The Generation of 1914: Disillusionment

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The end of World War I raised hopes and expectations among large numbers of people. In a few years those hopes and expectations turned into disappointment and disillusionment, coloring the two decades between World Wars I and II. In the following selection Robert Wohl analyzes the origins and meaning of this disillusionment, focusing on the shared experiences of the generation of Europeans who were born during the 1890s and who had to shoulder much of the burden of the war.

Consider: *Why the first few years of peace were so crucial for the creation of cynicism and disillusionment among survivors of the war; the forms disillusionment took; possible consequences of the developments of 1917–1920 according to Wohl.*

When we think of the army of returning veterans during the 1920s, we see them through the eyes of Remarque and Hemingway as a generation of men crippled, both physically and morally, by their service in the war. Many no doubt were. Yet it is a fact that the famed cynicism and disillusionment of the survivors were, to a great extent, a product of the first few years of peace. To understand this mood of disillusionment we must recall the attitudes and expectations that soldiers brought home with them, attitudes and expectations that were also widespread among the younger population as a whole.

Many soldiers had, like Omodeo, come to think that the war must have a secret meaning that only the future would reveal; they found it necessary to believe that their sacrifice and suffering would not be in vain; and they clung to the hope that the war would turn out to have been a rite of purification with positive results. Sensing this feeling and realizing its importance, political leaders in all countries encouraged the fighting and civilian sectors of the population to expect from peace not merely an end to bloodshed but a real alteration and improvement in the tenor and quality of life. It was said, and widely believed, that class barriers would fall; that selfishness would give way to cooperation; that harmony would reign; that conflict among nations would cease; and that everyone's sacrifice and suffering would somehow be compensated.

These expectations were often encapsulated in the word "revolution," but people of different social backgrounds assigned very different meanings to the term. Governments encouraged these hopes with their propaganda, and in 1918 Wilson came to incarnate the dream of renovation. The Wilsonian vision of a world safe for democracy merged with the equally vague idea of a revolution carried out by returning soldiers in the name of the values of manhood and self-sacrifice they had discovered on the battlefield. . . .

Disillusionment comes in many forms. The special form it took in Europe in the 1920s had to do with the development of the political situation and the frustration of apocalyptic hopes. Between 1917 and 1920 a revolutionary wave broke over every European country. Armies grew restive and mutinied; urban populations staged riots and insurrections over dwindling food supplies and rising prices; unions swelled in membership far beyond their prewar size; and workers began to challenge factory owners for the control of production. . . .

This disillusionment was felt by men and women of all age-groups in all parts of Europe; but the feeling of betrayal and defeat was especially strong among returning veterans born in the 1890s. They suffered from a tremendous sense of anticlimax, and the younger they were the more disoriented they felt. . . .

The developments of 1917–1920 engendered disappointment and frustration; they gave rise to bitterness and cynicism; but among young war veterans, the dream of cultural and political renewal did not die. Brought up in a crepuscular atmosphere of cultural crisis, subjected while still young to the ordeal of the war, witnesses during the immediate postwar years to a wave of revolution that swept away century-old empires and shook to its foundations every European institution, intellectuals born in the last two decades of the nineteenth century could not divest themselves of the feeling that the apocalypse had only been postponed and that any restoration of the postwar era would be temporary. The survival of the revolutionary regime in Russia, the creation of Communist parties throughout Europe, the victory of the Fascist movement in Italy, the collapse of parliamentary government in Spain, the difficulties that Great Britain and France experienced in regaining their prewar dynamism, and the onset of the worldwide economic crisis in 1929 confirmed these intellectuals in their belief that the world of their childhood was dead and that a new postwar world was being born.