World War I: The Legacy
Guest: Hunt Tooley
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WOODS: I pretty much covered, well, to one degree or another, the vexed question of war guilt with Paul Gottfried earlier this year, and I have all my guests for only a limited time. So I want to focus my attention on some other questions. I want to look, first of all, at the long-term consequences of World War I, because there are many disastrous effects that have been sometimes attributed to World War I, and I want to ask you about them one by one.

But before I do that, I want to read to you a comment that I received, and I wonder if you might in turn comment on it. Somebody says, "I absolutely love World War I week," which is my thing that I invented this week, "and I think it can't be overstated how important it is to remind people how horrific war is," etc. And then he said, "But the one thing I would really like to hear is something on the impact that the mass death and economic costs these wars had after they were over. In countries like Germany and France they lost up to 5% of their populations. What was it like in 1919 with almost an entire generation of the most productive people dead? Were there enough people to fill jobs at manufacturing plants? Too many dead farmers to feed the population? What was it like to be a survivor in a country where all your friends and relatives were dead? How did people continue on? I would imagine a country of hollowed-out, soulless shells of human beings who have lost their humanity." What do you have to say about that, Hunt?

TOOLEY: Well, I think it's a terrific question, and whoever posed that question got it all just right in those suggestions. The places that we don't think about so much in thinking about the Western front or something like that. The places that had very little leeway, very little slack in their societies to sustain those kinds of losses. In other words people in eastern Europe, in southeastern Europe, especially Serbia was in the war for so long, and the Ottoman Empire. These had losses that were just absolutely terrific, and they had economies that could ill sustain any kind of recovery in any way. There were 100,000 people in Lebanon alone who starved to death during the war. There were cholera outbreaks attendant to the campaigns in the Middle

East and other places—widespread dysentery, camp fevers of all kinds. So yeah, in fact, part of this is reflected in the relief efforts that are all recorded at the Hoover Institution that were headed up by Herbert Hoover, and the Europe that you see there in the Middle East that you see in these pictures of the relief efforts correspond almost exactly to what the question posed. People were dead in huge numbers. The hunger blockade in Germany also had starved to death something approaching 800,000 people, civilians of course. So it was a very, very grim scene. And we add to this in all the countries that had something like stable currencies before the war, we add that wartime inflation, that was part and parcel of the war with every single country. In other words, it's exploitation of the masses of people, this unjust economic or financial dodge to get money into the government's coffers. That intensified in every country, and so in the wake of the war you get also the destruction of these currencies and the breaking of savings, and yeah, it was an extremely grim picture.

I can also talk about the physical destruction, because just to take not to mention eastern Europe, where there was plenty of physical destruction, but in the west, and the Western front, 300 miles of front, nearly 400 miles, depending on how you measure it, and that front was a swath of land anywhere from 6 to 15 miles wide, the land that was torn up by that shelling on that stationary Western front. And after the war, much of that land was deemed so full of poison, so full of dugouts and caverns dug by the soldiers, so full of unexploded ordinance, that much of that land was just simply red-zoned by the French or Belgian governments. That means that it was deemed useless for any purpose. I have talked to some friends of mine, some colleagues who are environmental scientists, and asked them about the number of carcasses, human and animal, who were destroyed in the course of the war and never really taken to some kind of burial, and this also might well have had with the heavy metals and the decomposing and so forth, this had an impact probably for generations to come. So the scars are pretty deep in a lot of different directions, the physical, and economic, and as your questioner suggests, the moral scars are very, very deep.

WOODS: I want to talk now about what some people attribute to the war—and sometimes they attribute it specifically to Woodrow Wilson's decision to bring the United States into the war, because that seems to have tipped the balance. Maybe it would have turned out that way anyway, but not quite as overwhelmingly as it did.

People will say that as a result of this you got, for example, the Bolshevik Revolution, you got the Nazis, and you got this and that. Let's take this one at a time. What connection, if any, can you see between the war and the Bolshevik Revolution? Of course, we know that the Bolsheviks probably would not have been able to come to power if they hadn't been able to exploit the war issue, but is there anything else there?

TOOLEY: Well, I think so. I think there are some pretty direct effects. For one thing the imperial Russian war effort before the revolutions in 1917 was mismanaged. This was a somewhat huge country, but somewhat backward, industrially fighting this industrial war and sacrificing soldiers to make up for the lack of artillery and motor vehicles and whatnot, and so this was an

especially brutal war for Russian soldiers who saw what nearly all soldiers in all armies began to see during the war: that they were being murdered for some cause that they didn't believe in, some cause of the state that they really had nothing to do with. So the Russian army, especially after the brutal year of 1916 when the Brusilov Offensive managed to kill a million human beings on both sides just in the course of one campaign. The Russian army was demoralized, and this crumbling of the army really, really contributed to the atmosphere of chaos that the Bolsheviks found themselves in. In other words, there was enough instability there that that crumbling in the army gave the Bolsheviks a fertile field, although the Bolshevik Party was a tiny party.

The war contributed in another way. Of course, the German General Staff and the German Foreign Office collaborated to put Lenin into Russia. Take him from Switzerland during the war. He crossed Germany with a contingent of Bolsheviks and a bunch of money that was provided by the Germans, and in this boarded-up, sealed-up train—boarded up so as they crossed Germany they wouldn't foment revolution. The Bolsheviks were deposited at the border of the Russian Empire, and so in that very direct way the war supplied the Bolsheviks to Russia, since most of the Bolsheviks had been exiles, or a lot of them.

So that's important. Lenin made it that way. It was a similar wartime circumstance, and Tom, you know this story very well, about the shipping of Trotsky to Russia from New York City. So in many direct ways, I mean, there are these larger issues, but in many direct ways I think the regime was a precise result. And finally, Lenin took many notes from the command economies of western Europe, in particular, to the German Hindenburg Program, which amounted to a total war economy, and Lenin and the Bolsheviks, the Council of People's Commissars when they took over at the beginning, October 1917, they sat down and said, well, how are we going to run this now that we've taken over the government, how are we going to run the economy? And Lenin said that's no problem, the Germans had pioneered that through the Hindenburg Program. So many of these total war kinds of patterns just transfer themselves, directly in the case of the Bolsheviks for sure.

WOODS: Wow! Very, very interesting stuff. What about the development of the Nazi Party and the popularity of the Nazi Party? The usual explanation is that, and I think there is something to it, that the Nazis wouldn't have had anything to campaign on if there hadn't been a Treaty of Versailles to whip people into a patriotic hysteria, but is there more to the rise of the Nazis that can be set at the foot of World War I?

TOOLEY: Oh, I think so, and I agree with that beginning assessment certainly. There are many direct connections, so many we could talk for a long, long time about that, but just to summarize a few. Hitler was a frontline soldier in the war and came back as a kind of veteran's candidate. When Hitler infiltrated the crackpot party in Munich called the DAP, the German Worker's Party, he was there as an agent of military intelligence, and he found the party so simpatico, it was kind of leftish, but kind of statist, but kind of nationalist, anti-Semitic, kind of

socialist. It had many aspects to it. And Hitler thought, as far as we know, well, I can work with this, and so he left the army and reshaped the party, ousted all the leaders that existed in that party and took it himself and renamed it the NSDAP, so that's a quite direct connection there. Of course, the war made the early Republic of Germany, we call it the Weimar Republic, extremely unstable; until 1924 or 1925 there were coup attempts from the Right and from the Left. The war was at the basis of almost all these things. Of course, the Germans experienced, I have already mentioned inflation. They experienced a great inflation which wiped out a substantial part of the German middle class in terms of destroying their savings—because, of course, in a hyperinflation, you may save $1,000, but if $1,000 can't buy a loaf of bread, then your savings just go up in smoke.

So that also contributed, and it was the wartime inflation. It really began at the beginning of the war for Germany, and indeed, even little bits before that as a result of costs and the military establishment making its way toward the war, but yeah, those are some very direct connections. I think Germans, you've covered the war guilt clause already, but I think that this impacted the way people felt. They thought, well, the other powers were in this war, too. Other people fought this war, too. Why do we get all the blame? And that's how it was sold, of course, by the German government. The government papers in the '20s wanted to drill that in even more because governments don't want—the state doesn't want responsibilities. So it loaded this responsibility onto others. Germans had paid higher taxes because of the reparation payments in Germany. So in the economic chaos, and there was economic chaos in the Weimar Republic, which lasted from 1919 to 1933 when Hitler came to power, and in that time there was economic distress of major proportions up until 1924. One great historian of Germany has called these the Fool's Gold Years, where things seemed pretty good from '24 to '29 and '30, and then after that the Depression hit Germany in full force. So for most of the time the Weimar Republic was economically distressed, and all of these things were directly related to the wartime—a fertile field for Hitler, in other words.

WOODS: Right, no doubt. Now, after the Napoleonic Wars came to a conclusion, the Congress of Vienna treated France fairly liberally, and it seems that they believed that if they did otherwise that France would simply be nursing its wounds and its grievances, and its resentments, and it would simply resume fighting in a generation. Then we contrast that with what happened in Paris after World War I, and of course, we see the exact opposite: there are all kinds of double standards doled out against Germany, the Fourteen Points of Woodrow Wilson are thrown aside. Am I comparing apples with oranges, or is it fair to say that the statesmen of Paris were, let's say, not comparable to the statesmen of Vienna?

TOOLEY: You know, Tom, yes, that's a great question, and here's a little piece of evidence that really, I think, goes a long way. The British Foreign Office said once the United States got into the war, and it became clear to the British that they would win, maybe in years, but that they would win, they had one of the diplomats who was also a historian put together a study of the Congress in Vienna. Because they looked at it and said, well, you know, France, and they told

exactly the case that you've described, that France was treated more or less as an equal in a few brief years as back in the fold of the great states and all that, and they didn't take a lot of territory away or anything. And the British Foreign Office diplomat was charged with writing a history so that it could be studied so that that would not be repeated, so that somebody wouldn't get soft at Paris and let the Germans in some way.

WOODS: Wow! I did not know that.

TOOLEY: So the comparison is exact. These are two great pieces, and one went one way, and the other quite intentionally went the other way. Another point of comparison would be that at the Congress of Vienna, the French were there on the spot. They were in the meetings and so forth and so on, and part of that is owing to the great statesman, the great crafty statesman Talleyrand and his abilities, but they were there and represented. During the Paris Peace, not only were there no Germans represented at the conference, but no German was permitted to have a visa to come into France during the entire period of the conference except in very special cases, and in the cases, the three occasions when the German conference, the peace delegation traveled to Paris to interact for a day or so with the peace conference, and then went back. So there is no sense in which the Germans had any representation at the conference except to just go there and receive the results, and then come back and respond to the results, and then finally to come back and sign the results. So Germans were not even allowed in the country.

WOODS: That's just unbelievable to me. I know we could do a whole show on this topic, but as our last topic I do want to just mention something about the modern Middle East and World War I. After the war you get chunks of what had been the Ottoman Empire apportioned to the various Western powers to be administered as League of Nations mandates, presumably on the way to full self-government and sovereignty. How does that affect us today? Is there any legacy to that that remains today?

TOOLEY: Oh, I think it's all in the news every day. Our multiple dealings with Iraq over the last 20 years all go directly back to the British mandate of Iran and their shaping of that. The British also, of course, controlled the mandates of Palestine, and Transjordan, and of course, if you combine the British, let's say quasi-colonial occupation of Palestine with the Balfour Declaration that had promised a Zionist state within Palestine, and voila, you have the conditions that are just clearly in the newspaper today, and yesterday, and tomorrow, so those issues are very much the same. You get the French in Syria and Lebanon—this pattern of chaos and warfare. You know, the French—there was an Arab King of Syria in 1920 driven out by a French army, and the French ran Syria, and it was not at peace for the next seven years. There were revolts. There was internal chaos. There were French armies fighting huge battles in the land of Syria. So the impact there was huge. During the war, the British carried out a Mesopotamian campaign that was designed to protect the port/refinery island of Abadan which is, of course, much a part of modern history in the Iran/Iraq wars and whatnot, and so all of these issues, to tell you the truth, there's pretty much a direct continuum for all of these issues from World

War I to today. There's not much of a continuity from before the war because, frankly, under the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Empire, things were pretty peaceful. On the whole our image of the Middle East as a place where people are always killing each other, and roaming gangs, and murderous dictators and all of that, that's really a feature of the post-World War I period. The period before that, not so much. We can name some civil wars, and we can name some massacres, and there was religious violence at certain times, but on the whole for five or six or 700 years if you tracked back in those empires, there's was much, much less killing and mayhem and torture, and the rulers had much, much less power. It was when the state, the modern sort of Western state that then tried to come in and organize and state build and so forth, and when the locals adopted that model, that these atrocious events really came into place. So yeah, I think the war is on every page of the newspaper today just in the way that we're talking about—about Syria, whether we're talking about Gaza, whether we're talking about Iran and its desire to be independent when it was dominated by the British for so long and so forth and so on. I think it's very much a present kind of thing for us.

WOODS: Well, all you listeners out there, if you feel compelled, if you feel drawn to learn more about World War I as we make note of its 100th grisly anniversary, then you can hardly do better than *The Western Front: Battleground and Home Front in the First World War* by our guest, Hunt Tooley. Hunt, you have done us quite a service. I hope we can come back to you as the months and years go on as we continue to commemorate 100 years of this terrible disaster.