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1918-2018: France and Germany Mourn



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On November 11, 2018, France commemorates the one hundredth anniversary of the Armistice, the victory of the French troops and their allies (including soldiers from its African and Asian colonies) in the First World War.

Triggered by a marginal diplomatic dispute, propagated through a rigid system of alliances, escalating out of proportion through massive civilian recruitment and industrial advances, the 1914–1918 war, which supposedly no one wanted, led to unimaginable carnage: 18 million dead, 6 million cripples, 3 million widows, 6 million orphans. Among them were 100,000 Africans from the African colonies, forcibly drafted or recruited with

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the illusory promise of French citizenship once the “blood tax” had been paid, in the expression used by Blaise Diagne, who was in charge of recruitment for the colonial troops. It was a fratricidal war: some fighting for France, England, Belgium, or Portugal, others fighting for Germany, depending on where they stood in the colonial lottery. There is not a single village in France or Germany, however humble, that has not erected a monument in the town square commemorating those lost during the Great War. But only the city of Reims, in France, has built a memorial paying tribute to the African troops, the Armée Noire: the Zouaves, Chasseurs d’Afrique, Tirailleurs Sénégalais, Spahis. The great mosque in Paris, inaugurated in 1926, was built in memory of the 68,000 north Africans (Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians) who died during this war for a cause that was not their own. It would not be until 2006 that a military monument was erected, in Douaumont, to the Muslim victims. By comparison, the British built a memorial in London in 1921 to honor the Army of India that had fought in France and Belgium, and another one in Neuve La Chapelle, France, in 1927, where the Sikh contingent lost 80% of its men in March 1915. In Germany there has been only ingratitude and contempt for the former combatants from the African colonies (Tanzania, Cameroon, Namibia, Togo), without mentioning the black troops who occupied the Rhineland, referred to as Die Schwarze Schmach, “The Black Shame”.

Alain-Fournier, Charles Péguy, Guillaume Apollinaire, August Macke, Ernest Psichari, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg... how many writers and poets were sacrificed on the altar of the absurd that the governments and military apparatuses decked out with high-sounding words: “fields of honor”? The anthology of French writers who died during the war, published in five volumes in 1924 by Edgar Malfere, included more than 800 names. Ezra Pound, Ernest Jünger, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Otto Dix, Siegfried Sassoon, George Grosz, Edmund Blunden, Henri Barbusse, Erich Maria Remarque, Roland Dorgelès, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Fernando Pessoa, Cristiano Cruz... how many surviving artists were marked forever by this branding iron of horror?

The inexorable conflagration among nations that claimed to represent a model for their colonies in Asia and Africa was the burial ground of the values that allow humanity to live together. The ethical and moral trauma that spread through Europe, as evidenced in a literature of doubt and despair, reminds the belligerents that the laurels of victory are irrelevant compared to the brutal betrayal of values in the fighting and the contempt for human beings festering in the heart of the fighter. In his book *La Crise de l’Esprit* (Crisis

of the Mind), published in 1919, Paul Valéry wrote: “We later civilizations ... we too know that we are mortal.”

For what reason did the European nations march themselves into this hegemonic war in 1914? The question was hotly debated because, for perhaps the first time in history, the belligerents themselves were convinced that the war was absurd, ruinous for their shared civilization, disproportionate, feeding on its own fury, increasingly ignorant of its causes and objectives as it developed.

In August 1914, these rich and powerful nations mobilized popular enthusiasm through irresponsible nationalism to engage in a war that exterminated one third of their youth (18–27 years). It was almost an industrial enterprise. “Factories for the manufacture of corpses”, as Hannah Arendt wrote in a letter to Eric Voegelin. During the second battle of Ypres in April 1915, the use of poison gas by the Germans claimed 100,000 lives. Over the six days of the battle of Verdun in 1916, 25,000 French soldiers and 27,000 German soldiers died without either side gaining a single centimeter of territory. On one day, July 1, 1916, 21,000 British soldiers died on the banks of the Somme. At the end of four years, and with nine million troops dead, the two sides were almost where they were when they started.

This patriotic posturing harbored an ideology as pernicious as racism, colonialism, or imperialism: the concept of national superiority. Those who did not share this bellicose patriotism were considered traitors or communists and imprisoned (Paul Vaillant-Couturier in France, Bertrand Russell in the United Kingdom, Eugene Debs in the United States), murdered (Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in Germany; Jean Jaurès, French political leader) or executed by firing squad “to serve as an example”, to teach a lesson. An estimated 600 young French soldiers questioned the sense of this slaughter and were sentenced to death during the conflict. In Italy, 750 met a similar fate; 306 in the United Kingdom. The only country that refused to execute its seditious soldiers was Australia.

The famous “Chanson de Craonne”, named after a French village, is an anti-war song composed in 1917 and sung by rebellious soldiers, who chose to defend and not to attack. The military authorities treated them very harshly and offered a reward for the head of the “criminal” songwriter, who remains anonymous to this day:

*Adieu la vie, adieu l'amour,
Adieu toutes les femmes.
C'est bien fini, c'est pour toujours
De cette guerre infâme.
C'est à Craonne sur le plateau
Qu'on doit laisser sa peau.
Car nous sommes tous des condamnés,
Nous sommes les sacrifiés.*

*Good-bye to life, good-bye to love,
Good-bye to all the women.
It's all over now, we've had it for good
With this awful war.
It's in the Craonne up on the plateau
That we're leaving our skins.
'Cause we've all been sentenced to die,
We're the ones they're sacrificing.*

*Ceux qu'ont le pognon, ceux-là reviendront,
Car c'est pour eux qu'on crève.
Mais c'est fini, car les trouffions
Vont tous se mettre en grève.
Ce s'ra votre tour, messieurs les gros,
De monter sur l'plateau,
Car si vous voulez la guerre,
Payez-la de votre peau.*

*Those who have the dough, they'll be coming back,
'Cause it's for them that we're dying.
But it's all over now, 'cause all of the grunts
Are going to go on strike.
It'll be your turn, all you rich and fat cats,
To go up on the plateau.
And if you want to make war,
Then pay for it with your own skin.*

The protests of these soldiers have been brought to the screen in many films, such as *Uomini Contro* [English title: *Many Wars Ago*] by Francesco Rosi (1970), *King and Country* by Joseph Losey (1964), and *Paths of Glory* by Stanley Kubrick (1957), which was not allowed to be shown in France until eighteen years after it was released.

After clashing again in a bloody conflict (1939-1945) that caused 60 million deaths, including 28 million Soviet troops and 8 million Germans, while France, collaborating with the Nazis, was partially spared (560,000 dead), France and Germany are now pacified, and to all appearances reconciled within the European Union. The stability and durability of this heterogeneous and fragile ensemble, to which the Swedish Academy paid tribute in awarding it the Nobel Peace Prize, depends on the union of these two former belligerents.

They are nations of new generations but, in the Middle East, in Africa, and in Europe, they are confronted with new conflicts, new rivalries as absurd and pointless as the war experienced by their forebears, who were once young 18-year-old recruits. Grateful and compassionate, they pay bitter and painful tribute to them this November 11, 2018. They mourn their own dead but apparently feel no grief about causing more: France and Germany are the world's third and fifth arms suppliers.