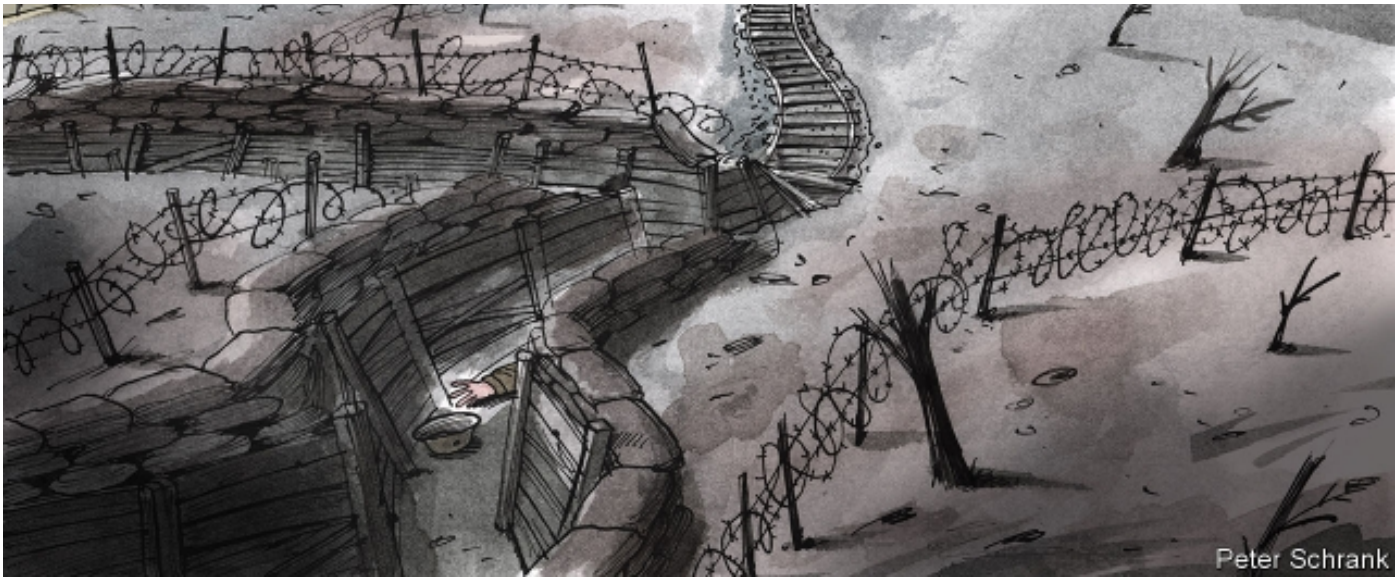
Between the tracks

Lessons from history 100 years after the Armistice

The guns fell silent a century ago



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SHORTLY AFTER 2am on November 11th 1918 a train came to a halt in a wood in Compiègne, near Paris. A second train pulled up on a nearby

track. After four years of fighting, delegates of the German government sought an armistice from Ferdinand Foch, the commander of the French forces. Rare photos of the scene, hazy as a memory, show engine smoke twisting between the twiggy trees, makeshift boardwalks across the leaf-strewn ground and clusters of soldiers by the rails. At 5.15am the Germans signed the peace in the light of brass lamps in a teak-lined dining car. At 11am the guns fell silent along the 400km (250 mile) front, their thunder replaced by the pealing of church bells.

This peace ended a collective nightmare of hitherto unrivalled intensity and volume. The first world war was not just a grand tragedy. For the 67m who fought, it was a sordid hellscape. Few of the 10m killed in combat died from a "bullet, straight to the heart", as pro forma telegrams to relatives put it. Many more bled to death in no-man's land, their wails lingering for days like "moist fingers being dragged down an enormous windowpane", as a British lieutenant wrote of the Battle of the Somme. Traumatised survivors sometimes slept in open sewers, and begged for their mothers as superiors ordered them over the top.

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They guarded what slivers of humanity and dignity they could. At Compiègne today visitors can view silver rings from the trenches bearing initials (LV, MJ, SH or G) or four-leaf clovers; pipes with marks worn where teeth once clenched; a tube of insect-bite cream; letter-openers fashioned from shell

casings, the names of yearned-for correspondents etched into their blades ("Marguerite", "Mlle Rose-Marie"). A certain stoic humour also played its part. "I was hit. I looked round and saw that my leg had shot out and hit the fellow behind me (who got rather annoyed about [it])" wrote Charlemagne's great-grandfather in his diary in 1915, just outside Ypres.

The memorial at Compiègne focuses on the leaders, the "switchmen of history" as Geert Mak, a Dutch historian, calls them. A replica carriage is the star artefact, name cards marking where the German and French delegates sat. Outside, a statue of Foch keeps vigil over the clearing. On November 10th Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel will visit the site. As they enter the room where the carriage stands they will pass under a quote by Winston Churchill: "Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it."

Pondering the exhibits, that apophthegm seems at once true and yet hopelessly hubristic. The first world war happened because a generation of Victorian leaders took for granted the stable order that had prevailed in most of Europe for decades. They should have read their history books. Yet the war was also a tale of forces beyond the power of any leader, however well-read; of nations and continents not as trains on history's railway lines, run by drivers and switchmen, but as rafts tossed about on history's ocean, dipping at most an occasional oar into the waves. Fate was the real *grand homme* of the "Great War". The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 would not have happened had his driver not taken a wrong turning in Sarajevo. The German army's initial advance was halted at Nieuwpoort by a Belgian lock-keeper who flooded the surrounding marshlands. Political twists in Berlin, not crushing defeat on the battlefield, pushed Germany to sue for peace in 1918.

The raftsmen also lacked maps. Across the continent, the armistice was greeted with relief. Newspapers announced it with a retrospectively stomach-churning sense of finality. "The war is over" cried Londoners as ceremonial gunfire broke the news. The nightmare seemed to have passed, but it had not. The armistice and the peace treaties that followed in 1919 and 1920 reshaped

the maps of Europe and the Middle East, and imposed vengeance on the defeated, seeding future conflicts. Millions returned from the front angry, traumatised, wounded, resentful or all four. *Gueules cassées* (broken faces) the French called them. One such, an Austrian-born lance-corporal, would take Germany to war again two decades later, and in 1940 would have the French sign their own surrender in the same railway carriage at Compiègne.

The power of nightmares

Memories are everywhere. Two plaques in Compiègne's station list the 23 locals killed in the first world war and the 20 killed in the second. Engraved brass cobblestones glint from German streets marking the addresses where Holocaust victims once lived. Recollections live on in diaries or passed through families orally. The past summer's hot weather exposed shells and bullets in dried-up rivers. Other artefacts remain hidden: the original French version of the Treaty of Versailles went missing and probably rests, forgotten, in some German attic or cellar. "Europe is a continent in which one can easily travel back and forth through time," writes Mr Mak. The EU, forged from the rubble of the two wars, knits the continent together in the spirit of lessons learned: peace, fraternity, unity in diversity. The pedagogical value of the past is to today's European establishment what the uninhibited pursuit of freedom is to the American one, a foundational story, an essence.

Long may that learning continue. Yet modesty is also due, about forces greater than the wits and power of even historically aware societies are able to contain. National chauvinisms live on despite the Somme. Anti-Semitism lives on despite the Holocaust. Societies' capacity to imagine collapse and barbarism in visceral terms fades with time. All Europeans can do is be vigilant and humble before these forces, dip their oars into the waves of history when possible, hold tight to their humanity and be grateful that their continent's past and present are now broadly in harmony, the former educating and civilising the latter, for now at least. Like train lines running together in a wood.