WORLD WAR I AND THE COMING OF TOTALITARIAN WARFARE

I. Purpose and overview of lecture

A. This is the beginning of new section of the course: the Age of the Masses (or “coming of mass society,” the “triumph of democracy”, etc.), one that of course I have been preparing you for in the two previous lectures

B. I want to explore further today what such terms imply in terms of the catastrophes that characterize the twentieth century

1. The previous, Victorian period was characterized as one of the “rise of the bourgeoisie,” of liberalism, capitalism, national unification

2. Now we begin to see a shifting of power, a growing influence and "presence" of the lower orders
   a) It is not a dramatic shift and is measured in many subtle or intangible ways

C. I will look at the outbreak of the war as an aspect of mass mobilization, passions of the masses

1. Other aspects are also important: hope for quick victory, new technologies of mass destruction

D. To examine, then, what is meant by “totalitarian warfare” in this context

II. Democracy and mass society

A. Review of points previously made:

B. Like “liberalism” or the “triumph of bourgeoisie” these are terms with wide-ranging and elusive implications

1. Each following lecture will try to give greater texture to them

C. Perhaps the best way of describing the rise of the masses is in terms of “visibility” (recall that I used the word “hegemony” in discussing the rise of the bourgeoisie; that term is less useful in this context)

1. People who were previously “invisible,” or less visible in some sense now come to assume more of a center-stage position
2. Perhaps the best analogy, though a problematic one, is the way that Blacks have become more “visible” in American society in the past twenty years or so
   a) They hardly have come to dominate, but their influence is greater, their visibility higher
   b) The comparison is only suggestive, since Blacks are minority of less than ten percent, while "the masses" in Europe constitute the overwhelming majority of the population

D. A few relatively palpable things can be noted, however, by way of overview

1. Mass vote
   a) By 1914 universal male suffrage is established in most countries of western and central Europe

2. New mass organizations
   a) Most notable: the socialist parties, especially in Germany
   b) Other varieties of religious or non-Marxist “socialist” parties, usually called “Christian social”
   c) In fact, nearly all parties, begin to make efforts to appeal to the masses, in one way or another—even the conservatives, as I have suggested in talking about Bismarck, Disraeli, and Napoleon III

3. New mass journalism and literature
   a) Related to the new mass literacy, made possible through widespread primary education by the turn of the century
   b) Many members of the lower classes now had a smattering of education, could at least read, although they were not “educated” in the more demanding sense of the term
   c) A new kind of literature begins to spread, quite different from “bourgeois” literature of the rest of the century
   d) It is much simpler in themes and language, mostly “escapist”: Key themes were violence, sex, vampires, wild adventures
   e) Absolute pre-requisite: a happy ending
   f) Yellow journalism, based not really on “news” but
rather sensation—in effect, another kind of escapism rather than "hard" information

4. New mass armies
   a) Much larger numbers of men recruited and trained than before
   b) This is often an important “educational experience” for them, and of course has profound implications for war in 1914

III. The “conservatism” of the masses

A. Again, this is a most slippery area

B. The most impressive of the new mass organizations, the socialists, were not conservative, politically—they looked to fundamental change
   1. Even they, however, were proving to be less revolutionary than their official ideologies might lead one to think; reformism was making large inroads
   2. And in culture they were in many regards conservative

C. One clear theme: The masses were by no means so intent on social revolution as was assumed in the early part of the century
   1. At that time, both conservative and liberal thought of universal manhood suffrage as a dangerous idea, put forth only by radicals, by socialists and communists, etc.
   2. Now, conservatives in particular begin to see that conservatism was not necessarily incompatible with popularity among the masses
   3. That meant, however, developing certain new themes, certain new kinds of appeals to the tastes of the masses
      a) Which was done, typically, in the new schools, the army, the newspapers
      b) It also centered around the themes of nationalism, a “new” nationalism, more frenzied, exclusivist, and racist than was the case earlier on
      c) The Dreyfus Affair was only one manifestation of this, as was a kind of related theme: anti-Semitism
         (1) That theme was especially attractive, since the Jews were now portrayed as cosmopolitans, people without country, with
international fidelities—and in fact were mostly on the left

D. The emerging alliance of mass energies and conservative principles of order and authority is a major theme of the twentieth century

IV. The outbreak of war and the response of the masses

A. The left, and socialists in particular, had long opposed war
   1. They often spoke of opposing a war, if it did break out, by calling a general strike
   2. Workers of the world would show their brotherhood, their rejection of “bourgeois” chauvinism

B. But the events of August 1914 showed those words to be hollow
   1. The working class was scarcely less frenzied in its nationalism than the rest of the population
   2. In virtually all countries there was a remarkable explosion of national unity, enthusiasm for war, confidence in victory

C. The mood of these first weeks was movingly captured by a French anarchist
   1. He had ardently agitated against war in the summer of 1914, denouncing it as a monstrous deception, a violation of working-class international solidarity
   2. He, like others in France, had worked for expected mass strikes against the war
      a) But he wrote in his diary, after the proclamations of war:
      b) “On the first of August, stunned, disoriented, and morally reduced to dust, I was loaded into a cattle car with other soldiers, who were endlessly bellowing, at the top of their lungs, ‘To Berlin!, to Berlin!’"
   3. There was similar testimony elsewhere
      a) A German socialist leader later wrote that if he had openly opposed the war in August, he would have been beaten to death by his own working-class followers

V. The expectations of a quick victory: War plans
A. The model of war in nearly everyone’s minds was that of the 1860s and 1870s—six-week wars of drama and decision

B. The expectation of a quick victory was no doubt part of the reason that the enthusiasm was so great

C. For the Germans, furthermore, the notion of a quick victory was linked up to elaborate military plans
   1. Ever since 1894, when the France and Russia had concluded a treaty, German generals had lived under the nightmare of a two-front war
   2. They had thus worked out a special strategy intended to make use of Germany’s special situation and advantages
      a) That is, her position in central Europe, her high level of industrialization, and her excellent lines of internal communication
   3. This special strategy, known as the Schlieffen Plan, looked to an initial, rapid concentration of forces on the west, defeating France
      a) Then Germany would quickly regroup its forces on the east, to defeat slow-mobilizing Russia

D. The French were aware of the Schlieffen Plan, at least in terms of its overall conception, but they did not think it could work
   1. They had their own plan for an offensive (known as “Plan XVII”), striking to the east of the concentration of German forces on the western part of northern France
   2. They would thus break through and head for the German heartland, in powerful show of offensive force

E. The German plan seemed at first to go according to its very tight schedule
   1. German armies raced through Belgium, violating Belgian neutrality, and continued into northern France

F. The French plan, on the other hand, faltered at the Franco-German border

G. By the end of August, the Germans were within 15 miles of Paris, apparently well on their way to repeating their dramatic victory over France in 1871

H. However, there then occurred the so-called “miracle of the Marne”
   1. French forces succeeded in mounting a counter-attack, north of Paris
2. They then pushed the Germans back to the north

I. By Christmas a long front stretched from the English Channel to Switzerland

J. And now the war that was supposed to be over in six weeks was turning into a stalemate, a ghastly war of attrition
   1. Neither side was willing to accept a compromise peace
   2. Over the next years, the lines changed almost not at all—even after gigantic offensives, and appalling losses of men

VI. The new, totalitarian warfare

A. It soon enough became clear just how different this war was from those of the 1860s and 1870s
   1. Within a few weeks after its outbreak, approximately six million men were ready to fight
   2. Many more were being made ready and would see action in the following years

B. When these great hordes of men clashed on the battlefield, thousands, even hundreds of thousands, fell in single battles

C. It was not, however, only a matter of great numbers
   1. It was also the application of modern industrial methods, of mass production and industrial efficiency, of new technologies
      a) These were interconnected: Such great masses of men could not really be brought to the battlefield without new methods
      b) Moving them, clothing them, feeding them, arming them all required new methods
   3. And, as the war heated up, the entire industrial plant of a country had to be directed to the war effort
      a) This was done to an entirely unprecedented extent
      b) The new tools of industrialism providing not only the means of transporting, feeding, clothing
      c) It also provided the armies with new weapons of terrifying destructiveness
      d) Factory discipline, mass production, industrial efficiency were now used to produce death and destruction
VII. The First years of war

A. Yet, in spite of the horrible shock of the front, the bitter disappointments, morale in most armies held in the first years of the conflict
   1. Such was the case even though the armies remained bogged down in trenches

B. It became ever clearer that military technology had developed the defensive over the offensive, to an unexpected and initially misunderstood degree
   1. The trench, surrounded by barbed wire and protected by machine guns, proved practically impermeable

C. This technological advantage of the defensive over the offensive also in part accounts for the special destructiveness of this war
   1. Generals continued to believe in the offensive
      a) They sent wave after wave of troops “over the top,” only to see them die by the thousands, without changing the lines of battle significantly

VIII. Battles at Verdun, the Somme, 1916

A. These battles were especially noteworthy, and horrifying

B. In many regards they were the most ferocious, savage, destructive—and senseless—of any battles fought in modern times, though rivaled by those around Stalingrad in WW II
   1. By July 1916 some 500,000 men had lost their lives at Verdun

C. The battles of 1916, at Verdun and the Somme, attained a level of horror and destructiveness never before attained

D. Yet, by early 1917 the generals were busily planning new, even more ambitious offensives

IX. The turning point of 1917

A. After the battles of 1916, morale was never the same
   1. In the beginning of the year, men continued to fight, but more and more like robots, without enthusiasm or particular bravery

B. More and more, the typical fighting man’s concern was simply survival
1. And for growing numbers of them the unspeakable war began to sink into their spirits, to corrupt and traumatize them

C. By the spring of 1917, a snapping point for the French was reached
   1. The so-called Nivelle Offense provoked a mutiny
   2. It was at first answered by summary executions, but the mutiny then spread
   3. Finally, Pétain, known for his humane concern for his men, was called in
      a) He was able to patch things up, contain the mutiny, partly by making it clear that offensives like the Nivelle Offensive were not going to be tried again

D. In the Christmas weeks of 1917, opposing troops in some areas crossed over the wires to sing Christmas carols together (they had actually done this also in December 1914)

E. But this was of course a year of much bigger events, of crucial importance to the war: the revolution in Russia and the United States' joining the side of the Entente

F. 1917 was the first year in which peace was seriously considered, at least by significant parts of the population
   1. The socialists, in particular, hoped to pressure their governments into a compromise peace
   2. But their efforts, and those of others, finally came to nothing

G. The fundamental problem remained: Neither side was willing to compromise
   1. The Germans would not withdraw, and the French would not accept Germans on their territory
      a) And thus the machine gun and the trenches were the only solution

H. What if peace had been achieved in the summer of 1917?
   1. This is a most intriguing question
   2. There would have been no Bolshevik Revolution
      a) There is little question that the Provisional Government’s decision to continue war was fatal to it (a theme of the next lecture)
   3. The nazi movement, and fascism more generally, almost
certainly would not have gained great popular support
   a) They all thrived on the sense of being cheated, of
      not really being defeated—bringing on a humiliated
      and vengeful nationalism
4. The economic implications of peace would have been
   entirely different, without the notion of reparations and
   “war guilt” etc.
5. In short, the horrors of the Thirties and Forties might
   never have occurred
I. In this light, it is interesting to speculate what might have
   happened if the Americans had never intervened
   1. Their intervention, and the promise of it, was decisive in
      causing France and Great Britain to hold on, to press for
      total victory
      a) Without that hope, a compromise peace might well
         have looked more attractive, almost inevitable in the
         long run

X. The defeat of the Central Powers, 1918

A. The last great German onslaught came in the early spring of
   1918
   1. In certain ways it resembled the attack of August 1914
   2. The key difference was that there was no Russian front
      now to be concerned with, since the Bolsheviks had
      made a separate peace
   3. But there was a fundamental similarity with August 1914
      in the need to deliver a speedy knock-out blow
      a) This time the German hope was to gain victory
         before the Americans had arrived in sufficient
         numbers to make a difference
B. General Ludendorff, who directed the operation, declared that
   he was prepared to lose a million lives in the offensive
C. Again, the Germans came very near to Paris (ca. 40 miles)
   1. But again a counteroffensive, this time of allied French,
      British, and Americans, pushed the Germans back
D. It was the beginning of the end for the Germans: They began a
   long retreat for the rest of the year
   1. In November, a revolution in Germany forced the Kaiser
to abdicate

2. A new government sued for peace; the war was over

XI. The cost of the war and its consequences

A. The consequences of the war will be to a large degree the subject of most of the following lectures—the twentieth century was profoundly and indelibly marked by it

1. The Bolshevik Revolution, the development of Stalinism, fascism, the Depression, even WW II—all can be directly connected to WWI

B. But certain points can be profitably noted here

C. WW I nearly wiped out a large part of a generation of young men in Europe

1. Approximately 10 million young men had been killed

2. Around 20 million had been wounded, often in serious or permanent ways—blinded by gas, limbs amputated, faces horribly disfigured

3. The physical effects were complemented by incalculable psychological ones

   a) Few returned from these years of hell on earth without being profoundly changed—recurring nightmares, depression, withering resentments and hatreds

4. A poet spoke for many others in recalling a gas attack:

   a) Gas! Gas! Quick men! —an ecstasy of fumbling, fitting the clumsy helmets just in time ... But someone out there was yelling out and stumbling and floundering like a man on fire. As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, he plunges at me, sputtering, choking, drowning ... If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace behind the wagon we flung him in, and watch the eyes writhing in his face. If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood come garbling from the froth-corrupted lungs ....

D. Not only human lives were destroyed

1. The war also destroyed fantastic amounts of material wealth

   a) Cities, bridges, roads, factories, churches, cities,
farmland
b) Much of northern France was a moon landscape

2. This enormous destruction of material wealth was in part reflected by the fact that Europe now became a debtor nation
   a) Before 1914 had been the banker of the world

3. Much of this economic leadership was transferred to the United States
   a) Europe was left to lick its wounds

E. Perhaps the most profound consequence is the most difficult to measure or even cogently describe:
   1. The undermining of civilized values, the values of humanism and rationality, the belief in progress
   2. In some ways this theme meshes with the theme of the coming of mass society, or the “revolt of the masses”
      a) Much of “western civilization” had at any rate not been something in which the masses had participated
   3. But it is clear that the brutal and senseless destruction of over four years deeply changed Europe
      a) New trends, with their roots in the prewar years, of the irrationality of life, of disdain for the ideal of humanity, took on a new importance

F. In short, post-war Europe was ripe for a new kind of leadership, one that could exploit mass passions and tastes
   1. One could say that a new “dark age” had begun