

# Feature Articles - If Germany Had Won World War 1...

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In a way, this is a more interesting hypothesis than the more commonly asked question about what the world would be like if the Germans had won World War II. Several historians have noted that both world wars should really be considered a single conflict with a long armistice in the middle. If this viewpoint is valid, then the official outcome of the first phase of this conflict may have been important for reasons other than those usually cited.



As a preliminary matter, we should note that the actual outcome of the First World War was a near thing, a far nearer thing than was the outcome of World War II after 1941. While it is true that the United States entered the war on the allied side in 1917, thus providing vast new potential sources of men and material, it is also true that Germany had knocked Russia out of the war at about the same time. This gave the Germans access to the resources of Eastern Europe and freed their troops for deployment to the West. The German Spring Offensive of 1918 actually succeeded in rupturing the Allied line at a point where the Allies had no significant reserves. (At about this time, British Prime Minister Lloyd George was heard to remark, "We are going to lose this war." He began to create a record which would shift the blame to others.)



The British Summer Offensive of the same year similarly breached the German lines, but did a much better job of exploiting the breakthrough than the Germans had done a few months earlier. General Luddendorf panicked and demanded that the government seek an armistice. The German army did succeed in containing the Allied breakthrough, but meanwhile the German diplomats had opened tentative armistice discussions with the United States. Given U.S. President Wilson's penchant for diplomacy by press-release, the discussions could not be broken off even though the German military situation was no longer critical. While the Germans were not militarily defeated, or even economically desperate, the government and general public saw no prospect of winning. Presented with the possibility of negotiating a settlement, their willingness to continue the conflict simply dissolved.

The Germans were defeated by exhaustion. This could as easily have happened to the Allies. When you read the diaries and reports of the French and British on the Western Front from early 1918, the writers seem to be perfectly lucid and in full command of their faculties. What the Americans noted when they started to arrive at about that time was that everyone at the front was not only dirty and malnourished, but half asleep.

In addition to their other deleterious effects, the terrible trench warfare battles of that conflict were remarkably exhausting, and the capacity of the Allies to rotate out survivors diminished with the passage of time. Even with American assistance, France and Britain were societies that were slowly falling apart from lack of ordinary maintenance. Both faced food shortages from the diversion of farmers into the army and from attacks on ocean borne supplies. Had the Germans been able to exploit their breakthrough in the spring, or if the German Empire had held together long enough for Luddendorf's planned autumn offensive to take place, its quite likely that either the French or British would have sued for peace. Had one or the other even raised the question of an armistice, the same process of internal political collapse which destroyed Germany would have overtaken both of them.



Although today it is reasonably clear that Germany fought the war with the general aim of transforming itself from a merely continental power to a true world power, the fact is that at no point did the German government know just what its peace terms would be if it won. It might have annexed Belgium and part of the industrial regions of northern France, though bringing hostile, non-German populations into the Empire might not have seemed such a good idea if the occasion actually arose. More likely, or more rationally, the Germans would have contented themselves with demilitarizing these areas.

From the British, they would probably have demanded nothing but more African colonies and the unrestricted right to expand the German High Seas Fleet. In Eastern Europe, they would be more likely to have established friendly satellite countries in areas formerly belonging to the defunct empires than to have directly annexed much territory. It seems to me that the Austrian and Ottoman Empires were just as likely to have fallen apart even if the Central Powers had won. The Hungarians were practically independent before the war, after all, and the chaos caused by the eclipse of Russia would have created opportunities for them which they could exploit only without the restraint of Vienna. As for the Ottoman Empire, most of it had already fallen to British invasion or native revolt. No one would have seen much benefit in putting it back together again, not even the Turks.



Communist agitation was an important factor in the dissolution of Imperial Germany, and it would probably have been important to the collapse of France and Britain, too. One can imagine Soviets being established in Glasgow and the north of England, a new Commune in Paris. This could even have happened in New York, dominated as it was by immigrant groups who were either highly radicalized or anti-British. It is unlikely that any of these rebellions would have succeeded in establishing durable Communist regimes in the West, however. The Soviets established in Germany and Eastern Europe

after the war did not last, even though the central government had dissolved. In putting down such uprisings, France might have experienced a bout of military dictatorship, not unlike the Franco era in Spain, and Britain might have become a republic.

Still, although the public life of these countries would have been polarized and degraded, they would probably have remained capitalist democracies. The U.S., one suspects, would have reacted to the surrender or forced withdrawal of its European expeditionary force by beginning to adopt the attitude toward German-dominated Europe which it did later in the century toward the victorious Soviet Union. Britain, possibly with its empire in premature dissolution, would have been forced to seek a strong Atlantic alliance. As for the Soviet Union in this scenario, it is hard to imagine the Germans putting up with its existence after it had served its purpose.

Doubtless some surviving Romanov could have been put on the throne of a much-diminished Russia. If no Romanov was available, Germany has never lacked for princelings willing to be sent abroad to govern improvised countries.

This leaves us with the most interesting question: what would have happened to Germany itself? Before the war, the German constitution was working less and less well. Reich chancellors were not responsible to parliament but to the Kaiser. The system could work only when the Kaiser was himself a competent executive, or when he had the sense to appoint and support a chancellor who was.

The reign of Wilhelm II showed that neither of these conditions need be the case. In the twenty years preceding the war, national policy was made more and more by the army and the bureaucracy. It is unlikely that this degree of drift could have continued after a victorious war. Two things would have happened which in fact happened in the real world: the monarchy would have lost prestige to the military, and electoral politics would have fallen more and more under the influence of populist veterans groups.



We should remember that to win a great war can be almost as disruptive for a combatant country as to lose it. There was a prolonged political crisis, indeed the whiff of revolution, in victorious Britain in the 1920s. Something similar seems to be happening in the United States today after the Cold War. While it is, of course, unlikely that the Kaiser would have been overthrown, it is highly probable that there would have been some constitutional crisis which would have drastically altered the relationship between the branches of government.

It would have been in the military's interest to push for more democracy in the Reich government, since the people would have been conspicuously pro-military. The social and political roles of the old aristocracy would have declined, since the war would have

brought forward so many men of humble origin. Again, this is very much what happened in real history. If Germany had won and the Allies lost, the emphasis in these developments would certainly have been different, but not the fundamental trends.

All the bad and strange things which happened in Germany in the 1920s are conventionally blamed on the harsh terms of the Versailles treaty. We forget, however, that the practical effect of these terms was really very limited. The diplomatic disabilities on Germany were eliminated by the Locarno Pact of 1925. The great Weimar inflation, which was engineered by the government to defeat French attempts to extract reparations, was ended in 1923.

The reparations themselves, of course, were a humiliating drain on the German budget, but a system of financing with international loans was arranged which worked satisfactorily until the world financial system broke down in the early 1930s. Even arms development was continued through clandestine projects with the Soviet Union. It is also false to assert that German culture was driven to insanity by a pervasive sense of defeat. The 1920s were the age of the Lost Generation in America and the Bright Young Things in Britain.

A reader ignorant of the history of the 20th century who was given samples from this literature that did not contain actual references to the war could reasonably conclude that he was reading the literature of defeated peoples. There was indeed insanity in culture in the 1920s, but the insanity pervaded the whole West.



Weimar culture would have happened even if there had been no Weimar Republic. We know this, since all the major themes of the Weimar period, the new art and revolutionary politics and sexual liberation, all began before the war. This was a major argument of the remarkable book, *RITES OF SPRING*, by the Canadian scholar, Modris Ekstein. There would still have been Bauhaus architecture and surrealist cinema and depressing war novels if the Kaiser had issued a victory proclamation in late 1918 rather than an instrument of abdication. There would even have been a *DECLINE OF THE WEST* by Oswald Spengler in 1918. He began working on it years before the war. The book was, in fact, written in part to explain the significance of a German victory.

These things were simply extensions of the trends that had dominated German culture for a generation. They grew logically out of Nietzsche and Wagner and Freud. A different outcome in the First World War would probably have made the political right less suspicious of modernity, for the simple reason that left wing politics would not have been anywhere nearly as fashionable among artists as such politics were in defeat.

I would go so far as to say this: something very like the Nazi Party would still have come to power in Germany, even if that country had won the First World War. I realize that this assertion runs counter to the historiography of most of this century, but the conclusion is inescapable. Politics is a part of culture, and the Nazis represented a kind of politics which was integral with Weimar culture. Salvador Dali once said, perhaps ironically, that he approved of the Nazi Party because they represented the surrealists come to power. The connection is deep, as with the Nazi affinity for the modernist post-rationalism of the philosopher Heidegger, and also superficial, in the styles the party promoted.

The Nuremberg Rallies, for instance, were masterpieces of Art Deco stagecraft, particularly Albert Speer's "cathedral of ice" effect, created with the use of searchlights. As a young hopeful in Vienna, Hitler once passed up the chance to work as a theatrical set designer because he was too shy to go to the interview. But whether he knew it or not, that is what he became. People with no fascist inclinations at all love to watch film footage produced by the Nazis, for the simple reason that it is very good cinema: it comes from the same artistic culture which gave us METROPOLIS and THE BLUE ANGEL. The Weimar Republic and the Third Reich formed a historical unit, one whose advent was not dependent on the accident of who won the First World War.



The Nazi Party was other things besides a right wing populist group with a penchant for snazzy uniforms. It was a millenarian movement. The term "Third Reich," "Drittes Reich," is an old term for the Millennium. The Party's core began as a sort of occult lodge, like the Thule Society of Munich to which so many of its important early members belonged. It promoted a racist theory of history not unlike that of the Theosophist, H.P. Blavatsky, whose movement also used the swastika as an emblem. The little-read ideological guidebook of the party, Alfred Rosenberg's MYTH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, begins its study of history in Atlantis. Like the Theosophists, they looked for a new "root race" of men to appear in the future, perhaps with some artificial help. When Hitler spoke of the Master Race, it is not entirely clear that he was thinking of contemporary Germans.

This is not to say that the Nazi Party was a conspiracy of evil magicians. A good, non-conspiratorial account of this disconcerting matter may be found in James Webb's THE OCCULT ESTABLISHMENT. I have two simple points to make here. The first is that the leadership had some very odd notions that, at least to some degree, explain the unique things they said and did. The other is that these ideas were not unique to them, that they were spreading among the German elites. General Von Moltke, the chief of the General Staff at the beginning of the war, was an Anthroposophist. (This group drew the peculiar ire of the SS, since Himmler believed that its leader, Rudolf Steiner, hypnotized the general so as to make him mismanage the invasion of France.)

The Nazi Party was immensely popular on university campuses. The intellectual climate of early 20th century Germany was extraordinarily friendly to mysticism of all types,

including in politics. The Nazi leadership were just particularly nasty people whose worldview bore a family resemblance to that of Herman Hesse and C.G. Jung. The same would probably have been true of anyone who ruled Germany in the 1930s.



Am I saying then that German defeat in the First World War made no difference? Hardly. If the war had not been lost, the establishment would have been much less discredited, and there would have been less room for the ignorant eccentrics who led the Nazi Party. Certainly people with no qualifications for higher command, such as Goering, would not have been put in charge of the Luftwaffe, nor would the Foreign Ministry have been given over to so empty-headed a man as Von Ribbentrop. As for the fate of Hitler himself, who can say?

The big difference would have been that Germany would have been immensely stronger and more competent by the late 1930s than it was in the history we know. That another war would have been brewed by then we may be sure. Hitler was only secondarily interested in revenge for the First World War; his primary goal had always been geopolitical expansion into Eastern Europe and western Asia. This would have given Germany the Lebensraum to become a world power. His ideas on the subject were perfectly coherent, and not original with him: they were almost truisms. There is no reason to think that the heirs of a German victory in 1918 (or 1919, or 1920) would have been less likely to pursue these objectives.

These alternative German leaders would doubtless have been reacting in part to some new coalition aligned against them. Its obvious constituents would have been Britain, the United States and Russia, assuming Britain and Russia had a sufficient degree of independence to pursue such a policy. One suspects that if the Germans pursued a policy of aggressive colonial expansion in the 1920s and 30s, they might have succeeded in alienating the Japanese, who could have provided a fourth to the coalition.

Germany for its part would have begun the war with complete control of continental Europe and probably effective control of north Africa and the Near East. It would also have started with a real navy, so that Britain's position could have quickly become untenable. The coalition's chances in such a war would not have been hopeless, but they would have been desperate.

It is commonly said of the First World War that it was pure waste, that it was an accident, that it accomplished nothing. The analysis I have just presented, on the contrary, suggests that the "war to end all war" may have been the most important war of the modern era after all.

Saturday, 22 August, 2009 John J. Reilly

