War’s End? November 1918 and the Politics of Remembrance

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The leading states affiliated with the military alliance known as North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) held commemorations earlier this month to remember those who died in the First World War. The official framing of the mourning observations was accompanied by impish smiles of the leaders as they looked forward to further increasing the bloated military budgets. This brings us to certain elementary questions which persist. They simply refuse to go away. Why was the war started? Who paid for the war with their lives, labour and resources? What was the immediate impact of the war? How is the war being remembered now?

1. Scholars do not subscribe to the official interpretations and conventional accounts of a century long ‘blame-game’ and finger-pointing by the rival imperial states who started the war. They have persuasively demonstrated that the deadly competition between the big powers reached a toxic climax in the form of an immensely destructive war in 1914. Imperialism, the underlying cause of the war, had triggered tremendous brutality in the colonial territories of Asia, Africa and Latin America. It was now returning to unleash havoc within Europe. Though the war was chiefly confined to Europe and Asia-minor, it had a worldwide material impact by subjecting the colonies and semi-colonies to conditions of starvation and death by draining their resources. Prabhat Patnaik, following Marx and Lenin, argues centralisation of capital or the formation of ever larger blocs of capital culminated in the emergence of monopoly capital. Big banks, a handful in number came to control the most profitable branches of financial transactions, production and trade in the imperial states of the west and their colonies and semi-colonies. The ‘coalescence’ of banking and industrial capital, including manufacture of weapons of mass destruction, came to constitute a financial oligarchy and shaped the era of ‘monopoly capital’. ‘Monopoly capital’ of the times was based on imperial nation-states. The monopoly combines could therefore be identified as British, French, German, American etc. The financial oligarchies in the era of monopoly capital penetrated state structures and directed state policies. Big power rivalry underlined by inter-imperialist competition over...
The devastating impact of the First World War is known. According to certain estimates, 6000 soldiers died every day on an average in the course of the war. At the end of the war, though the calculations vary, out of 65 million soldiers mobilised, roughly 20 million were killed and 21 million wounded. 40 million people died including 10 million civilians. Let us look at the casualty figures of the principal belligerent powers. 800,000 British men were killed. Among them, 500,000 were under the age of thirty including some of the leading War Poets. 1.6 million French soldiers, 1.8 million German soldiers, 5.5 million Russian soldiers and more than 100,000 American soldiers perished. The end of the war brought a sinister gift: an influenza epidemic which killed 50 million people across the world. In Kolkata, in the course of October-November-December 1918, official health records showed nearly thirty thousand people had died. They were mostly children, women and the elderly belonging to poor families and suffering from malnutrition and lack of medical facilities. Who remembers them?

The belligerent powers drew on colonial resources and used European and other working-class civilians by transforming them into military labour and exploiting their labour-power in the war industries. The warring European states whipped up xenophobic hysteria among ordinary people in the name of nationalism and even forced reluctant subjects to go to war. Jaroslav Hasek’s ‘The Good Soldier Svejk’ and Erich Maria Remarque’s ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’, written after the war, exposed the corruptions and cynicism of the military authorities who regarded the lives of soldiers as expendable. Women, children and prisoners of war provided cheap or unfree labour in the factories producing commodities to support the war-effort. The salaries of workers remained frozen and accidents at work increased as super-profits piled up in the stock-markets of the capital cities of the principal belligerents. Those who emerged victorious, namely the Anglo-French Alliance, were supported by men and money taken from the colonies. France exploited the cheap labour of Vietnamese workers in the armament factories and used Moroccan soldiers as cannon-fodder. Britain mobilised more than a
colonial capital. colonial mass upsurge and waves of industrial strike actions directed against protests, suppressed during the war, found a direct outlet in post-war anti-

against any intervention to check the prices. Starving conditions and resulting epidemic, the 'war fever'. The war induced inflated prices of food and cloth maidan. The victory celebrations were accompanied by the influenza

On the day of Armistice, the colonial authorities held a huge parade in the happened in colonial cities, seemingly untouched by war, such as Kolkata. 3.

Troops. If caught, the deserters and mutineers faced the firing squad. On 15 February 1915 Punjabi Muslim garrisons in Singapore turned their guns on the British officers. These soldiers were suppressed with utmost brutality. As for the flow of money, Sumit Sarkar has pointed out that the 'drain of wealth' led to massive plunder of India's material resources. The defence expenditure was increased by 300%. Semi-compulsory 'war loans' were imposed on the colonial economy. There was a sharp rise in taxes and steep fall in the living standards for the majority of the population in India.

A hundred years later, national commemorations are being held by the major western powers. The principal belligerents, Britain, France and Germany are keen to project the First World War as national tragedies never to be repeated. On the date of Armistice, more military aid has been pledged by the European Union (EU) to sustain war in West Asia and NATO continues to trigger genocidal conflict. To paraphrase Vijay Prashad, wars are raging to sustain war in West Asia and NATO continues to trigger genocidal conflict. To paraphrase Vijay Prashad, wars are raging from the Atlas Mountains to the Hindukush. Millions of civilians have died in the regions lying in between from aerial bombardment and starvation, from weapons of mass
Exactly 100 years ago, World War I came to an end. France and the UK will be holding major commemorative events, and high-ranking German leaders will be attending. What does this tell us about our respective cultures? On the morning of November 11, 1918, at 10:59, American soldier Henry Nicholas Gunther stormed towards a German machine gun position and was killed — exactly one minute before the armistice that ended World War I came into effect. Gunther was the last soldier to fall in the so-called Great War. He was one of roughly 10 million soldiers that perished in the fighting. One hundred years ago – on November 11 1918, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month – millions of men laid down their guns. This was Armistice Day, the end of the first world
destruction manufactured by Lockheed Martin and other big armament producing corporations located in the West, firmly entrenched within the military-industrial complex. At this moment, Yemen faces one of the worst famines in recorded history due to war unleashed by Saudi Arabia, with generous assistance from the US-UK-EU Alliance. As the most powerful states of the planet continue to pursue the goals of imperialism, who determines the ‘global’ scales of remembering the dead from Afghanistan to Iraq, from Syria to Libya? Who counts the dead? Who mourns the mass casualties of imperialism in our times?

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References:
V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (April 1917).
war. Germany, the last belligerent standing among the Central Powers, had collapsed militarily, economically and politically. Armistice Day – later known as Remembrance Day – has since been commemorated every year. Read more: World politics explainer: The Great War (WWI). Ending the war. On November 11 1918, aboard Marshall Ferdinand Foch’s train carriage, a few plenipotentiaries of Germany and the main Allied World War I didn’t end for everyone in 1918. And it’s still shaping politics today. By Emily Gioielli. Nov 27, 2018 2:28 PM. Tweet. Share. In short, millions of central, eastern, and southeastern Europeans fought or died long after the November 1918 armistice, and the war “failed to end,” as historian Robert Gerwarth puts it. This “long First World War” was certainly bloody, and we can and should argue about the destructive effects of nationalism for the history of Europe. But it was hardly pointless.