

Philosophy and War: How could we let this happen?

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As a 3 year old I was taken on a family holiday to Normandy, pulled in the back of a trailer attached to my Dad's bicycle. You can imagine me, wide eyed, taking in the sights and sounds of numerous rural French villages. I cannot say I remember the quaint beauty I found in the people, buildings and natural landscape. It is also true that the war memorials in each town, dedicated to the 200-300 faceless dead, whole schools, football teams and families, holds no



particularly strong association in my memory. These historical objects, erected to homage a lost generation, are physical representations of a mental concept, which at the time, I had no access to.

This concept is the idea of history. The philosophy of history does more than inquire into the anthology of a recorded sequence of previous events. Rather, it asks us to engage with the concept of the past, make judgements of it and question its validity and value. These questions are an attempt to make sense of the past, if it can be defined as historically necessary, whether history is simply 'written by the victors', whether or not its course is determined by anything other than the



contemporary economic situation (per Marxist interpretation). By studying our history with a critical eye, we can hope to understand where we stand, how we came to be here, and where it's likely we will end up. As the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel said: "world history is a tribunal that judges the world".

In terms of WW1, our first problem in dissecting it philosophically is the scope of its sheer scale and importance. It seems to me that any remarks made about its historical necessity, the inevitable clashing of imperial powers, or the economic status of the soldiers who died putting words into action sound like a dismissal of something, that at times, is far too important to deserve simplification. Am I claiming it's an event which it's impossible for us to make any real sense of? Am I arguing that all historical phenomena of great importance cannot be explained on an intellectual level?

Rather, the history I claim to want to understand remains inaccessible to me, because I haven't lived it. All of us, when confronted with the physical truth of the war, perhaps standing in front of one of the memorials in Normandy, must come to terms with it, and learn the lessons that we believe it teaches us for ourselves. This type of personal feeling can maybe only be revealed in the poetry, art or first-hand accounts of those who lived through it. Lastly, the importance of this kind of historical philosophising is in its ability to clear the sort of historical fog, referring to a lack of memory or immediacy associated with the past. Stanislaw Aronson, who took part in the Warsaw uprising wrote in

the Guardian that 'If disaster comes, you will find that all the myths you once cherished are of no use to you.' This idea of the destruction of myths is crucial here: we live in a post-war society, where we reap the legacy of those who gave their lives for the modern order, where we over simplify and mythologise the past.



Aronson argues that the complacency his inter-war generation enjoyed blinded them to the mess they were getting into. They sleep-walked into the greatest conflicts in human history, led by their own prejudices and by lies, which we, today, don't have the luxury to leave unchallenged.

We must ask how they allowed these things to happen. We must ask how we can make sure they never happen again.

David Stevenson in conversation.

Professor David Stevenson, the renowned WWI historian, author and lecturer at the London School of Economics, talks to Ben Ettridge, Rebecca Churchill Coleman and Rhys Skillman about the history of WWI and its legacy.

Your latest book looks in detail at 1917. What is the significance of this year?

I've looked at why the war started, how the war ended and wanted to come back to the question on what was driving the war in the middle years. 1917 is particularly interesting to look at because by that time people had already been in the war for 3 years, 100s of thousands of people had been killed and there was enormous suffering to all the societies involved. The question as to why it was so difficult to restore peace when they found themselves deep into a conflict that was so different to the one they envisioned when it started out is the key question I was driving at.

I looked at this question in many different ways, particularly at the decisions to keep launching new attacks and new offensives. I think one of the things that puzzle people about WWI is the fact that people kept attacking. I looked closely at some of the key decisions of 1917 and the British decision to launch the third battle of Ypres, which was one of the worst of all the experiences that the British army had on the Western Front.

The interesting thing about 1917 is that by that time, it was no longer a foregone conclusion that these attacks would keep happening. There was actually debate among politicians in Britain and France, with some wanting to stop these attacks.

I was also looking at the impact of US entry into the war, the Russian revolution and if you look at 1917, you can see it as a global turning point, not just a European one. For example, in Palestine the Balfour Declaration established a home for the Jewish people in Palestine and India became a self-governing nation.

In your opinion, what was the greatest impact of WWI, be that technological, political or social?

Probably I'd stress the political. The First World War didn't make the Second World War inevitable but it's a precondition to



the Second World War. In other words, you have to look at WWI not just in itself, but as setting off a whole series of further disasters. It was the precondition to the rise of the Nazis in Germany, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Communist regime in Russia, the great crash and depression. All of these things lead on to the Second World War, which then has a further series of chain reactions following from it, including the Cold War. So, in some ways, you aren't free from the consequences of the First World War until the early 21st century. Yet, even in the Middle East today, the redrawing of the map of that region during WWI still has an impact there.

From a technological point of view, the war accelerated changes, rather than provoking completely unpredictable changes. The development of medicine, for example, has been very important.

Socially, there's a lot of interest now in the gender relations and the emancipation of women. However, that emancipation was pretty incomplete in 1918 and quite a lot of the social progress that happened during the war was reversed afterwards.

That's important, worth studying and it's right that we remember it. On the whole, the impact on domestic and international politics, leading on to the Second World War and beyond is where I'd put the main stress.

So, do you believe the First World War truly finished with the Treaty of Versailles or was it just a precondition to the Second World War?

Well, obviously, the actual fighting stopped, no more guns were fired, which is something. But, it didn't end the political struggle that was going on during the war. After the treaty was signed, the struggle between France and Germany just continued in different means through out the crises of the 1920s and into the Nazism of the 1930s.

I don't think the way WWI ends makes the Second World War inevitable. There's a lot of history between 1918 and 1939. The way the first world war was fought and finished was a precondition for the Second World War and in some ways in 1939, some thought, particularly on the German side, that WWI was being fought again.

Hitler believed this and in many ways his character is moulded by his experience of WWI and in 1939 he thinks he is reenacting the First World War but hopefully better, avoiding the mistakes of last time. There was a lot of continuity of personnel, on both sides, in fact, with Winston Churchill playing a major role in both world wars.

Do you think the lessons of WWI have helped avoid conflict on such a large scale in recent times?

WWI was tremendously important. Obviously, it's easier if we look at this from a British perspective and it clearly had a major impact. It had a delayed impact and more research has been done on how the war was remembered and it has been very revealing. In the 1920s, if you look at what was being said on Armistice day, speeches and sermons, the idea of the First World War being futile wasn't stressed. It was a tragedy, but it wasn't a waste, it wasn't pointless.

By the time you get to the 1930s, you look at Armistice day speeches and you get this new element coming in; that it had all been a waste and completely futile because it was all going to have to happen again, with the Nazis in Germany. The war hadn't brought permanent peace - was it worth the sacrifice? The war was very important I think, particularly in

the UK, for creating the origins of the international pacifist movement.

If you look at the arts, there's a massive anti-war movement, expressed through artwork and films, which comes out in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It's interesting there's an almost 10 year gap since the end of the war and the movement getting going. The simple answer to the question is yes, but the way in which the connection works is a bit more complicated.

How should the centenary of WWI be commemorated in our schools and taught to young people?

It's good if you can relate it to your locality, get out and see the local war memorial, think about the names and find out about their stories. It's important to connect with the reality of war, so do some research into the impact on your community or even the impact on your own family. It's easiest to try and understand the huge impact that the war had by looking at it at a local and community level.

Once you've got beyond that, then I'd hope that the teaching at school would incorporate some of the bigger national issues to try and make it possible for people to understand what caused the war, what it was all about, could it happen again, what kept it going and how it ended.

What made you want to study history?

This is going back a long time to the 1960s. I think it was a mixture of magazines and BBC documentaries. There was a lot of history in the house because my father and grandfather served in the second and first world wars, so that was always being talked about. My imagination was really captured by a BBC documentary released in 1964, 50 years after the outbreak of WWI. I remember that and in those days, huge audiences would see them. It had a really big impact.

Would you say due to the evolution of society, there's been a deterioration in the way that people connect with the past?

I'm not convinced by that. You could say that on a superficial level, but there is actually all sorts of evidence that points the other way. There is a lot of interest in history, but it may be taking different forms. People aren't losing interest with the past, but are rather connecting with it in different ways.

What would your advice be to any aspiring historians?

Read. Find out more about it. Use as many different means as possible to access the past. The internet is the key now to get a flavour of all types of history. Get an overview and find out about as many time periods, places and topics as possible.

Read as much as you can about as many different things as you can.

