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A Time to Remember U.S. Rise as a World Power

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A Time to Remember U.S. Rise as a World Power

Abstract

This summer marks the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. In the United States, the war has been long eclipsed by the other great conflicts straddling it - the Civil War and Second World War - and as a result has been unfairly pushed to the margins in our national memory.

My hope is that the First World War's centennial, starting this summer and ending in 2018, will be an opportunity for Americans to break out of our intellectual isolationism and discover again a conflict that not only transformed world history, but also America's place within it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

World War I, United States, world power, global, memory, centennial

Disciplines

European History | History | Military History | United States History

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The Delaware County Peace Celebration, honoring the local soldiers and sailors who served in World War I, was held in Media on June 27-28, 1919. Delaware County Historical Society

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By Ian Isherwood

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Americans should remember World War I because it was an important international event with lasting lessons for our present day.

The world in 1914 was globalized in ways familiar to us now. The worldwide economy was linked through complex trade and communications networks sprawling from the imperial financial epicenters of London, New York, Berlin, and Paris. As a leading industrial power, the United States was an important player in the world economy before the war, linked to the great empires of Old Europe by trade.

As such, Americans were not naïvely isolationist to events in Europe in 1914. After its outbreak, the war had significant importance within both the American political and economic spheres - the foundations of U.S. power. The furor over our neutrality versus intervention was a contentious issue. When Americans debated intervention - on the floors of Congress or around household coffee tables - they were debating the role this country would play in the international arena.

The First World War is essential to understanding not only America's place in the world, but also our place within world history. The war was a debutante moment for American power. The nation fought a major, modern war, mobilizing significant resources quickly and applying them to battlefields outside of our own borders. Though the Treaty of Versailles would fail to preserve peace, and the League of Nations would be bitterly contested in the U.S. Senate, in retrospect those facts should not alter what was a historical reality in 1919: In a world political system undone by shattered empires, the United States was a major emergent power.

In this way, the First World War is a keystone conflict for understanding the rest of the 20th century.

It is impossible to understand the Second World War without knowing something of the first.

It is impossible to understand the Cold War without knowing something of the Russian Revolution and Soviet Union, both born in Petrograd out of battlefield defeats in World War I.

It is impossible to understand the colonial and postcolonial struggles in the Middle East, Africa, and Central and Southeast Asia without knowing something of the imperial world order, a system that was challenged and disrupted fundamentally by war in 1914. The war had reverberations beyond Western Europe.

Beyond the geopolitical legacy of the war, there are more personal reasons to remember it, reasons felt acutely in American households both a hundred years ago and today.

Nearly five million Americans were mobilized for the war effort in 1917-1918. Though U.S. combat operations were short in duration in 1918, the U.S. Armed Forces suffered 53,000 deaths and more than 200,000 men wounded in battle.

After the war, American Legion halls were full of returned doughboys. Towns across the country dedicated monuments to soldiers, streets were named for leaders, parades held for veterans. The Great War is a part of our identity as Americans - the sacrifices of the war generation are a part of our collective historical DNA.

Beyond anything else, I hope the centennial of the First World War can be a teachable moment that helps Americans better understand events that shaped the world a hundred years ago, a world our ancestors knew was being upset by violence.

Understanding stems from trying to find answers: Why do nations go to war? How do nations justify violence? Is lasting international peace achievable? Why and how do we remember war?

These are some of the hard questions raised by the events of 1914-1918. They are also essential questions for our present age.

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