

When did the Great War End?

In 2018, it was my privilege to chair the Scientific Committee of the exhibition *A l'Est la guerre sans fin, 1918-1923* (In the East, the War without End, 1918-1923), which the Army Museum in Paris organised at the Hôtel des Invalides to close the Centenary of the Great War. Numerous historians worked on this exhibition and its catalogue (including Julien Gueslin, here today, on the Baltic states) and both the exhibition and catalogue were (so the Museum tells me) an outstanding success with the public. I am pleased, therefore, to be at this conference in Riga because some of the panels of the Paris exhibition form part of the exhibition prepared by the Institut Français of Riga together with Latvian colleagues on *La Contribution de la France et des Alliés à l'indépendance de la Lettonie, 1918-21*, which we are inaugurating today. Such a collaboration seems highly appropriate for I am sure that today we shall focus in the case of Latvia on some of the big themes from the Paris exhibition. I should like to thank the organisers for the invitation to speak and in particular Ambassador Hennessy and the Irish Embassy for sponsoring my visit. How Ireland fits into all this is something I shall turn to at the end of my remarks.

There was of course a deliberate paradox at the heart of the exhibition in Paris: an event to mark the centenary of the end of the war in 2018 took as its argument that the Great War did not in fact end on 11 November 1918 but rather transitioned into new wars, revolutions, counter-revolutions and multiple types of violence in many parts of Europe. This was especially true of central and eastern Europe, Russia and the former Ottoman Empire including the Middle East. In these zones, what I would call 'une plus grande guerre' (a greater war) continued

until around 1923. Moreover, and this was a crucial part of the exhibition's argument, even victorious Britain and France, which soon came to commemorate 11 November 1918 as the moment when the war ended, took part in this further round of wars and violence. They did so from the vantage-point of the Paris Peace Conference, where they were trying to construct a new order for Europe and the Middle East, although the wars and revolutions taking place on the ground often defied their efforts. But they also took part in those same upheavals as actors and witnesses. I think one reason why the public liked the exhibition was because of its explanatory power. If one wants to understand why the First World War was followed by a second world war twenty years later, the 'greater war' holds some of the clues.

Perhaps nowhere better exemplifies the argument than the Baltic region, including Latvia. There are many people here more expert than I am in the history of Latvia's independence and the struggle to gain international recognition. What I propose to do is simply to highlight several crucial features of the larger argument about the 'greater war' and to suggest how these might be relevant to Latvia.

Firstly, the Great War of 1914-18 itself proved to be such a profoundly destabilising event because it unleashed more forces than it could possibly resolve. Among these forces was that of nationalism and its translation into nation-states, which henceforth provided Europe with its principal form of political organisation and identity (down to the present). This also became an aspiration in the colonial world, though the spread of the nation-state to Africa and Asia would only come with decolonisation after the Second World War. Of course, I am not

suggesting that nations and nation-states did not have a long pre-history in the 19th century and even earlier. But I do want to claim that the Great War itself, with its military and civic mobilisations and above all with its mass death in battle (which posed the question of who had really made the sacrifice and why), powerfully accelerated national sentiment. It wasn't just that historic dynastic empires crumbled under the weight of the war (in Tsarist Russia, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire) but also that the nation and nationality proved the best political form for mobilising the war effort or justifying in retrospect the sacrifice it had exacted. The Russian decision in 1915 to organise national military units (including Latvian infantry regiments) and Latvia's civil mobilisation in 1915-16 on behalf of 750,000 refugees (many of them Latvian) paved the way (I suspect) for the national aspirations that assumed a more overtly political form after the February Revolution in 1917.

Second, nationality by the period of the Great War was subject to ethnic and even racial definitions and sensibilities. These either reinforced or overrode earlier religious affiliations and they combined with class and urban-rural tensions to provide increasingly sharp definitions of what the nation was and who belonged to it. These distinctions had been accentuated by the social and personal resentments of wartime – at those who had 'shirked' their military duty or were accused of 'hoarding' and 'profiteering' in worsening economic conditions.

The question of whether nations could (and should) consist of multiple ethnic and other identities on the basis of common citizenship or should be defined first and foremost by ethnicity was fundamental. The western Allies who presided

over the peace-making in Paris favoured the citizenship model (it was certainly the one that US president Woodrow Wilson promoted with his famously vague notion of 'self-determination'). It was also at the root of the 'minority' clauses by which the Allies tried to make the states that they recognized as the building-blocks of their new Europe conform to the pluralist model. This was also the legal order that the League of Nations would seek (and fail) to apply between the wars. The reality, however, was that battles over minorities and borders proved to be one of the most powerful sources of conflict as new nation-states tried to create a coherent geographical framework, and all of them ended up with 'national minorities.'

Latvia perhaps most obviously exemplified this in relation to the Baltic Germans, a landowning class but also a cultural elite which became engaged in the efforts by defeated Germany in 1919 to promote its Baltic aspirations (under Rüdiger von der Goltz) while also keeping the Bolsheviks at bay on behalf of the Allies. But (and this is my ignorance) I don't know how much attitudes to the smaller pre-war Russian minority were shaped by attitudes in Latvia to the Russian Civil War with its polarisation between Reds and Whites as it played out on Latvian soil.

In any event, the ideologies of class and socialism were (alongside nationality and nationalism) a fundamental feature of the 'greater war' which reverberated across Europe and around the world. For the Bolshevik revolution in November 1917, which took Russia out of the Great War, had two dramatic consequences. It ended the War in eastern Europe almost a year before Germany signed the Armistice on the western front – another reason why the 11 November date does not work for much of the continent. Yet months before that Armistice,

Russia and eastern Europe had plunged into new forms of violence (the Finnish Revolution, the Russian Civil War, a complex national and class revolution in Ukraine etc.). This violence would traverse the November 1918 caesura and interact with the peace-making process in Paris in 1919 and 1920.

But the Bolshevik Revolution also, for the first time since 1789, incarnated the idea of revolution as a challenge to the international political and economic order in one country – and a major state at that. Communist Russia encapsulated both the hope and the fear of revolution across the world, generating powerful myths both for and against it. On the one hand there was Trotsky's 'permanent revolution' menacing the heartlands of the west or Lenin as a hero in Bela Kun's Hungary and in nascent communist movements, as social democracy split across Europe and beyond. On the other hand, conservatives and even moderates saw 'Bolshevik gold' or the 'Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy' behind all manner of local radical movements or revolutionary episodes, from Kurt Eisner's Munich revolution to factory occupations in Italy in 1920. Marx and Engels wrote in 1848 of the 'spectre of Communism' haunting Europe, but it was after 1918 that this really became the case.

Latvia, given its proximity to a Russia in which the Bolsheviks did not accept until 1920 that Latvia was now independent, experienced this aspect of the 'greater war' directly by virtue of its native Bolsheviks (under Peteris Stucka) – meaning that Latvia was riven by its own class-based civil war, and by the Russian Bolshevik occupation of so much of the country in 1919, including Riga. What in much of central and western Europe, Italy or North America was a mythic

transposition of Bolshevism onto local experiences of labour militancy and even revolution was also in Latvia a direct encounter with the Russian Revolution.

By the same token, an equally central feature of the 'greater war' was a radical counter-revolution that viscerally rejected Bolshevism (usually in the form of the Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy) as well as liberal parliamentary democracy. Combining ethnic nationalism, anti-Semitism and anti-feminism with paramilitary modes of organisation (often inspired by elite combat troops in the Great War, such as the German *Sturmtruppen*), this counter-revolutionary tendency found expression in Italian fascism in 1919 and also in the Freikorps.

The Freikorps, as Robert Gerwarth has shown us, were a major force – a kind of counter-revolutionary international consisting of several hundred-thousand volunteer soldiers (mainly German but also Austrian and Hungarian) who in 1919-1920 revolved through a series of ethnic, border and class conflicts from the Baltic to the Austro-Slovenian border and on to the industrial Ruhr in Germany. I don't need to explain to anyone here that Latvia was one of their principal theatres of operation in the form of the heterogeneous forces gathered by the German general, Rüdiger von der Goltz. As the German Eighth Army melted away in 1919 it was replaced by volunteers such as the Eiserne (Iron) Division or the combined Germans and Latvians of the *Baltische Landeswehr* who took Riga from the Bolsheviks in May 1919 before being defeated by the Estonian army in the north.

This brings me to a further, related feature of the 'greater war,' which is the kinds of violence that it entailed. The Great War had already seen the erosion of

pre-war efforts to moderate the conduct of war (humane treatment of civilians and prisoners, banning of certain weapons) but the 'greater war' marked a further erosion of the distinction between combatants and non-combatants because the enemy was no longer usually the professional army of a foreign state. Rather, it consisted of the ethnic, class or even gendered groups who were perceived to be the real foes in revolutionary and counter-revolutionary conflicts or in the wars to rescue or expel ethnic minorities in the pursuit of the new nation-states.

It was this that made the Red and White 'terror' possible, as for example in the civil war in Finland in 1918 in which 36,000 people were killed by both sides in six months (about one per cent of the population), most of them captured soldiers or civilians. In the violence that unfurled across the former border lands of the Russian Empire, anti-Semitism was especially pronounced. For example, Poles marked their independence (and the start of their battle with Ukrainian nationalists for Lodz and the western Ukraine) by burning down the main synagogue in the city. Nor was anti-Semitism confined to Poland; it afflicted Ukraine and White-controlled areas of Russia, too. Of course, anti-Semitism wasn't the only form of violence against civilians, but it was symptomatic of the spread of battle into society. It was as if, with the swelling of ethnic nationalism and visceral anti-Bolshevism, the Jews now became the regional minority for most of the new states in eastern Europe before the Nazis, twenty years later, made them the minority of Europe as a whole.¹

It seems to me important to examine in the case of Latvia the forms taken by violence in the three-way (or perhaps four-way) war of independence fought

between Bolsheviks, Freikorps, the national army raised by Karlis Ulmanis' government and the White Russian forces under Yudenich and later Bermont-Avalov. It is no accident if a classic text on Freikorps violence, the novel by Ernst von Salomon, *The Outlaws*, takes place (in part) in Latvia, or that the future commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, attributed his radicalisation to his days in Freikorps Rossbach, which rescued the Iron Division from Riga in November 1919. Höss later wrote:

'The fighting in the Baltic was more savage and desperate than anything else in all the Freikorps fighting I saw before or afterwards. There was no real front to speak of; the enemy was everywhere. And whenever there was a clash, it turned into butchery to the extent of total annihilation.'²

One final feature of the 'greater war' deserves comment. As I mentioned at the outset, the Allies presiding over the peace conference in Paris were both the would-be architects of the new European order and at the same time observers and participants in the 'greater war' on the ground which interacted with the peace conference (and the subsequent actions of the League of Nations), shaping from below what the Allies tried to order from above. It is a crucial point. The Allies were not making peace after the war had finished (as they did in 1945). They were attempting to make peace in a world still in flames, including in the Baltic. The point with regard to Latvia, is that unlike the nation-states that the Allies sponsored from the start (Poland, Czechoslovakia, the future Yugoslavia etc.), Latvia (like Estonia) might still in the future be part of a restored Russian Empire under White control for which the Allies were themselves fighting in 1919. Recognition of Latvian independence by Britain and France could only come once the Whites had lost to the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War – as shown by the fact that the treaty with the Allies came a year after the treaty Latvian treaty with Bolshevik

Russian in 1920. Hostility to continued German machinations explains the decisive Franco-British naval intervention at Riga in November 1919. But reading the story of the year in the Baltic in 1918-19 of the British naval commander Admiral Cowan is to realise just how much the Royal Navy like the French Navy and the two Allied military missions navigated a difficult line between action and inaction, observing and intervening, in a theatre in which the Inter-Allied Commission in Paris took a long time to define its policy.³ It is a perfect example of the both the power peacemakers and the limits to their power.

I promised that I would conclude with Ireland, and I shall do so very briefly. During the planning of the Paris exhibition, we wondered whether we were right to limit ourselves to the east. For the 'greater war' affected other parts of Europe, including Alsace-Lorraine (the expulsion of Germans in 1919) and the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. In particular, we were conscious of the case of Ireland. We decided (wisely I think) to restrict our focus to the east but let me end with this parallel. We could of course look for Irish involvement in Latvia in 1919 (the head of the Allied military mission, Sir Hubert Gough, was Anglo-Irish and a stout champion of Irish soldiers' service in the Great War). Far more relevant, however, is the parallel between the Latvian War of Independence and that occurring at exactly the same time at the other end of Europe in Ireland. The differences are clear – Ireland was a long way from the geo-political force-field of German-Russian relations within which Latvian independence took place. Yet the role of British paramilitary forces (the Black and Tans) against the guerrillas of the Irish Republican Army, and the fact that Britain ended up with an unacknowledged minority question once the country had been partitioned (in the shape of the large

Catholic and nationalist minority in Northern Ireland) are only some parallels amongst others. Both of these newly independent countries struggled both to gain recognition externally and to establish liberal democracies internally, suggesting that what took place in Ireland, as in Latvia, should be seen as part of Europe's 'greater war.'

John Horne, Dublin, 4th October 2019

¹ On the issue of anti-Semitism, see Mark Levene, *The Crisis of Genocide, vol. 1, Devastation: The European Rimland 1912-1938* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 172-237.

² Qu. Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford, 2007), p. 308.

³ Geoffrey Bennett, *Freeing the Baltic, 1918-1920* (1964: new edition, Barnsley, 2017).