

OUR
WORLD
REMADE
WORLD
WAR I

Essay by
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Our World Remade: The Great War

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When H.G. Wells described The Great War as “the war to end war,” his phrase had a resonance that it cannot have today. Indeed, when people refer to World War I now as “the war to end war” (or, more commonly, as “the war to end all wars”) it is with irony; it could not be otherwise, given everything that has occurred between 1918 and today.

Yet when we immerse ourselves in the history of The Great War, when we allow ourselves to see the conflict through the eyes of those who were there, the hope that this could actually have been the war to end war no longer seems so farfetched. The battles themselves were so terrible, the damage wrought so horrendous, that it seemed impossible that humankind could ever consider going to war again after the end of World War I. The difficulty for us, as modern readers, is that war did, in fact, not end. So how do we begin to try and make sense of The Great War and its aftermath?

During World War I, and in the years that followed, authors and historians have struggled to come to terms with what happened, with the terrors of the battlefield, and with the sociological and political upheaval caused by the conflict. So much of what happened during the war was ‘new,’ from the months-long battles and the carnage wrought by new war technologies, to the dehumanizing effects of the horrors that civilians and especially soldiers

witnessed. Society had not yet developed a vocabulary for dealing with these issues; it was up to authors to articulate people's initial responses to the war, both as it was raging and in the years that followed.

Some authors were eyewitnesses, writing letters and field reports detailing their experiences, as well as producing official documents pertaining to the war, its inception and its aftermath. These works give us the immediacy of the battlefield and a personal connection to events as they played out. Short stories and novels allow us, through their characters, to make a personal connection as well; while this can be an excellent way for readers to engage with historical events, it is important to keep in mind that, no matter how vividly a character is depicted, she is, in the end, just a fictional character. Historians writing many years later give us a perspective tempered by time. They have the luxury of hindsight and can bring together many different aspects of the events they are depicting, but of course they generally have no direct, personal knowledge of the event.

Then there are the poets.

Indeed, World War I could be called 'The Poets' War.' So much of what we know about The Great War, the horror and despair, the pathos and chaos and confusion, has been evoked through poetry. This is not to say that World War I poets spoke with a unified voice. Some poets were for the war, issuing their own calls to arms as 1914 approached and urging their fellow countrymen to continue on as the fighting dragged on year after year. Yet it is the other poetic voices, the voices that urged their countrymen to witness who are perhaps best remembered. These are the poets who laid bare the raw emotions of the soldier on the battlefield, who brought to horrible life the terrible tolls that mechanized warfare took on those who experienced it.

All of the texts in this series, arranged over six themed sessions, have been selected to help participants come to understand how The Great War remade the world, not only during the terrible years of 1914 to 1918 but also in the years that followed. The sessions are arranged in (roughly) chronological order, with texts chosen not only to illustrate each session's theme but also to be in conversation with the themes of the other sessions.

A century after the outbreak of The Great War, we are still struggling to come to terms with the conflict and its aftermath; to understand the impact the war had on human lives and human endeavors; and to comprehend why "the war to end war" did not, ultimately, do so. Just as the participants in, and survivors of, World War I did, we continue to try to make sense of the senseless.

Session One: The War to End All Wars

Novels help readers gain rich and enlightening insights about warfare, and perhaps no novel better expresses the horror and dehumanizing effect of war than Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Long hailed as the anti-war novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* is based on Remarque's own experiences as a soldier in the German army during World War I. The novel is a blistering attack on misguided patriotism and the destructive nationalism that can arise when patriotism is used as a means to control a country's populace. Remarque looks unflinchingly at how quickly patriotism gives way to cynicism once a soldier reaches the battlefield. He examines the dehumanizing effect of warfare in general and the technological and emotional horrors specific to World War I. Survival is all, yet most do not survive.

All Quiet on the Western Front provides an excellent introduction to the themes *Our World Remade* will examine, allowing participants to enter the bloody world of battle by showing them World War I through the eyes of an increasingly disillusioned and despairing German soldier.

Session Two: The Call to Arms (and Its Dissenters)

As the 19th century drew to a close and the 20th century began, nationalism was on the rise throughout Europe, with German and Italian unification at the forefront. Social Darwinism (very loosely based on Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection) began to take hold as a 'scientific' theory that proved the superiority of one group of people over another. Countries began seeking new alliances and developing newer and better technological methods for waging war; "The Treaty of Vienna" and "The Hague Conventions" provide an overview of the political and national entanglements that, ironically, many hoped would prevent a European war.

There is no one issue that can be called the cause of The Great War. International tensions, the desire of countries to expand into new territories, monetary policies and the rise of nationalism all played a role. What can be said is that the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary (who, with his wife, was killed by a Bosnian nationalist) was the spark that ignited the powder keg of Europe.

Writers such as F. T. Marinetti and Charles Mangin were planning for war, even encouraging the outbreak of fighting, but as the call to arms grew louder throughout Europe, there were also dissenting voices. Bertha von Suttner, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905 for her anti-war work, fictionalized her own wartime experiences in the novel *Lay Down Your Arms*, hoping that moments such as the death of the narrator's husband would help her readers understand not only the effect of war on the soldiers who fight but also on their loved ones at home. And in *The War in the Air*, published in 1908, H.G. Wells envisioned the “special peculiarities of aerial warfare” and the ways in which new technologies might be put to use on the battlefield.

Many of the voices raised in opposition to the oncoming war were those of the age's poets; it was during World War I that writers such as A. E. Houseman, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves wrote some of their best works. In the years before 1914, poets were calling upon people to heed the possibility of a great conflict on the horizon. Geoffrey Faber's “The Eve of War” imagines a nighttime London where people are living beneath the threat of the coming conflict, a threat that is palpable to Londoners if they would only pay attention. Of course, not all poets opposed the upcoming war; in “The Trumpet,” for example, Edward Thomas issues the call to “Rise up, rise up” and hear the call to arms, to “arise” in response to the trumpeter's summons. Throughout this Poets' War, writers would attempt to come to grips with the overwhelming and often conflicting emotions engendered by events both at home and on the battlefield.





Session Three: Incalculable Losses: The Battle of Verdun

As with any war, there are certain battles that take on near-mythic proportions. In World War I, one such battle was fought in Verdun (February 21 to December 18, 1916). In this session, participants will focus on the Battle of Verdun by reading Paul Jankowski's *Verdun: The Longest Battle of the Great War*. Using both German and French sources, Jankowski provides fresh insights by combining an examination of military tactics and results with the personal experiences of soldiers and their commanding officers. All the issues raised by Remarque's fiction are addressed in this non-fiction account of the Battle of Verdun.

Germany launched the attack on Verdun, an area surrounded by a ring of underground forts, to “bleed France white,” believing that the French would have no choice militarily but to defend the forts. The idea that France would fight to the last man assumed that French soldiers were weaker, less effective fighters than the Germans and would take massive casualties without inflicting much damage on German troops. This proved not to be the case.

Jankowski skillfully and effectively portrays the horrors of modern warfare, which he characterizes as “a technocratic Moloch devouring its children.” Under constant assault, Verdun became a “necropolis,” continually shaking from massive artillery fire. Men were losing hope, disillusioned by what they saw as inept leadership and demoralized by the effects of trench warfare at its worse. The living and the dead shared underground shelter in fort galleries and the Tunnel de Tavannes, where corpses and wounded soldiers, livestock and active troops shared the same unsanitary spaces.

A battle of attrition, Verdun lasted for 10 months, with close to a million casualties. When it finally ended, French troops had retaken all the ground they initially lost; effectively, the front lines remained unchanged.

Session Four: Technology, Horror and Dehumanization

As Remarque and Jankowski effectively portray, The Great War spawned modern, industrialized, technological warfare. While every war, of necessity, leads to improved and more effective means of waging battle, World War I gave birth to unimaginable horrors.

In May of 1915, less than twelve months after the war started, H.G. Wells was already mourning “man’s increasing power of destruction.” The way soldiers fought had changed dramatically. The infantry, once dependent on individual marksmanship and hand-to-hand combat, now faced the mechanized horror of the rapid-fire machine gun and of trying to move across fields seeded with landmines and strung with barbed wire. Trench warfare evolved to counter these developments, but this brought its own perils, with the introduction of tanks and chemical warfare in the form of mustard gas and other poisons. No longer was the danger limited to the area immediately around the fighting. Airplanes and ship-board guns could kill from great distances, and the horrors of the battlefield continued to multiply exponentially.

All this, along with the terrible grinding pressure of a soldier’s day-to-day struggle to survive, served to demoralize – indeed, to dehumanize – the people involved in the war. Many men began to feel as if they were just great cogs in a merciless machine, interchangeable and thus easily replaced. People on the home front experienced fury and despair upon hearing what was happening on the battlefields while also worrying about the possibility of spies and assassins in their own ‘backyards.’ (Even England’s most famous consulting detective gets into the act in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s “His Last Bow.”)



The documents, stories and poems in this session provide glimpses into the horror of modern technological warfare. “Private Meyrick – Company Idiot” examines questions of obedience, conformity and bravery in the trenches, while Mary Borden’s “Blind” tells the story of a nurse at her absolute breaking point. Letters from a British officer and a German soldier give two views of the Battle of the Somme, and poems such as “Breakfast” and “The Survivor Comes Home” are the poets’ ways of coming to some kind of terms with wartime experiences.

Session Five: Trying to Make Sense of the Senseless

At 11:00 a.m. on November 11, 1918, The Great War formally ended. With more than 9 million soldiers dead and more than 20 million injured, along with civilian casualties (direct or indirect) of nearly 10 million, the impact of the fighting was widespread and devastating. The world was left to bury its dead and to try to come to grips with the terrible legacy of mechanized warfare.

Indeed, The Great War had been ‘total war,’ engulfing nearly all of Europe, soldier and civilian alike. Though the war did not feature the massive national mobilization of World War II, there were economic, social and political pressures put on the countries involved, pressures that would require effort and sacrifice from civilian populations. All of this meant that a great many people, on the battlefields and off, were struggling to make sense of what seemed senseless, especially the dehumanization and horrors of industrialized, technological warfare.

The difficulties of this coming to terms, and the desire to make sure this was the “war to end war,” meant that it took six months to draft the Treaty of Versailles. It was finally registered with the League of Nations on October 21, 1919. But it takes more than a treaty to make peace, especially when the point is to develop not just peace among nations but also peace within nations, and within the hearts and minds of their people. The years following The Great War were years of mourning and an intense desire that the horrors of the past four years not be repeated.

This session brings together works that deal with the aftermath of the war and fears about the future. Muriel Spark, born “on the first day of the second month of the last year of the First World War,” connects her earliest childhood experiences with the end of the great conflict, while “Paris, November 11, 1918” by Mae Wedderburn Cannan depicts a much more somber reaction to the

declaration of peace. Harold Brighthouse’s “Once a Hero” addresses the issue of what happens to a soldier once he returns from war, and “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” by G.K. Chesterton points out the injustice of who died and who lived during the four years of World War I.

Session Six: Those Left Behind: Love and Loss in The Great War

Sébastien Japrisot’s antiwar novel *A Very Long Engagement*, first published in France in 1991, then in English with translation by Linda Coverdale in 1993, is an intimate and moving portrayal of what it means to be ‘left behind’ when a loved one disappears during wartime. It ties together the themes of the previous sessions, dealing with the dehumanizing effects of World War I, the misguided patriotism that led to heartless and inhumane acts, the devastation war wreaked on the lives of both soldiers and civilians, and the ways people worked to make sense of The Great War’s senselessness.

Additional Reading

Session Two Companion Works

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914 by Christopher Clark

An engaging and enlightening look at the factors that led to the outbreak of war in 1914.

The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914 by Margaret MacMillan

A compelling work of “narrative nonfiction” that examines the decisions that eventually led to the outbreak of war, as well as the lives of the people who made those decisions.

The Guns of August: The Outbreak of World War I by Barbara W. Tuchman

By focusing on the month leading up to the outbreak of The Great War and the first month of the conflict, this work presents not only the “turning point” of 1914 but the turning point when the world moved from the 19th to the 20th Century.

Session Three Companion Works

The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front by Peter Hart

Hart, an oral historian in London’s Imperial War Museum, combines narration with quotations from those who participated in the Battle of the Somme way that brings the bloody, months-long battle to life.

Passchendaele: The Untold Story by Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson

Through a focus on the political dimensions of the war in Flanders in general, and the fighting at Passchendaele in particular, Prior and Wilson explore the bloody futility of this battle on the Western Front.

Session Four Companion Works

The Great War and Modern Memory by Paul Fussell

Long considered a classic, this volume explores the war through personal writing such as diaries and letters, as well as novels and poems. Fussell demonstrates how authors used their works to remember and memorialize the events of the war.

Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography by Robert Graves

This memoir by the acclaimed poet moves from his childhood in England to the unimaginable horrors of his experiences in The Great War.

Session Five Companion Works

The First World War: A Very Short Introduction by Michael Howard

A clear, concise overview of World War I.

The First World War by John Keegan

A well-written account of the war, with a special emphasis on military strategies and tactics.

A World Undone: The Story of the Great War, 1914 to 1918 by G.J. Meyer

A popular historian's overview of World War I, this is a work of both general narrative history and an intimate portrait of individual lives changed forever by the conflict.

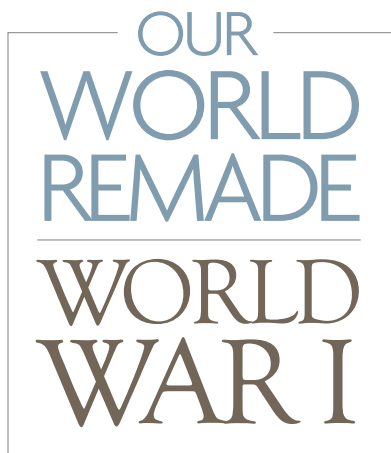
Literary Collections

World War One Short Stories (Dover Thrift Editions) edited by Bob Blaisdell

A good collection of stories that includes not only American and British writers, but also German, French and Russian. Many of the writers are veterans of World War I.

The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War
edited by Santanu Das

In addition to the poetry of World War I, this collection includes informative essays on the historical context of the works, critical assessments of poets and their poetry, and a detailed chronology.



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About Wendy Galgan, Ph.D.

Wendy Galgan is Assistant Professor of English at St. Francis College, where she is editor of *Assisi: An Online Journal of Arts & Letters*, Director of the Women's Poetry Initiative, and Director of the Women's Studies Center. Her areas of interest include war literature, poetry and pop culture. She wrote "Why doesn't make any difference. It's time you moved on faith': Detection, Redemption and Saving Grace" in *Christianity and the Detective Story*, "Dale Evans: Girlie-Girl with a Six-Gun" in *Westerns: Paperback Novels and Movies from Hollywood* and the Forward to Editions Bibliotekos's *Battle Runes: Writings on War*.

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