



A TIME FOR DESTRUCTION

The Geo-Politics, Techno-Politics, and Sensory Politics of World War I

Michael Geyer

The great wars of the twentieth century provoked horror and amazement in the face of utter destruction. World War I in particular was seen as the catastrophic breakdown, the by now proverbial *Urkatastrophe*, of the European world order. The overwhelming urge was to escape the shadow of extreme violence. Nostalgia, the compulsion to return to a past that never was, and utopia, the compulsion to see a future that never could be, defined in equal measure the reaction to the slaughter. The demobilization of these sentiments, a return to normalcy, took Europe all the way into the twenty-first century. But in the intervening time, what constitutes normalcy has quite radically changed.

There is no indication that the outrage in the face of destruction will cease, even as the time of the great wars recedes and Europe is stepping out of the shadow of its age of extreme violence. This age enters the human record as one of the great man-made tribulations that are visited upon civilizations. Troy or Babylon are its archetypes. There will be a poetic and also intensely moral history to craft the enduring memory as there has always been. Such history, the shape and form it may take, is still beyond the horizon of our time. But the one-hundredth anniversary of World War I seems an appropriate occasion to begin exploring the contours of this future history.

Historically minded observers, who have begun to remove themselves from the tense confrontations of nostalgia and utopia the war had generated, have begun to step out of the fog of archives in order to contemplate what happened in the light of what came of it. The latter is so important, because we cannot act as if the war has yet to happen, its consequences have yet to unfold, and its shadows have yet to lift. We now know -- or, should we say, we could know if we took on the challenge of seeing this age of catastrophe as sediments of embattled futures -- the kind of world that after even greater turmoil has become our world. Rather than looking in on World War I from the nineteenth century and consequently seeing it as a catastrophic flame-out of a prosperous, bourgeois age, we propose looking back on World War I from the other shore of the twenty-first century in order to see what the war begot. Take the reconstitution of Europe as a template. It is a Europe, not of Empire but of Republics. "War" did not create them in 1918; war is not the father of all things. But one of the futures of World War I was the rise of the nation state as the ordering principle of Europe. We return to 1917/18 not only for the utter destructiveness of these years, such as the end of Empire, but to sort out the futures sedimented in these times of tribulation -- all futures: the lived ones, the forgotten ones, and the merely dreamed ones -- as they were broken in, or broken down, by extreme violence. World War I was a European war over the future of the world. But the futures of the world that emerged from the war, including a yet more deadly war and a long period of cold confrontation, were quite unlike anything the belligerents, high and low, had expected. It is to the futures of this violent past that the series of three conferences on The Time of Destruction is dedicated.

Geopolitics, Technopolitics and Sensory Politics are the three points of entry into the world of utter destruction. Geopolitics is concerned with the shifting tectonics of European civilization. Technopolitics focuses on the extraordinary capacity to mobilize, organize, and regulate destructive forces. Sensory Politics, dedicated to the memory of Karl Kraus, will take the apperception of mass death, the media-mediated articulation of experience and the moral politics in -- and of -- a time of destruction as its cue.

The image of shifting force fields that collide to explode in horrific bursts to give way to a new layout of the land serves as a one of the most potent metaphors for what happened in World War I. This war was fought in defense of civilization, but it was evident to many, even

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foreshadowed in dreams of violence to come, that utter destruction not only was a product of a deep disquiet with, but would also inexorably change civilization. The nature of this tectonic shift is the subject of a first conference that takes the excess of destruction as a measure for the forces and movements that remade European civilization. The total nature of the war captured all aspects of civilization in its material reality and its imagination: the spatial order of Europe and the world; the order of social bonds in and between communities and societies; the interiority and subjectivity of the human sense of self. These civilizational spaces – the way the world was configured – were the battlefields of a “greater war,” a struggle over civilized life that came to a head in the utter destruction of the Great War.

Words still fail to capture the capacity of nation states to pour seemingly limitless numbers of human beings, the resources of the entire world, and the accumulated knowledge of the science and technology into battle spaces of overwhelming destruction. Even if battle spaces were diffuse, as in the eastern theaters of war, the capacity to orchestrate mass-annihilation and extermination was unheard of. The capacity to mobilize and organize and, more so, to maximize the forces of destruction – what the Greeks called *techné* and what we call technopolitics – is the subject of a second conference. Its first focus is on how technopolitics “was done” in battle and at home and what kind of resistance and evasions it generated. The other must be to what effect the rule of necessity and instrumental reason was harnessed; what efforts were made to tame or regulate it; and to what ends it was used. The suspicion, not least among common soldiers, had always been that *techné*, the capacity to maximize force, was an end in itself. In hindsight it appears that there was more purpose to its destructive deployment than meets the eye, but the very capacity for utter destruction also vitiated against what there was to be achieved. The European peace order, the great “invention” of preceding generations, or for that matter, European Empire, was its casualty.

The most overwhelming of all futures of World War I was man-made mass death, and the most difficult task for another century was to order life after “the last days of mankind.” The third conference is dedicated to the memory of Karl Kraus with good reason. He was among the rare observers – they can be found among all belligerents – to capture both the hyperventilating media and the silent hieroglyphics of the war’s major reality: man-made mass death that exceeded all imagination, exhausted ordinary decencies, and threw finely honed cultures of grief and mourning into disarray. What we are concerned with in this conference is the noise of the media in making this war, but also, and more so, the less apparent and, some would say, secret history of mass death and the imprint it left on the moral order of Europe. It is this “shadow of the war” and the spiritual, artistic, and also plain common acts to wallow in destruction, live with it, push it back, and overcome it that agitated Karl Kraus. The subject of this third and final conference on World War I is sensory politics or the politics of sense-security and its main instrument, apperception. Death challenges the sensory order of things and the moral regimes that buttress them. Far from disappearing from view, the unknowable reality of mass death generated both extraordinary agitation and stupefying numbing. It disturbed the sense of time and of being and generated desires and wants that expressed the futures, all possible futures, of the twentieth century. Mass death was a catastrophic “experience.” But this experience, or rather the agitation in the face of it, engendered the most enduring futures of World War I.