
Some Costs of the Great War

Nationalizing Private Life

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The Great War's costs were truly astronomical. As with numbering the stars, the final accounting is in God's hands. The lives, the treasure, the faith in ordered society—all were among the costs. Wilfred Owen suggested in his disconcerting poem "Strange Meeting" that the culture of Europe seemed hell-bent on trekking *away* from progress. He clearly had in mind what the literary historian Paul Fussell would later call the "troglodyte world" (1975, chap. 2): a kind of Hobbesian vision, one might say, rendered in pen and ink by Otto Dix. Costs, indeed.

Yet in this article I am concerned not so much with the number of lives ended as with altered lives or, rather, with changes in the status of the private life of the modern individual, the modern family, the modern community. I am concerned here with private property, the autonomy of the individual, and the disastrous trend, which World War I accelerated, toward the state's exercise of a right to take anything within its reach on its whim.

My secondary theme is that this great change in private life was already under way before 1914. The real agent of change was not the war itself, but the state and its backers and minions. That the war accelerated the change, however, was bad enough (see Rothbard 1994). Political and intellectual leaders in all countries welcomed the war for the augmented collectivism it would inevitably bring. In the United States,

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one of the more important figures who welcomed the war was John Dewey, a veritable god in the pantheon of our modern civil religion. Dewey saw the war, rightly, as the accelerator of the coming industrial society, a managed positivist society that he thought of as democracy itself.

Mere Statistics

Mere statistics do not tell the whole story, but they begin it. Fifty million men worldwide were mobilized for military service in the war. More than one-fifth of them died (Ayers 1919). Civilian deaths are more difficult to calculate, but many millions died of deliberate mass murder, forced migration, execution in reprisal or for spying, accidental killing by either “friendly” or “unfriendly” fire, deliberate violence by individual soldiers (“friendly” or “unfriendly”), and starvation (as in the case of Germany, where perhaps seven hundred thousand civilians died from malnutrition), and other causes (Vincent 1989).¹

Apart from its ability to transform living individuals into dead ones, the state during World War I also managed to pollute, disrupt, and destroy ecologies of countryside and town in Europe and elsewhere that had developed over a span of two thousand years. The zone of destruction along the Western Front is of course the most notable example. Every city and town in this zone was damaged; a large number of them disappeared. Some survived only as reunion associations because the very terrain of their locations had been left physically altered, polluted, and honeycombed with live explosives. Indeed, unnatural amounts of rotting organic material and an enormous distribution of toxic chemicals (including heavy metals), along with the almost complete disruption of natural and man-made drainage systems in most areas, meant that some of the places were simply irreclaimable for the following ninety years—and for how many more years in the future we can only guess. Even now, lives continue to be lost or threatened because of these explosives and other left-behind dangers (see Tooley 2003, chap. 8).

On other fronts, the destruction tended to be less intense. Nevertheless, town after town was bombed and burned throughout eastern central Europe and southeastern Europe, as well as elsewhere. Early in World War I, Russian armies “cleansed”

1. In addition, the influenza epidemic of 1918–19 carried off many more civilians (and more people worldwide than the entire death toll of the Great War). This epidemic was in some sense a natural occurrence, but completely owing to the war: it seems to have started with a virus that was able to adapt because of the large numbers of men concentrated in U.S. training camps in the Midwest, where it had the medium in which to adapt and break out of its original population and form. In fact, although the United States was already hit hard (with some 675,000 deaths, including 43,000 soldiers and sailors), the virus apparently adapted again in August 1918, assuming a form that allowed it to spread around the globe. Europeans died in like numbers, but the enormous total of deaths in India pushed the worldwide total as high as 40 million, about two to two and a half times the number of dead from all other causes of death in the war. For a short summary of the epidemic and its costs, see Pope and Wheal 1995, 104, and Van Hartesveldt 1992; and for recent scientific assessments, see Taubenberger 1999 and Taubenberger and Morens 2006.

the areas close to the front by forcibly removing millions of Jews, Germans, and other persons considered likely to favor the German army. Many hundreds of thousands died in the process (Levene 1993; Gattrell 1999). The Turks massacred Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks at about the same time. Indeed, these cases of ethnic cleansing and ethnic murder opened yet another Pandora's box, establishing the "technique" of violently forced migration as one of the principle motifs of the twentieth-century world.

We should also think of the long-term results: the misery caused by these deaths and brutality, the productive lives lost to the world, the work never done, the family traditions that ended, and much more. And if we extend our thinking to the war's geopolitical results, we see additional miseries flowing from the human decisions of the time. The Bolshevik Revolution and conflicts that flowed from the almost inexplicable Paris Peace Conference conjured up untold misery, death, and despair, and created problems that still seem insoluble (for example, achieving peace in the Middle East).

European Civilization and Individuals

I concentrate here, however, not on the lives lost, but on the consequences for private life and its extension, private property. In the first place, one of the war's enormous costs was reflected by the increased percentage of wealth or productive capacity transferred from private hands to the state. Even the original theorist of state power Nicolò Machiavelli advised aspiring absolutists to keep their hands off the property (and the women) of their peasants and other productive citizens ([1532] 1997, chap. 8).

In effect, Machiavelli's absolutists struggled against the Europe of individualism and constitutionalism for three hundred years, until the liberal individualists seemed to have won the upper hand in both Europe and its overseas appendages. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, the Europe of empires, nationalism, and growing collectivism had turned its back on the achievements of individuals and on the autonomy of individuals and their families. Just before World War I, Europeans increasingly came to define themselves by group—whether by national group, sex, or class. Each group developed habits of calling on the government to confirm it, support it, or give it special privilege, often with the threat of violence lurking in the background. This trend stood in direct opposition to both the conservative and the liberal values of the nineteenth century, but liberals in Europe and the United States underwent a transformation: starting as champions of individual autonomy, they became devotees of group security. In this setting, the war became, as Murray Rothbard (1994) and others have pointed out, fulfillment. The policies are familiar: economic intervention on all sides, heavy-handed cheerleading to join the war "system," continual denunciation of internal enemies, disregard of the rule of law, and massive transfers of wealth from individuals, families, and other private sources to the

state. Not least of these trends was the overwhelming of private lives and even privacy. From the vacuous propaganda extolling groupthink in the societies of all of the belligerents to the break-up of family units by the Bolsheviks, the war was the cover for multifarious inroads by state interference in private life.

Accelerated Transfers of Private Property to the State

Let us turn to some cases that give us insight into the process of decivilization—the “trek from progress,” in Wilfred Owen’s words. During the war, government expenditures among the belligerents increased by an average factor of about eighteen, their stated revenues by a factor of about eight (Gray 1991, 2:293). The cost of living doubled in the best cases and quadrupled in the worst. Governments in all of the belligerent countries intervened in their economies through price controls and rationing, and they scrambled to pay for the horrendous costs of the carnage that the preceding figures reflect. In so doing, they had to develop new attitudes about private property and hence about private life itself.

Walther Rathenau provides us with an important case study. Formerly the head of German General Electric, Rathenau served crucially from the first days of World War I as the head of the German Office of War Materials. His office used state authority to bully companies into consolidation (electric companies included), to confiscate needed resources, and to intervene directly in the operation of businesses large and small. His task, he revealed in a report only one year into the war, was daunting, mainly because Germany was so attached to outdated concepts such as the rule of law, or, rather, the rule of laws based on private ownership and disposition, including those “defective and incomplete” laws of property holding sway since the time of Frederick the Great and earlier.² The “coercive measures” Rathenau oversaw were only part of the array of changes that would “in all probability be destined to affect future times.” Indeed, he showed precisely how the process of change was achieved—by redefinition: “The term ‘sequestration’ was given a new interpretation,” he stated, “somewhat arbitrarily I admit, but supported by certain passages in our martial law. . . . ‘Sequestration’ [now] does not mean that merchandise or material is seized by the state, but only that it is restricted, i.e., that it no longer can be disposed of by the owner at will but must be reserved for a more important purpose. . . . At first many people found it difficult to adjust themselves to the new doctrine.”³ No doubt they did!

2. Frederick the Great, for all his own statist economic enterprises, did in fact try to blend the old Prussian respect for law with Enlightenment respect for the individual. The circulation of the story “The Miller of Sans Souci”—a story in which the miller stands up to the young king by pointing to the power of law—demonstrates something of this devotion, whether the story is apocryphal or not. Rathenau’s reference to Frederick the Great here is quite specific.

3. The text is “Address of Walther Rathenau on Germany’s Provision for Raw Materials,” December 20, 1915, reprinted in Lutz 1932, 77–90.

This kind of redefinition went on in all the belligerent countries during and long after the war, and not only in the totalitarian regimes: every country had its Walther Rathenau, ready to leap into this role. Redefinitions of words such as *confiscation* and *sequestration* led to the redistributive, paternalistic, welfare regimes of Great Britain, France, and Franklin Roosevelt's America, as well as to the war socialism and other socialisms of Russia and Germany.

This "flexible" approach to basic issues was of course already well on its way to enhancing state power and replenishing state coffers before the war, but wartime represented fulfillment. This outcome was especially the case for the agents of the state, but it applied as well to the many "rent-seeking" individuals whose fortunes depended on the expansion of the modern state.

Another wartime development that gives us insight is the related aspect of transferring private wealth to the use of the state. So let us consider wartime inflation. Most belligerent powers' inflation policies represented, after all, an extension of the newly redefined erosions of private property. Inflation was historically a classic game of legal plunder, more effective than taxes because the legalized theft was veiled. Hence, as governments grew by leaps and bounds during World War I and employed more and more henchmen both military and regulatory to do the state's bidding, they transferred correspondingly more of the people's wealth to the state.

Thus, all of the belligerents "created" currency or money by printing it or conjuring it in the form of credit. War planners also paved the way to what we might call the modern "ethics" of inflation (extolled by John Maynard Keynes and later by the Phillips curve cheering section) by ignoring the involuntary nature of this transfer of wealth to the government and by encouraging the victims of all such transfers to regard these sacrifices and their attendant hardships as acts of patriotism. The head of the German central bank told the bank's board as early as September 25, 1914, that the best way to cover the massive war costs to come would be by means of "an appeal to an entire people," an appeal to "ethical values and not merely personal gain" (Feldman 1997, 64). "Don't just rob them," one might rephrase, "Make them feel guilty for resenting it."

After 1918, governments tended to back off somewhat from the more extreme taxation of wartime, but transfers of private property to the states continued in the form of inflation. Even in the postwar United States, when the currency supply did not grow rapidly, the Federal Reserve fostered a substantial credit expansion, as Murray Rothbard demonstrated many years ago in his book *America's Great Depression* ([1963] 2000). In general, the Austrian economists, from Ludwig von Mises and Costantino Bresciani-Turroni onward, showed quite clearly that the 1920s represented an asset-price bubble whose bursting heralded the Great Depression (see Bresciani-Turroni [1937] 1968, 405–57; Rothbard [1963] 2000, 86–179).⁴

4. On the European side, see also Sennholz 1979, and on the American side see Rothbard 1994.

If we add to the hidden “inflation tax” the explicit wartime tax hikes that raised taxes by a factor of three or more, it is clear that during World War I the state crossed a threshold to a sustained, much higher capture of private wealth. During the post-war period, tax rates abated somewhat, but the ground had by and large been prepared for a continual rise of such transfers up to the end of the twentieth century and beyond.

I am suggesting here that a far-reaching cost of the war was the degradation of individuals and families’ autonomy in relation to their property. I might add that many of the huge, flashy fortunes of the twentieth century are not based primarily on the private property I have in mind, but rather on *de facto* partnerships between the great centers of “private” wealth and government privileges and protections of various sorts. What I am thinking of here, in contrast, is the justice of keeping what one has worked for, the justice inherent in that wonderful human capability to work hard, plan, and save in order to survive, give, and consume in ways chosen by the individual and family. Of course, the state’s aggressive tendency is to take larger and larger chunks.

The Nationalization of the Private

Part of the problem for the state’s henchmen was the question of how to nationalize, systematize, and bring under state control a broad swath of essentially private aspects of life. Of thousands of cases we might study in this regard, the multifarious issues of public schooling are perhaps the ones most closely associated with the loss of privacy. These issues are particularly revealing when we think of them in connection with the Great War. Here I concentrate on the United States, where the sainted John Dewey comes prominently into consideration. Dewey’s complex collectivist vision of the role of education in society was based on destroying the old mediating practices of individual and family custom, tradition, and negotiation. Like his fellow progressives Frederick Taylor and Edward Mandell House, Dewey hoped the new community would be controlled by sophisticated administrators of the “system” who understood the problems of individualism. As he wrote a decade before the war, “We are apt to look at the school from an individualistic standpoint, as something between teacher and pupil, or between teacher and parent. . . . And rightly so. Yet the range of the outlook needs to be enlarged. What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy” (1915, 3).

In the fight to regiment children democratically, Dewey received support from rafts of progressive foot soldiers. To consider just one of them, we might think of sociologist and journalist Frances Kellor. Leading the Americanization movement in the period before the war, Kellor linked her predilections for American nationalism, industrial efficiency, and the need for indoctrinating immigrants with American

attitudes into a movement that fairly took off as World War I started. By 1916, the increasingly influential Kellor was calling for universal military service, carefully crafted indoctrination in the school curricula, and the revitalization of America. She welcomed the coming war because it would create that “heroic spirit by which a nation is finally welded together” (Kellor 1916, 19). By the end of the war, Kellor and others like her took credit for the real work of successfully lobbying state legislatures to implement a new regime of education, outlawing both public and private foreign-language schools, promoting Americanization classes, and otherwise using the schools to promote the progressive agenda of the destruction of privacy and the immersion of the individual in the murky waters of democracy.⁵

Another case study has to do with the ways in which states nationalized villages, families, and regions in the name of disaster. A prime example is Vauquois, a typical village of the Argonne Forest region of Lorraine, a hilltop home for several hundred peaceful French citizens before 1914. Units of the French army retreated from the frontier to Vauquois in the first weeks of the war and made a stand there. The Germans attacked, but as so often happened, the armies deadlocked, in this case across the very top of the oblong hill or ridge. The sides dug in, both trench lines running through the village—indeed, within easy stone’s, or grenade’s, throw of each other. This segment of the Western Front line remained in place for four years, except for the narrow no-man’s-land in between blown to pieces by underground mines. Hence, the hill was literally hollowed out by explosives and honeycombed with tunnels. The soldiers even occasionally fought it out underground. On other occasions, they swapped tobacco and chocolate instead. The U.S. First Army moved into the French positions in September 1918 and “took” the German Vauquois position by incinerating it with thermite shells and then simply going around it (Kenamore 1919, 76–97; Johnstone n.d.).

But what happened to the close-knit villagers of Vauquois? They were evacuated to a place many miles behind the lines, where they languished during the war. Once the war was over, the military bureaucracy of French reconstruction—famously haughty and inept—continued to restrict the area so that official reclamation workers could “reclaim” the village in spite of the villagers’ pleas to allow them to return to reclaim their own property. Because, in fact, no village remained except for huge craters and some bits of masonry, the French government finally—years after the evacuation and long after the war was over—decided to declare the area a “red zone.” That is to say, no one was allowed to move back there. The plight of the Vauquois villagers finally became privatized, and several charity collections enabled them to return, buy some land a few hundred yards down the hill, and establish a new village of Vauquois (see Clout 1993).

5. This discussion is based on the excellent analysis in Gatto 2001, 232–36. See also Rothbard 1996, 221–23.

Hence, the state that brought on the war also engulfed the private lives of the people of Vauquois. The state removed them for their own safety and then prevented them from coming back to salvage what could be salvaged. This pattern is so engrained ninety years later that it might take a moment's mental work to imagine the sequence of events otherwise than it happened: after the war moved beyond the region in September 1918, the sooner those individuals could have returned, the more chance they would have had to reclaim something, to recycle the remains, to salvage what could be salvaged. If they had been released sooner from nationalization and allowed to return to private existence, rather than being forced to live as a part of the war system in another city, the natural order of individual, family, and village life might have reasserted itself, even if hard work were necessary to restore it. Instead, they faced bureaucratic delays while their government collected millions of francs' worth of reparations from Germany and built new government buildings and various other "infrastructural" additions to France (highways and so forth) far from Vauquois.

From disasters such as that of Vauquois and a hundred other French towns and villages, we gain insight into the genesis of the state management of disasters in the twenty-first century. Individuals who try to protect their own property during a storm are regarded as opponents of the state and problems for the police. The recent Federal Emergency Management Agency debacles in the United States are only the latest and most massive version of this way of doing things.

Inquiry into many other case studies would fill out the outlines of this story: the enlistment of women into munitions factories whose ultratoxicity had devastating health effects, the propaganda of state obligation that led young women in England to organize the giving of white feathers to able-bodied men who had not enlisted in the army, forced labor in Germany, internment of ethnic Germans in Australia, the program to open U.S. mail in a search for saboteurs and traitors, the brutal treatment of conscientious objectors, and so on. To cut a long story short, as with Rathenau's "sequestration" of private property and with the "systematization" of state-managed disasters, the upshot of the Great War crisis was a sea change in all relations of the individual to the state and therefore a sea change in all relations between and among individuals, families, churches, and nonstate groups.

As I suggested in my opening line, we shall never be able to count the Great War's costs fully. We can, however, come to appreciate the world that was lost as the lights went out all over Europe in 1914 and elsewhere thereafter. And one of the most important costs was the beginning of the nationalization of private life that continues its course to the present day.

This accounting of costs and the whole view of the war in its negative aspects are hardly conceivable in modern democratic and statist modes of thinking. After all is said and done, perhaps the war *did* make the world safe for democracy. Indeed, Randolph Bourne, famous for his observation that war is the health of the state, might have gone further: war is not only the health of the state, but the health of

collectivist democracy, too. Hardly any aspect of war is unwelcome to the modern, collectivist, democratic state. War justifies every desired measure for the expansion of state power; it necessitates the removal of all intermediaries between the state and individuals, families, or other natural human units. War exalts the collective and tends to kill, maim, humiliate, and corrupt the individual. War lends an air of sacralization to the modern, positivist, humanist civic religion. Our war-related national holidays represent high holy days, except that the sacrifice extolled is the sacrifice of individuals in the service of the state (or of “freedom” or whatever buzzword the state happens to be using as a synonym for its powers). From the state’s perspective, the costs of war, which loom so devastatingly to individuals, are not even entered on the debit side of the statement. Why should they be? For the state, they represent pure profit.

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