Lessons From WWI

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PETER VALE, SEP 13 2013

For a number of reasons I have been thinking a lot about the First World War these past months. One motive has been next year's Centenary of its outbreak but also because the history of the discipline of IR – on which I've been forced to think a bit – is so closely linked with the truly horrific events which ran between 1914 and 1918.

In our age, score-cards seem to matter so much – the most, the best, the biggest: these seem to add to the sheen of places, events, people. But few would regard the scorecard of the First World War as worthy of emulating. Consider it is known as "the War to End All War": 8.5-million soldiers were killed on all fronts – more than 21-million were wounded; civilian deaths ran between 12 and 13-million.

Quite correctly, too, that War was also described as a "World War". Its geographical spread, which had been refracted by colonialism, was on a front far wider than what had ever been previously experienced. So, aside from the European cockpit, the fighting involved Russia, Japan, Africa, both the Near and the Far East, and ultimately the United States. But the latter's near neighbour, Canada, which was a British Colony, had entered the War on August, 5, 1914, a day after Britain declared war on Germany.

Other (more distant places) were touched in a myriad of ways. India, for example, paid GBP 146-million towards the War effort and, in consequence, suffered inflation and shortages. Although this continent, Africa, was spared the worst of its immediate impact, it was deeply affected: more than two million Africans were drafted into various forms of (what has been called) "forced labour" – of these, some 400 000 died of disease and exhaustion. But the fighting, when it took place in Africa, it was mainly between Colonialist in what today is Namibia and Tanzania.

Moreover, too, the magnitude of social disruption caused other forms of social fall-out was remarkable. – so, and quite ironically, most of the 73 incarcerated British Conscientious Objectors who died during the four years of fighting, perished from the influenza which had swept across the world – a development which has been ascribed to the War rather than the failure of public medicine which was only just emerging within medical science.

This events in Syria, particularly the August 21, report that the Asad regime used Chemical Weapons against people in the suburbs of Damascus, of course, also brings to mind the First World War – the origins of the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 are to be found in the use of gas – especially Tear Gas and Mustard Gas – on Western Front. Its effect was famously captured in Wilfred Owen's Poem, *Dulce et Decorum est*, with these three lines,

"As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."

What will IR make of the intriguing parallel between the events in August in Damascus and the events in Flanders? Did the invention of the IR change thinking about wholesale war? What are we to make now of those four-years of "social trauma" that every day brings us to labour in its groves?

We can hope for great answers to these questions, but long experience suggests that deep thinking will be crowded out by the score-card of who is up, and who down.

What will count, of course, is the score-card.

So, and this has already happened over Syria, the loudest voice on the chat-show will emerge as the greatest authority on international issues. Or the strongest lobby-group will become the most respected voice on this (or that) regional issue.

In IR, there will be no place for trying to understand how poets, like Owen, used the English language as an instrument of peace. And we will fail to make the connection between the generation who were lost in the Trenches and the way contemporary capitalism has stripped our young – another generation lost – of hope.

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