

Did 'high ideals' survive the Great War?

As we mark look back on World War I, it is not particularly difficult to see its great political aftershocks: the emergence of the United States as a global power, the Russian Revolution, the modern state of Israel, the still controversial borders of the Middle East, and of course: the second world war and the Nazis who caused it.

All of these are more or less direct results of the terrible war that began in 1914.

But the war has also had dramatic spiritual effects that are more difficult for us to see.

A good place to begin considering them is with the realisation that the 20th century has not proved hospitable to what were once called "high ideals". In the aftermath of the senseless waste of human excellence that was the first world war, the high ideals that had made it possible have come under attack for a second time. It's almost as if they were responsible for Ypres, Verdun, and Gallipoli, and not the machinations of farsighted masters of geopolitical realities.

While the causes of the first world war still remain shrouded in darkness, obfuscated by historians' generalities such as "the alliance system," its spiritual results are so widespread that it is difficult for us to see them, simply because doing so would require us in some sense to see beyond them.

Consider the case of Plato, who can help us to do so. If that venerable name makes you think of a bodiless Platonic Love, of an otherworldly realm of Ideas, and the immortality of the Soul, then it's pretty obvious that you are not staying abreast of current developments in Platonic scholarship.

As the great champion of “the Ideas,” Plato’s philosophy – as embodied by the noble and death-defying Socrates – had long been regarded as perhaps the greatest single source of idealism.

Idealism is a term almost as varied in meaning as Plato’s beautifully constructed dialogues. Perhaps the most famous of those tell the story of Socrates’ trial and death. When Socrates compared himself to Achilles during his trial, drowned out the self-preserving counsel of his best friend with the speech of the Athenian laws in [Crito](#), and explained immortality in relation to other-worldly Ideas in [Phaedo](#), he offered a comprehensive vision that made modern war more bearable for those who actually endured its horrors.

But the Plato of 1914 is very different from the one you will meet in the learned journals of today.

Before 1914, for example, no scholar had ever doubted that Socrates – himself a veteran of foreign wars – was anything less than sincere in [Crito](#) when he explained to his best friend that his duty to Athens precluded his escape from prison to avoid the unjust sentence passed on him by his fellow Athenians. It would be difficult to find any significant Plato scholar who reads [Crito](#) in this obvious way today.

A new Plato has emerged in the last hundred years, and Platonism – notoriously a philosophy of the highest of high ideals – has paid the price for the disillusionment that followed the Great War. Of course it is also true, given the truth of Nietzsche’s famous observation that Christianity is “Platonism for the masses,” that it is by no means only Platonism that has done so.

If Christianity already found itself embattled thanks to Charles Darwin, the very notion of evolution nevertheless promoted a more secular but ultimately no less idealistic

worldview based on the Idea of Progress. That is, the boys who died in the Great War generally believed they were fighting for a better tomorrow.

Whether secularised as “social justice,” “the classless society,” or “the spirit of capitalism,” Christianity had managed to survive Nietzsche’s pre-War announcement of the death of God. When Woodrow Wilson placed the high-flown rhetoric of a preacher’s son in the service of the Treaty of Versailles, this cynical instrument was made to seem like the Second Coming.

In beaten Germany, the lofty rhetoric of the victors necessarily fell on deaf ears, and deconstructionism was duly born in the agony of Weimar. Progress, Enlightenment, “a world safe for democracy,” and “the war to end all wars” were nothing more than cover for an anti-German conspiracy masquerading as a crusade.

Despite the fact that history had betrayed Germany on the Marne, the Weimar years witnessed a ruthless application of historicism on a mass scale that explained her humiliation as originating in the revaluation of values wrought by Judaism. Although the Nazis would be beaten on the battlefields of a second war, the poisonous legacy of the first will remain with us until we emancipate ourselves from post-War thought’s thoughtless rejection of God, Christianity, and Platonism.

It was not the high ideals of its victims that caused the first world war, and only thinking that recognises itself as “post-post-war” can at once honour their sacrifice and build on its foundation a conception of progress that will not be fooled again.

And here’s a sobering hint for those willing to undertake this idealistic task: the agonised bitterness and inescapable despair that led to the Nazis only becomes intelligible when “the English-speaking peoples” confront the heretofore

unthinkable possibility that it was not Germany, but the farsighted politicians of Great Britain, who caused the first world war.

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