If World War I was a European war over the future of the world, the futures of the world that emerged from the age of destruction were unlike anything the belligerents, high and low, had expected. How could this happen? Answers hinge on understanding the peculiar “totalizing” energy of the war, which was unleashed in 1914 and crashed through legal, political and “civilizational” hedges that had meant to contain violence — away from bourgeois society and beyond the European world. It also depends on making sense of an age of destruction — a yet more deadly war, a forty-year war-in-sight confrontation in Europe and the violent ends of empire — that emerged from World War I.

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