

Pierre Lierneux & Natasja Peeters (eds.)

BEYOND THE
GREAT WAR

Belgium 1918-1928



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PREFACE

Michel Jaupart

On 11 November 1918 at 11 a.m. the armistice trumpet announces the end of the most terrible war ever to have ravaged Europe. That same trumpet also proclaims the end of the Russian, German, Austrian and Ottoman empires. It rings out for 9,500,000 deadly casualties, 20,000,000 wounded and 10,000,000 disappearances. Moreover, it heralds both the end of an era and the emergence of a new society, thriving on hope but also undermined by hitherto unseen tensions and imbued with a brutality and violence of a new kind, industrial in size and inhuman on every level...

For millions of fighters and for their families, the 1918 armistice promises a new future. However, it is not synonymous with worldwide peace, in spite of the “*No more war*” bellowed by veterans as soon as fighting stops and in spite of the League of Nations wishing, in 1924, to outlaw war and to establish peace through arbitration.

The Allied powers take pride in a great victory, although it has come at an unfathomable human cost burdening European societies for years on end. Soldiers can finally return home, but all is not well. Mere days after the armistice, fights erupt in Germany, in Austria and in Hungary, putting communist factions wishing to install a proletarian dictatorship at odds with conservative movements.

Conflicts arise in the east too. When Russia is devastated by civil war, Western powers send out units to support the white counter-revolution. The former Ottoman Empire is wrecked by civil and international wars from May 1919 onwards. Elsewhere, in Poland, in Czechoslovakia, in the Baltic States, in Finland guns continue to be heard as well...!

The 1920s truly deserve the epithet “Roaring Twenties”, as both new generations and those who survived the war dream of a new world and go all out to forget the atrocities of war. However, the same decade witnesses the rise of frustrations, not only in defeated Germany and Austria, but also in Italy who feels short-changed and believes the Allies did not compensate for the sacrifices brought in their favour.

Closely observed by the public, a car with an American Red Cross camera team drives through the streets of Brussels in mid-November 1918. The Germans have just left the city. Lieutenant H.E. Du Bois and Captain Ernest Meadows probably are the first Allies to enter the capital after the armistice. The Joyous Entry by the royal family and the army only takes place on November 22, 1918. (Library of Congress, Washington, 2017683173)



July 1919, liberation festivities in Heist-op-den-Berg. Once the Versailles Treaty is signed, many towns and villages all over the country celebrate the official end of the First World War. Lots of liberation parties also take place in November 1919. (Gemeentearchief Heist-op-den-Berg, Henri De Wolf collection)

In the USSR, communism puts its foot down, although the country is subjected both to civil war and to repression by the newly constituted Cheka, forerunner of the GPU and the KGB. As Lenin is laid to rest in his Red Square mausoleum, Stalin starts his unstoppable ascension.

While the world is enthused by jazz, that new and exciting sound coming from the United States; while Art Deco replaces Art Nouveau; while André Gide, Paul Morand, Raymond Radiguet, Joseph Kessel and Colette revolutionise literature; while André Breton writes his manifesto of surrealism; while communist parties emerge all over Europe in the hope of taking control, Benito Mussolini in Italy and Adolf Hitler in Germany talk of grandeur, of power and of creating empires that would be the heirs of Antique Rome or an imaginary Germania. Europe dances when Mussolini marches on Rome in 1922 and seizes power; it still dances in 1933 when Hitler becomes Chancellor.

In Belgium, as in other places, war accelerates social reform. Universal suffrage is introduced and enables all men to participate in political life, and the first social laws assist war victims. Meanwhile, military cemeteries and monuments honouring the dead testify to the bloody price paid by everyone.

It is the story of this troubled era that the exhibition “Beyond the Great War: 1918–1928” wishes to tell and that the publication you are holding illustrates. I hope this book is a stimulating one and that it will make readers see how the First World War – often referred to as the Great War – influenced our history and how we still live with its consequences to this day.

Such is my goal, and it has also been the drive of my collaborators and all those who participated in the creation of this exhibition and of this book. I seize the opportunity to thank them all for their remarkable work.



INTRODUCTION

BEYOND THE GREAT WAR? BELGIUM FROM 1918 TO 1928

Luc De Vos

By 1918, 1914 and the *Belle Époque* seemed a distant memory. In those short years Europe and, in fact, the world had changed fundamentally. War, and certainly a war on that scale, deeply affects man and society, involving, as it does, the most extreme emotions: love and hate, trust and betrayal... What is good, what is bad? Ethical norms are severely tested. On the other hand, it is in battle that war-related discoveries are made. But does that outweigh the huge material losses? In the First World War more was afoot. Contemporary historians are right in saying that the twentieth century began not in 1900 but during the First World War.

The nineteenth century had already been characterised by a great acceleration of history. That was when the ideals of the Enlightenment were really disseminated. The Industrial Revolution, born in England in the eighteenth century, had spread throughout Europe. A world leader since the sixteenth century, Western Europe now ruled supreme, colonising the majority of the globe. The United Kingdom and France shared Africa; Belgium, through its monarch, gained the Congo, the heart of Africa. It was supposed to act as a sort of buffer, mirroring the role our country fulfilled in Europe. France appropriated the highly profitable Indochina, and the United Kingdom crowned its monarch Empress of India. Even China, immense though it was, suffered – economically at least – at the hands of what were actually relatively small European states: the United Kingdom, France and the German Empire.

In the nineteenth century Italy was unified and the German peoples united. Those unifications were, however, relative: Austria and Switzerland remained separate states, and the actual German Empire – with Berlin as the capital – consisted of four kingdoms and twenty counties and duchies. The autonomy of those parts was huge. The intellec-

A Belgian boy, wearing a pre-war Belgian side cap and holding a small Belgian flag, poses next to a German artillery piece in Arlon, November 1918. The war is also over for the German soldiers in the background.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, B.1.84.21)

tuals dreamed of “Germany”, but the people preferred their familiar *Heimat*. It is certainly true that the German Empire, a confederation, defined foreign policy. The industrial might of the most populated country in Western and Central Europe gave it a privileged position. As a latecomer, Germany had ended up with only the crumbs from the ultimate wave of colonisation. But in continental Europe it was the dominant power.

In the nineteenth century there were relatively few wars. The century began with the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire and there were, of course, the small wars of unification of Italy and “Germany” and the wars of Balkan liberation. Amongst these, the war of 1870 between France and the German peoples stands out, since it led to not only the foundation of the Second German Empire under Wilhelm I, but manifestly demonstrated the waning power of France. For centuries the threat to our regions had come from the south. Now there was a new threat in the east.

It was during the nineteenth century that all the ideologies that were so important to the twentieth century were formed. Socialism and its more extreme form, communism, were born, and liberalism came of age. At the same time, the seeds of fascism were sown. In Russia the First World War would bring about the collapse of the established order, as communism triumphed.

Industrialisation and, with it, the exponential increase in the population of Western Europe, made the mobilisation of mass armies possible, and conscription was a fact virtually everywhere. Generalised basic education allowed national feelings to pervade a nation’s own population. Suffrage was still very limited and, for women, nonexistent.

In the 1890s and early 1900s, alliances were born, as France, the United Kingdom and Russia tried to rein in the German Empire. Meanwhile, the small states of the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries looked on anxiously, hoping that their neutrality meant they would steer clear of acts of war.

Many economists believed that war in Europe was no longer possible, given the commercial entanglement and high costs. However, they underestimated the inventiveness of the Europeans: autarchy, money printing and sky-high taxes proved to be the solution. For France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Belgium the colonial empires provided breathing space.

The First World War, which has long been known as the Great War – or the European War to the Americans – was an all-out war in which everyone and everything was deployed. The people of the empires came to fight in Western Europe and the Middle East and replaced the workers in the factories and on the farms. Refugees from Belgium, among other places, helped the factories stay operational in the United Kingdom and France, and the Germans used people from the occupied countries to work behind the front in their fields and factories. Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Arabs, Senegalese, Indo-chinese, Indians, and a host of others increasingly wondered why they had to fight and work for their masters: the Germans, Russians, French and British. New Zealanders,



November 1918. Soon after liberation Antwerp citizens flood the *De Keyserlei*.

(National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, 165-WW-79A-4)

Australians and Canadians fought enthusiastically for the British motherland, yet were aware of their individuality and dreamed of being self-governing. Everywhere, women were being employed in production, to emancipatory effect.

The United States, in contravention of the Monroe Doctrine, came to join the fight in Europe, bringing fresh blood and powerful American industry that ultimately tipped the balance in the Allies' favour. But their intervention on the old continent gave the new continent a headache, and after the war the United States would return to isolationism.

In the First World War the essence of battle also changed. By the end of 1914, the huge increase in firepower in terms of loading, precision and discharge rate had brought a stabilisation of the fronts, but not without dramatic losses. On 22 August 1914 around 27,000 French soldiers were killed in the Belgian and French Ardennes, and in September of the same year the German armies suffered the deaths of 71,000 troops. Trenches, barbed wire and most of all firepower formed the basis of the fundamental problem of the First World War: how could you break through a front? All kinds of technical inventions and tactical procedures were used in the search for a solution until, ultimately, came the tank. That tank, used properly, would bring the solution in the Second World War.

The First World War, meanwhile, started rashly: contemporaries believed that if differences of opinion could not be set aside diplomatically, a war would provide the



Ypres, 1919. Returning to the areas that were devastated by war is not easy. Rubble has to be cleared before rebuilding can start. Many people are overwhelmed by what appears to be an insurmountable task.

(Imperial War Museum, London, Ivan L. Bawtree, Q100483)

solution. The Germans in particular thought that they deserved a better place in the world. The French and British, on the other hand, did not wish to relinquish their position of power. In 1914 people had no idea that the war would last as long as it did or have such drastic consequences. It was the beginning of the decline of Western Europe; in Germany they even spoke of the downfall of the Western world.

The First World War ended with a series of treaties, the most important of which was the Treaty of Versailles. The peace treaty was ruthless and caused a great deal of ill-will in Germany; people were looking for someone to blame for the “stab in the back”, singling out Jews and communists. Many see the Treaty of Versailles as a cause of the outbreak of the Second World War. There are some colleagues who dub the period 1914–1945 the Thirty Years’ War: one generation, hit by two terrible wars. Following in France’s wake, Belgium shed its mandatory armed and guaranteed neutrality, which caused great dismay in Flanders. King Albert, too, was not happy with that evolution.

Vast numbers died in the First World War: around ten million soldiers and the same number of civilians, though half the number of deaths were attributable to Spanish flu, a disease that held a weakened population in its grip. For a long time, or at least until the Second World War, we thought that it was the most terrible of wars. Is that not ethnocentric European thinking?

Every war has an aftermath, so too, the Great War. Materially and mentally, countries had to be rebuilt. On the battlefield the ground literally had to be levelled. Countries that were once rich – France, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany – were

now groaning under the weight of debt and sought to avoid their obligations through inflation and taxes that, for that era, were sky-high.

In towns and villages, men with one arm or one leg were a common sight. The *gueules cassées* hid their disfigured faces behind masks. Even the smallest villages unveiled monuments to their fallen sons. Hundreds of military cemeteries dotted the landscape. Widows, mothers and fathers made pilgrimages to Flanders Fields, to the Somme and Verdun... Veterans' associations were born. Some tried to reclaim their lost youth with drink and dancing, a period that later became known as the Roaring Twenties.

The political landscape was completely redrawn. The Socialists broke through everywhere, partly due to the introduction of universal single suffrage. But more authoritarian parties also came into being. In the countries that had lost the war, a climate of revolution reigned. Even art was shaken up by a revolution: Cubism, Fauvism and Dadaism were among the forms breaking with the norm.

A multitude of historians have studied 1918 and the aftermath of the First World War up to 1928, each focusing on their own domain of expertise. Alongside their own research they have been able to use the many new publications that appeared particularly in 2014. However cruel war may be, the study of this international conflict and its aftermath are fascinating episodes in the history of mankind. For the Germans it was the *Urkatastrophe*. The slogan "No more war" was everywhere, culminating in 1928 in the Briand-Kellogg Pact. This "General Treaty for Renunciation of War as an Instrument of National Policy" garnered great optimism. But to no avail: the Second World War was to bring even more upheaval.



THE WAR YEAR 1918

Tom Simoens

At the beginning of 1918 the Allies' strategic situation is not looking particularly rosy. The previous year had failed to live up to their sky-high expectations: the French-British offensives had stalled on the heights of the Chemin des Dames and in the Passchendaele mud, and more than half the French divisions are facing mutiny. The German Empire holds better cards. After Romania, Russia also signs an armistice in December 1917, and on the 3rd of March 1918 Lenin and the Bolsheviks, after a new German advance, even swallow the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. For the Germans, the Russian capitulation comes as a relief. For the first time, the German military leaders, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, join forces for a decisive campaign on the Western Front. The Germans, nonetheless, leave more than a million troops in the east, to secure the captured territories, so German supremacy on the Western Front is limited to 191 divisions to the Allied powers' 175. In absolute figures, both parties are evenly matched, with around four million troops. The Germans do not have much choice: they need to pursue a quick victory. Millions of American soldiers are on their way to Europe, and within a few months the Allies will have more soldiers than the Germans. At the same time, the British naval blockade is strangling the German economy, leading to strikes and production problems. The German population is starving.

September 1918, in the vicinity of Ypres. According to the original caption of the photo, a Belgian soldier holding a trench knife helps a German soldier clamber out of a shattered German bunker. Belgian artillery fire in preparation of the attack on 28 September 1918 had indeed been both intense and destructive.

(War Heritage Institute, Brussels, EST-1-813/44)

The German Spring Offensives

The Germans have a few military trump cards that make it seem as if a quick victory is within their grasp.¹ Since 1915 they have been experimenting with new assault tactics. They replace the tightly packed waves of soldiers with smaller groups of specially trained stormtroopers with unprecedented firepower: from hand grenades and flamethrowers to light machine guns and mortars. Their job is to advance as quickly as possible and encircle the enemy defence nests. Clearing the trenches and shelters becomes a job for the second wave of infantrymen. In this manner, the stormtroopers generate speed and continuity and sometimes hit upon enemy artillery positions or commando posts. Moreover, the Germans prevent days of artillery bombardment designed to level the path for the infantry by blasting away at everything, but which, in practice, has tended not to be very profitable. The new German approach opts for short but heavy barrage on the most important enemy positions several hours before the assault by the stormtroopers. Just before the start of the assault, poison gas causes confusion. Then a rolling barrage forces the Allied soldiers to entrench themselves, which means they cannot use their machine guns. These tactical innovations have already led to spectacular victories in 1917 on the Eastern Front (Riga) and on the Italian Front (Caporetto). Nevertheless, the German war machine also has a few weak points: there is a significant shortage of horses, carts and trucks. Those logistical problems are the biggest cause of the failure of the German offensives of 1918.

The offensives begin on the 21st of March 1918. Ludendorff aims his attack arrows at the British with Operation Michael, a reference to the patron saint of the German Empire. He hopes to break through the British Front between Arras and Saint-Quentin, thereby cutting off the British and Belgians from the French forces. From day one, it becomes clear that the German advance is formidable. However, the French come to Britain's aid, and the German tactical victory yields no strategic breakthrough. Two weeks later Operation Michael is history. This pattern typifies the German Spring Offensives: following a promising breakthrough, the advance falters after several days or weeks because the Allied reserves arrive faster than the German reinforcements. However, the German territorial gain, in some places as much as sixty kilometres deep, is unprecedented. The French, British, and Belgians too, are becoming particularly nervous and, as a matter of urgency, start to extend and occupy their lines of defence a long way to the rear. For the Allies it is all hands on deck. Political and military differences of opinion are set aside, and the French general Ferdinand Foch is appointed "coordinator of the Allied forces" five days after the start of Operation Michael. In the months that follow his powers are expanded. From now on, Foch can quickly send aeroplanes, tanks, cavalry and infantry to sectors under threat.

These measures are much needed. From the 9th of April onwards, the Germans start to batter the British again near the Lys. Passchendaele, the ridge at Messines and even the Kemmelberg are lost. Again, the French save the day. After three weeks, Operation Georgette ceases. The Belgians, too, share the hits this time at Merkem, but they stand fast. The failed German attack, carried out without much artillery support, gives the Belgian army confidence.

The military tipping point of the war

Yet Ludendorff still believes that the Allies are gradually reaching breaking point. He aims his sights at the French with new combat operations in May and June. Just like in 1914, the Germans reach the Marne and panic breaks out in Paris. On the 15th of July 1918 the final German attack begins near Reims. The French successfully fend off the Germans; their defence is now a match for the German assault tactics. After only three days



In the spring of 1918 the Germans pull out all the stops in the hope of breaking through the western front. On 14 April 1918 the British Middlesex Regiment guards improvised barricades in the streets of the French city of Bailleul. The city nevertheless falls into German hands. However, the German offensive is contained soon afterwards. (National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, 165-BO-1515)

the French counterattack. The Germans are forced to retreat. Ludendorff takes a gamble... and loses. Between the 15th and the 18th of July, the 1918 campaign – and in some sense even the whole war – tips. The weight of the Americans is decisive: in May they carry out an initial attack, and in July already eight American divisions take part in the fighting near Reims. Ludendorff feels a storm coming. He cancels the next offensive and gets the German army to defend again. The initiative now lies with the Allies.

The balance sheet of the German Spring Offensives is catastrophic. Although the German territorial gains are considerable and unprecedented for the Western Front, they bring new problems more than anything. Before the Spring Offensives the German troops occupy the well-structured positions of the *Hindenburgstellung*; after the offensives they occupy a new frontline without much cohesion, which, because of its many bulges, ends up being more than 120 kilometres longer. Not a single strategic target is reached. At the final count, German losses are 800,000 – often their best soldiers – leaving a shattered fighting force to defend poorly prepared and difficult-to-maintain positions. Still, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich von Ludendorff do not give up the fight, believing that it is unlikely that the war will be settled in 1918 since the Allies have been hit too hard by the Spring Offensives. Moreover, they are not expecting the American divisions at the front very quickly or in large numbers. Their optimism proves unfounded: the summer of 1918 becomes the military turning point of the war. In the months of July and August 1918 the initiative definitely goes to the Allies, who capitalise on their numerical superiority in terms of soldiers, ammunition, aeroplanes and tanks.

This is possible thanks to improvements at strategic, operational and tactical levels. At a strategic level everything is finally arranged. Ferdinand Foch fully embraces his role as coordinator. Admittedly, he still has to negotiate with his most important colleagues: his fellow countryman Philippe Pétain, the Briton Douglas Haig and the American general John Pershing. The four of them determine the military strategy. Most observers think that the liberation offensive will not be possible until 1919. Pending that ultimate offensive, Foch wants to take the Germans by the throat and conquer major railways. This will cause the logistical support for the offensive planned in 1919 to run smoother. So, in the summer of 1918, Foch organises a series of smaller, less ambitious attacks along the whole of the front. That those ultimately unfold into the liberation offensive is not something he predicts at the time.

At operational level the Allied generals – reluctantly – comply with the military restrictions of that time. They know that their troops can break through the first German lines, but at the same time realise that an offensive to unsettle the whole German Front is not a viable option. The infantry needs the protective umbrella of the artillery in order to conquer and occupy territory. Hence, where necessary, they work in stages (“bite and hold”) from now on. After each attack (“bite”), they take a break (“hold”), to allow logistics and artillery to push forward.