

Xenophobia

By [Thomas Brodie](#)

Summary

This article provides an overview of xenophobia during the First World War - namely, the ways in which the conflict was justified and sustained by the growth of hatred for external enemies, and increasingly perceived internal ones. It discusses the inculcation of xenophobia by wartime governments and societal elites, and explores the manifestations of such hatreds on the ground in the form of atrocities and war crimes. The essay concludes by locating xenophobia during the First World War within the wider sweep of 20th century history, and the racial hatreds so central to its successor conflict between 1939 and 1945.

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Introduction

Reflecting on the course of his life in 1942, the Jewish-Viennese author [Stefan Zweig \(1881-1942\)](#) highlighted the outbreak of the First World War as its decisive turning point; the moment when, in his memorable phrase, a ‘dreadful hysteria of mass hatred’ tore apart the ‘golden age of security’ characteristic of his fin-de-siècle youth. For Zweig, writing in Brazilian exile at the height of the Holocaust, it was the rise of this mass xenophobia throughout all combatant states that defined the First World War, and represented the conflict’s primary bequest to the societies which emerged in its wake. As he claimed regarding 1914, “in Germany, in France, in Italy, in Russia and in Belgium, they all obediently served the war propaganda and thus mass delusion and mass hatred, instead of fighting against it.”¹ Zweig’s lament, *The World of Yesterday*, recalled how, in Vienna and Berlin, “the French and English signs on the shops were made to disappear Sober merchants stamped *Gott Strafe*

England on their letters and society ladies swore (so they wrote to the papers) that never again would they speak a word of French.”²

Of course, Zweig’s memoir must primarily be read as a highly personal, subjective text – a lament for the destruction of the (partly imagined) cosmopolitan Vienna and Europe of his youth, an act of mourning by a liberal Jewish intellectual writing at the zenith of [Adolf Hitler’s \(1889-1945\)](#) “New Order”, and shortly before his own suicide. As Zweig wrote in his preface, “against my will, I have witnessed the most terrible defeat of reason and the most savage triumph of brutality in the chronicles of time.”³ His portrait of *The World of Yesterday* is naturally somewhat rose-tinted – the idealised foil to the horrors he witnessed between the outbreak of war in 1914 and his death in 1942. As [Sebastian Conrad](#) has noted, Zweig’s recollection of the *fin-de-siècle* as an era of free movement, internationalism and cultural exchange reflected his identity as “a respected and wealthy writer and as an educated white man.” Suffice it to say, those occupying less privileged positions in the period’s racial and class hierarchies would probably not have reflected on the pre-1914 world in such elegiac terms.⁴ Nevertheless, *The World of Yesterday*’s central claim does speak powerfully to a key strand within the First World War’s recent [historiography](#) – namely, how the conflict shaped and transformed the mentalities of combatant societies, and the destabilizing legacies it thus bequeathed to the following decades. For all the ways in which literary devices and personal subjectivity shape Zweig’s memoir, much recent historical scholarship would suggest his focus on the First World War as a powerful incubator of hatred and xenophobia was not misplaced. [Alan Kramer](#) has recently placed “newly radicalized [nationalisms](#)” at the centre of his account of the conflict and its destructive dynamic, and one of the main drivers of First World War historiography since the late 1990s has been the desire to contextualise and explain the genocidal horrors of its successor conflict between 1939 and 1945.⁵ As [Alexander Watson](#) has argued, “the story of East-Central Europe’s “Bloodlands” rightly begins in 1914.”⁶

The Oxford English Dictionary defines xenophobia as “a deep antipathy to foreigners”, and this is the basic definition employed in this article.⁷ It discusses articulations of such prejudice in cultural expression, and searches for its manifestations in deed, such as war crimes and other atrocities. This article’s one qualification to the Oxford definition of xenophobia is to include analysis of animosity towards perceived “foreigners” of the same citizenship during the First World War. As this essay outlines, xenophobia often divided wartime societies against themselves on lines of ethnicity and religion, as well as mobilising them to fight external enemies.

Mobilising Xenophobia

As noted by Zweig, combatant states did their best to inculcate hatred for the enemy within their own populations, as part of their ongoing mobilisation for “[total war](#)” throughout the years 1914 to 1918.⁸ Wartime [propaganda](#) sought from the very outset to inspire detestation and revulsion of the national or imperial enemy. In the [Russian Empire](#), [propaganda](#) posters portrayed the Central Powers as an evil multi-headed hydra and [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) as the devil.⁹ Even as early as the [July Crisis](#), [Austro-Hungarian propaganda](#) played heavily on popular perceptions of [Serbia](#) as a barbaric, uncivilised state that bore responsibility for the [Sarajevo assassinations of 28 June 1914](#).¹⁰ In [Great Britain](#), [propaganda](#) portrayed German soldiers from 1914 onwards as bloodthirsty beasts, typically engaged in the perpetration of [atrocities](#) against the innocent civilian population of [Belgium](#).¹¹ In so doing, British posters cultivated the image of the barbarous “Hun”, who rejoiced in the murder of defenceless women, children and [prisoners of war](#) (POWs). Central to this campaign was the British nurse [Edith Cavell \(1865-1915\)](#), who was executed by the Germans in [occupied Belgium](#) in 1915. Drawing upon Cavell’s devout Anglicanism, British propaganda portrayed her as a saintly woman who suffered martyrdom at the hands of an immoral enemy.¹²

In a mirror image of British efforts, Anglophobia represented the core of much wartime German propaganda. It was inconceivable to many Germans that Protestant, Anglo-Saxon ‘England’ should have sided with Russia, [France](#) and Serbia “against German culture”, as two philosophers, [Ernst Haeckel \(1834-1919\)](#) and [Rudolf Eucken \(1846-1926\)](#) put it.¹³ The explanation could only be that the British were envious of [Germany’s](#) rapid economic growth, and selfishly guarding their own mercantile primacy by orchestrating a global coalition to cut the young Reich down to size. As the *Kölnische Zeitung* claimed in October 1914, “England” had “from sheer selfishness stirred up the peoples of the continent into this terrible war.”¹⁴ The virulence of this new German Anglophobia found expression in the German-Jewish poet [Ernst Lissauer’s \(1882-1937\)](#) *Hassgesang gegen England* (Hymn of Hate against Britain), as well as his popularization of the phrase *Gott Strafe England!*, recalled decades later by his friend Stefan Zweig.¹⁵ The development of this Anglophobic culture in German society indeed stands as testimony to the war’s transformative impact upon popular attitudes. As Alexander Watson has noted, it was not “any ingrained hatred” prior to 1914 which drove this cultural development, but rather the “sense of hurt and betrayal” felt by a traditionally Anglophone society, suddenly forced to embrace war with the object of its affection.¹⁶

The strength of Anglo-German cultural connections prior to 1914 may have rendered the deliberate cultivation of xenophobia following war's outbreak especially important, but on other fronts, pre-existing national and racial hostilities made life much easier for propagandists.¹⁷ Xenophobia and fear of "[the other](#)" often played indispensable roles for governments at the war's very outset, in justifying the conflict to largely fearful and apprehensive domestic audiences. As research over the past twenty-five years has demonstrated, European populations in July and August 1914 were by no means as [enthusiastic about the prospect of war](#) as traditionally believed, and required coaxing by governments to accept the perils and sacrifices of major international conflict.¹⁸ For instance, in the German Empire, it was above all the fear of Russian invasion which reconciled popular opinion to military mobilisation in late July and August 1914, with the sceptre of Tsarism playing the decisive role in rallying the [Social Democratic Party](#) to the Reich's cause. In this case, the revulsion felt by social democrats for Tsarist autocracy sufficed to overcome the party's previous opposition to armed conflict and [militarism](#), in evidence for much of the July Crisis.¹⁹ In the Habsburg Monarchy, anti-Serbian sentiment did much to ensure that the empire's initial mobilisation of summer 1914 was successful, reflecting the widespread assumption that the Belgrade government had engineered the Sarajevo assassinations.²⁰ Indeed, the July Crisis in Austria-Hungary was marked by anti-Serb demonstrations and riots, expressing popular sentiment rather than governmental coordination.²¹

The importance of such fearful xenophobia to wartime mobilisation increased even further during the war's opening campaigns of 1914.²² Reports of [sexual violence](#) perpetrated by invading German forces against local women in Belgium and northern France rapidly emerged in 1914 and 1915 as a central propaganda theme in the Third Republic, stressing the obligation of the nation's menfolk to protect female compatriots from assault by the "barbarian".²³ As Ruth Harris has argued, these profoundly gendered propaganda materials served to couch the war as one waged defensively by an innocent, female [France](#) "against a plundering, overarmoured brute."²⁴ Similarly in the German Empire, stories of atrocities perpetrated by invading Russian forces in East Prussia in 1914 and 1915 played a vital role in forging popular support for the war, understood as one of defence against "Asiatic barbarism".²⁵ German propaganda heavily exploited evidence of Russian atrocities in the province, horrifying readers with photographs and sketches of burning towns and fleeing East Prussian civilians. Even as late as autumn 1917, German propaganda drew upon the memory of the Russian invasion of East Prussia three years earlier to rally support for a seventh [war loan](#), portraying in visual and textual form the "robbery, murder, arson and rape" perpetrated

against innocent civilians by brutal [Cossack](#) troops.²⁶ As Watson has noted, such images and understandings of the Reich's enemies "played a central role in mobilizing Germans to fight the First World War."²⁷ Xenophobia and fear of "the other" thus served from the very outset as highly influential legitimators of the war, helping populations perceive the conflict as one of national defence, not the consequence of diplomatic brinkmanship, aggression and miscalculation during the July Crisis.²⁸

Religious leaders and intellectuals outside the halls of government also played influential roles in cultivating and disseminating negative images of "the other", which served to justify their states' war efforts to domestic and international audiences. The production of xenophobic [war cultures](#) was thus by no means solely a consequence of governmental policy, but also reflected the investments of wider societal actors. The [Manifesto of the 93 German Intellectuals](#) to the "civilized world" of October 1914 explicitly justified the Reich's war effort to an international audience by mobilising racial prejudices against elements of the Entente coalition, such as the "wild Russian hordes" invading East Prussia. In response to British accusations of German atrocities in Belgium and France, the signed professors argued:

Those who have allied themselves with Russians and Serbs, and who present the world with shameful spectacle of inciting Mongolians and Negroes against the white race, have the very least right to portray themselves as the defenders of European civilization.²⁹

Such nationalist academic partisanship did not, moreover, represent a German peculiarity, with intellectuals across combatant societies overwhelmingly emerging as propagandists of their state or nation's cause. As [Adrian Gregory](#) has noted, "the cosmopolitan intellectual pre-war world", so beloved of Stefan Zweig, was an early victim of war in the summer of 1914.³⁰

Transnational religious bonds equally did little to restrain the development of wartime xenophobia. In Great Britain, the weight of Anglican opinion expected patriotic support of the national cause from its senior clergy, despite the common Protestant heritage shared with Germany's Lutheran and Calvinist [Churches](#).³¹ In [Austria-Hungary](#), the close relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Habsburg dynasty ensured that senior clergymen, such as Vienna's Cardinal [Friedrich Gustav Piffl \(1864-1932\)](#), often endorsed the war in fervent terms.³² This wartime commitment was certainly eased in 1914 by the Orthodox identity of the empire's Serbian and Russian foes – but the senior clergy's bellicose "war theology" also remained in evidence during the monarchy's war against [Italy](#) as of 1915.³³ Catholic clergymen in France and Germany overwhelmingly voiced strong support and theological legitimation for their respective nation's war efforts, with the presence of

millions of good Catholics in both states doing little to restrain this trend.³⁴ Chauvinist forms of nationalism became ever more influential within Germany's Protestant denominations during the war years, taking the conflation of religious and patriotic identities, much in evidence before 1914, to new heights. One influential military chaplain, [Ludwig Wessel \(1879-1922\)](#), evinced firm support for the Reich's harsh occupation policies in Belgium and northern France, and cultivated a "racially-based, aggressively pan-German" theology. Ludwig's son [Horst Wessel \(1907-1930\)](#) went on to become a martyr of the National Socialist movement following his assassination by communists in 1930.³⁵

Xenophobia in Practice

The use of xenophobia as a tool of mobilisation was certainly not without effect, and the occurrence of atrocities on all wartime fronts affords a means of gauging its prevalence and impact. The invading German armies murdered around 6,000 civilians during their advance through Belgium and northern France in 1914, in massacres such as those at Louvain and Dinant. While these atrocities mostly reflected the German army's institutional fear of *franc tireurs*, in many cases they also drew upon the anti-Catholic prejudices held by Protestant soldiers.³⁶ Xenophobia also doubtless played a role in incidents on the [Western Front](#) between 1914 and 1918 in which Entente and German troops killed surrendering opponents, and racial hostility was palpably obvious in cases where Germans soldiers murdered French prisoners from the Third Republic's African colonies. As Alan Kramer has observed, however, further research is needed to assess how common such atrocities were on the Western Front.³⁷ On the [Eastern Front](#), anti-Slav sentiments doubtless played their part in sustaining the combat motivation of German troops, including those from working-class and left-leaning backgrounds. One officer described Russia as "Asia, steppe, swamps ... a godforsaken wasteland of slime."³⁸

Xenophobia also spread on the home fronts of respective states. One French psychologist even claimed in 1917 that the inhabitants of [Alsace and Lorraine](#) could never truly have been assimilated into the German nation after 1871, as they would always find the smell of Germans disagreeable.³⁹ In Great Britain, many Anglicans were frustrated that [their church's](#) leadership was not more outspoken in its support of the war effort. When, in 1917, the Archbishop of Canterbury opposed the notion of reprisal air raids for German bombing of the British home front, he received "a continuous shower of protests", slamming what one termed the "flabby-babby babble of Boche-defending Bishops."⁴⁰ The weight of British public opinion clearly supported air raids against German cities. As early as October 1914, several British localities were marred by [anti-German riots](#), and the aftermath of the [Lusitania's](#)

[sinking](#) in May 1915 witnessed yet more widespread attacks on the properties of German immigrants in a host of British towns and cities.⁴¹ Conversely in the Reich, the anti-British propaganda campaign came to influence wide sections of society, beyond the circles of nationalist intellectuals and government propagandists such as Ernst Lissauer. One child noted in her diary in 1915 that, “one is terribly bloodthirsty – the favourite greeting is: ‘God punish the English!’ – Answer: ‘and soon!’” Here, one can discern the influence of the “patriotic education” (*vaterländische Erziehung*) served up in Germany’s schools; with many teachers during the war setting their pupils essays with questions such as “Why Do We Hate England?”⁴²

Xenophobia and Atrocity

It was, however, away from the Western Front, in Eastern Europe and the [Ottoman Empire](#), that the worst excesses of wartime xenophobia found expression between 1914 and 1918. It was here, in the clash of unstable multi-national empires, that the war interacted most lethally with pre-existing ethnic and religious animosities.⁴³ The conquest and occupation of Serbia by the Central Powers, for example, certainly drew upon negative perceptions of Serbs and their culture. As early as the Austro-Hungarian invasion of the country in 1914, Habsburg troops perpetrated widespread atrocities against Serbian civilians, murdering between 3,500 and 4,000. These killings reflected paranoias concerning Serbian guerrilla tactics, with one Austro-Hungarian soldier noting: “Here, every peasant carried a rifle and the soldiers (presumably shyly) wore peasant clothes....” As one Habsburg commander noted, “the entire population in the area of deployment was unreliable because they were Serb.”⁴⁴ Bulgarian forces were also keen to take vengeance on Serbia for defeats suffered in the [Second Balkan War of 1913](#). Almost one-fifth of Serbia’s population perished in the First World War, despite the Central Powers completing the state’s conquest as early as 1915.⁴⁵

Recent research has moreover highlighted the sheer extent of [anti-Semitic](#) atrocities [perpetrated by the Russian armed forces](#) during the First World War. Anti-Jewish prejudice was pervasive within the late Tsarist state and its armed forces, reflecting the increasing centrality of anti-Semitism to the conservative and nationalist Russian right over the proceeding decades. The empire’s Jews suffered violent pogroms in the early 1880s and mid-1900s, which the Tsarist authorities did precious little to restrain, and may even have tacitly condoned.⁴⁶ After the outbreak of war, this Russian anti-Semitism swiftly found expression in the Tsarist invasion and occupation of Galicia in 1914-15. One Jewish aid worker in the former Habsburg province spoke of the “bestial anti-Semitism permeating the entire army”, which manifested itself in pogroms against the local Jewish population, rape, murder

and the destruction of property.⁴⁷ Tellingly, conditions for local Jews did not improve as the Tsarist state tightened its grip on the province during late 1914 and early 1915. Determined to render Galicia part of greater Orthodox Russia, [Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia \(1868-1918\)](#) and his ministers saw no place for local Jews and deemed them a fifth column sympathetic to the Germans and Austrians. The Tsarist occupation regime deported over 100,000 Galician Jews into the Russian interior and in certain localities employed them as human shields for Russian troops in engagements with Austrian forces. A Habsburg official noted following Galicia's recapture in 1915 that the treatment of local Jews by Tsarist forces had been "in places truly inhuman."⁴⁸ As Alexander Watson has recently argued, the Russian occupation of Galicia represented "the closest link between the campaigns of 1914 and the genocidal horrors of the mid-twentieth century."⁴⁹

It was, however, in the Ottoman Empire that wartime xenophobia spilled over into outright [genocide](#) during the First World War. As in the case of the anti-Semitic atrocities perpetrated by the Tsarist state in Galicia, Turkish attacks on Armenian Christians stood in a line of continuity with the pre-1914 era, as nationalism increasingly displaced older, more multi-cultural Ottoman identities. At least 100,000 Armenians were murdered in the Hamidian massacres of the mid-1890s, and between 15,000 and 30,000 were killed in Adana in 1909.⁵⁰ It was, however, in the context of "total war" that systematic genocide developed, with the Ottoman government fearing that Armenian Christians posed an internal security threat due to their perceived sympathies with Orthodox Russia. Beginning in 1915 as Russian troops broke into Anatolia, Turkish forces began evicting Armenian communities from their homes across Asia Minor, and deporting them to the eastern territories of the Ottoman Empire, such as contemporary Syria and Iraq. Turkish forces and irregulars perpetrated mass killings of Armenians during these deportations, with the Ottoman state doing nothing to provide the deportees with the supplies required for survival away from their home communities.⁵¹ By 1920, this systematic genocide of Armenians had claimed between 800,000 and 1 million victims. That religious and racial prejudices stood behind this atrocity should be in no doubt. As Germany's ambassador in Constantinople wrote home to the Reich Chancellor in June 1915, the Ottoman Empire "wants to use the world war to clear away its internal enemies – the indigenous Christians...."⁵²

Xenophobic Imaginaries

The examples of the Armenian Genocide and the Russian attacks on Galician Jews highlight that wartime xenophobia frequently attached itself to perceived internal enemies or civilian population groups, typically defined by race and religion. Such hatreds cannot simply be

explained with reference to the exigencies of wartime mobilisation and propaganda against opposing states. For example, the experience of fighting alongside Imperial [Japan](#) within the Entente did little to undermine racialised fears and prejudices on the part of American, British Empire or French statesmen and diplomats, for whom their ally continued to represent a threat to the supremacy of the “white” powers in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵³ Such prejudices played a prominent role at the [Paris Peace Conference in 1919](#), in which the Australian delegation, acting with the tacit support of American and British representatives, decisively opposed the Japanese government’s [racial equality proposal](#). The opposition to this measure by the Australians and Americans in particular reflected profoundly racial fears that Japanese immigrants might gain entry into their societies. Australian Prime Minister [Billy Hughes \(1862-1952\)](#) indeed informed the federal parliament in Melbourne upon his return from Paris that: “White Australia is yours!” Scarce wonder that Japan’s former prime minister, Marquess [Ōkuma Shigenobu \(1838-1922\)](#), warned following the conclusion of the peace conference of a “league of white nations to perpetuate white supremacy in the world.”⁵⁴

Such racial fears and prejudices could also divide societies against themselves, with xenophobia acting to undermine the social cohesion required to wage “total war”. In Germany, the infamous [Juden­zählung](#) (Jewish census) of 1916 served as testimony to growing anti-Semitism in wartime society, coalescing around baseless claims that the Reich’s Jews were not contributing fully to the national cause.⁵⁵ Furthermore, such racialized paranoias did not represent a peculiarity of the Central Powers. In Great Britain, the hyper-nationalist culture of mobilisation acted as a spur to anti-Semitism, with Jews regarded by certain sections of the population as “other”, and dubious in their patriotic engagement. Around 1,000 people participated in an anti-Semitic riot in Leeds in June 1917, and 5,000 joined another in East London in September 1917.⁵⁶ The year 1919 in the [United States](#) was marked by a wave of [racial violence](#), in which white mobs lynched over 100 African Americans, and riots hit localities as diverse as Charleston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. The perpetrators in these cases sought to maintain racial hierarchies they deemed threatened by the [wartime service of African American men](#).⁵⁷

Popular resentment towards [refugees](#) also developed in many host societies.⁵⁸ [Belgian refugees](#) often encountered hostility in both France and Great Britain, despite being citizens of an Allied state. Such resentments typically surfaced in the mid-war years, after the initial wave of sympathy accompanying the German invasion of Belgium in 1914 had subsided.⁵⁹ This trend was also discernible in [neutral](#) states located near the battlefronts, such as [Switzerland](#) and [the Netherlands](#), where locals were often less than thrilled by the arrival of

thousands of refugees fleeing combat zones and enemy invasion.⁶⁰

It is nevertheless the Austro-Hungarian Empire which provides the most telling case study of the way in which wartime xenophobia and population movements could tear apart the social fabric of a multi-ethnic polity. As Pieter Judson has noted, in many ways the people of the Habsburg Monarchy went to war with each other in 1914, with Orthodox and South-Slavic citizens often suspected of Russian and Serbian sympathies and falling victim to riots and state repression. Jewish refugees fleeing Tsarist persecution in Galicia provoked increased anti-Semitism in the empire's interior, in cities such as Vienna and Prague.⁶¹ At the front, Habsburg troops occasionally even perpetrated atrocities against their fellow Austro-Hungarian citizens, with linguistic divides in particular serving to alienate soldiers from civilians in theatres such as the Galician front. In several cases, Hungarian troops massacred Ruthenian and Polish civilians, deeming them complicit of collaborating with the Tsarist invaders.⁶² Current research persuasively argues that the Habsburg Monarchy "cannot be written off simply as a doomed anachronism" prior to 1914. What sealed the empire's fate was the way in which wartime chauvinism and paranoia increasingly poisoned the relationship between its peoples over the course of the years 1914 to 1918.⁶³

The Limits of Xenophobia

While much recent historiography of the First World War has sought to explain the violence and atrocities of the Second World War, many works also push back against the potential temptations of this teleology. As [Jonathan Gumz](#) has argued, there is a danger of reducing "the First World War to little more than a speed bump on the way to the Second World War."⁶⁴ His important research on the [Austrian occupation of Serbia](#) has highlighted elements of the 1914-1918 conflict which reflected older traditions derived from the 19th century. Gumz claimed that the institutional memory of the 1848 revolutions "stamped the military culture of the Habsburg Army", leaving an ingrained hatred of nationalism itself, along with its manifestations as mass politics and irregular warfare.⁶⁵ Habsburg officials and military commanders thus sought to demobilise Serbian society, undercut nationalism and establish Austro-Hungarian control; but they emphatically did not intend to wage a racial war against local civilians. According to this line of argument, anti-Serb sentiments on the part of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces, while certainly prevalent, cannot serve as an adequate stand-alone explanation of Habsburg atrocities in Serbia, but must be combined with the army's loathing of partisans, grounded in conservative and elite conceptions of warfare. The Austro-Hungarian occupation of Serbia thus looked back to the mid-19th century more than it

anticipated the wars of annihilation waged by Nazi Germany against Poland and the Soviet Union during the Second World War.⁶⁶ To cite another example, many Polish soldiers from the Reich's eastern regions were "successfully assimilated" into the German army during the First World War, and proved an efficient fighting force for the Reich. Their service underlines that it was primarily in the imaginations of senior statesmen and commanders that the war on the Eastern Front represented "a racial war between Teuton and Slav."⁶⁷

At the battlefronts, moreover, ample evidence hints at the limits of soldiers' hatred of the enemy, or their internalization of xenophobic stereotypes. The [Christmas Truce](#) of December 1914, shared by British and German soldiers on the Western Front, provides one famous example of this trend.⁶⁸ Another is the pervasive "live and let live" system which for long periods shaped everyday life on the Western Front, with British and German troops' desire for self-preservation far outweighing any combat motivation derived from hatred of the enemy.⁶⁹ As Benjamin Ziemann's classic research on Bavarian peasant soldiers has outlined, these men had little desire to risk life or limb, or indeed kill French or British troops. Their primary desire was to return home safely to their families and farms in rural Bavaria. Xenophobic prejudice on their part was equally likely to be directed at the 'Prussians' in charge of the German war effort as it was the Reich's foreign opponents, with fights between Prussian and Bavarian units a far from uncommon occurrence at the front.⁷⁰ While Tsarist troops on the Eastern Front frequently fought tenaciously, much evidence indicates the limits of their internalisation of government propaganda, and hatred of the Germans and Austro-Hungarians. One German intelligence officer who interviewed Entente POWs concluded that whereas Anglo-French soldiers had a clear sense of what they were fighting for, this was strikingly absent in the case of Russian prisoners.⁷¹ Russian soldiers' letters often evinced a grudging respect for German efficiency and professionalism.⁷²

The flowering of [humanitarian activity](#) in the war's aftermaths also hints at the limits of popular xenophobia between 1914 and 1918.⁷³ The earnest desire on the part of many religious and philanthropic groups in the United States and United Kingdom in particular, such as the newly founded Save the Children, to assist the starving populations of Central Europe testifies powerfully to this trend.⁷⁴ Whereas much of British public opinion demanded that a harsh peace treaty be imposed on the societies of the defeated Central Powers, humanitarian groups such as the Quakers organised soup kitchens and other forms of relief in cities such as Vienna. A core conviction of these activists was that the children of Austria and Germany were innocent, and did not deserve to die of starvation due to the actions of their former governments.⁷⁵ The Oxford classicist [Gilbert Murray \(1866-1957\)](#) opened an

exhibition of Viennese children's art in November 1920 that toured forty cities and towns in Britain and Ireland, before continuing on to North America and Australia. As Patricia Clavin observed, this exhibition "established the image of the single, starving child that laid the foundations for the iconography of international intervention in Austria and for famine relief for the twentieth century and beyond."⁷⁶

Conclusion

Such examples of humanitarianism admonish us to not draw too direct a line between the First and Second World Wars, and encourage us to contemplate the alternative paths inter-war history could have taken. As international historians stress, the Second World War was not an inevitable outcome of the First, and for long periods in the mid-late 1920s it seemed that the international order was stabilising.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Stefan Zweig was certainly correct to highlight the First World War as a turning point, an event which unleashed hatreds and bequeathed profound bitterness and resentment to the post-war world. As Ian Kershaw argued in his recent survey of European history between 1914 and 1949, "ethnic nationalism was one of the war's main legacies", manifesting itself in border conflicts fought across the centre and east of the continent during the years 1918 to 1923. German *Freikorps* battled Polish nationalists in borderlands such as Silesia, and the Greek-Turkish War of 1919-22 was marked on both sides by the perpetration of mass atrocities against civilian populations, culminating in the forced population exchange of 1923, ending centuries of co-existence between Orthodox and Muslim populations in the region.⁷⁸ White forces in the *Russian Civil War* murdered between 50,000 and 200,000 Jews in Ukraine and Belorussia alone, and in January 1919 *Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924)* regime ordered that "mass terror" should be deployed against the Cossack people.⁷⁹

Xenophobia also emerged as an influential framework for interpreting defeat in the societies of the former Central Powers. Habsburg commanders such as *Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf (1852-1925)* blamed the alleged disloyalty of the empire's Slavic populations for Austro-Hungarian collapse – an interpretation that was paradoxically shared by the governments of new states such as *Czechoslovakia*, keen to obscure their societies' real contributions to the Habsburg war effort between 1914 and 1918.⁸⁰ In Germany, the emerging '*stab-in-the-back myth*' bore anti-Semitic connotations from its very inception, and, as in Austria, served to downplay the responsibility of the Reich's political and military leaderships for ultimate defeat, offloading it instead onto a vulnerable minority.⁸¹ This anti-Semitic interpretation of German defeat was initially not, however, shared by a majority of those adjusting to life in the new Weimar Republic, nor were its champions successful at the ballot box prior to the

onset of the Great Depression. In this case as in others, the xenophobia unleashed by the First World War sat at the junction of the 19th and 20th centuries, and while paving the way for the horrors of the 1930s and 1940s, did not render them inevitable.⁸²

Thomas Brodie, University of Birmingham

Notes

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