



The Aftermath of The Great War: 1918-23

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in February 1918 removed Russia from the Great War of 1914 and drew new national boundaries in Eastern Europe. Then, on November 11, 1918, at the 11th hour, the guns fell silent in the Great War. At the Treaty of Versailles, new national boundaries were drawn, and the peace was established with little satisfaction on any side. Yet the fighting did not end, and the aftermath of the war saw Eastern Europe in continued conflicts as they tried to establish national states. There were 27 major civil wars and revolts between 1917 and 1921 in Eastern Europe along with the collapse of empires.

The Great War ended four empires—Ottoman, Habsburg, Romanov and Hohenzollern—creating a political vacuum in their territories. The Russian Revolution added a new ideology to the mix of nationalism. Soviet groups were formed by soldiers and workers, as were paramilitary groups and warlords who laid waste to Eastern Europe, leaving some four million dead soldiers in the wake of the “Red and White Terror” that swept the territories of Eastern Europe between 1918 and 1923.

The conflict’s path of destruction included diseases such as the influenza epidemic as well as shortages of food, housing, transportation and unemployment that added to the misery of local populations. The local Jewish populations were caught in the middle of the conflicts in part from a historical bias and the new elements of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. The Jews were seen as Bolsheviks and not to be trusted by either side. The pogrom in the city of Lemberg, Poland, during November of 1918 was a result of the struggle between the Poles and Ukrainians. There were 1,500 pogroms between 1918 and 1920 in Eastern Europe that cost as many as 60,000 lives of Jews.

The Polish push for survival and territory saw the Poles at war with six neighboring people: Lithuania, Silesia, Teschen, Ukrainian, Russia and Germany. The Poles had defended and expanded their territory with success, and then the tide turned and all seemed hopeless until the Poles surprised the Russians with an attack at their rear at the Vistula River, known as the Miracle on the Vistula. Stalin was in charge of the Soviet forces and remembered this defeat later.

Moscow saw the time as ripe for the spread of socialism and sent the seeds of socialism to nations in Eastern Europe and around the world. Hungary had the longest Soviet government outside of Russia—133 days—before that government fell to other forces. The Hungarian “White Guards” and socialist terror ended when Romanian and Czech troops ended the Hungarian Soviet State.

What had seen like a new world of liberal modernization and democracy became a world of totalitarian and military dictatorships in Europe. Civil wars increased the violence on civil populations with forced deportations and labor. The artist Ivan Vladimirov has left a visual representation of the trauma of these civil wars. Some six million POWs during this time were held, and one in five died of disease in captivity.

The guns were not silent after 1918. For example, in the Soviet Union alone, millions died in the struggle to control the population to a single idea.

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