

Four myths about the Great War of 1914-1918

Mark Harrison

The Great War offers lessons for today. But this column argues from recent research that many so-called lessons are misunderstood. Secretive, authoritarian regimes become dangerous when they fear the future. Deterrence matters. Other aspects also demand re-evaluation.

As its centennial approaches, the events of the Great War have worldwide resonance. Most obviously, is China the Germany of today? Will China's rise, unlike Germany's, remain peaceful? The journalist Gideon Rachman wrote last year (*Financial Times*, February 4, 2013):

"The analogy [of China today] with Germany before the first world war is striking ... It is, at least, encouraging that the Chinese leadership has made an intense study of the rise of great powers over the ages – and is determined to avoid the mistakes of both Germany and Japan."

The idea that China's leaders wish to avoid Germany's mistakes is reassuring. But what 'mistakes' do they seek to avoid? We ourselves continue to debate, and sometimes misunderstand, what mistakes were made, and even whether they were mistakes at all. This is not reassuring.

A recent paper (Harrison 2014) reviews four 'myths' of the Great War. These concern misinterpretations of how the war started, how it was won, how it was lost, and how the peace was made. Each has implications for today.

How the war began: An inadvertent conflict?

Interviewed earlier this year at Davos (*Financial Times*, January 22, 2014), Japanese premier Shinzo Abe likened modern China and Japan to Britain and Germany in 1913. He noted that strong commercial ties had not prevented the latter powers from going to war. He warned against a similar 'inadvertent' conflict.

In fact, the record is clear, despite attempts to falsify it (described by Herwig 1987). There was no inadvertent conflict. The decisions that began the Great War show:

- Agency;
- Calculation;
- Foresight; and
- Backward induction.

Agency is shown by the fact that in each country the decision was made by a handful of people (Hamilton and Herwig 2004). These governing circles included waverers, but at the critical moment the advocates of war, civilian as well as military, were able to dominate. Agency was not weakened by alliance commitments or mobilisation timetables. In its 'blank cheque' to Austria, for example, Germany went far beyond its alliance obligation. Italy, in contrast, eventually took up arms against former allies.

No country went to war for commercial advantage. Business interests favoured peace in all countries. Public opinion was considered mainly when the leading actors worried about the legitimacy of actions they had already decided on. If capital and labour had been represented in the Austrian, German, and Russian cabinets, there would have been no war.

What ruled the leaders' calculation in every country was the idea of the national interest (Hamilton and Herwig 2004: 239; on interests as ideas see Rodrik 2014), based on shared beliefs and values. All the decision makers were subscribers to a negative-sum game of power, not the positive-sum game of commerce and development. The Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires were in decline. This triggered a struggle for geopolitical advantage.

The first movers expected that action would be followed by counteraction (Herwig 2002, Hamilton and Herwig 2004, Fromkin 2007, McMeekin 2011, Macmillan 1913, Clark 2013). While the ignorant many hoped for a short war, the informed few rationally feared a longer, wider conflict. They planned for this, acknowledging that final victory was far from certain.

The European powers understood deterrence (Macmillan 2013: 503-4). No one started a war in 1909 or 1912 because at that time they were deterred. War came in 1914 because in that moment deterrence failed.

Deterrence was weakened by the atmosphere in Berlin and Vienna, which was far from triumphalist. The German and Austrian leaders believed their enemies were growing in strength. They knew that defeat was possible, but they also feared the future would never favour victory more than the present (Berghahn 1973, 2013, Herwig 1997: 11, 22, 37, 51, Ferguson 1999: 13). This 'rational pessimism' turned them into risk-takers.

The failure of deterrence was an immediate cause of the war. A deeper cause was the authoritarian regimes of the Central Powers and Russia, under which a few war advocates could decide the fate of millions in secret.

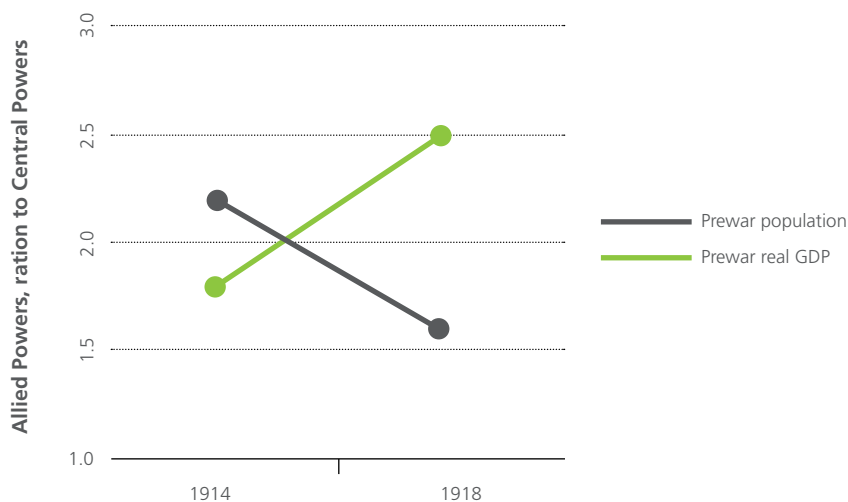
How the war was won: Needless slaughter?

Another myth characterises fighting in the Great War as a needless wasteful of life. In fact, there was no other way to defeat the enemy. Attrition was not a result of trench warfare. Also, casualties on both sides were heavier in the opening and closing stages (and were heavier still in World War II) when men fought in the open (Strachan 2003).

Attrition became a calculated strategy on both sides (French 1982, Bourne 2005, Herwig 1997). From the Allied standpoint, the rationality of attrition is not immediately clear. The French and British generally lost troops at a faster rate than the Germans. Based on that alone, the Allies could have expected to lose the war.

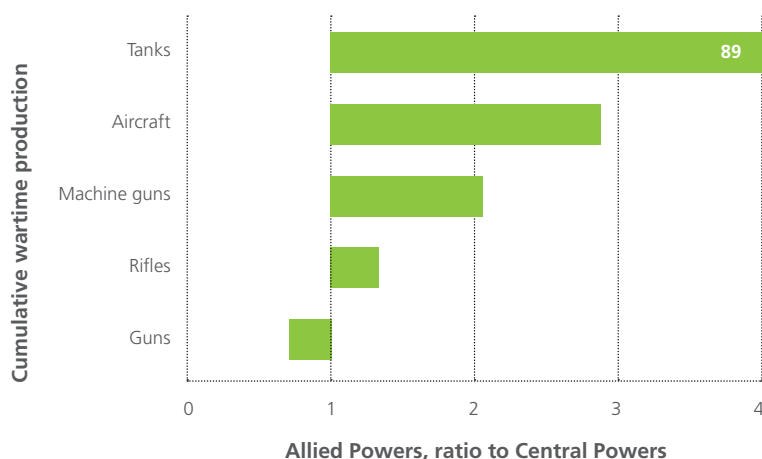
The forgotten margin that explains Allied victory was economic (Broadberry and Harrison 2005). This was a war of firepower, as well as manpower. Figure 1 shows the great advantage of the Allied great powers over the Central Powers in population and real GDP. When America joined the war and Russia left it, the Allied advantage declined in population but rose in production. On the basis of their advantage, as Figure 2 shows, the Allies produced far more munitions, including the offensive weaponry that finally broke the stalemate on the Western front.

Figure 1. Pre-war population and real GDP of the Great Powers: Allies, ratio to central powers



Source: Broadberry and Harrison (2005: 11). The figure counts Britain France, and either Russia (in 1914) or the USA (in 1918) against Germany and Austria-Hungary. All figures are based on 1913, because wartime changes are not known for all countries. GDP is measured in international dollars at 1990 prices.

Figure 2. Cumulative wartime production: Allies, ratio to Central Powers



Sources: War production from Adelman (1988: 45), except UK from Broadberry and Howlett (2005: 212) and Austria-Hungary from Schulze (2005: 88).

How the war was lost: The food weapon?

Hunger was decisive in the collapse of the German home front in 1918. Was Germany starved out of the war by Allied use of the food weapon? In Germany, this myth became prevalent and assumed historic significance in Hitler's words (cited by Collingham 2011: 37) of 1939:

“I need the Ukraine, so that no one is able to starve us again, like in the last war.”

It is true that Germany imported 20-25% of calories for human consumption before the war. Wartime imports were limited by an Allied blockade at sea and (via pressure on neutrals) on land. At the same time, German civilians suffered greatly: hunger-related mortality is estimated at around 750,000 (Davis and Engerman 2006: 204).

But decisions made in Berlin, not London, did the main damage to German food supplies. The decision to attack Germany's main food suppliers struck the first blow. In 1913, the German economy was more interlinked with future adversaries than allies. Britain, France, Italy, and Russia accounted for 36% of pre-war German trade. Britain alone provided more German trade than the 12% share of Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire combined (Gartzke and Lupu 2012, Kramer 2013).

Gerd Hardach (1987) conjectured that the effects of the loss of trade were outweighed by Germany's war mobilisation. Mobilisation policies damaged food production in several ways (described by Feldman 1966). On the side of resources, mobilisation diverted young men, horses, and chemical fertilisers from agricultural use to the front line. Farmers' incentives to sell food were weakened when German industry was converted to war production and ceased to supply the countryside with manufactures. Government initiatives to hold down food prices for the consumer did further damage.

Because trade supplied at most one quarter of German calories, and German farmers the other three quarters, it is implausible to see the loss of trade as the primary factor. Germany's own war effort probably did more to undermine food supplies.

How the peace was made: Folly at Versailles?

Since Keynes (1920), many serious consequences have been ascribed to the treaty of Versailles. According to the financier and philanthropist George Soros (2014), for example, the French "insistence on reparations led to the rise of Hitler." Moreover, Soros continues:

"Angela Merkel's [similar] policies are giving rise to extremist movements in the rest of Europe."

The burdens on Germany arising from the peace treaty can be assessed *ex ante* and *ex post*. *Ex post*, there is hardly an issue. Germany actually paid less than one fifth of the 50 billion gold marks that were due (Marks 1978). From 1924, there was no net drain from the Germany economy because repayments were covered by American loans (Schuker 1988). Eventually, Hitler defaulted on both loans and reparations.

The *ex-ante* burden on Germany was certainly heavy, although comparable in magnitude with the public debts that France and Britain carried at the time (Ritschl 2005: 68-70). German governments could have covered most of it by accepting the treaty limits on military spending (Hantke and Spoerer 2010). Instead, they evaded it by means of a 'war of attrition' against foreign creditors.

The Allied pursuit of reparations was unwise and unnecessarily complicated Europe's postwar readjustment, but it is wrong to conclude that it radicalised German politics. The political extremism arising from the treaty was short-lived. In successive elections from 1920 through 1928, a growing majority of German votes went to moderate parties that supported constitutional government.

In fact, Weimar democracy's bad name is undeserved. It was the Great Depression that reawakened German nationalism and put Hitler in power (Van Riel and Schram 1993, King et al. 2008).

Concluding remarks

The history of the Great War has implications for today. Secretive, authoritarian regimes become dangerous when they fear the future. Deterrence matters. Trench warfare was terrible, but not uniquely so. It is total war that is terrible and total war cannot be done cheaply. The blockade of Germany provides one more case study of economic sanctions that have been less effective than believed

by both perpetrators and victims. The treaty of Versailles, however unwise, was not a slow fuse for another war. It started a game of 'Can't Pay/Won't Pay' that typically ends peacefully, and would have done so in this case without the Great Depression.

Editors' note: This is the second in a series of Vox columns by leading economic historians on the First World War, which will be collected in a Vox eBook at the end of the year: "The Economics of the First World War", edited by Nicholas Crafts, Kevin O'Rourke and Alan Taylor.

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