WWI's Civilians, the Homefront, and an Uneasy Peace: Crash Course European History #34

Crash Course: European History
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Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, World War I was a "total war," meaning it wasn't just something that affected soldiers. All citizens were mobilized to participate in the struggle—some on the battlefront and others on the so-called home front.

In fact, the phrase "the home front" was coined during World War I, as a way of reminding people that even if they weren't firing guns, they were still participating in a war. [Intro] The home front is often defined as the site where battles did not rage but where civilians produced the goods for those battles. So factory workers in cities made munitions, and weapons, and ships, and tanks, and poisonous gas. And farmers in rural areas grew food, and raised animals for meat, and provided other raw materials.

Also on the home front, government officials rationed food, and allocated raw materials to factories, and determined railroad schedules, and censored newspapers and public speech as part of the war effort. Civilians were expected to shift every ounce of their energy away from everyday concerns--like about the well-being of their families and themselves--and into material support for the battle front. In the first months of the war, textile and other factories that produced "luxuries" were closed and the workers—many of them women—were fired and were left destitute.

But as the war extended beyond the few weeks most expected it to last, these closed factories were converted. They started making parts for airplanes and parachutes, for example, or creating the many new uniforms that were suddenly needed to replace those of the dead. And this meant that many of the women who had been made unemployed by initial factory closures were rehired to work in munitions and other jobs that had traditionally been seen as men's work .

As the war progressed, governments increased the number of hours civilians needed to work. Care for children and the elderly became a huge problem for the hard-pressed head of the family—which was often a woman. To address the women's struggle to feed themselves and their families, some local governments and factory owners set up canteens to provide food for workers and also day-care centers for children.

And Civilian work hours were mostly devoted to fueling the war, not, like, building housing, or providing medical care, or repairing infrastructure, and other ordinary things that civilizations need to grow. Early on, leaders in all countries called a political truce on the home front. Kaiser William announced on August 4, 1914: "I no longer recognize [political] parties.

I recognize only Germans." Which is one of those statements that suspiciously benefits the person saying it. Like, Kaiser William was basically saying, "there's only one party at this party...my party." But across Europe, people did often leave behind their internal divisions. Like, Socialists, for instance, largely put aside their belief in the international brotherhood and adopted the "Burgfrieden" or party truce, also called the "union sacrée" or sacred union in France and Russia.

Instead of acting on their belief that "the working man has no country," socialist men mostly volunteered for service like men from other political perspectives. Feminists, many of whom were pacifists, rolled up their sleeves and volunteered in hospitals. Some even served as nurses on the front lines.

One German rabbi reinforced the Kaiser's celebration of unity: "In the German fatherland there are no longer any Christians and Jews, any believers and disbelievers, there are only Germans." Politicians felt that criticism and normal complaints from inside communities had to be put aside, because there was an existential threat to the community from the outside. So, to ensure the continuation of unity, they enacted censorship laws that made certain types of criticism crimes against the state. But initially at least, the warm glow of patriotism and shared sacrifice meant that those laws were hardly needed.

However, the home front did eventually become a site of tension around many issues, but especially gender roles. Industrialists and government officials had summoned women out of the home and into factories, or driving ambulances and trucks, or conducting streetcars, and serving the war effort in any way needed. Many women were elated to have jobs, especially when their husbands and fathers had left for war and the family needed funds to survive.

But , some civilians saw the situation as chaos. Women were heading households; And by taking jobs, women in factories were "sending men to the slaughter," at least according to one male worker. Of course, that's not how war works.

It doesn't happen merely because there are available bodies. But if there's one thing we can say about misogyny: It ain't rational. At any rate, instead of calming gender tensions, war accelerated them.

And that unity and patriotism among civilians also became complicated because of soaring inflation across Europe. Inflation: The Most Underrated Historical Force. Furthermore, farmland was turned into trenches on the western front and into a vast battlefield stripped of produce and animals on the eastern front.

So the food allotted to the civilian population declined, and the British naval blockade of the Central Powers prevented foodstuffs from neutral countries reaching workers in cities, which intensified the shortages. Anti-Semitism also flourished; So, throughout history hard times often get blamed on those considered outsiders, and people standing in line for ever more expensive food often wrongly blamed the rising prices on Jewish people. Meanwhile, because some countries, notably Germany, did not tax war profits, some civilians grew incredibly rich from the war and showed off that rising wealth.

And the resulting growing class differences weakened the sense of solidarity that was supposed to keep all the civilians mobilized together to sacrifice for the armies at the front. I mean, it didn't seem like the people making all this untaxed wealth were sacrificing much. I wonder if the workers will ever figure out that they can seize the means of production and just take back the excess wealth of the rich?

What's that? Oh, apparently we're talking about that next week. By 1916, east-central and eastern Europe had become ever more barren battlefields.

In the first year of the war, Russian and Central Power armies pushed the front back and forth across hundreds of miles of farmland. And both pursued a scorched earth policy in Poland, and parts of Latvia and Lithuania, and Ukraine. So, the retreating Russian army in late 1914 and 1915 drove people from their houses, torched entire villages, burned crops in the fields, and took all the cattle, so that advancing.

Germans would have no resources. Germans and Austro-Hungarians did the same to deprive Russians of resources. And of course in all this, civilians suffered tremendously. did the center of the world just open?

Is there a camera in there? There is! You may have noticed there are a lot more images in these episodes of Crash Course European.

History than in our early episodes, and the reason for that is, there were many more images. Like, today it's difficult to even process how common the image has become, and how much we interact with images in our everyday life. Like, for instance, you are interacting with one now...

But the growing proliferation of both still and moving pictures dramatically shaped people's understanding of the world in the early twentieth century, and also, their understanding of each other's suffering. So remember, when you're looking at footage like this, you're looking at footage that literally wasn't available in, for instance, the Wars of 1848,. OK.

So, amid all of this violence, some six million people were registered as refugees in Russia, a number that does not include the many who were living in forests and deserted areas. Altogether an estimated two million houses were burned in the region. Roads were so clogged with fleeing civilians that armies had a difficult time advancing or retreating, a situation that was made more difficult by the many bodies of those who did not survive.

Meanwhile other civilians were driven westward, taking shelter in cities like Vienna, which was a nightmarish site of disease and starvation. The Habsburg government was hard-pressed to offer any help, leaving the task of public welfare to civilians. That meant that across multiethnic eastern Europe, clubs and other organizations took to tending to refugees of their own ethnicity, helping to provide food and medical services and find at least minimal housing.

And all that civilian activism really undermined the claims and credibility of the imperial governments of Germany, and Austria-Hungary, and Russia, and the Ottoman Empire. Like, if governments don't provide people with security, or create stable and just social orders in which people can live and work and raise their children in peace and some measure of prosperity, what's even the point of governments? As one group of ten starving peasant women wrote to the Ottoman minister of the interior in 1917: "Either deport us all to another place or cast us into the sea," What crops they grew were often taken by deserters or the army and their livestock and even pots and pans were seized by the government.

And so as the war and its miseries dragged on and on and on, the so-called home front (which in the case of eastern Europe was often simultaneously a battlefront) became a site of uprisings. And all this expanded beyond Europe as the war expanded: The Allies inflicted a famine in Greater Syria (today Lebanon and Syria) to provoke an uprising. In Africa, many villages became wastelands.

And so, really, it's no wonder that the armistice on November 11, 1918 failed to bring a true end to the fighting. In October and November in Germany, citizens were on the streets demanding the Kaiser's ouster; in Vienna, soldiers manned the streets to keep order among starving civilians who were demanding change because their lives literally depended on it. As the Spanish influenza hit, causing an estimated 100 million deaths worldwide, caregiving and death added to the tragedies of civilian life in the early 20th century.

Meanwhile after the armistice, Britain, backed by the United States, encouraged the Greeks to invade Turkey, with Britain hoping to gain Constantinople for itself. The Turkish countryside went up in flames as the Greek army and Greek civilians burned. Turkish villages, while Turkish people retaliated in kind.

Eastern Europe also remained a site of bloodshed as many soldiers refused to demobilize and formed paramilitary groups supporting the rise of new states to replace the defeated. Habsburg Empire. And many soldiers returned home deeply traumatized, in ways that often lasted for the rest of their lives.

So, as Europe remained a militarized powder-keg of civil war and revolution, in 1919 representatives from the victorious powers—Britain, France, Italy, the United States, and their allies--met in Paris. Their goal was to determine conditions for creating a "lasting peace" to end this "great war." Unlike the Congress of Vienna following Napoleon's defeat in which France participated, the meeting in Paris excluded Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottomans, as well as Russia, which was busy having the civil war we'll be talking about next week. All right , Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1.

The air at the meeting was hardly pacifistic: 2. "Hang the Kaiser," had been Prime Minister David Lloyd George's recent election slogan. 3. Some 20 million people had officially been declared dead in the war, 4. approximately half soldiers and half civilians. 5. So, French and British negotiators saw U.

S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points peace proposal as deeply naive- 6. -not least because one of the Points involved colonial rulers and colonies just, like, getting together and settling their differences. 7. The Allies also rejected Japan's drive to declare an allied opposition to racism. 8.

Instead in six treaties, collectively called the Peace of Paris 9. and enacted between 1919 and 1923, 10. the victors dismantled and reduced in size the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and German. Empires. 11. From the vast, multi-ethnic Habsburg Empire the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye created small successor states: 12.

Austria, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, 13. and the Balkan states that would eventually unite to become Yugoslavia. 14. The Treaty of Trianon drastically shrank the size of Hungary, 15. while the Treaty of Neuilly dealt with Bulgaria. 16. But the centerpiece of the settlement was the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, 17. which stripped Germany of its colonies, 18. imposed a massive penalty for warmongering, 19. and forbid it to have an air force or to build an army bigger than 100,000. 20.

And importantly it also imposed a "war guilt" clause blaming Germany for the war. Thanks Thought Bubble. So, heads of state and negotiators also founded the League of Nations, Point 14 in Woodrow.

Wilson's 14 Points. Some historians maintain that the League of Nations should more appropriately be called the League of Empires. Indeed, instead of recognizing the promises made by Britain to give Arab countries their freedom in exchange for help in the war, Britain and France expanded their empires by taking oil-rich regions of the Middle East as "mandates" because the people were supposedly incapable of ruling themselves.

And in the end, despite the League of Nations being an American President's idea, the. U. S. never actually joined it, which further weakened its ability to accomplish much on a global scale.

Many were outraged at the peace settlement, especially Germans, Hungarians, and Middle. Eastern people, and of course, it would have further consequences. When I was a kid, I usually imagined World War I and World War II as being separated by generations--my grandparents and many other people I knew during my childhood had fought in World War II, while World War I seemed very distant. a But in fact, they were only separated by a couple decades, and both the nature of World War I's violence and the nature of the war's peace treaties had a profound impact on the rest of the 20th century--a reminder that how you fight a war

matters, and how you end one matters, too.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next time.