

Elora-Salem Remembrance Day 2018

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The 100th Anniversary of the End of the First World War

Listen to the sounds, as the guns were silenced 100 years ago. What do you hear?

<https://metro.co.uk/video/imperial-war-museum-approximate-end-wwi-1798600/?ito=vjs-link>

In the silence, what did you hear? Peace? Hope? Unimaginable sadness?

What do you hear? The quieted voices of more than 9 million soldiers dead? The 7 million others not in armies but killed nonetheless? The 15 million left wounded in their bodies, minds and souls?

What did you hear? Devastated landscapes in France, Belgium, Serbia, Russia? The collapsing empires of Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary and Turkey? Seeds being planted for a century of war that was still to come from that “War to End All Wars?” After that “Great War,” people could never imagine we’d risk doing something like that again. But we did. And still do.

In the silence, did you hear the virus of fascism already incubating? The virus of influenza already spreading?

In the silence, did you hear the generation of mothers with lost sons, of wives widowed, and children without dads? Or, with men who came home deeply damaged?

In the silence, what do you hear? What should we hear?

Thomas Hardy wrote a poem about that day, called *There Was a Great Calm*. Here is how it ends.

*Calm fell. From Heaven distilled a clemency;
There was peace on earth, and silence in the sky;
Some could, some could not, shake off misery:
The Sinister Spirit sneered: 'It had to be!'
And again the Spirit of Pity whispered, 'Why?'*

Why?

In that “Great War,” I am hard-pressed to find a “Great Purpose.” Except perhaps a lesson we might learn, someday.

For the most part, Europe had been at peace for a century. Few could imagine it ending. Yet in just 5 weeks, from shots fired in Sarajevo to armies marching across the continent, it had all

crashed into brutal conflict. Historians have tried unravelling those fatal weeks, the threads that wove together to create that burning blanket.

Those historians have unpacked the roles of arms races, military plans, economic rivalries, trade wars, imperialisms, alliances.

They've exposed the nastiness of nationalism, nationalism which turns grudges, grievances, pride, honour, toxic masculinity, and fear into great causes, nationalism which demands blood sacrifices.

They've described the personalities of the Kaiser and the Czar, the Emperor and the King, Prime Ministers and Presidents — yes, the personalities and insecurities of our leaders matter.

All these factors mixed together to launch billions of bullets and bombs.

But the danger we face is imagining that it was somehow inevitable.

People made decisions. They had options. Every step along the way, they chose. They chose a trail that led to trenches, bombs, gas, and millions of corpses.

Yes, it was only a few who made the big decisions. But it was millions who went along with them.

Peace is not inevitable. Don't take it for granted. We need to decide for it.

Listen to the silence. What do you hear? Will we learn from it?

When people threaten peace — sowing division, suspicion, hatred and fear — what decision will we make?