Episode 575: World War I's Pivotal Year, A Century Later

Guest: Hunt Tooley

WOODS: You've got a new edition, a second edition of your book. It's now called *The Great War: Western Front and Home Front*, and I love this book. It's tremendous.

TOOLEY: That is so kind of you, Tom. Thank you.

WOODS: Oh, look, any time people ask me for what's a good book on World War I, I always say read Hunt Tooley's book.

TOOLEY: Oh, terrific.

WOODS: More people need to listen to me, you know? They listen to the show; I don't know if they always take my advice. That's my advice: read your book, not only because the scholarship is great and you're one of us, so to speak, but also because it's really well written, which is one of the reasons you got it published by Palgrave. It's a real achievement. I'm really glad to — also to have your nice inscription on the new second edition, so I appreciate that.

Let's talk about some episodes in 1916, because it is 100 years later. The United States of course is not in the war yet, but that doesn't mean there aren't things going on related to the war, there isn't controversy.

TOOLEY: Right. Well, you know, Tom, that I feel that 1916 is the real crucial point of the war. It's the point when things changed. There's a great line from one of the earlier historians of the war who says this is when the deeper forces broke through, and it's so true. It's when the Bolshevik Revolution is set up; it's when United States entry is set up, and so it's like this whole range of changes, including internal domestic changes in all the belligerent countries, that make it such a crucial, kind of pivotal year.

WOODS: What exactly is going on on the Western Front in 1916? It has bogged down — certainly it's already bogged down before 1916.

TOOLEY: Oh yeah, 1915 was in effect a year of experimentation in an attempt to stop the bogging down or the stalemate and to attack and press through, and it reached the green fields beyond and all those things. But what happens is they take all these

techniques that they kind of invented, horrible techniques undermining the opposite trenches, flamethrowers, all kinds of things, blowing up the other side with tons of artillery shells, and they put those all together for these huge 1916 battles, especially on the Western Front, at Verdun beginning in February, and then a little later in the year in the early summer of 1916 in the midsummer July at the Battle of the Somme. And then meanwhile there's also the Battle of Jutland that takes place as the only really great sea battle of the Western Front. So these huge battles really up the ante for everyone, and that's I think the real significance of 1916 for Western civilization as a whole.

WOODS: Set the stage for us by explaining what the Woodrow Wilson policy was as the leader of a neutral nation. The United States was positioning itself as a neutral country. It obviously was not an active belligerent, but there was something fishy about the way Wilson discriminated between actions taken by Germany and actions taken by the British.

TOOLEY: Indeed, indeed. We were a very unneutral neutral, and this is seen in many ways. One of the additions I made to this edition of the book is a little bit more in the way of examining the financial background, so that as we are lavishing on the Entente Powers, on the British and the French and their allies, loans and helpful mechanisms to purchase items in the United States, we simply cut off the other side from any similar considerations. And we allowed the British to subsidize newspapers all over the United States with a sort of pro-British line, a sort of anti-German line, and the administration was very much a kind of unneutral neutral. The so-called neutrality policy only went so far. In fact, it hardly went anywhere. We didn't get into the war, but still, in all it was a very unneutral policy of Wilson and his administration.

WOODS: Now, given that your book is primarily a book about — you know, it's a book about the powers that were fighting in the war, so it does talk about the United States, but a little bit before 1917 and much more after 1917, so it's not a U.S.-centered telling of the story, so I almost feel asking you about this. But what can you say about the Gore-McLemore Resolution? Was that 1916?

TOOLEY: Yes, and when this resolution was passed, of course one of the problems of the war was that it basically sort of rewrote international law, and the British claims for the sea were confusing, and the German efforts to oppose the British blockade, which was essentially illegal in international law, also made for confusing issues. So everything gets a little bit mixed up. I mean, the Germans were warning American citizens as early as 1915 not to go on British passenger ships, because those passenger ships were armed. And when the Gore Resolution warned Americans to not travel on these armed British merchant ships and passenger ships, then, I don't know, it was a wise thing to keep them from, as you say, as a libertarian proposition. But there was basically nothing about this war that was libertarian from the beginning to end. It was at all levels an aggrandizement of state power. So yeah, I think the worst of the evils is a question here.

WOODS: 1916 is also, again if I'm remembering my chronology correctly, the year of the so-called Sussex Pledge that the Germans made I guess to the U.S., and it had to do with the — let's just state the policy. The Germans had this submarine policy that they felt like they could sink enemy ships, and this could mean that some civilians would perish, but there view is that's the British's fault, because they run around putting neutral flags on their belligerent ships.

TOOLEY: Right.

WOODS: But with the case of the *Sussex*, this was a case where I guess at least one American either was killed or injured, and the American government protested, and so the Germans made a pledge for the future.

TOOLEY: Yes, correct. And so this essentially led to what we call restricted submarine war. Actually, the whole issue of the submarines is, as you point out, it's complicated. In a sense, the old sea laws were based on a premise of ships on the surface of the sea, and in the beginning those submarines were sort of held to this international system or international understanding, so they would surface and demand that a given British or other Allied ship surrender. And the fact of the matter is that especially these early subs simply didn't dive down the way we see subs diving suddenly on movies, and if they surfaced to demand a surrender and then the British or French ship fired on that submarine, you know, it's going to take many minutes, 10 or 15 minutes to be completely submerged. So that was the main issue: they could be blown out of the water.

So they started unlimited submarine warfare, and in disguise they torpedoed ships that often, not always, they knew to be military ships or they knew to be carrying armaments. Some submarine commanders in Germany were more aggressive than others, and some surfaced sometimes, and some picked up survivors, and some didn't. I mean, there was a range of activities, a range of behaviors in those German submarine commanders.

But of course, on the American side, Wilson had his alter ego, Colonel House, in Europe, working on this kind of issue, and that's the origin of this Sussex Pledge, to get the Germans to say no, we won't carry out these kinds of policies with regard to the United States. Of course, the Americans lost in the *Lusitania* had already been lost. That was a long time before. So yeah, another step of 1916.

And then of course what compounds this — and I don't want to go on and on with this, necessarily, but just to make a final point — what compounds this is then at the end of the summer, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, the two generals, were brought from the Eastern Front, where they had been very successful, and the commander in chief in the west, Falkenhayn, was moved from office and moved elsewhere in the army. And Hindenburg and Ludendorff came over, having experimented with a kind of — I don't know, you could almost say war communism in the eastern occupied areas that they had conquered, and they came back and sort of instituted that in the west, and part

of their policy was hardcore, total war kinds of defense, and they reinstituted then the unlimited submarine warfare.

WOODS: Let's say something about the German population in 1916, the civilian population, because by 1916, the starvation blockade being imposed by the British was beginning to take a very substantial toll on the public, and it seems, by the way, as if that's one of the factors leading into the military decision to push for the resumption of unlimited submarine warfare at the beginning of 1917. Something's got to be done here, right?

TOOLEY: Right.

WOODS: One way or another, we've got to do something.

TOOLEY: Certainly. The British blockade eventually would kill about 800,000 Germans, and that blockade of course continued on after the war. It was kept in place for a couple of years. Germans were malnourished. In the midst of that great inflation that we talk about very often, there's also the fact that, you know, most people were hungry in the midst of all that and couldn't get food. But yes, conditions were worse and worse as a result of the blockade, and indeed, it's this winter, the 1916-17 winter that the Germans always call the Turnip Winter, because basically turnips were what most normal people, average, everyday people had to eat, unless they had some special food source. But in any case, turnips got to be the main item on the menu for many people.

So yeah, things were in a dire situation. This brings us to this point: 1916 really was the period of time when the war of attrition really became the main motor of this. And you know, that's from the very beginning in February, when Falkenhayn launched this assault on Verdun. He said, you know, I don't think we can move the French; we won't take very much of this Western Front, but we can bleed the French white. We can just kill more of them than they kill of us, and in the end, maybe we'll be the survivors. So it's, again, this same kind of attritional thinking that really comes to the fore in these 1916 battles.

WOODS: Can you give us maybe a bird's eye overview of the key belligerents, of each belligerent country, what's basically going on with each belligerent country as of 1916?

TOOLEY: Oh yeah, sure. Of course the original Entente consisted of — that is the side that got to be called the Allies. In America they're more often called the Allies. We call them the Entente, because this alliance formed up earlier before the war, but it was of course Russia, France, and Britain, along with Belgium, which was invaded by the Germans to open the war, and it was a war of invasion in that sense. The Russians also invaded Germany. But there's the Belgians on that side, and there still was a Belgian army in the field and a Belgian government in operation, though only a tiny bit of Belgium remained outside of German occupation. Also occupied was northern France.

The Russians in the war — and this is a huge part of the war, of course the Eastern Front — and the Russians in the war were likewise engaged in a war of attrition. In fact, 1916 is the time of the biggest Russian offensive, called the Brusilov Offensive, and in terms of bleeding dry the countries involved, it was an offensive basically against Austria-Hungary. And in this one single campaign, a million men died in total — in fact, a bit more than that. So we have probably 2 million people wounded, maimed, etc., and then a million dead on both sides in that one single campaign. It's a very remarkable kind of thing. So again, these huge battles of 1916 lead to something else, and in the Russian case, this Brusilov Offensive really sort of ended the good will of the Russian army, the willingness to fight and so forth, and that leads us directly to the Bolshevik Revolution the next year.

But, oh yes, and of course Italy was fighting its own huge battles in 1916. In the First World War, the Italians were on the Entente side, the side of Britain and France, fighting both Austrians and then German forces. All these societies engaging in inflationary financing, engaging in robbing Peter to pay Paul, engaging in intervention in the greatest degree. So it's kind of an experiment in modern governmental finances what we see here.

But yeah, the war very much deepens in this period. We're about to get other powers engaged in — I haven't even mentioned the Ottoman Empire, which is fighting the British on two different fronts at this point in desperate battles. Actually, the Ottomans were winning in Mesopotamia at this time. So it's quite a picture. It's a picture of chaos, of increasing — it's a kind of Higgsian moment, in the sense of Robert Higgs' theory from his great book on *Crisis and Leviathan*. It's a moment when governments are in the war, they get challenged, and of course their solution is always to bring about more government. So these kinds of processes that we know from fairly weekly occurrences, these happen big time in the year of 1916 and the year to follow.

WOODS: Were there any peace initiatives put out by anybody during this period?

TOOLEY: Well, yes, there were a number of peace initiatives. Actually, Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points were part of theoretically a peace initiative. The contents of the Fourteen Points were highly problematic in many ways, but certainly that was what Europeans thought of as a peace initiative, and this is what Colonel House thought of himself as doing part of the time, as trying to establish some sort of a peace.

There were other individuals. There were peace movements within the international Left to some degree, but you know, even the social democrats, the socialist parties in Europe had for the most part become kind of like modern social democrats; that is to say they were nationalists and sort of war and welfare purveyors, as well. There were some initiatives that came from the Vatican, of course, to try to stop the war, as there are nearly every war.

WOODS: Yeah, I'm interested in that, because I think Benedict XV — my sense is he felt like this wouldn't just be a lot of platitudes about peace, that he really thought he might be able to be an honest broker.

TOOLEY: I think so, and again, I think the Vatican has played that role in many of the huge conflicts. I'm thinking back to the Thirty Years' War, when, in fact, there was in fact a successful peace initiative. It took a long time to effect, but it certainly worked. But yes, I think that Benedict had a very clear and rational view of what was going on, and of course, there were Catholics on both sides of the conflict, obviously, and Catholics killing Catholics, and it just didn't make any sense. Of course, like all these other peace initiatives, it foundered on these nationalist, kind of raging nationalist, I don't know, you might say systems of salvation that emerged instead.

You know, as I mention this, this brings me to one of the recent books on World War I whose research I incorporate into the new edition of *The Great War*, of my book, and that is a great book by Philip Jenkins, who is a historian of religious thought and the modern world also, working in an institute at Baylor University. And he in the last year has put out a great book, called *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*. And you know, one of the points that he makes is that there was religion — I think it's really new research, and I was interested to increase my coverage of what happened from a religious standpoint in World War I. I mean, everybody claimed on the surface, "*Gott mit uns*" — "God with us," you know, God is with us and on our side.

But Jenkins goes into this in book-length form, and it is a fascinating study of the ways in which people's religious habits were then in a sense altered by the breaking up of some of the older patterns and the forming of new allegiances. And the new allegiances don't just go to the state, but also to a number — well, he points out, sort of, you might say fundamentalist-type, I would almost say kind of crusading-type religions. He's particularly interesting on the Middle East, and how the breakup of the Ottoman Empire really turns out to be an originator of the radical elements of Islam that are so prevalent today. I mean, it's just after the war that the Muslim Brotherhood starts in Egypt, and so forth and so on. So I'll give him I think a well-deserved plug here. It's an excellent book and really, really food for thought.

WOODS: I'd like to ask you a little bit about the way that the historiography of the war has changed over the years, but before I do that, let's just pause for a message.

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As I said, I'm interested in the way historians looked at the war has evolved, and related to that, I'm interested in what makes the second edition of your book different from the first. Has there been — when did your first edition come out?

TOOLEY: That was 2003, so we're looking at a period of 13 years. And yeah, it's a period in which I think many things have changed in our whole thinking — when I say, "our whole thinking," I mean society's thinking about the state. I think that on the

whole, though libertarians have actually effected great gains and classical liberals have effected great gains in kind of talking to society and kind of engaging the society, I think on the whole we have to say that the warfare-welfare state, this whole enterprise of perpetual war for perpetual peace has gained on us all. Its nature is that it has to keep on growing, so I think that's impacted some of the historiography.

I think that there are many books that have come out since 2003, in which mainstream historians have sort of decided to take a kind of neoconservative look at the war, a tough look at the war. Yes, who cares about the brutalization; it was a war that had to be won at all costs, and it was a war that was a good war for us to fight, because it put America in a position of what it later became. So there are a number of works of American scholars who take that kind of tough, neoconservative position. And to tell you the truth, British scholarship too. A number of the recent works — Hew Strachan's great book — and it is actually a series of books on the war; it's a massive work — but it is written from this sort of power of the state perspective.

So I think there very much needs to be a case of the kind made by John Mosier in his 2001 book on the Great War, and in this new edition of my book — a case to be made that this war was not about some Americans hating some Germans or some Lithuanians hating some Galician Poles. It was not about that at all, because the people on the battlefield really didn't have any cause to hate each other. In fact, they had a lot in common in many, many cases. It was only the states involved that promoted these wars. So that's one direction of historiography.

I think there've been some good works done. I've just mentioned the Philip Jenkins book, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*. You know, I like very much the book by American historian Nina Mjagkij, which is a book about African Americans in World War I and their attempts to kind of, from Booker T. Washington to W.E.B Du Bois, to kind of do what the Irish did. Well, let's fight for the British and show them that we're good scouts, and then maybe they'll give us rights. And in the case of the African Americans, it worked out even worse than it did for the Irish.

So there was this seduction of war as the fulfillment of our wildest dreams, as Murray Rothbard talked about so eloquently in that older article from the 1970s, "War is Fulfillment." And that was just so seductive to everybody. But I think Nina's book and Philip Jenkins' books, I think they get at something that's deeper, so I do think there's excellent scholarship emerging here that's very worthwhile and very helpful to people who are affiliated with the cause of liberty, people who believe in the original founding principles of many of the Founding Fathers, people who are Jeffersonians, classical liberals, libertarians. So I think there's been some very good stuff.

And I tried to put as much of that as I could into the book. I've rewritten a good many sections. I've added some sections. As I mentioned, I deal more with religion than I did before. I deal a little bit more with the African American picture, partly relying on Nina Mjagkij's book and some others. And so I've also tried to bring it up to date, and a lot of people have made comments over time, and so I've expanded it a little bit.

Palgrave didn't — you know, these book publishers are maybe not as generous with the pages as they might be, and so they didn't give me a whole lot of space to expand, but a little bit.

You know, another thing that I like better about this edition of the book than I did about the first edition is that I did get them to allow me some graphic latitude, and so we put more maps into this, some very fine maps, which we actually found from a wonderful immediate post-war book, back when people knew how to make great maps for books. And so we were able to have permission to put those in. I put in a lot of photographs. There are several photographs, in any case, and cartoons from the period, so I think it's a more attractive book in some ways. And I think those — I worked really hard to have the cartoons and the graphics tell a little bit of a side story as you go through the book, so I think it's on the whole a better edition, a little more reader friendly, user friendly, maybe — at least that's how I've tried to make it.

WOODS: I don't know if it's possible — I want to want to close with this question. I don't know if it's possible to determine this, but is there any way to assess in which country or countries morale was the highest in 1916?

TOOLEY: That's a great question.

WOODS: I don't know how you would measure that. Obviously not by political statements, because every leader's going to tell you that it's going great, right, so it's hard.

TOOLEY: You know, there've been a couple of studies in France that dealt with this question interestingly through the school systems of the country, because they had school principals sort of talking about what their students were saying. I mean, it's almost like a reporting on what people were saying. And the results are that they can kind of track the number of, you know, sort of negative, in their sense, anti-war comments and things like that. And so it is a very interesting study, and you can kind of track that. So France, I think we can conclude from these studies, their morale was not going up. I mean, they were getting pretty sickened by the whole thing.

Of course the Russian morale was on its way down. I'm now engaged in a study and have been for the past few years, international study in the enemy alien movement that immediately appeared, and not really appeared before World War I started, but immediately on the outbreak everyone started rounding up citizens who were considered untrustworthy or those citizens of other countries, say Germans living in Britain, they all rounded them up. But everybody did the same thing.

And in that connection, I went through a massive group of Austrian files in the Austrian state archives a couple of years ago, and you know, I think, although everybody's morale was going down, I think as far as the war goes the Austrians kind of kept up a good front as much as anybody. They had a whole agency to assess who was reliable and who was not, and so in those documents you do find some indications I think about general sort of morale, and I think the Austrians had pretty good morale. I think Italy

did not. Maybe Canada's morale was better; I don't know. Maybe that's your answer, Tom. It could be that the Canadians were still on the upside of things, so that would be my guess, but this is all just shooting from the hip.

WOODS: Well and of course American morale was great, because they thought surely no president will be stupid enough to drag us into this thing, so everything's going fun.

TOOLEY: Well, there you go, yes. Absolutely, yeah.

WOODS: You know, next year is likely to be a busy year for you; at least, I hope, because it'll be 100 years since the entry into the war, and there'll be I hope a lot of people interested in that, in observing that 100-year anniversary, and you no doubt will have a lot to say, and we'll all have a lot to say, but you will actually have something really, super informed to say because this great book represents your work over the years, *The Great War: Western Front and Home Front*. I'm going to link to it at TomWoods.com/575. I urge people to read it. You will enjoy it, and you will learn a lot, and there aren't that many books you can say both of those things about, so I'm glad about that, and I appreciate your time today, Hunt. Thanks so much.

TOOLEY: Tom, thank you so much. It's so great to be on your show again, and thanks so much for your kind words and the conversation too.