position became fundamentally questioned by the experience of the war. Some of these developments had already been underway before the war, and it is probably fair to say that this early wave of global entanglements confirmed the European model of nation-states and their imperializing form of rule.

Against this background this article will concentrate on particular, exemplary moments in which transformations from the European to the global experience of war became obvious—experiences and constellations that did not exist as such before 1914, and which cannot easily be connected to the apparent global moment of spring and fall 1917, when with the advent of Woodrow Wilson and V. I. Lenin the future twentieth century seemed to take another turn. As with so many other moments in history, it is the retrospective logic that allows us to mark this moment; for the contemporaries of 1917 this was far from obvious. The

5. Ernst Jünger, “Vorwort,” in *Der Kampf um das Reich*, 2nd ed. (Essen, [1931]), p. 6; Sondhaus, *World War One*, pp. 1–3; Martin Schramm, *Das Deutschlandbild der britischen Presse 1912–1919* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2007), pp. 333–35.

6. Jay Winter, “Demography,” in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 249; Rüdiger Overmans, “Kriegsverluste,” in *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg*, 2nd ed., ed. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004), p. 665.

following examples are symptomatic and incomplete, and they focus on what may seem as peripheries from the perspective of the Western Front, which still dominates our understanding and our memory of the First World War. But it is this apparent periphery that underlines the global war that was so much more than a war also fought in extra-European spaces as a mere continuation of the European war.

2. Acceleration:

Local Origins—Regional Crisis—European Conflict—World War

The outbreak of war in August 1914 was in no way determined by the transformation and erosion of the international system since the 1870s. On the one hand, the system lost a lot of its characteristic flexibility after the creation of the new nation-states of Italy and Germany between the 1860s and 1870s and the imperial extension of many European powers in Africa and Asia before 1900. No doubt these developments intensified international conflicts and crises. But they did not make a great war inevitable. Rather, the solution of many crises before 1914 underlined the system's ability to prevent such a war. Had not the governments in Britain and Berlin channeled the conflict in the Balkans in 1912–13 and successfully prevented an escalation of a regional conflict into a world crisis? Furthermore, not only authors anticipating a great war sold best sellers, but also those who were sure that wars only belonged to a past period in history, that war was no instrument for highly industrialized societies that seemed far too entangled with other societies, far too dependent on economic, financial, and scientific exchange. It was no accident that many economists argued along those lines, generating a quasi-empirical, rational pacifism. For them war was a characteristic of agrarian societies, not of the modern industrial type.⁷

On the other hand, there existed objective factors that made war at least more probable. First, military experts gained greater influence when arguing in terms of military scenarios that focused on windows of time in order to decide a war as quickly as possible. The German Schlieffen Plan, the French Plan XVII, and the Russian offensive plans

7. Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora*, pp. 67–74.

against East Prussia and Galicia were examples in this context. The most important factor however was the particular situation in the Balkans. Eventually the war did not break out in the European colonies in Africa or Asia, but in the southeast of Europe, a region where a number of factors and risks overlapped and reinforced each other, which only existed in isolation in other regions of the world. Only here, on the Balkans, existed a multiethnic population in combination with the competing empires of Russia and Habsburg. Only here existed a radical secessionist nationalism that called for a greater Serbia and an ethnic homogeneous nation-state. This inflamed young Bosnian Serbs who could not forgive Habsburg's formal annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908. Only here the long term disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent loss of her European territories left a vacuum that provoked more and more uncontrolled expectations of all neighbors and the two continental empires. And only here the South Slav question was more than a mere regional conflict over a handful Serbian irredentists; it was here that the Viennese government felt that it had to prove its will and its strength to fight for the Habsburg monarchy's future, for its ability to prevent the fate of the Ottoman Empire's decline. This constellation played into the hands of those military officers in Vienna who advocated a preventive war against Serbia at the earliest possible moment. And finally the crisis over the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908 had left a latent conflict unresolved, a conflict that could be reactivated in any moment. Nowhere else was there so little room for political maneuvering, between the possible de-escalation by international resolution and possible escalation through the international involvement of other European actors.⁸

In sum, one does not need a global perspective in order to explain the shots of the morning of June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo. However, once the crisis had escalated into war, the space of war immediately became global. From local origins and regional crisis, the situation had escalated into a European conflict and a world war—a unique example for historical acceleration that immediately reflected how much the different

8. Ibid., pp. 83–127.

world regions had already become interconnected and entangled before 1914.⁹

3. Transformations:

Five Moments from the European to the Global Experience of War

(a) A Maritime Coup:

Controlling Space in the Southeastern Mediterranean

When and how did war begin in August 1914? Conventional wisdom points to August 4 and the invasion of Belgium by German armies as part of the Schlieffen Plan, the military answer to Germany's two-front dilemma. According to the plan German troops would capture Paris in the first four to six weeks of the war, before the Russian attack on Eastern Prussia could gain momentum. Yet before the first German soldier entered Belgium, the commander of the German fleet in the Mediterranean, Admiral Souchon, received a coded message in which he was told to bring his two ships, the battle cruiser *Goeben* and the light cruiser *Breslau*, immediately to Constantinople. This operation was meant to foster an imminent military alliance between the German and the Ottoman Empire, which was finally completed in October 1914.

In comparison with the anticipated great naval battle in the North Sea with the Royal Navy, the maritime operation in the Mediterranean seemed no more than a minor event with no further meaning at the periphery of the European continent. But the consequences of this operation in early August can hardly be overestimated. Admiral Souchon not only bombarded the ports of Bône and Philippeville in Algeria, but successfully managed to avoid any open battle with British warships and reached the Dardanelles on August 10. A complicated negotiation started between the governments in Berlin and Constantinople. As a result the German commanders officially handed over the two ships to

9. Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela, eds., *Empires at War, 1911–1923* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014).

the Ottoman navy, a step that was vital for agreeing on the military alliance between the two empires at the end of October.¹⁰

The presence of the two ships, on which German seamen and officers were kept under the formal command of the Ottoman navy, meant that the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus were effectively blocked for all allied ships. The consequences for Russia were disastrous when the Black Sea was blocked. Since the German fleet controlled the Baltic Sea, and a complex canal system allowed a transport of German warships from the North to the Baltic Sea, Russia was confronted with an almost total blockade of her most important ports. All imports of resources, so necessary for the continuation of the war, had to go via Arkhangelsk, which was blocked by ice over six months of the war, or via Vladivostok, which was 13,000 kilometers away from the front line in the west.¹¹ Russia's economy was immediately affected: within weeks her exports fell by 98 percent and her imports by 95 percent. Against this background the fatal allied campaign against the Dardanelles at Gallipoli in 1915 was a response to this constellation, trying to break off the blockade and ease the economic situation of the Russian ally. But the blockade by two former German battleships had even more far reaching consequences for the whole region. It meant that all future military operations in this region took place against separate fronts: by the British in Mesopotamia and in the Near East, using mainly Indian troops, and by the Russian armies in the Caucasus. Not only Germany but Russia as well was confronted with a two-front dilemma, which absorbed energy, time, and huge resources.¹²

10. Dan van der Vat, *The Ship That Changed the World: The Escape of the Goeben to the Dardanelles in 1914* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), pp. 183–202; Bernd Langensiepen, Dirk Nottelmann, and Jochen Krüsmann, *Halbmond und Kaiseradler: Goeben und Breslau am Bosphorus, 1914–1918* (Hamburg: Mittler, 1999), pp. 9–28.

11. Reinhard Nachtigal, *Die Murmanbahn: Die Verkehrsanbindung eines kriegswichtigen Hafens und das Arbeitspotential der Kriegsgefangenen (1915 bis 1918)* (Grunbach: Greiner, 2001), pp. 126–27.

12. Barbara Tuchman, *August 1914*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2007), pp. 151–74; Karl-Volker Neugebauer, “Die Urkatastrophe des 20. Jahrhunderts. Der Erste Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918,” in *Grundkurs deutsche Militärgeschichte*, vol. 2, *Das Zeitalter der Weltkriege 1914 bis 1945: Völker in Waffen*, 2nd ed. (Munich: R. Oldenbourg,

(b) Calculated Escalation?

Anticipating Anti-Colonial Civil Wars

Karl Hampe was professor of history at the University of Heidelberg. Already in autumn 1914 and only a few weeks after the war, he recorded his hope for a worldwide escalation in his war diary. His greatest hopes rested on an anti-colonial resurrection of all Muslims against British colonial rule in India—hence the German government's pressure on the Sultan-Caliph Mehmed V in Constantinople to declare a “jihad,” a holy war of all Muslims against British and French colonial regimes in Asia and Africa, and on an inner destabilization of the Tsarist Empire. “All bombs must be brought to explosion,” he noted, “in Japan, in India, in Poland.”¹³ This was not only the wild fantasy of a German history professor.

In fact the German military high command had established a special section that concentrated on worldwide operations in support of anti-colonial movements. In late 1914 the section's head, Rudolf Nardolny, listed the potential targets: “liberation movements in Finland, in Ireland, in Georgia and Morocco, the Senussi movement in Libya, on the Arab peninsula and in India.” The formal declaration of the “jihad” by the Sultan-Caliph in mid-November 1915 also stood in this context.¹⁴ Although most of these operations did not generate notable effects (with the exception of Lenin's journey from Zürich to Petrograd in spring 1917, paid and made possible by the German government), they nevertheless underlined the global dimension and imagination of the war. Colonies, from the perspective of European militaries, politicians, and diplomats, seemed to stand for a prolongation of the European war, seemed to be battlegrounds and spaces for recruiting men and mobilizing resources for the war in Europe. But this view completely underestimated the inner dynamic of the war in the non-European societies. When the

2009), p. 62; Ronald Park Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (London: Tauris, 2006), pp. 150–51.

13. Karl Hampe, *Kriegstagebuch 1914–1919*, 2nd ed., ed. Folker Reichert and Eike Wolgast (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2007), pp. 99–101.

14. Gerd Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex: Die Deutschen und der Osten 1900–1945* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), pp. 76–77.

short-war myth turned into the reality of a long war, Indian, African, and Asian soldiers and the British Dominions could no longer be reduced to a mere reservoir for the European war. Instead the war effort questioned the image of imperial defense communities and intensified the bargaining over the political status and participation in the future.

(c) Empire-building in East Asia
in the Shadow of the Great War in Europe

The French actress Geni La France had spent her holiday in a hotel in Tahiti's city of Papeete. On September 22, she sat on the hotel's terrace, enjoying a drink, when she saw two dark battleships on the little river that suddenly and without any previous warning opened fire on the city.¹⁵ The two ships were the German heavy cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, which belonged to the East Asian command of Admiral von Spee. They had left the German protectorate in China, Tsingtao, in June 1914. Already their journey from China through the South Pacific Ocean to South America was an extraordinary achievement, pointing to the new character of global maritime operations. Between June and December 1914 the ships left more than 24,000 kilometers behind them. Never before had navy ships done this under war conditions. It was only made possible by a detailed network of communication and infrastructure that included coal ships and telegraph stations. It was no accident that von Spee's final actions against the Falkland Islands—where the Royal Navy destroyed his ships, and where he himself and his two sons serving as officers on the ships were killed—were directed against British infrastructures of communication and logistics.¹⁶

This episode underlined that the war at sea was influenced less by Dreadnought-class battleships, refined armaments, and heavy ship artillery, and much more by speed and global infrastructures of communication and mobility. This war at sea was not decided by a classical battle between two navies, as most experts had anticipated would take

15. "Saw Papeete Raized by German Shells," *New York Times*, October 8, 1914, quoted in Sondhaus, *World War One*, p. 104.

16. Richard Hough, *The Great War at Sea, 1914–1918* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 87–98.

place between the British and German navies in the North Sea. In fact both fleets remained merely "fleets in being," too expensive to risk a grand battle. Instead the global control of resources became vital, and for operations with this focus the navy commanders did not need huge battleships but fast cruisers and a safe network of telegraph and coal stations.

But there was another lesson to be learned from the beginning of the war in East Asia. It was not Britain that took the greatest profit from the events, but Japan, which at the end of 1914 would have gained a new position with far-reaching consequences in the region at practically no cost. Tsingtao had been founded as a trading post and a de facto protectorate in China by the German Empire in 1898, following the example by other imperializing nation-states in Europe. When Japan declared war on Germany on August 23, 1914, the political and military elites of the country followed a strategy of imperial expansion in Southeast Asia that they had developed earlier, as the successful military campaigns against Russia and China before 1914 had clearly demonstrated. The war of 1914 allowed the Japanese elites to further expand their influence.¹⁷ Additional territorial gains in Taiwan, in Korea, and on the peninsula of Liaotung, as well as the establishment of a zone of influence in Manchuria, underlined this. But most important was the expansion in mainland China, and the German area of Tsingtao was an ideal target. Sixty-five thousand Japanese soldiers landed on the northern coast of Shantung in early September 1914, and following an artillery siege from sea the German military with only 4,000 soldiers capitulated in early November and went to Japanese camps, treated much better than British and American prisoners of war during the Second World War.¹⁸

The capture of Tsingtao was much more than just a brief episode at the periphery of the Great War. The Japanese military made use of their previous experiences with machine guns and heavy artillery during the war against Russia in 1904–5 and abstained from offensive

17. Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 34–58.

18. Charles B. Burdick, *The Japanese Siege of Tsingtao: World War I in Asia* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1976), pp. 156–99.

attacks against enemy trenches. Instead they relied on the advantages of a systematic siege against enemy troops, which were cut off from any resources. Hence the Japanese armies lost less than 400 men and the Japanese fleet did not have to engage in any battles with German cruisers that had left Tsingtao months before. All this stood in stark contrast to the experiences of strategic stalemate and the useless offensives against ever more perfect defense systems and trenches at the Western Front in continental Europe. In comparison with the exploding number of fallen and injured soldiers in Europe, Japan succeeded in achieving far-reaching territorial and strategic gains at a minimal cost. Hence Japan benefitted most from the beginning of the war. Building on the erosion of political structures and competing warlords in China, the "21 demands" of January 1915 showed how Japan was prepared to make China a de facto protectorate with Japanese control of Shandong, Port Arthur, and Dairen as well as an expanded zone of interest in Manchuria and Mongolia.¹⁹ In addition to the operation in Tsingtao, Japanese military also occupied all islands held by Germany before summer 1914, among them the Palau and Marshall Islands. When in December 1914 the Japanese and British governments agreed on the equator as a frontier between the Japanese and the zone of interest of the British Dominions Australia and New Zealand, the Japanese foreign minister Kato insisted that this could not be a temporary solution, but that Japan demanded all former German territories in the South Pacific. In sum, Japan had successfully defined a territorial area under its rule that would become the main war theater of the Pacific after December 1941.

(d) At the Front and Behind the Lines:

Soldiers from European Colonies and Workers from China

Not only the war's spatial dimension was global. Millions of soldiers fighting in the European trenches came from societies outside Europe. Soldiers from more than fifty ethnicities and nationalities fought at the Yser Front in Belgium or the Saloniki Front in northern Greece, among

19. W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 108-15.

them thousands of Dominion troops and soldiers from French colonies in Asia and Africa. For many Europeans, the experience of the European fronts meant the very first concrete encounter with non-Europeans. Very often the foreigners were exoticized at first, and a particularly ambivalent perception of the other developed. On the one hand, the "wild warriors" from outside Europe were admired for their supposed qualities, such as courage, endurance, and a somewhat natural cruelty that in the eyes of many European officers their soldiers seemed to lack as a result of industrialization, urbanization, and general physical and psychological degeneration. On the other hand, the French *tirailleurs sénégalais*, the Maoris, or the Indian soldiers also provoked fears and anxieties. Whereas the recruitment of black soldiers in the allied armies provoked Germans to point to the barbarism of allied warfare, many French, British, and American officers often regarded the non-white soldiers in their units as "wild" and "naïve" children, courageous and enduring, yet lacking intelligence and experience, and potentially dangerous if not disciplined by white officers.²⁰

The war did not become a melting pot, homogenizing differences in the light of unifying war experiences. Instead it provoked more and more outspoken racist hierarchies or it intensified stereotypes of ethnic difference and belonging. This marked the experience of indigenous Afrikaners from the Cape who were denied the right to fight together with white South Africans in racially mixed units and were only allowed to work behind the front lines. But Canadians, Australians, Scots, or Bretons also experienced how the war led to new forms of daily exclusion and stereotypes. In no way did the reality of the war reflect the propaganda of equality of all who fought against the common enemy or the ideal of an imperial community of heroes.²¹

20. Piet Chielens, "Les troupes coloniales françaises sur le front en Flandre," in *Cinq Continents au front: La Première Guerre mondiale*, ed. Dominiek Dendooven and Piet Chielens (Brussels: Racine, 2008), pp. 51-88; Dominiek Dendooven, "Les dominions et colonies britanniques sur le front en Flandre," in *ibid.*, pp. 89-116; Dendooven, "Troupes de l'Inde britannique dans le Westhoek, 1914-1919," in *ibid.*, pp. 117-30.

21. Christian Koller, "Colonialisme militaire en France et dans l'Empire britannique," in Dendooven and Chielens, *Cinq Continents au front*, pp. 11-22; Dominiek Dendooven, "Les armées européennes loin du monolithe ethnico-culturel," in *ibid.*,

However, the global experience of war went far beyond the complexities of recruiting soldiers and mobilizing resources from colonial societies. The example of the over 150,000 Chinese workers recruited by the British and French in mainland China in order to stabilize the situation in the arms and munitions industry in Europe and to help in the hinterland of the Western Front, was particularly illustrating. From August 1916 onward and against the background of increasing losses of soldiers and workers, the British and French government started negotiations with the Chinese government. In the end over 100,000 Chinese belonged to the British Expeditionary Force and well over 50,000 worked in French factories or were used to dig trenches and build roads in the hinterland of the front. Although they had no status as regular soldiers, thousands were killed. Mainly recruited from Northern Chinese provinces, the workers first underwent medical examinations and were then brought to Canada. Here many local workers feared that the Chinese would stay and offer cheap labor on the market; as a consequence the Chinese were effectively interned before transported to Europe. The tension between local workers and those brought from colonial societies anticipated a conflict that would develop in the period of mass demobilization in late 1918, when in numerous European port cities a wave of racist violence broke out, directed against the tens of thousands of soldiers from extra-European colonies. Many demobilized European soldiers feared that they would flood the postwar labor market. Once in Europe, most of the Chinese workers were confronted with racist stereotypes, particularly after spring 1917 by American officers. But the war experience of the Chinese was much more complex. Many were impressed by the patriotism of the French soldiers who despite horrible losses defended a democratic republic against a German invader. Many experienced the existence and power of trade unions, of workers' rights, or the fundamental meaning of women for the war industry. Thousands of the Chinese workers would stay in France after the war and have their own families.

pp. 23–50; Dendooven, "Living Apart Together: Belgian Civilians and Non-white Troops and Workers in Wartime Flanders," in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. Santanu Das (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 2011), pp. 143–57.

This recruitment was much more than an episode in the global mobilization of resources by European war governments. The Chinese leaders in Beijing hoped that this step would allow them to overcome China's role as a mere object of international politics, to gain a seat in a future peace conference. Furthermore, the recruitment took place in a period of an intensified perception of the Western models by Chinese intellectuals—who in 1917 would concentrate their hopes on the promises of the American president Wilson, including the right of national self-determination, which they regarded as a chance to free their country from foreign intervention and de facto colonial rule, be it by European powers or by Japan.²²

The encounter between the Chinese and the European war had far-reaching consequences. A number of Chinese intellectuals came to Europe and realized the importance of alphabetization among their compatriots. Thus Yan Yangchu, also called James Yen, began to organize courses among the workers and even published a Chinese newspaper behind the Western Front. Returning to China in the 1920s, he began to organize a mass movement that would foster education and alphabetization in the Chinese countryside. Thousands of young people joined the movement, which eventually included over five million young students and scholars, including the young Mao Zedong, who volunteered to become a teacher in the countryside.²³

(e) War of Communication:

Fighting for Information and Global Influence of Public Opinion

When the United States joined the Allies and entered the war in spring 1917, this step provoked a wave of worldwide expectations: not only hopes for the creation of new nation-states out of the crumbling multi-ethnic Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman Empires, but also hopes for a new postwar order that would overcome the status quo of colonial rule. Anti-colonial movements from Egypt to India, from Korea to China,

22. Guoqi Xu, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011), p. 226.

23. Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 22–31.

and in many African regions regarded national self-determination as a sign for a new political order. Hence Wilson became the prophet of a new age, a kind of political messiah, who would prevent a mere return to the status quo ante 1914. But if we want to understand the meaning of 1917 as a global moment, a watershed from the European to the World War, then it is fundamental to understand the war not only as a military conflict but also one of communication and media, of texts and pictures and images, of propaganda and the management of public opinion.

The war was not only fought in the trenches and the factories. It was also a battle between information and news, between interpretations and explanations of the war. And this communication war was fought between the different news agencies.²⁴ Whereas the French Havas dominated in the African and Asian French colonies and southern Europe, the German Wolff'sches Telegraphenbüro had a quasi-monopoly over central, northern, and eastern Europe. But only the British agency Reuters could claim to be a truly global news agency, influencing the market of news and information in the British Empire and the Americas.²⁵ Against this background the control of the Atlantic telegraph cables was absolutely vital. It was no accident that one of the first maritime actions of the Royal Navy against Germany was directed against the cables connecting the continent with North America. After the British had destroyed these cables in early August 1914, German agencies were practically cut off from the news market in the United States. It became extremely difficult to argue for the German perspective and explanation of the war, as many German-born intellectuals in American universities and colleges on the East Coast soon found out. One could therefore argue that already in the first weeks of the war, Germany found itself in a defensive and critical position in the war of global communication. By 1917 this constellation was even more obvious. Only Reuters, Havas, and the Associated Press could be regarded as globally operating news agencies. This was all the more important at the very moment of the

24. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), pp. 46–47.

25. Jonathan Reed Winkler, *Nexus: Strategic Communications and American Security in World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 268–69.

United States' entry into the war. Wilson's agenda, his promises, provoked high and highly contradictory expectations not only in European societies but in the whole world. In addition, the U.S. government focused on progressive means to communicate the war. The foundation of the Committee on Public Information, led by the energetic Wilsonian George Creel, stood in this context.²⁶

There is hardly a better example to demonstrate the importance of this global war of communication, and what may be called a revolution of rising expectations, than India in 1917. Many representatives of the Indian National Congress advocated the Indian war efforts (over 1.2 million Indian soldiers fought at all fronts of the war, mainly in Mesopotamia and the Near East), because they hoped that in a postwar world this would offer them the chance to renegotiate a new status of India within the British Empire, including a de facto home rule. In fact the government in London was prepared to make concessions, and in August 1917 Sir Montague, the minister responsible for India, proclaimed "the increasing association of Indians in every branch of the administration and the gradual development of self-governing institutions."²⁷ Yet it was not this course of concession that dominated public opinion and the headlines of all major Indian newspapers, but rather the perception of the American president Wilson and his agenda of a new postwar order. The Committee of Public Information had successfully launched Wilson's agenda as a global promise, not only one designed for the future of Czechs or Poles in Europe. While London and Paris began to fear a decisively anti-colonial stimulus from Wilson's promises, the Indian middle classes welcomed them. For them this program was much more attractive than the concessions from London, which seemed to reflect the more and more exhausted resources of Britain and its growing dependence on the empire for enduring the war in Europe.²⁸

Similar hopes developed in other parts of the world, not least in China and Korea. However the rising expectations of a new world order,

26. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, pp. 46–48.

27. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 83; Judith Margaret Brown, *Modern India: The Origins of an Asian Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 197–99.

28. Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, pp. 83–84.

combining national self-determination, democratic participation, and collective security, and catalyzed by a global network of effective U.S. war propaganda, would soon be disappointed. Soon after the Paris peace conferences, the search began for radical alternatives in many colonial societies. Twenty-six-year-old Ho Chi Minh, who had traveled to Paris to take part in negotiations as a representative of the thousands of Vietnamese soldiers who had fought in French units, was bitterly disappointed when he found out that now that the war was over no French government was prepared to make any further concessions.

Against this background it was no accident that the immediate postwar period after 1918 was marked by a wave of violent conflicts over the future of colonial regimes: in Egypt, in India where the Amritsar massacre of 1919 demonstrated the widening gulf between promises and practice, in Korea and China, in the Middle and Near East where the French and British model of colonial protectorates clashed with pan-Arabic and anti-colonial movements.

4. Summary: The Non-Synchronic End of the War

(1) The world war ended what one may describe as a world history still imagined by most Europeans (and beyond) as a European history of the world. Global interactions and entanglements had already been part of the pre-1914 period, but the war fundamentally challenged political balances and hierarchies. The European pentarchy, the system of five great powers, collapsed with the disintegration of the Tsarist Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy, while at the same time the British and French empires expanded and reached their territorial peak. Imperial overstretch and the long decline, one may argue, began in 1918. Furthermore, the war had provoked rising expectations on a hitherto unknown level: expectations of political and social participation, of national self-determination and greater independence and autonomy, of ending an era of warfare by a new system of public diplomacy and collective security.²⁹ For many societies, the Poles and Irish as the Canadians and

29. Jörn Leonhard, "Die Büchse der Pandora des 20. Jahrhunderts: Der Erste Weltkrieg als Umbruch von Erwartungen und Erfahrungen," in *Faszination und Schrecken*

Australians, the war marked a fundamental period of nation-building, of political and cultural emancipation. For the many soldiers returning from Europe to their homes in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, or Canada, their war experiences not only were contributions to a British war in Europe but also became part of a distinct national narrative. But for many Indian, Asian, and African war veterans, their war efforts, the uncountable victims, and the proven loyalty were not translated into any political capital. Measuring the promises of 1914 against the reality after 1918 would question the European model of political rule.

(2) How does our image of the war change if we open our European narrative of 1918 into a global one? The answer may seem provocative, but the end of the war becomes ambivalent. The beginning of the war in early August 1914 marked a common experience for millions over thousands of kilometers, as the examples of Kande Kamara and Franz Kafka proved. Yet the end of the war was no longer a synchronic moment in history. If we follow the aura of the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, we focus on the end of war between states in Western Europe—while other wars continued or were about to start: in Ireland and Poland, where new nation-states emerged in civil war or national war, in Eastern Europe as a whole, where the state war had already ended in 1917 and had transcended into a civil war, time and again overlapping with ethnic conflicts, which would continue into the early 1920s, in the Near and Middle East, in India, Asia, and many parts of Northern Africa. The formal end of the war gave way to a broad spectrum of new spaces of violence on a global level which transcended the chronological compartment of 1914–18.

(3) In 1918 Henri Barbusse, author of the radical war novel *Le feu*, published in 1916, wrote: "Humanity instead of nation. In 1789 our revolutionaries proclaimed 'All French are equal.' We say: 'All human beings!' The equality of all necessitates rules for all men on earth."³⁰ This sentence, this hope that this world war with its 17 million dead soldiers

des Krieges: XXIII. Reihlen-Vorlesung, Beiheft 2015 zur Berliner Theologischen Zeitschrift, ed. Notger Slenczka (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), pp. 120–36.

30. Henri Barbusse, *Der Schimmer im Abgrund: Ein Manifest an alle Denkenden*, German ed. by Iwan Goll (Basel: Im Rhein Verlag, n.d.), p. 60.

and civilians would not be in vain, in that it would lead to a new world order and a new era of peaceful internationalism, has never again lost its appeal. But nobody can say that we have seen these expectations fulfilled. Rather the disappointment, the disillusion of the hope that the First World War would be the “war to end all wars” has accompanied the twentieth century and still accompanies us today. The discourse on foreign policy changing into a domestic policy of the world indicates that conflicts have not been solved but reemerge in a different form. We are no longer confronted with state wars but with asymmetric civil wars and eroding boundaries between war and terrorism, between armies and militias, between combatants and non-combatants.³¹

The global conflict zones in Eastern Europe, in the former Yugoslavia, and in the Near and Middle East remind us of the shatter zones of multiethnic empires and the long shadow of empires after their collapse.³² If in August 1914 the Pandora’s box was opened, some of the violent legacies of this war are still with us today. This past is very present.

31. Reinhart Koselleck, “Patriotismus. Gründe und Grenzen eines neuzeitlichen Begriffs,” in *Begriffsgeschichten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), pp. 238–39.

32. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, eds., *Shatterzone of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2013); Jörn Leonhard, “Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe’s First World War—A Commentary from a Comparative Perspective,” in *Legacies of Violence: Eastern Europe’s First World War*, ed. Jochen Böhrer, Włodzimierz Borodziej, and Joachim von Puttkamer (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2014), pp. 319–26.