

## Reflection of National and European Identity in the New Millennium

# FACTSHEET NO. 3

### FROM NATIONALISM TO EUROPEAN UNIFICATION: WORLD WAR I AND ITS CONSEQUENCES



#### 1 Project and Objectives

The project brings together partners from Germany, the Czech and the Slovak Republic to compare their experience with education in the realm of European and National identity and

to learn about the state-of-art development, which can be used by university teachers and teachers at secondary schools. The long-term aim is the participation of young people in active EU citizenship. The particular aim is to teach the above-named topics at university level in a highly innovative way with the use of information and communication technology (ICT). For instance, the various perspectives on national and European identity are brought together in learning opportunities on the virtual 3D-platform 'Kitely'.

In this third factsheet, the focus is on the significance of the First World War for the process of political development in the 20th century in the three states involved in this project. In addition to the development itself, which is presented in outline, the focus of interest is on the students' perspective on this phenomenon and the possibilities offered by virtual learning environments to process the First World War cognitively in a specific way and to develop learning opportunities for pupils in a virtual world.

## 2 Tendencies of Nationalism as the Cause of the Outbreak of War

One of the central characteristics of political developments in 19th century Europe was the often conflict-ridden emergence of nation states. It has long been customary to distinguish between a 'long' 19th century and a 'short' 20th century in world history. The long 19th century began with the French Revolution. Belief in progress, industrialisation, national movements, nationalism, and colonialism were defining characteristics. The short 20th century, which began with the First World War, ended with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc since 1989 and was characterised by war, system competition, worldwide aspirations for freedom and bloc confrontation. The First World War is therefore commonly understood, in the words of the American diplomat and historian George F. Kennan, as the "great seminal catastrophe of this century" (1979). In fact, it is hardly possible to understand the developments of the 20th century without the First World War. Unlike earlier wars, the First World War was present in all areas of society. Industrial production was dominated by war equipment, the development of the press brought war information to the civilian population far more quickly than was the case in earlier wars. Due to the largely completed literacy of the population in Central Europe from around the turn of the century, the messages actually reached the people! In the aftermath of the First World War, American dominance began – partly because of the significant use of American loans by the European belligerents. The effects of the war have profoundly shaped the further course of modern history. This applies to the systemic competition between the liberal-capitalist USA on the one hand and Bolshevik Russia on the other, which began in 1917 with the American entry into the war and the Russian Revolution, and which significantly shaped the bloc confrontation in the second half of the 20th century.

The losses on all sides of those involved in the First World War were enormous. Almost nine million soldiers lost their lives in the First World War, more than two thirds of them in the armies of four warring parties: two million from Germany, almost 1.5 million from Austria-Hungary, over 1.8 million from Russia and 1.3 million French soldiers. Even after the end of the war, its results were still obvious, especially in Germany, and were also present as a constant reminder due to the consequences for the many former combatants: there were around 2.7 million physically and psychologically injured combatants.

While for a long time the Second World War and the decades immediately following it were discussed as central cornerstones for the process of European unification, the last 10 years in particular have seen the publication of various ground-breaking new research works that emphasise the continuities of the short 20th century and, thus, also of the First World War for the European post-war order (Tooze 2015; Münkler 2013). Against the backdrop of these current research findings, it made sense to address the first war spanning large parts of Europe in a project dealing with the formation of European identity.

### 3 Making the First World War 'Tangible'

Historical developments, events and processes are often taught in class via texts or videos. Virtual reality offers an alternative and complementary access to the experiential worlds of events. Therefore, one of NAETINEM's goals was to explore the possibilities of virtual reality to make historical events tangible for students and pupils. Since the beginning of the project, students have been introduced to the virtual 3D world of Kitely. The aim was to develop learning opportunities for students and pupils, which – another explicit project goal – can be used barrier-free by students and pupils with special needs. After some introductory sessions, which focused on getting accustomed to the use of Kitely, with the First World War a specific topic relevant to the European unification process was picked out in the context of mobility month.



While history lessons often take a national or nation-state perspective, the NAETINEM project succeeded in involving students from Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in a jointly created learning unit. After the students had familiarised themselves with the content of the war, the next step was to jointly implement a learning unit in the virtual 3D world Kitley. The students decided to depict the events in trenches on the Western Front.



The university students have created a virtual world to give secondary school students an understanding of the horrific experiences soldiers had during the First World War, to let them see the world from the soldiers' perspective. "This journey through the battlefields of World War I is meant to give you a vibe of historical battles, the situation with which the soldiers had to fight their way through narrow trenches, with the explosions of cannons and gunfire above them" (quoted from Kitley). The students were able to move through burnt landscapes, descend into the trenches and recreate the field of vision from the trenches. Historical information was also included, for example about the author Erich Maria Remarque and his book "All Quiet on the Western Front" ("Im Westen nichts Neues", 2004 [1929]) and about the most famous Czech author, Jaroslav Hasek. His satirical book "The Good Soldier Svejk" (2005 [1921]) is the most translated book in all of Czech literature.



Although the horror, brutality and cruelty could not and cannot be recreated, the view from a trench alone changes the otherwise distanced view of the events of the war. The students' work is only a first attempt to make historical events and processes tangible for pupils in an innovative way. Extensive further work would be useful and profitable. However, the short duration of the project has already made it possible for the students to gain insights into a virtual realisation of historical events and to do this with a view to the requirements of students (and pupils) with special needs. Finally, the students also gained the important experience of seeing the war events (here in the trenches of the Western Front) from the perspective of different warring parties and processing these different perspectives in learning opportunities.

#### 4 The Aftermath of the First World War: Germany, Czechoslovakia, and the European Order

In retrospect, the year 1917 is also referred to as the 'epoch year' due to the entry of the USA into the war and the Bolshevik Revolution, as it shaped the further course of the 20th century. At the end of the First World War in 1918, state relations in Europe and the Middle East had changed considerably. The monarchies in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia had been eliminated, the Ottoman Empire broke apart. New nation states emerged. The countries involved in the project were confronted with very different consequences of the war, also due to the respective nature of their participation at the beginning of the war.



In the autumn of 1918, in the last days of the First World War, Germany found itself militarily and politically at an impasse. Defeat was inevitable, surrender only a question of time. The political order was extraordinarily fragile; there was great fear among the old elites of a revolution like the

one that had taken place in Russia. The first signs of revolutionary upheaval appeared in November 1918. Workers' and soldiers' councils were formed in some areas and calls for the abdication of the emperor and the establishment of a republic were heard. On 9 November, in a politically very confusing situation, Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the German Republic, and only two hours later Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the "Free Socialist Republic of Germany". Obviously, the nation of war losers was in a very fragile situation in which different forces were wrestling with each other and the leaders of political parties took the initiative to found a state. The Weimar Republic was then founded in January 1919. The pre-war elites had left the country to the parliamentary forces – also in order not to have to take responsibility for the war, which had been lost with great losses. Thus, it was the task of the parliamentary government to negotiate a peace treaty.

In this treaty (Peace Treaty of Versailles of 28.06.1919), Germany had to accept sole responsibility for the war. As was already apparent in the first confusing days and months after the end of the war, the young republic was challenged by various, conflicting forces; radical left-wing as well as right-wing currents gained momentum. Economic crises, inflation, and unemployment, especially in the early 1920s, shook the population's confidence in the democratic form of government. Adolf Hitler's seizure of power in 1933 ended the brief first phase of democratic governments in Germany. The totalitarian regime headed for the next catastrophe, the Second World War.



The consequences of the war from 1918 onwards were quite different for the Czechs and Slovaks. Czechs and Slovaks had been subjects of the Habsburg Emperor since the 16th century, but the Czechs were much better off in the Austrian part of the empire than the Slovaks in the Hungarian part. While the Czechs experienced their national rebirth in the 19th century, especially in literature, the Slovaks and everything Slovak were suppressed and banned by Hungary.

When World War I broke out in 1914, some Czechs began to fight for the creation of their own independent state. They were joined by Slovaks, and as early as 1915 an agreement was signed in Cleveland, USA, in which the formation of a future Czech-Slovak federal state was declared as a common goal. The later famous Fourteen Points of the American President Woodrow Wilson contained, among other things, the goal that the Danubian states should develop freely and independently. On 28 October 1918 the time had come. The independence of the state of the Czechs and Slovaks was proclaimed in Prague. Ten days later, Austria accepted US President Wilson's conditions for an armistice. One of them: the secession of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and part of Silesia – the territory of Czechoslovakia. Therefore,

28 October is considered the founding day in the Czech Republic and is still a bank holiday today.

The Provisional Czechoslovak National Assembly met for the first time on 14 November 1918. In its first resolution, it declared the House of Habsburg deposed. Although Hungary continued to fight for Slovakia for another eight months, the decision in favour of a Czechoslovak state was taken during the Paris Peace Conference in the summer of 1919 (Peace Treaty of St. Germain en Laye, September 1919). "Our state was established because our state law was recognised by the Allies and because the nation at home and abroad stood up to our enemies in unity," said Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, the founding president, on the 10th anniversary of the state in 1928.

Czechoslovakia became a stable and prosperous democracy surprisingly quickly after the founding of the state. One problem, however, remained unsolved: the status and position of the German minority. When the provisional National Assembly met for the first time in November, the German deputies who wanted the German-speaking parts of the Bohemian Lands to join 'German Austria' were already missing.



There are many reasons to consider the end of the First World War as the birth of modern Europe. It marked the end of a Europe of imperial powers. Instead, a Europe of nation states took over. Many of the European countries that are now members of the EU declared independence after the war, for example Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The map of Europe as we know it today took shape during this period. Moreover, the end of the First World War also triggered a completely new idea – Euro-Federalism. For the first time in modern times, the idea of a united Europe was on the agenda. The Pan-European Movement, which still exists today, started in 1923 with the publication of a manifesto presenting the idea of a European state. Although this vision of a European state is very different from the European Union as we know it today, the core idea of Euro-Federalism remains. It shapes European politics after the Second World War, three decades later and beyond. Furthermore, Europe made a first attempt to create a world order based on liberal values, international treaties, and human rights.



## 5 Conclusion

Although the results of the First World War led quite directly to the Second World War, the many nation states that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War also initiated the possibilities of European unification. For this reason, it proved to be a sensible topic in the project for students from different European states to examine the First World War together. The students were only able to work on a small part of the multi-perspective elaboration of the events of the war in Kately's 3D world. But this joint work nevertheless produced interesting learning opportunities that could also take into account the use by pupils and students with special needs.

## References

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