In France, a lasting hymn to the silence

AMSTERDAM – Traveling around northwestern Europe one eventually comes to notice that though it's been close to 90 years since the Armistice, the Great War has never really gone away.

The present era of good feelings between the states of Europe – a 25-member political union of increasing confidence, a single currency that's been embraced to a degree few thought possible a generation ago, international checkpoint stations lying abandoned and closed up by the roadside – belies a not-so-long-ago time when these same states tore at each other's throats in two devastating world wars in the previous century. Those twin cataclysms linger, decades down the line, in countless ways large and small across Europe's timeless, roiled landscape: the graveyards on the outskirts of all too many towns, serving as a final resting place for the fallen of a particular town or region. The massive artillery crater surviving to the north of the town of Albert in northern France, 100 meters across and 30 deep, leaving one to wonder at the earthly hell mankind could unleash on itself and the innocent earth below it. The names on a map, once serving merely to guide the traveler to where he wanted to go, now existing as throat-clenching touchstones of bitterness: the Marne. The Somme. Verdun.

Until you travel these roads, read the names and view the faded, grainy likenesses of these men staring at us from down through the years, imploring us not to forget them, you can't really understand. America's civil war might have been the most wrenching experience in American history, but the Civil War battlefields Americans tour reverently each year seem to pale in comparison to the almost incomprehensible numbers massacred in Europe during World War I. Between 500,000 and 600,000 Americans, Union and Confederate, perished in battle from 1861 to 1865; the death tolls from the Great War – a conflict that also lasted four years – are estimated at at least 25 times that many.

Stalin's famous dictum that a single death is a tragedy, while a million deaths is but a statistic, might have ventured on the cynical side, but – in accurately gaging the difficulty with which the mind grapples with killing on that scale – the old fellow was onto something. The Great War itself had that sobriquet for less than a generation, until World War II unleashed a level of death and destruction to dwarf even that earlier disaster, but one imagines that World War I lingers in the collective memory as the more shocking of the two. At the time the war started many still held onto the 19 th-Century notion that humanity as a whole was getting better as the years progressed; by 1939 and the Nazi onslaught, a numbed population doubtless could think only, "not again."

These days we are under no illusions of ending all wars, as did the men and women of 1918 – ours are merely of a different kind, if no less sinister. Today we lionize the heroes of World War II as they fade into the sunset, while their counterparts from a generation earlier threaten to slip quietly into the cradle of history. But traveling across this land it's clear that France hasn't forgotten.

The enormity strikes you at the Somme 1916 museum in Albert, reading the narrative about the life and death of John Courtney, a British infantryman who fought with his unit, the Salford Pals, on the Western Front before being killed in Belgium in 1917. It strikes you at the simple, poignant Armistice memorial site near Compeigne where the Great War officially came to an end – an open green space with several low stone monuments, a small museum, a statue of Marshal Foch and one of liberty's sword striking down the German eagle, the French tricolor snapping briskly in the breeze. It hits you again in the various cathedrals erected around Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, many of which added interior war memorials to the fallen during the 20 th Century, and again at Verdun, where 400,000 Frenchmen fell defending the town against the German advance – and where today sits a huge stone monument amidst a field of crosses, stretching on and on under the open sky.

Mostly, though, there is the silence – as in the former village site of Fleury-devant-Douaument near Verdun, where German shelling completely obliterated the town and left the earth itself cratered and chewed up to this day. For Fleury's sacrifice the French government designated the area as a shrine to the town's vanished souls, and today the site offers the visitor a place for quiet contemplation and prayer. But the town – where generations lived and died, young men married their sweethearts, flowers grew – exists now only as a neverending hymn to the silence, a place where (one imagines) uneasy spirits dwell, a shattered reminder of the despair that resonates when that basic unit of civilization – home, family, community – is broken and torn away.

Travel through this land looking for monuments to the Great War, and you'll find them – in the white marble of remembrance, in a landscape deformed by a new kind of war that nevertheless accomplished no more than those preceding it. For the true memorial, though, start by looking for what isn't there.

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