

World War I: A Great War Under the “Condition of Democracy”

Adam Tooze

Columbia University

April 2015

Rough Draft

In the English language at the opening of the 20th century, the concept (der Begriff) of democracy was not yet a label reserved for a settled constitution. It could also be used to designate a popular force or body of opinion.¹ In the lexicon of a reformer like Lloyd George, “British democracy” designated the political supporters of radical liberalism and labour. This striking fact of Begriffsgeschichte can be read in two ways. Clearly it was true that democracy in the early twentieth century was far from being an achieved reality, in Britain as elsewhere. For those historians who seek to minimize the extent of progress towards “Western democracy” and argue that it emerged in fully fledged form only after 1945, the important thing to emphasize are the limits on the prewar franchise. Before 1918 less than 60 percent of British men could vote.² But one could also take this another way. As the 20th century and the 21st century were to amply demonstrate a democratic constitution does not guarantee the energy of democratic politics. If the substance of democracy is pluralistic political contestation by engaged citizens, the statistics of enfranchisement are a very partial measure of democratization. Liberal democratic complacency can function as an antipolitics machine. In 1914, by contrast, the very term “democracy” still had an oppositional edge. Democracy was not an established fact, it was the rallying cry of those around the world who wanted to make it so. The question that this essay poses is how this dynamic political force field was entwined with the Great War that broke out in August 1914.

I

¹ A. Chadwick, *Augmenting Democracy: Political Movements and Constitutional Reform during*

² H.G.C. Matthews, R.I. McKibbin and J.A. Kay, “The franchise Factor in the Rise of the labour Party”, *English Historical Review* XCI (1976), 723-752.

In the early 20th century, democratization was a contested trend in which we can see both intensifying and dispersing tendencies. Feminism and socialism were powerful forces demanding extension and intensification. Geoff Eley captures these energies in his history of democracy in Europe written from the left.³ The quintessential Lib-Lab alliance was in Britain, where between 1905 and 1918 the convergent forces of radical liberalism, reforming welfarism, organized labour, Irish nationalism and suffragism would transform the constitution. But it is important not to cast the net too narrowly and to identify democratization exclusively with “the left”. There were “forces of movement” on all sides. And the relationship between the achievement of “progressive” constitutional change and the objectives of left-wing politics was not straightforward. The populist upsurge in the United States triggered by the depression of 1893 and figureheaded by William Jennings Bryan shook the political establishment, but it also contained within it powerful strands of xenophobia.⁴ Christian Democrats and welfare activists of every stripe all contributed towards the pressures for the political incorporation of the masses. Conservative speculation that giving women the vote would help to neutralize the radicalism of working men helped to universalize the franchise. Even in previously conservative catholic countries such as Austria (1918), Poland (1919) and Ireland (1923) the aftermath of the war saw the vote extended to women. Indeed, in 1919 Pope Benedict XV abruptly reversed the Vatican anti-suffrage stance and actively supported votes for Catholic women. Likewise it was conservatives who extended votes to women in the aftermath of World War I in Belgium (1919) and Canada (1921) and the Netherlands (1922).

Amongst the most vociferous and obstreperous popular actors in many countries in the early 20th century were popular nationalists. Even if their inclinations were anti-left and authoritarian, the “objective” effect of movements like the pangermans was to mobilize, energize and contest authority.⁵ This was true

³ G. Eley *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford OUP 2002).

⁴ Joseph Gerteis and Alyssa Goolsby, “Nationalism in America: The Case of the Populist”, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Apr., 2005), pp. 197-225

⁵ Geoff Eley, “Reshaping the Right: Radical Nationalism and the German Navy League, 1898-1908” *The Historical Journal* Vol. 21, No. 2 (Jun., 1978), pp. 327-354.

as much of Imperial Germany as it was of Japan, where the unsatisfactory Treaty of Portsmouth produced an outburst of unprecedented national protest against the establishment “sell out”. The Hibiya Park incident in September 1905 ushered in a prolonged period of popular rioting and protest that culminated in the convulsive rice riots of 1918 which felled the wartime government and ushered in the first government led by a commoner in Japanese history.⁶

The complex ambiguities of democratic energy in the Anglo-American sphere are powerfully captured by a work such as Lake and Reynolds on the *Global Colour Line*.⁷ They show how emphatic notions of democracy circulated between the United States and the Commonwealth of the British Empire, but also how these were circumscribed by a powerful commitment to racial exclusion and an emphatic notion of “Whiteness”. This framed the enfranchisement of women in New Zealand on the same basis as men in 1893 and in Australia in 1901. It was no less marked in the “new freedom” proclaimed by Wilson’s progressive administration from 1913.

But though the constellation of political forces was particular and complex in each case, the remarkable thing in the decades before 1914 was the sheer scale of change literally across the world. Indeed, so inescapable did the imperative seem to be that one might speak, borrowing from Michael Geyer and Charles Bright’s concept of a “condition of globality”, of a “democratic condition”.⁸ As the militant suffragist Millicent Fawcett put it to a triumphant Suffragist and Labour rally in the spring of 1917: “The result of” Britain’s franchise reform “was an illustration of the deathless energy and vitality of the suffrage movement.” The discussion about electoral expansion “had been initiated by an anti-suffragist, presided over by an anti-suffragist and consisted at first of fifty percent anti-suffragists; though the brew

⁶ Andrew Gordon, “The Crowd and Politics in Imperial Japan: Tokyo 1905-1918” *Past & Present* No. 121 (Nov., 1988), pp. 141-170.

⁷ Marilyn Lake, Henry Reynolds. *Drawing the Global Colour Line. White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge CUP, 2008).

⁸ Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, “World History in a Global Age” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 100, No. 4 (Oct., 1995), pp. 1034-1060.

seemed distinctly anti-suffrage, when the tap was turned - suffrage came out."⁹ The methods and ingredients were varied but the results were increasingly the same.

Qualified manhood suffrage multiplied the number of voters in Belgium tenfold in 1893 after a wave of mass strikes.¹⁰ After four years of disruptive parliamentary argument a conservative government in the Netherlands introduced a dramatically expanded franchise in 1896.¹¹ Women were enfranchised along with men in Finland in 1907 and Norway in 1913. This followed a process of general democratization in Norway, which moved to direct elections on the basis of universal suffrage between 1898 and 1905. Though full universal suffrage did not come until 1918, Sweden's bicameral constitution was democratized in 1909. Secret ballots and fully democratic elections for local government were introduced in Denmark in 1901 and 1908.¹²

Bismarck was one of the first conservatives to attempt to use universal manhood suffrage as a weapon against liberalism in the German Empire. As the forces of political Catholicism and social democracy expanded it would backfire seriously. At the turn of the century the conservative complexion of government in Germany depended above all on the qualified voting systems that were still the norm in the member states of the Empire. But here too the pressure for change was relentless. Electoral reform was carried out in Baden, Wuerttemberg and Bavaria between 1904 and 1906. Saxony oscillated back and forth between more or less extensive franchise, triggering gigantic suffrage demonstrations in 1910.¹³ In 1910 Prussia too witnessed huge demonstrations demanding a reform of its notorious three-class franchise.

⁹ S.S. Holton *Feminism and Democracy. Women's Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1986), 149.

¹⁰ Maurice Vauthier, "The Revision of the Belgian Constitution in 1893" *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Dec., 1894), pp. 704-729.

¹¹ Jan Verhoef, "The rise of national political parties in the Netherlands 1888-1913" *International Journal of Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 1/2, Aspects of Nation-Building in Northwestern Europe (SPRING-SUMMER 1974), pp. 207-221

¹² Adam Przeworski "Conquered or Granted? A History of Suffrage Extensions" *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Apr., 2009), pp. 291-321.

¹³ James Retallack "'What Is to Be Done?' The Red Specter, Franchise Questions, and the Crisis of Conservative Hegemony in Saxony, 1896-1909" *Central European History* Vol. 23, No. 4 (Dec., 1990), pp. 271-312.

Between 1896 and 1907 the Austrian constitution was democratized with the abolition of class voting and universal manhood suffrage. A rather more ambiguous democratization in Hungary between 1906 and 1908 weighted voting rights so as to favor speakers of Hungarian.¹⁴ In 1910 elections on the basis of separate constituencies were introduced in Bosnia Herzegovina the latest addition to the Habsburg Empire.

In Italy reformists had long debated the relative merits of progressing towards full enfranchisement by way of the immediate extension of voting rights or the slow reforming progress of mass education. In a remarkable volte face on 18 March 1911 Liberal PM Giolitti declared to the chamber:

“I believe that today an enlargement of the franchise cannot be postponed any longer. Twenty years after the last electoral reform, a big revolution has happened in Italy, which has produced a vast progress in the economic, intellectual and moral condition of the popular classes (...) I don't think that an exam on how easily a man can use the 24 letters of the alphabet should constitute the question to decide if he has the attitude to evaluate the big issues that interest the popular classes”.¹⁵ Nor did Giolitti face serious opposition from conservative opposition leader Sidney Sonnino. Sonnino professed himself in favor of universal suffrage on Bismarckian grounds: “It is only from universal suffrage that the government can achieve the strength to represent and protect the general interest, which is continuously endangered by the particular interests of individuals, localities and small and egoistic groups.” Indeed, Sonnino would even have been ready to support votes for women. The MP and sociologist Gaetano Mosca was in a minority in his advocacy of an overtly elitist position that opposed the inclusion of millions of uneducated voters on grounds of their incompetence.

For the advocates of democracy it was mobilization and inclusion that would raise the educational level of the population at large. In Bulgaria from 1900 onwards the lock grip of the elite was challenged by the upsurge of socialist and agrarian parties, which by 1908 were regularly scoring a combined 20-30 percent of the vote.¹⁶ Romania's elite too were under pressure to widen the elitist base of their political system. In 1914, following the Balkan war, the Romanian liberal government of Bratiano drafted a constitution based on manhood suffrage that would form the basis for comprehensive enfranchisement after the war. In 1909, Greece's staid elite politics were convulsed

¹⁴ W.F. Dodd, “Constitutional Developments in Foreign Countries During 1908 and 1909” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Aug., 1910), pp. 325-349.

¹⁵ Quoted in http://politics.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/19600/enfranchisement_nyu.pdf

¹⁶ R. J. Crampton, *A Short History of Modern Bulgaria* (Cambridge CUP 1987)

by the Goudi coup, which opened the door to Venizelos's liberal reform movement and dramatic constitutional revision.¹⁷

Not every one of these developments was marked by a dramatic change of the franchise, but in Daniel Ziblatt's helpful terminology they marked important "democratization episodes".¹⁸ Nor were such "episodes" confined to the North Atlantic or Europe. Between the election of Jose Batlle y Ordonez as President of Uruguay in 1903 and the Constituent Assembly election of 1916 a modern polity was shaped out of a tense stand off between the urban working class of Montevideo and provincial ranching interests. It provided not only a liberal franchise, but extensive welfare provision. In Colombia in 1910 the hegemonic conservative party undertook electoral reform that allowed the liberal opposition to gain parliamentary representation for the first time.¹⁹ The literacy qualification on voting was abolished in Costa Rica in 1912. In the same year in Argentina, the richest Latin American nation, a self-confident conservative elite determined to outflank an anarchist minority by introducing comprehensive electoral reform. As a result electoral participation surged from 21 to 69 percent of those eligible to vote, setting the stage for a shift in power from the conservative party to Yrigoyen's UCR.²⁰

Nor did political empowerment in the early twentieth century come only in the form of far-sighted elite concessions. In 1908 General Porfirio Diaz, long-term dictator of Mexico, sensing the "spirit of the age" announced to an American journalist that he considered his country ripe for democracy and promised contested elections in 1910.²¹ He had not reckoned with the forces that would be unleashed. His effort to rig the subsequent poll resulted in 1910 in a convulsive period of revolution and civil war.

¹⁷ Mark Mazower, "The Messiah and the Bourgeoisie: Venizelos and Politics in Greece, 1909-1912", *The Historical Journal* Vol. 35, No. 4 (Dec., 1992), pp. 885-904.

¹⁸ D. Ziblatt, "How did Europe democratize?", *World Politics* 58 (January 2006), 311-338.

¹⁹ Eduardo Posada-Carbó, "Limits of Power: Elections Under the Conservative Hegemony in Colombia, 1886-1930" *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 77, No. 2 (May, 1997), pp. 245-279.

²⁰ James W. McGuire "Political parties and democracy in argentina", 206 in S. Mainwaring and T. Cully, *Building democratic institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford, 1995).

²¹ Eugene Maur Braderman, "Mexico's Political Evolution" *World Affairs* Vol. 103, No. 4 (December, 1940), pp. 240-245

To contemporaries the Mexican revolution of 1911 did not stand alone.²² It was the sixth of a series of constitutional revolutions that began in Russia in 1905, followed by Iran (1906/1909), the Ottoman Empire (1908) and Portugal (1910) and climaxed with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in China in 1912 and the holding of elections to China's first National Assembly over the winter of 1912-1913. China's first national elections were a rough and ready electoral contest. But they remain to this day the most competitive election in Chinese history and an impressive democratic display by any standard. Twenty-five percent of the adult male population were qualified to vote, amounting to c. 40 million electors. Turnout was between 60 and 75 percent and despite considerable corruption the elections were won decisively by the nationalist Kuomintang party.²³

The decision by China to opt for an experiment in republicanism in 1912 was a huge shock to East Asia. Since 1869 Japan's Meiji restoration had been seen as a symbol of reform across much of the non-Western world. But its constitution of 1889 was an extremely conservative document influenced by both the Prussian model and the example of the British house of Lords. This, however, was not uncontested within Japan itself. The constitution of 1889 was a disappointing conclusion to the liberal mobilization of the 1880s under the flag of the Popular Rights Movement.²⁴ And from 1900 onwards successive waves of electoral reform in Japan expanded the electorate from 450,000 to 1 million in 1902 and then in 1908 to more than 1.5 million. Manhood suffrage would be achieved by 1925.

Nor did the pressure for the franchise stop at the borders of Empire. In 1906 Dadabhai Naoroji who was serving as President of India's National Congress, was moved to comment: "Surely", Indians as British subjects were "far more entitled to self-government" and a "constitutional representative system, than the peasants of Russia."²⁵ In words that would be echoed by Giolitti in Italy five years later Naionji

²² Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied 1905-1915. Intellectuals and the Fate of Democracy* (Cambridge Mass Harvard, 2008).

²³ Mary Clabaugh Wright, *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900-1913*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 1968), 209-218.

²⁴ Jackson H. Bailey, "Prince Saionji and the Popular Rights Movement" *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 21, No. 1 (Nov., 1961), pp. 49-63

²⁵ Cited in Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied 1905-1915*, 4.

commented “It is futile to tell me that we must wait till all the people ready. The British people did not so wait for their Parliament. ... We can never be fit until we actually undertake the work and the responsibility. While China in the East and Persia in the West of Asia are awakening and Japan has already awakened, and Russia is struggling for emancipation ... can the free citizens of the British Indian Empire continue to remain subject to despotism ... unworthy of British instincts, principles and civilization?”²⁶ Naoroji had reason to expect a response. In 1905 a new Liberal government had taken office in London. Between 1892 and 1895 Naoroji had represented the Liberal Party for the parliamentary seat of Finsbury in North London. In response to the rise of Indian Nationalism the Secretary of State for India John Morley, himself a veteran of the Gladstonian Home Rule push for Ireland, imposed not just the determined repression of dissent in Bengal, but also a set of political reforms that would culminate in the so-called Morley-Minto council system of 1909. For the first time this gave an active, though limited role to the Indian elite in both central and provincial government.

As the twentieth century began there was no part of the world not caught up in what Samuel Huntington would dub the first, “long” wave of democratization.²⁷ In 1914 Blaise Diagne would become the first African elected to the French chamber from the Senegalese capital of Dakar. Fluent in both French and Wolof Diagne’s campaign drove home the central message of the era: “Until today the whites and the metis have campaigned for deputy. Today, it is a black man, like you or me, that I give you!”²⁸ Diagne’s victory prepared the way for the virtually complete capture of elective offices in colonial Senegal by African candidates. The racial question was also very much to the fore in South Africa with its combustible combination of rival white settler populations, a rapidly growing Asian minority and mobile and conflicted African populations. When five years after the end of the Boer war, the Republics of Transvaal and the Orange River were granted self-government in 1907

²⁶ The Late Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji on Swaraj. Presidential Address at the Calcutta Congress, 1906 (Bombay, 1917).

²⁷ Samuel P. Huntington “How Countries Democratize”, *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 106, No. 4 (Winter, 1991-1992), pp. 579-616.

²⁸ G. Wesley Johnson, “The Ascendancy of Blaise Diagne and the Beginning of African Politics in Senegal”, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Jul., 1966), pp. 235-253.

all white men were enfranchised and no people of color. But, the Union of South Africa Act of 1909 preserved the status quo between the Boer republics and the two British colonies of the Cape and Natal. Under the so-called “entrenched clauses” the voting rights of elite black and colored voters in the Cape were protected.²⁹ With hindsight this, of course, looks like a minimal defensive compromise. But as one commentator remarked looking back from the 1950s the victory of apartheid was not inevitable. When the 1909 compromise was agreed “many people in the Cape believed that eventually the Northern provinces would adopt the more liberal attitude of the Cape.” It was not until South Africa’s independence from Britain in the 1930s that the door was opened to a full racial rollback.³⁰

II

One may criticize efforts at quantification in the political sciences but they can be useful in conveying at least a sense of proportion. Any comprehensive summary of constitutional change from the late 19th century onwards will point to a general trend towards enfranchisement.

²⁹ Joan Rydon, “The Constitutional Crisis In South Africa” *The Australian Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 1 (March, 1956), pp. 38-47.

³⁰ A.P. Walshe, “The Origins of African Political Consciousness in South Africa” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol. 7, No. 4 (Dec., 1969), pp. 583-610.

Table 2

The size of the franchise, electoral turnout rates, and the polity index for the 12 countries, selected time periods

Country	$\bar{e1}$	$\bar{e2}$	$\bar{t1}$	\bar{p}	$\bar{e1}$	$\bar{e2}$	$\bar{t1}$	\bar{p}	$\bar{e1}$	$\bar{e2}$	$\bar{t1}$	\bar{p}
	Till 1880 (%)	(%)	(%)		1881–1914 (%)	(%)	(%)		1920–1938 (%)	(%)	(%)	
Finland	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	66.2 ^a	77.1 ^a	60.3 ^a	n.a.	74.4	85.6	61.2	7.1
Denmark	25.7	73.3	34.2	-0.1	29.2	84.8	63.4	-3	85.9	93.8	79.2	9.8
Netherlands	5.0	11.4	n.a.	-3	17.8	42.5	70.8	-2.2	82.5	97.1	91.9	10
Austria	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	38.0 ^a	94.5 ^a	n.a.	-4	90.6	90.6	87.8	3.2
Norway	8.8	21.8	46.2	-6.3	55.1	27.4	69.7	3.8	89.3	98.2	73.3	10
Sweden	10.2	22.3	19.6	-4	15.2	34.5	43.7	-4	79.5	93.6	62.8	10
UK	8.6	18.8	n.a.	2.5	26.4	57.2	60.9	7.4	80.4	94.9	68.6	10
France	19.1	39.8	75.3	-2.7	42.4	88.7	72.2	7.5	39.9	86.9	80.9	9.4
Germany	35.9	87.7	59.7	-4	37.6	92.6	73.1	-0.2	96.5 ^b	97.7 ^b	79.5 ^b	6 ^b
Italy	3.6	8.8	54.4	-4	35.0	16.4	59.8	-2.7	52.1 ^c	108.6 ^c	58.1 ^c	-1 ^c
Belgium	2.8	6.5	71.4	1.6	24.2	57.7	86.3	6	45.3	95.2	93.0	9.5
Switzerland	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	37.7	78.3	52.0	10	41.0	86.9	77.5	10
All countries	14.9	36.2	58.7	-1.5	64.2	30.1	64.9	2.1	93.4	74.0	77.3	7.3

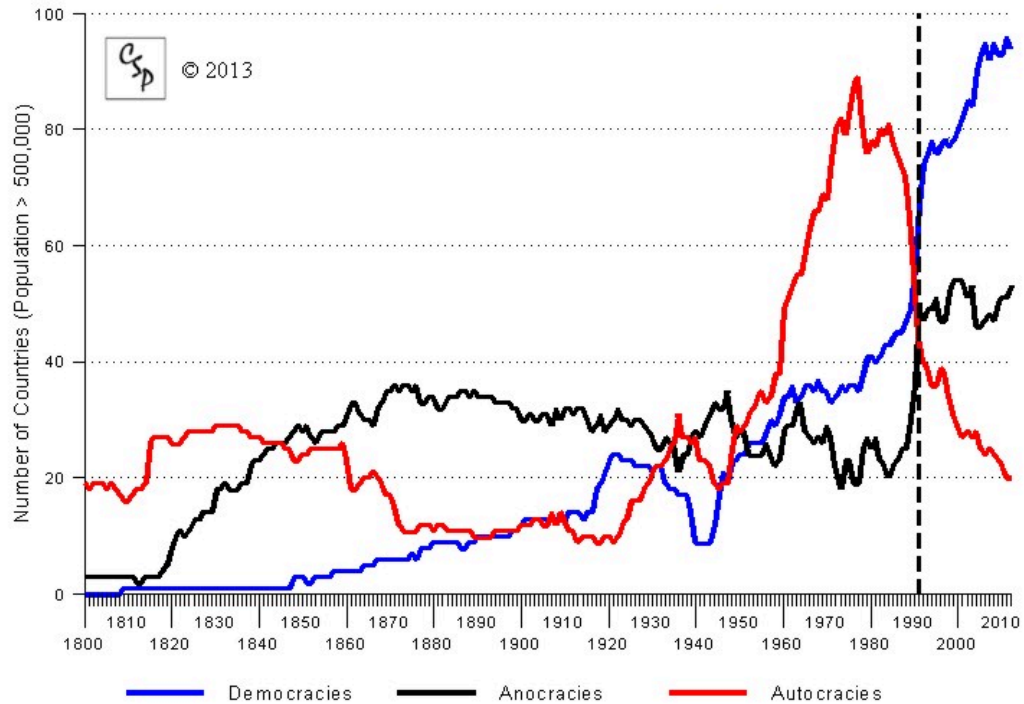
Source: Flora et al. (1983).

Notes: $\bar{e1}$ = average total franchise (electorate as % of population 20 and older); $\bar{e2}$ = average economic franchise (electorate as % of enfranchised age and sex group); \bar{p} average score of the polity index (scale from -10 to 10); $\bar{t1}$ = average turnout rate (fraction of those enfranchised turning out to vote); ^a means that data is available from 1907 onwards only; ^b indicates that data refers to the period before 1933; ^c indicates that the data refers to the period before 1924.

The same story emerges if we use summary composite indexes such as that derived from the standard Polity database. These data show a trend towards democracy rising linearly from the 1850s to 1914.³¹

³¹ R. Doorenspleet "Reassessing the three waves of democratization", World politics 52 (April 2000), 384-406.

Global Trends in Governance, 1800-2012



Nor were these merely formal gains. The degree to which radicals or progressives could govern or, indeed, wanted to govern varied dramatically. The socialist movement was split between reformists and abstentionist radicals.³² But the evidence suggests that whether directly through influence on government, or indirectly as a latent threat the pressure of democratization contributed towards the rise of welfare spending and public spending on education visible from the late nineteenth century onwards. Acemoglu and Robinson go so far as to hypothesize that the Kuznet curve inflection of falling inequality at higher levels of income that is observable over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was driven in large part through the politics of democratization and welfare.³³

³² Gary Marks, Heather A. D. Mbaye and Hyung Min Kim “Radicalism or Reformism? Socialist Parties before World War I” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 74, No. 4 (Aug., 2009), pp. 615-635

³³ Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson “Why Did the West Extend the Franchise? Democracy, Inequality, and Growth in Historical Perspective” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* Vol. 115, No. 4 (Nov., 2000), pp. 1167-1199.

Nor is our sense of a “wave” of democratization merely a retrospective imposition. It was a movement that had a consciousness of its own history. A particularly strong version was voiced by *Liberation*, a Russian prodemocracy organ in 1902, which stated:

“Free forms of political life are as little national as are the use of the alphabet or of the printing press, steam or electricity. These are merely forms of higher culture ...” the adoption of which “becomes necessary when public life becomes so complicated that it can no longer be contained within the framework of a more primitive public structure. When such a time arrives, when a new era of history knocks at the door, it is useless to place restraints and delays in its path. It will come just the same.”³⁴

This monolithic and functionalist vision may have added strength to the democratic cause, but in retrospect what is more striking about the “wave” of democratization are the multifaceted, diverse and braided strands of political culture that contributed to it. Coming together in the politics of the early 20th century, were traditions of oratory inculcated by way of the canon of classical Greek and Latin examples taught in schoolrooms and University classes across the Western world.³⁵ These were melded with traditions of parliamentary practice that dated back to the long 18th century. Added to which there were models of modern heroic political leadership offered by figures such as Lincoln, Cavour, Gladstone or Bismarck.³⁶ A new generation of political orators such as Lloyd George mastered a modern mass media machine that gave them unprecedented popular reach.³⁷ Additional energy or threat was provided by a live revolutionary tradition, which included figures as diverse as Clemenceau and Rosa Luxembourg, as well as social movements such as the suffragettes, or nationalism in its many varieties, whether Irish, Polish or insurgent and anti-colonial. Meanwhile, beyond the formal sphere of

³⁴ Cited in Kurzman, *Democracy Denied*, 34.

³⁵ G. Clemenceau, *Demosthenes* (London, 1926) and a primer such as R.I. Fulton and TC Trueblood, *British And American eloquence* Ann Arbor Michigan 1912.

³⁶ D. A. Hamer, “Gladstone: The Making of a Political Myth” *Victorian Studies* Vol. 22, No. 1 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 29-50.

³⁷ J. M. McEwen, “Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War, 1914– 1918” *The Historical Journal* Volume 24 Issue 03 September 1981, pp 651 - 672

parliament, political life was sustained by the pullulating networks of mass party organizations and civil society, including the trade union movement, women's associations and Catholic populism.

For all the instituted and consolidated quality of its democratic institutions, the political culture of the early 21st century cannot but appear as a pale, stripped down, bureaucratized and commercialized shadow of this diverse and vibrant democratic ecology, which was not only richer but also less clearly western-centered than it would become. As the twentieth century began the geographic direction and center of gravity of political progress seemed open. For a contemporary as self-confident as Sun Yat-sen surveying the history of the last hundred years, three principles governed the "natural and inevitable ... advance of civilization": nationalism, democracy and the "people's livelihood", by which he meant the "social question". The West had taken the lead in accomplishing the first two revolutions. But the third was unresolved. For China simply to follow in the footsteps of the Western states would be to follow "paths that they have already proven to lead nowhere." Instead, China's republican revolution would tackle the social question before it became as crippling as it had become in the West. "Then", Sun imagined, China could "look back and find Europe and America looking ahead to us."³⁸

II

Against this backdrop we may enquire as to the "impact" of World War I on this broadly based and multi-faceted prewar democratic wave. And the short answer is that the war would not just shock and traumatize but also energize and dynamize this system to a remarkable degree. But to talk in terms of "impact" begs the question of the relationship between the democratization and the war. Talk of "impact" implies that the war struck the democratic wave like an external force. Whereas, in fact, whether we are concerned with the Tsar's cabinet in Russia or the liberal government in London, it is clear that the decision to unleash the war could not be separated from calculations of popular political advantage. Before we talk of

³⁸ Yat-sen Sun, Editorial introducing the first issue of *Min Pao* 26 November 1905 in *Prescriptions for Saving China* (Stanford, Hoover, 1994), 40.

the war's "impact" we should, consider the ways in which democratization may in fact have been entangled with the causation of the conflict.

From the left, one interpretation has been to argue that the war was part of a desperate effort by reactionary elites to resist and escape democratization.³⁹ A contrary conservative point of view would argue that the war is best seen not as a conservative anti-democratic tactic, but as the baneful result of the unleashing of the violent passions of popular nationalism, first set in motion by liberalism. A distinctively liberal point of view involves a synthesis of both these positions. It would start by interpreting the outbreak of conflict in Europe in 1914 in terms of a hierarchy of political development.⁴⁰ It was a war triggered in July-August 1914 by the defensive reactions of the most backward regimes in Central Europe, which felt that they had no option but to stand and fight if they were to survive much longer into the twentieth century. But what originally unleashed the violence in the Balkans was not pure conservatism, but the birth pangs of uneven modernization. Chris Clark's *Sleepwalkers* with its emphasis on Serbian and Russian culpability would be a striking restatement of this position.⁴¹ Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder's identification of the tendency of states undergoing democratization to become more aggressive provides systematic support.⁴²

To complicate matters these are not merely a range of contending historiographical perspectives. These types of analysis were powerfully operative in the epoch itself. For Bethmann-Hollweg's tactics in the final stage of the July crisis it was crucial to ensure that Russia not Germany mobilized first. This was doubly conditioned by the "democratic condition". First Bethmann Hollweg was seriously concerned to ensure that he could gain the backing of the Social Democrats, who held the largest block of seats in the Reichstag, for the war effort. And what Bethmann Hollweg played on was the developmentalist conception of political development held by the Social Democrats, who were convinced that a war of

³⁹ Arno Mayer, *The persistence of the old regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York, 1981).

⁴⁰ Tooze "Capitalist peace or capitalist war. The July Crisis Revisited" in A. Anievas ed. *Cataclysm 1914* (Leiden, Brill 2015).

⁴¹ C. Clark, *Sleepwalkers* (London, 2013).

⁴² Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War" *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer, 1995), pp. 5-38.

national defense against a “backward” and “autocratic” Russia was not just compatible with, but dictated by their Marxist view of history. When shipping magnate Ballin asked Bethmann Hollweg: ‘Your excellency, why are you in such a hurry to declare war on Russia?’ Bethmann ... replied: “Otherwise I wont be able to take the Social Democrats along with me”⁴³

As the war progressed, the entanglement between narratives of democratization, self-government, emancipation and war-fighting became ever more close. This was most overwhelming on the side of the Entente and their American associates. The concept of “western liberal democracy” that would be so powerful for the rest of the twentieth century in marking out a normative course of “proper” political development was a product of the war. In the heat of the vast military struggle incongruous and inconsistent ideas of republicanism, liberalism, democracy, constitutionalism, the rule of law and notions of “self government” or “responsible government” were amalgamated together in a way that would have been unthinkable in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ An alliance of states ranging from Romania, Italy and Japan to Britain and France with America as their associate were arrayed in a common cause against Imperial Germany, and the crumbling Empires of the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. Reified in the categories and images of sociology and political science these unlikely juxtapositions would become normalized as a model of political modernity.

The bewilderment this induced at the time can still be felt in an essay such as Max Weber’s “Politics as a vocation”. In that essay Weber was at pains to describe in unflattering empirical detail how the democratic systems of Britain and America had actually taken shape, and to remind his readers of the empirical and historical facts that had led their party caucuses and political machines to be regarded with considerable skepticism in the prewar period. Nor did Imperial Germany accept the role assigned to it as a backward reactionary autocracy without a fight. The eventual outcome of the war in which a coalition of self-proclaimed democracies defeated

⁴³ Bülow, Bernhard *Denkwürdigkeiten. Bd. 3. Weltkrieg und Zusammenbruch*. (Berlin 1931), S. 167/168.

⁴⁴ Dissecting this weird amalgam was bread and butter for C. Schmitt, *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (MIT Cambridge Mass, 1985).

bankrupt and unpopular autocrats was not predetermined, it was a result of the swirling politics, diplomacy and war-fighting of 1917-1918.⁴⁵

The Kaiser was hardly a natural advocate of democratic slogans, but he did proclaim an Islamic jihad against the British Empire. In 1916 the Central Powers established a Polish state with limited autonomy. In his Easter message of 1917 the Kaiser and his government promised finally to satisfy the demand for one man one vote in Prussia. And it was not merely a matter of rhetoric. In the summer of 1917 the Reichstag majority felled Bethmann Hollweg. After the short-lived and disastrous experiment with Michaelis, from the fall of 1917 Germany was governed by a Chancellor, Hertling, who was chosen explicitly with a view to gaining the confidence of the Reichstag. And when it came to the making of the Brest-Litovsk peace the Reichstag majority articulated quite explicitly a politics of self-determination and autonomy for the Baltic states and Ukraine.

The failure to make a legitimate “liberal” peace at Brest-Litovsk was no triumph for the conservative and military factions in Germany. It had the effect of delegitimizing the peace, splintering the Kaiser’s government, provoking the embarrassing departure of State Secretary Kuehlmann and persuading much of the Reichstag majority that the business of peace-making could not safely be left to the existing authorities. Not for nothing, in March 1918 the Kaiser would declare that what was at stake in the last German offensive “was a victory of monarchy over democracy.”⁴⁶ “(W)hen an English parliamentarian comes pleading for peace, he will first have to bow down before the Imperial standard...”. The Kaiser was not wrong. When Germany’s armies were driven back in the summer of 1918 history turned once and for all against monarchy. In Germany itself the impending military defeat set the stage for full-scale parlementarization in October 1918. The Reichstag majority took power not to surrender but because they were convinced that only a democratized Germany could make an adequate peace, or in extremis continue the

⁴⁵ A. Tooze, *The Deluge. The Great War and the Remaking of the Global Order* (London, Allen Lane 2014).

⁴⁶ W. Goerlitz (ed.), *Regierte Der Kaiser? Kriegstagebuecher, Aufzeichnungen und Briefe des Chefs des Marinekabinetts Admiral George Alexander von Mueller 1914-1918* (Goetingen, 1959), 366.

war.⁴⁷ In the course of the armistice negotiations with Wilson they convinced themselves that they had escaped the stigma attached to the Kaiser and his regime. It came as a rude shock in May 1919 when the terms of the Versailles Treaty reaffirmed the wartime narrative of Germany's unique responsibility for the war.

III

Even if we resist the externalist language of "impacts", it is clear that in a world already arguing over the term of its democratization, the experience of the massive mobilization for World War I had dramatic effects. In 1914, the nationalization of the working class disappoints radical international socialists who expect and call for worldwide revolution. But at a national level it had an irresistible democratizing effect. The war as a mass war could not be fought without working-class involvement. In 1916 Hindenburg and Ludendorff could only make the *Hilfsdienstgesetz* work in collaboration with trade unions.⁴⁸ In Italy following the Caporetto disaster in October 1917 the government made a conscious effort to broaden the social base of the war effort.⁴⁹ The war, the Orlando government declared "is for the soldier: the peasant, the worker, the clerk. It is fought for all those who suffer and who are hard up, in the countryside and in the cities, in Italy and outside Italy. The war is for the proletariat: this is the war of the workers."⁵⁰ The collapse of the Union Sacree in France in 1917 would seem to point in the other direction, likewise the exit of the Labour Party from the British coalition government. But in both cases this was part of a jockeying for political advantage on the left, initiated by the socialists themselves. Whilst they harassed their socialist opponents, both Lloyd George and Clemenceau continued to appeal emphatically to the population at large.⁵¹ Any strategy that did not do so was condemned to failure. In Germany, the Vaterlandspartei mobilization in 1917 was an impressive showing

⁴⁷ M. Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée en Masse* in October 1918." *Journal of Modern History* 73 (September 2001): 459-527.

⁴⁸ G. Mai, *Arbeiterschaft in Deutschland, 1914-1918: Studien zu Arbeitskampf und Arbeitsmarkt im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Duesseldorf, 1985).

⁴⁹ D. Rossini, *Woodrow Wilson and the American Myth in Italy* (Cambridge, Mass 2008).

⁵⁰ Charles L. Bertrand, "War and Subversion in Italy: 1917-1918", *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter/l'hiver 1976), pp. 120.

⁵¹ Watson, *Clemenceau, A Political Biography* (London, 1974), 275-292.

by the far right. But it was a disappointment precisely because it did not reach out much beyond the familiar boundaries of the right-wing bourgeois constituency.⁵² It did not reach the working-class. It would take the shock of defeat and a socialist led republic to force a populist modernization of the German Right. The NSDAP was its characteristic product. It was anti-leftist, anti-liberal and anti-parliamentary. But it was, for all that, thoroughly demotic.

In Prussia the reactionary upper house continued to make a stand against universal one-man-one vote franchise. But they did so in the face of the explicit request by their monarch to adopt the cause of reform. In Austria, it was the new Kaiser who reopened the Austrian parliament in Vienna. In Britain it was conservative peers in the House of Lords who introduced the so-called “trench voting” bill in 1916 and it was the conservatives who in enacting the Reform Act of 1918 pushed, unsuccessfully, for proportional representation.⁵³ They did so because they assumed that under the Westminster first-past-the-post system, the force of the mass electorate would sweep them away. As Lord Bryce, the eminent constitutionalist, commented to his colleague Dicey in September 1917, the contrast to the struggles over the great Reform Act of 1866 was stark. Then, both sides of the argument had assumed “that fitness” for the franchise “had to be proved.” Now, “when one talks to the young sentimental woman suffragist he (sic) sees no relevance in the enquiry whether the great mass of women know or care anything about politics. It is quite enough for him that they are human beings. As such they have a right to vote.”⁵⁴ And the press fell into line with Lord Northcliffe leading the way. By 1917, in the pages of the *Times*, opposition to the franchise was painted as divisive and ipso facto unpatriotic.

But the war not only intensified the demands for democratization within the combatant states, it also widened them. If France, Britain and the US denounced German autocracy they could not so easily practice repression within their own domain. This pressure was particularly powerful on the British Empire. At the same

⁵² Hagenluecke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei* (Duesseldorf, 1996).

⁵³ M. Pugh, *Electoral reform in war and peace 1906-1918* (London, 1978).

⁵⁴ Pugh, *Electoral Reform*, 136.

time as it carried out the largest expansion of the British franchise in history, the Lloyd George coalition began a comprehensive reconstruction of the legitimacy of Imperial rule. In Ireland, despite the open military challenge mounted by Sinn Fein in Dublin in 1916, Britain was forced to make good on promises of Home Rule. Emblematically the moment of decision came in the spring of 1918 when the emergency on the Western Front demanded another round of conscription. As the Labour collaborators of the coalition government made clear this could not be imposed on the urban working-class of Britain without an extension of conscription to Ireland as well. Democracy demanded equality of effort between all parts of the United Kingdom. But conscription in Ireland could not be attempted without steps finally to implement Home Rule, if necessary against the opposition of Ulster.⁵⁵ In India too, by 1917 Britain was forced to spell out a new justification for Empire in terms of the promise of “responsible government”.⁵⁶ In Australia the introduction of conscription was made dependent on popular referenda and twice rejected by the electorate.⁵⁷

The hostages given to historical fortune by the promises of British imperial liberalism made London particularly susceptible to this kind of logic. And the pressure was compounded by the grand strategic logic that required Britain to cultivate its relationship with the United States. From the moment it entered the war, the White House made clear that it expected action on Ireland. In the spring of 1918 before taking the decisive steps towards conscription and Home Rule London made sure that it had the approval of the White House. But though the pressure on London was particularly intense, the same logic could be seen at work also in the other Entente powers. In the course of the war Blaise Diagne won citizenship rights for the inhabitants of the four Communes of colonial Senegal as well as the right to serve in the regular French rather than the colonial army. In 1918 to raise another round of conscripts in Senegal Clemenceau promoted Blaise Diagne to the rank of a

⁵⁵ Hartley, *Irish Question*, 175.

⁵⁶ R. Danzig “The Announcement of August 20th, 1917”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Nov., 1968), 19-37. R.J. Moore “Curzon and Indian Reform” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Oct., 1993), 719-740

⁵⁷ Robin Archer, “Stopping War and Stopping Conscription: Australian Labour's Response to World War I in Comparative Perspective”, *Labour History*, No. 106 (May 2014), pp. 43-67.

Governor-General. Together with a team of African officers he was able to raise another 60,000 troops for the French war effort.⁵⁸

IV

In 1798 Immanuel Kant in the *Contest of the Faculties* remarked that the enthusiastic reaction around the world to the French revolution was a harbinger of a possibility of progress. In the spring of 1917 something similar might be said about the global reaction to the fall of Tsarist autocracy in Russia. Before the war the bottom of the scale of political development was clearly reserved for Tsarist Russia. The brutal suppression of the 1905 revolution and the wave of pogroms against the Jewish population of Western empire were recognized by international opinion as hallmarks of Russia's backwardness. The excitement of the overthrow of the Tsar was precisely that it promised to bring democracy and freedom to the least free population of Europe. And the extent of the shockwaves casts into stark relief the significance, which the issue of democracy had assumed in the conduct of the war by 1917.

The speed with which the collapse of Tsarism undercut the argument for a defensive war on the part of the Central Powers is nothing short of remarkable. Austria was desperate for a peace. In Germany, within weeks of the revolution in Russia, the long-awaited schism splintered the SPD into pro and anti-war factions. The Kaiser was reluctantly persuaded by Bethmann Hollweg to issue his promise of fundamental electoral reform in Prussia. And in military terms the central powers ceased offensive operations. Rather than seeking to force a decisive battle the Germans hoped for separate peace negotiations. Courtesy of the Germans Lenin was sluiced back into Russia to take advantage of the new democratic freedoms offered by the revolution.

But it was not just the Germans who sought to take advantage of the regime change in Russia. For advocates of the cause of the Entente as a democratic war, Russia's revolution was a godsend. As Robert Lansing, Woodrow Wilson's Secretary

⁵⁸ Myron J. Echenberg "Paying the Blood Tax: Military Conscription in French West Africa, 1914-1929" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1975), pp. 171-192.

of State put it to his cabinet colleagues: “the revolution in Russia ... had removed the one objection to affirming that the European war was a war between democracy and absolutism.”⁵⁹ And in his declaration of war, Wilson himself welcomed the “wonderful and heartening things that have been happening within the last few weeks in Russia”. The Tsarist autocracy had been “shaken off and the great, generous Russian people have been added in all their naive majesty and might to the forces that are fighting for freedom in the world... .”⁶⁰ In Paris Clemenceau welcomed the coincidence of America’s declaration of war and the overthrow of the Tsar in terms that were nothing short of ecstatic: “the supreme interest of the general ideas with which President Wilson sought to justify his actions”, in declaring war, “is that the Russian Revolution and the American revolution complement each other in a miraculous way, in defining once and for all the moral stakes in the conflict. All the great peoples of democracy ... have taken that place in the battle that was destined for them. They work for the triumph not of one alone, but of all.”⁶¹

But for the Entente powers as well, the overthrow of the Tsar was not simply a strategic gain. For them too it posed questions of legitimacy, explicitly couched in terms of the question of democracy. As following the Russian revolution of 1905 the question was put in India. If the Russian autocracy had been overthrown, how long could Britain’s self-confessedly “autocratic” rule in India prevail? As Secretary of State for India, the liberal conservative Austen Chamberlain explained to his cabinet colleagues on 22 May 1917: “The constant harping on the theme that we are fighting for liberty and justice and the rights of people to direct their own destinies, the revolution in Russia and the way in which it has been received in this country and elsewhere, - has strengthened the demand for reform and has created a ferment of ideas ...”, which demanded a clear declaration of Britain’s long-term intention to

⁵⁹ *PWW* 41, 440 and *FRUS Lansing Papers* I, 626-628, 636.

⁶⁰ Wilson’s declaration of war 2 April 1917.

⁶¹ Quoted in M. Winock, *Clemenceau* (Paris, 2007), 418-9. “Le supreme interet des pensees generales par les quelles le president Wilson a voulu justifier l’action de son pays (his declaration of war)... c’est que la revolution russe et la revolution americaine se completent a miracle pour fixed definitivement toute la portee idealiste du conflit. Tous les grands peuples de la democratie ... ont desormais pris, dans la lute, la place qui leur etait destine. Ils vont au triomphe, non pas d’un seul, mais de tous”.

grant India self-government. To fail to meet this demand risked throwing the “moderate element - such as it is - into the hands of the extremists”.⁶²

Given the undeniable wave of enthusiasm that greeted Russia’s experiment with democracy in early 1917, the diminution it has suffered in the rearview mirror of history is all the more striking. Overshadowed by the Bolshevik coup that overthrew it, no regime has been subjected to greater historical condescension than the “provisional government” that struggled to realize the democratic promise of revolution in Russia in 1917. It, in fact, is commonly invoked as an emblem of the indecisiveness of democracy or the weakness of liberals as opposed to their more hardnosed opponents on the left and right. But what surely ought to be recognized is not just the huge adversity that the regime faced and the violence and determination of its opponents but also the remarkable strides that it did manage to make towards democratization. Above all, the Constituent Assembly election of November 1917 was a remarkable demonstration of the possibility of extending electoral mechanisms across the world. Exceeding in scale even the Chinese elections of 1912/1913 the Russian Constituent Assembly election was the largest poll ever held. Unlike the Chinese elections the franchise was comprehensive including women as well as men. The turnout was substantial and the elections were generally agreed to have been “free and fair”. The results, furthermore, reflected a clear democratic logic with a majority of votes in the countryside going to the agrarian Social Revolutionaries and in the cities to the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.⁶³

The greatest challenge posed by the Russian revolution, however, was the challenge of peace. The Tsar’s war aims were discredited. Russia’s exhaustion demanded peace. But the Russia’s democratic revolutionaries, as democratic revolutionaries refused to contemplate the possibility of humiliating and treacherous talks for a separate peace with Germany’s reactionary regime. Here once again a notion of a democratic hierarchy served to sustain the war. The

⁶² Rumbold, *Watershed*, 71-2.

⁶³ O. Radkey, *Russia Goes to the Polls. The Election to the All-Russian Constituent Assembly, 1917* (Ithaca, 1989).

Provisional Government would open peace talks only in conjunction with its Entente partners. But their governments refused. The result was to undercut any prospect of success that Russian democracy might have had in 1917. Whilst seeking to open up informal diplomatic channels by way of the fraternity of European socialism, the provisional government braced itself to launch a democratic offensive. In so doing they explicitly invoked an image of revolutionary war handed down from the mythology of the French revolution and the *levee en masse* of 1792. It was the democratic revolutionaries in Russia who in the spring of 1917 introduced political commissars into the Russian army to energize their summer offensive. The military failure of the offensive broke the legitimacy of the Provisional government.

In the autumn of 1917 they were overthrown by the one party willing to contemplate an immediate separate peace. This was undoubtedly a staggering blow to the Entente war effort. But its effect was not to call into question the democratic war effort. If anything the Brest-Litovsk peace talks made even clearer the association between autocracy and the Central Powers. The German Reichstag with its vision of a legitimate peace in the East based on the principle of self-determination was drowned out by the clashing of swords between the Bolsheviks the German militarists and Allied propaganda. Though Lenin imagined that it was his communism that brought down upon his regime the force of Entente intervention, he was clearly wrong. What made the argument for intervention irresistible even for Woodrow Wilson in the summer of 1918 was the evidence that the Communist regime was sliding into dependence on Imperial Germany. When skeptics such as questioned whether anything would be gained by attacking Russia, Lloyd George responded in indignant terms:

"I am interventionist", he insisted "just as much because I am a democrat as because I want to win the war." The "last thing" he "would stand for, would be the encouragement of any kind of repressive regime" in Russia "under whatever guise."⁶⁴ Only a democratic Russia would provide a real buffer against the German threat. Russia's political complexion would define the post-war order. "Unless by the

⁶⁴ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet*, 222.

end of the war Russia is settled on liberal, progressive and democratic lines", neither the "peace of the world" nor more specifically "the peace and security of the Indian frontier" could be assured.⁶⁵

The intervention would by 1919 become a cause celebre of the European left. But this did not imply any deep sympathy for Lenin's regime. For the vast majority of the European socialists, the impact of the Bolshevik seizure of power and the coup against the constituent assembly in January 1918 was clarifying. They favored peace, democratization and social transformation, but they had little or no sympathy for the methods being used in Russia. The migration of Karl Kautsky from prewar pope of Marxist orthodoxy to vigorous critic of Bolshevik terror and defender of parliamentary democracy is emblematic of the shift.⁶⁶ Twenty-first century gauchists such as Slavoj Zizek are not wrong when they identify this moment of 1917-1918 as pivotal to the emergence of our era's democratic *pensee unique*.⁶⁷ What attracts their ire is the kind of self-eviscerating logic articulated by practitioners of reformist labour politics such as J. McGurk the chairman of the Labour Party. In 1919 he lectured his comrades on the choice they faced: "We are either constitutionalists or we are not constitutionalists. If we are constitutionalists, if we believe in the efficacy of the political weapon (and we are, or why do we have a Labour Party?) then it is both unwise and undemocratic because we fail to get a majority at the polls to turn around and demand that we should substitute industrial action."⁶⁸ As far as McGurk was concerned, a full commitment to parliamentary methods was not supplementary to extra parliamentary action, but a mutually exclusive alternative. Against this self-disarming of the left, Zizek is clearly right to see Trotsky and Lenin as formulating a truly radical critique of parliamentary democratic norms. The question for the democratic left from this moment on, was whether this was really an inescapable choice: Lenin's relentless contempt for all modes of parliamentary politics, or the Labour Party's

⁶⁵ Ullman, *Anglo-Soviet*, 305.

⁶⁶ K. Kautsky, *Terrorismus und Kommunismus* (Berlin, 1919).

⁶⁷ S. Zizek *Presents Trotsky: Terrorism and Communism: A reply to Kautsky* (1920).

⁶⁸ Cited by Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism. A study in the politics of labour* 2nd ed. (London Merlin Press 1975), p. 69.

uncompromising acceptance of the rules of the game, however one-sided those might be. For the rest of the century, at least down to the 1990s, the wager of radical democrats, whether they be social democrats or advocates of civil liberties, would be to reject this false alternative.

V

If one wanted a final testament to the force of the democratizing process in the early 20th century it surely lies in its capacity, not only to pose the question of constitutional change as a necessary concomitant of war-fighting, but even to call into question the rationale of the Great War itself. Not only did the effort of the war intensify the democratic question even on the victorious side. But democratic voices dared to pose the question of whether to continue the war, even in the face of the huge casualties and the immense pressure those exercised on the combatants to press the struggle to a victorious conclusion.

This radical capacity of democratic politics to pose the question of peace even in a situation of total war between 1914-1918 raises questions about how we should write this moment into broader narratives of democratization. It calls into question conventional narratives, such as those sketched by quantitative measures of democracy, that view the early twentieth century merely as a prelude to greater democratization to come. With regard to the franchise, with regard to the inclusion of women, with regard to civil rights for minorities and postcolonial freedom a narrative of progressive democratization clearly is indispensable. But it is far less obvious that the same story of progression applies to the substance of the democratic argument. If we ask what it is that democracy was about, the story of upward progression to greater democracy is less certain. Whereas the constitutional solidification of the franchise moves upward in a ratchet-like fashion, the breadth and depth of the democratic political field waxes and wanes in far less linear or progressive ways.

To add force to this point it is perhaps useful to invoke a contrast that is closer in time than World War I, one that is still very much within the living memory of Western democracies, that between the politics of the Vietnam war in the 1960s and early 1970s and the politics of the Iraq war after 2003. Though the anti-Iraq

mobilization in February 2003 was dramatic – the *Guinness Book of Records* credits the demonstrations of 15 February 2003 as the largest in world history - the media and political apparatus in the United States and the other combatant nations, notably the UK, managed to streamline the presentation of the war and build a remarkable consensus around it. Given the illegitimacy of the war, given that it was a quintessential “war of choice” the lack of real political choice actually exercised by the public, was remarkable. By contrast, Vietnam was not just challenged by an anti-war movement. That anti-war movement, as a dramatic exercise in democracy in action, converged with other movements of the day, including feminism and civil rights, to energize a broad based transformation of a significant part of American political culture. This was not welcomed, of course, by American conservatives, who engaged a countercultural mobilization of their own, or by the military and security establishment. Learning their lessons, their control of the media, already by the time of the first Iraq war in 1991, was spectacularly more effective. The smothering of dissent under a cloak of patriotic solidarity with the troops was astonishingly comprehensive. Similar fluctuations in the range of democratic argument can be seen in many crucial areas of power, most notably the fundamental issue of economic policy and not just in the United States but across much of the Western world. Not for nothing, Angela Merkel, one of the most successful exponents of twenty-first century democratic politics, responded to the Eurozone crisis by declaring this to be a moment of “Alternativlosigkeit”.⁶⁹

A comparison of the politics of war in World War I and World War II suggests analogous fluctuations in the bandwidth of democratic argument. Unlike World War I, World War II was fought to the death with little or no possibility of political negotiation either internally or with regard to the antagonist. More or less immediately it ushered in decades of Cold War stand-off along similarly hardened lines. The hardened politico-military-industrial machines that struggled to annihilate each other in World War II were designed on the basis of lessons in the

⁶⁹ <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article7703633/Merkel-ruft-wieder-die-Alternativlosigkeit-aus.html>.

politics of mobilization learned in World War I and its aftermath.⁷⁰ The Italian and Soviet regimes actually grew organically out of wartime politics. For them as for the Nazis the central problem was that of the conjunction of war, mobilization and democracy: how to reconcile the need for a truly popular and encompassing mobilization, without conceding the democratic open-endedness that posed the question of revolution and peace. Nor were these questions confined to the side of the dictatorships. Given the nature of their antagonists, and the violent propaganda directed by them at the West, it is hardly surprising that the ideological battlelines were drawn even more sharply than they were in World War I. As a result there was less room for dissent in World War II than in any previous war. In Britain and America where it had posed a considerable challenge in World War I, political pacifism was virtually non-existent. The labour movement was more effectively integrated and joined more willingly in corporatist frameworks of accommodation. The management of the home front was more effective, from the bureaucracy of rationing up to the macroeconomics of inflation control. Meanwhile, the alliance with the Soviet Union sealed off the left flank of any possible opposition.⁷¹

The difference can be felt down to this day in the way that World War I and World War II are remembered. The image of World War II as the “good” war is one of the few monoliths to survive the 20th century more or less intact. For the Western victors it was and remains a war for democracy waged with massive popular consent. For the Soviets too it was a heroic popular effort, the “great patriotic war” and it was admired as such, even by later Cold War antagonists. Strikingly even the defeated Germans, when they more or less furtively remembered the “good sides” of Hitler’s regime, tended to recall its unifying, solidaristic aspects. It is hard to deny that this legacy of the Third Reich shaped the social structures and political culture of the democratic Federal Republic. By contrast, a hundred years on, World War I still remains a troublesome topic. Its legitimacy is questioned and this questioning

⁷⁰ Mcgregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge CUP, 2009)

⁷¹ K. Middlemas, *The Politics of Industrial Society* (London, 1979) and J.T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (Oxford, 2011). Only in the colonies, was this lock grip subject to significant challenge, most notably in the Quit India campaign.

goes “all the way down”. Despite efforts to declare the question passé, the question of “war guilt” and responsibility refuse to die. One only needs to say the words - “Verdun”, “Somme” and “Passchendaele” – to trigger a pacifist reflex. The theme of “Lions led by donkeys” continues to resonate as an emblem of class division and upper class incompetence. “Versailles” completes the catalogue of disaster. It is tempting of course to press all of this into a developmental schema, in which the war and its aftermath are symptomatic of the slow painful death of an “old world”. By way of learning lessons from Sarajevo, Verdun and Versailles, by doing things better in World War II, “we” progressed to a brighter, better future. And in certain key respects, with regard for example to the democratic welfare state, this is evidently the case. But was this a progress towards greater democracy? Perhaps the opposite is the case. Perhaps unlike World War II, it is precisely the undecided, contested quality of World War I that ought to mark it as the prime example of a great war fought under democratic conditions.