The First World War was a historical watershed in the relation between European societies and other world regions. But at the same time the war also meant a redefinition of the relation between universal hopes and expectations and radically new experiences of millions of individuals. Against the background of a modern machine war and mass killing, most of the military scenarios, political plans and cultural anticipations developed before the summer of 1914 lost their meaning within a short period of time. The result was a vacuum of meaning which explains the almost messianic hope with which new utopias were perceived in 1917: be it Woodrow Wilson’s idea of a last war to end all wars in the name of democracy and national self-determination or W. I. Lenin’s model of a Bolshevik revolution in the name of a new social order. How can we explain the complexity of the war with regard to these constellations which went far beyond the European war societies? How did the crisis of universalism develop, what were contemporary responses to it, and what were the long-term consequences of this rupture?

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