

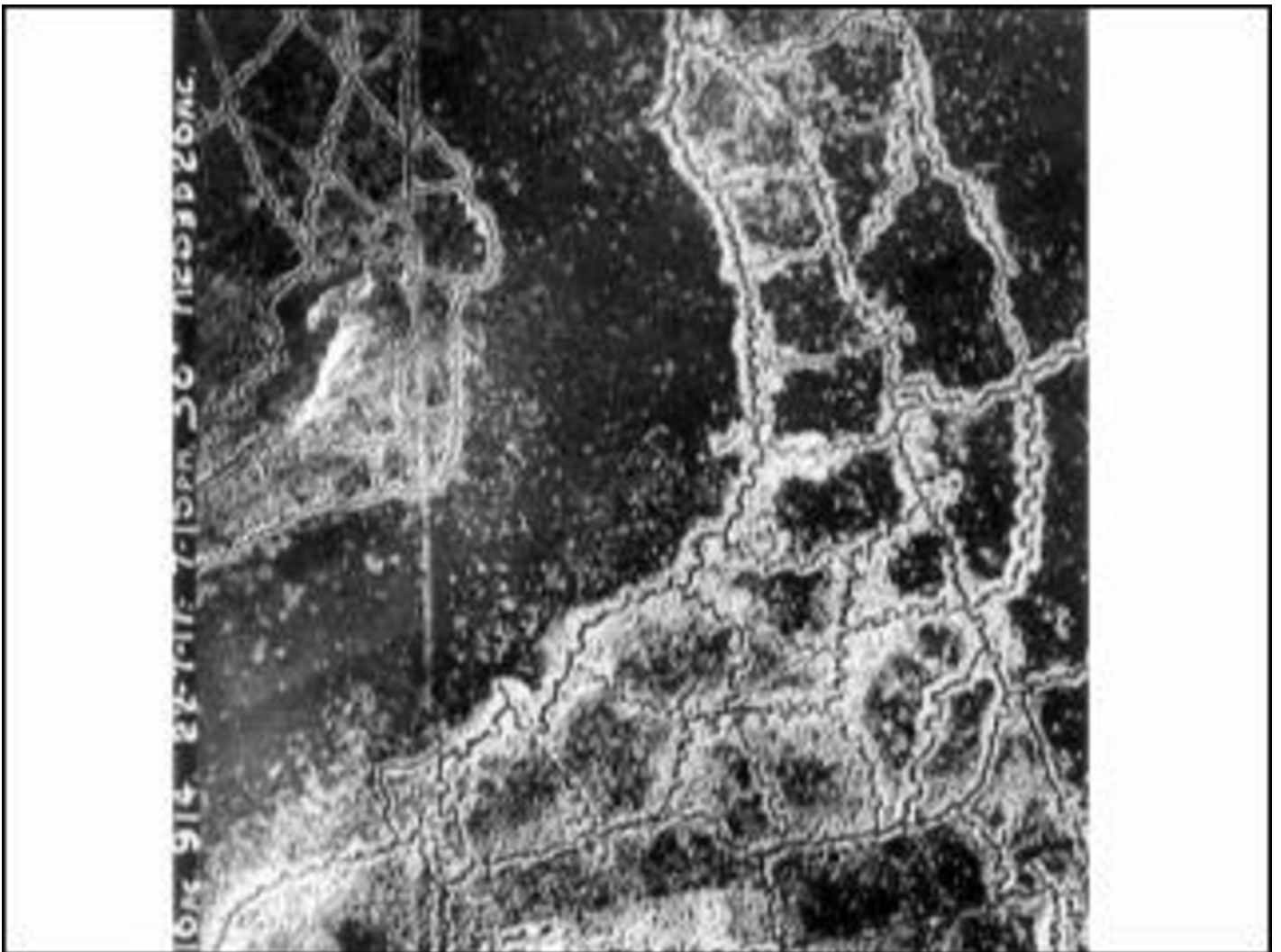


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War and Peace in Europe from Napoleon to the Kaiser: From Balkan War to World War, 1908- 1918 Transcript

Date: Thursday, 22 April 2010 - 12:00AM

Location: Museum of London



From Balkan War to World War 1908-1918

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22/4/2010

In my previous lecture in this series, in March, I noted how the spread of nationalism in the Balkans led nations such as Bulgaria and Serbia to devote increasing resources to armaments and to building up their military strength, and how the rapidly accelerating crisis of the Ottoman Empire prompted them to take action to grab territory they considered theirs by right. By the end of the Second Balkan War, in 1913, they had effectively fought each other as well as the Turks to a standstill, but had made major territorial gains from the Ottoman Empire in the process. But this did not mean that they were satisfied. On the contrary, there were powerful radical political groups in the Balkan countries that wanted more, and were prepared to use violent methods such as terrorism and assassination in order to achieve it. These included, as I mentioned in my previous lecture, the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, which aimed at the expansion of Bulgaria across Macedonia through violence and terror; and after some time, it was joined by other, similar groups. The most significant of these was *Unification or Death*, founded in Serbia by the army officer known as Colonel Apis who had engineered the murder of the King and Queen in the coup of 1903, and stood for the creation of a greater Serbia.

The creation of *Unification or Death*, which quickly became known by the simpler name of the *Black Hand*, reflected among other things the growing influence of the military in the Serbian state. It owed its origins to a more moderate nationalist organization, *National Defence*, formed in 1908 in response to the Habsburg Empire's formal annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which were still technically provinces of the Ottoman Empire, though they were actually administered from Vienna. Aimed at forestalling possible moves in Istanbul to invite delegates from the provinces to a democratic assembly convened under the revived Ottoman constitution of 1876, the annexation in fact had a cataclysmic effect not on Turkish but on Serbian opinion, since they contained a large Serbian population which nationalists like Colonel Apis believed should rightly be part of a Greater Serbian state. When the Austrian government forced the Serbian authorities to crack down on *National Defence*, Apis and other military officers reacted by founding the *Black Hand*. It soon gained wide influence in the armed forces, the police and the intelligence service, and recruited growing numbers of young Bosnian Serbs, a number of whom had taken advantage of scholarships offered by the Serbian government to study in Belgrade.

Their choice of assassination as a political tactic was neither particularly new, nor particularly exceptional. Not only in the Balkans but also more widely in Europe and indeed across the Atlantic, the murder of leading political figures had become extraordinarily widespread by 1914. Already in the 1890s assassins had claimed the lives of numerous public figures, including the President of France, the Empress of Austria and the recently dismissed Prime Minister of Bulgaria. From 1900 to 1914, the murder rate increased dramatically, and those killed included forty politicians, diplomats and heads of state, amongst them seven kings or presidents, six prime ministers, and numerous senior military and civil officials. And these figures were dwarfed by those of failed assassination attempts. Thus it seemed almost obvious to a group of young Bosnian Serbs in the Black Hand society that when the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, nephew of Emperor Franz Josef and heir to the Habsburg throne, announced that he was visiting the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo in what Serbs took to be a provocative gesture, the appropriate response was to try to kill him. Among other things, the Archduke was believed in Serbia to be the leader of the hard-liners in Vienna who had pressed for the annexation of Bosnia in 1908. Colonel Apis therefore approved of the project, and although he was not acting on behalf of the Serbian government, the government was aware of the plot and even advised the Archduke privately to call off his visit.

The Sarajevo conspirators of 28 June were as bungling and incompetent as might be expected from their age and inexperience - all of them were teenagers and none of them had even practiced this kind of thing, let alone tried it out for real. Four of them were too petrified at the magnitude of their enterprise that they failed to make use of their weapons when the Archduke passed. A fifth did manage to throw a bomb at his car but it bounced off the boot and only hurt spectators. Instead of calling off his visit, however, Franz Ferdinand, a pig-headed and none too bright man, insisted on continuing it. His Czech chauffeur did not know Sarajevo and took a wrong turning, coming to a halt right in front of the sixth conspirator, the sixteen-year-old Gavrilo Princip, who with great presence of mind let off two shots, killing the Archduke and fatally wounding his wife (though in fact he had meant the second shot for the military governor of Sarajevo). To avoid capture and interrogation, Princip swallowed a cyanide capsule, but the chemical had been exposed to air and was ineffective. Within a few years, horrified and depressed at the consequences of his act, he died in prison, not yet twenty years of age.

Few mourned the passing of Franz Ferdinand as a person. The Emperor, who disapproved of his morganatic marriage to a Czech commoner, is said on hearing the news to have commented: "A Higher Power has restored the order I could not uphold", and ordered a third-class funeral. Antisemitic, anti-democratic, short-tempered, and a believer in German racial superiority, Franz Ferdinand hated the Hungarians with the same passion that he devoted to his principal pastime, the slaughtering of large numbers of wild animals on hunting expeditions, during which, it was said, he fired at everything within range and was an object of general terror. Writing about the funeral of King Edward VII in London, he declared: "On horseback the King of Bulgaria resembled a pig" The Serbian Crown Prince, on the other hand, looks like a bad copy of a gypsy... Richon and Roosevelt... distinguished themselves by a remarkable lack of court manners... Contrary to the usual English practice, the dinner was excellent." Speculation that his succession to the throne might have saved the Empire is wide of the mark. However, in the internal debates of the Austro-Hungarian leadership in the years before his assassination, he seems generally to have been a force for moderation. Franz Ferdinand realized the weakness of the Empire, and consistently urged restraint. It may well not be true, therefore, to claim that the Austrians were hell-bent on war anyway and would have taken action against Serbia even had the Archduke not been killed. Apis was wrong, therefore. Franz Ferdinand's removal in fact made it easier for the war party in Vienna, led by army chief Conrad von Hötzendorff, to follow its aggressive instincts.

The government in Vienna was clear that action needed to be taken not only to punish the Serbs but also to prevent similar outrages occurring again and more generally to assert its status as a Great Power, which it knew was undergoing an alarming decline. First it consulted the Germans. Interrupting their holidays, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and other leading figures met on 5 July and told Vienna to go ahead. This was the famous "blank cheque" with which the Germans thought they could deter the Russians from defending Serbia, or persuade the French and the British to deter them. International opinion was generally on the Austrians' side; the British press, for example, was extremely hostile towards the Serbs. And surely the Tsar would not intervene to support regicides. But, even though it was armed with German support, the Austrian government now let the matter rest for the moment, because the French President was on a state visit to Russia and it did not want to take any action until he was back home. It was only on 23 July, therefore, that it issued the Serbian government with an ultimatum. The delay inevitably aroused suspicion; immediate action at the end of June would have won widespread approval, but a month later, the shock of the murder was no longer so potent, and sympathies for the Austrians had cooled. The ultimatum, therefore, no longer, somehow, seemed sincere.

Nevertheless, the Serbian government agreed to all of its main points except one. It agreed to ban the *Black Hand*, to suppress publications and speeches attacking Austria-Hungary and ban such criticism from the school curriculum, to cashier officers guilty of actions against the Dual Monarchy, to arrest those responsible for the murder (on provision of proof), and even to accept the participation of Austrian officials in these actions. The exception was Point 6, which demanded the participation of Austrian officials in the investigation of the murder, which the Serbian government declared incompatible with the country's Constitution. In effect, it suspected, this would amount to a takeover of the Serbian law enforcement agencies by a foreign power. This was enough for the authorities in Vienna to declare war, which they did on 28 July 1914. Within 24 hours shells were falling on Belgrade. But on 15 August, bringing up a quarter of a million fresh troops from the south, the Serbian army inflicted a crushing defeat on the Austrians, following this with a second victory in December. The Third Balkan War had begun.

All of these events are relatively easy to explain. What is not easy to explain, of course, is how the Third Balkan War turned into the First World War. During the war itself, of course, all sides tried to pin the blame on their opponents and to argue that the war had been planned. In particular, since it quickly became above all a struggle between Britain and Germany, historians and propagandists have devoted enormous efforts to proving that it was planned, or at least intended, by one or other, or possibly both, of these two countries, since it was the fight between them that made the war last for so long, with such enormously destructive consequences. By 1914, indeed, the dangers of a local or regional conflict dragging the Great Powers into a conflict of far wider scope were obvious to all; they had been apparent in the Serbo-Montenegrin attack on Albania in the First Balkan War, when Austria-Hungary, France and Russia threatened to intervene, and armed conflict was only avoided by the mediation of the British.

By July 1914, however, the options open to the Great Powers had narrowed appreciably. Russia, as I argued last time, was left, after a century of trying to gain influence in the Balkans, with Serbia as its only ally in the region. This made the Austrian invasion far more of a threat to international peace than previous crises since the turn of the century, all of which had been resolved peacefully, whether it had been Franco-German rivalry in Morocco, dealt with by an explicit threat of British intervention in support of the French, or Austro-Russian rivalry in the Balkans in 1908, kept peaceful by a German threat to back Austria should the Russians mobilize in support of the thwarted ambition of the Serbs. By 1914, the obvious dissolution of the Turkish empire

in Europe, and the effects of repeated armed conflict in the Balkans, had enormously heightened international tension. The question was, would the British, still the world's most powerful nation, intervene to keep the peace once again?

However, things had changed in this respect as well since the previous international crises over Morocco and Bosnia. Superficially, British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey did his best to localize the conflict, pressing the Germans, French and Russians to restrain the Austrians and Serbs until the issuing of the ultimatum made it clear that this was no longer an option, then urging mediation by an uninvolved power. This gave the Germans the impression that Britain would remain neutral. But at the same time, Grey was reassuring the French and Russians that they could count on British support if matters came to a head. The Russians, for their part, were prepared to press the Serbs to accept the ultimatum in its entirety but regarded an actual Austrian invasion of Serbia as a humiliation they could not accept. The French were committed to backing the Russians but played on the whole only a secondary role in the negotiations leading up to August 1914.

So the key lay with the Germans and the British. At the very least the Germans could have avoided giving the Austrians the blank cheque and made a serious attempt to restrain them. Some historians have gone further and argued that Germany was actively aiming for a general war. Chief of the General Staff Moltke the Younger, they have pointed out, was pressing for a war as early as December 1912, "the sooner the better", he said, in view of the impending expansion of the Russian army, while Naval chief Admiral von Tirpitz argued that war should only be avoided until the summer of 1914, when the widening of the Kiel canal would allow German warships to pass from the Baltic to the North Sea without leaving German territory. But there is no paper trail leading from the so-called war council of 1912 to August 1914, and this argument assumes a unity and coherence in German governing circles that simply wasn't there.

Kaiser Wilhelm II for example has often been viewed as a force pressing in favour of war, but in fact he was as inconsistent on this issue as he was on most others. On learning of the Serbs' acceptance of 9 out of 10 points on the ultimatum, for example, he wrote that this was "a great moral victory for Austria - now there is no need for war." Yet all the while Moltke was working for a generalization of the war. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, as the civilian leader of Germany in a weak position vis-à-vis the military, did nothing to stop him apart from trying to ensure British neutrality, and resisted all attempts to mediate unless they gave Austria complete control over Serbia.

Crucially, too, there was no attempt in Berlin to amend the Schlieffen Plan, the war plan devised by his predecessor Alfred von Schlieffen earlier in the decade. While the elder Moltke, victor in the wars of 1866 and 1870, had thought, at least after 1879, that Germany should hold the Western Front while crushing the Russians, a view shared by his successor Waldersee, Schlieffen was so impressed by improvements in Russian fortifications during the 1890s, by the vastness of Russia's territory, and by the growing size of the Russian army, that he reversed the plan, envisaging holding the Eastern Front while outflanking the French armies in a massive encircling manoeuvre, surrounding them and destroying them. This means a strong right flank of the German army would invade Belgium, a neutral country, and, passing round Paris, would pin the French forces against their own fortifications from the rear. The plan was not fully worked out in detail, but in broad outline it certainly existed, despite the doubts of some historians, and there was no alternative to it. Thus any German war with Russia would begin with a German attack on France. Moreover, the violation of Belgian neutrality would provide a perfect excuse for British intervention. But these political considerations counted for little in the German general staff, and the civilian government was too weak to intervene. After the war, when some argued that it would have been impossible to have changed mobilization plans and transfer the bulk of the German forces to the East to deal with the Russians, the German general in charge of railway operations in 1914 indignantly wrote a book, complete with maps, plans and timetables, to demonstrate that he could have performed this task in under three days had he been asked to do so. He was not, and this raises once more the question of whether the German leadership had decided anyway that the time had come for a war against France. In any event, as soon as the Austrians began military action, and Russian intervention became inevitable, Germany declared war, on 1 August 1914, and the next day German troops moved into Luxemburg, On 3 August Germany declared war on France, and on 4th Germany invaded Belgium. At midnight the British ultimatum to Germany to withdraw expired, and Britain declared war.

In the end, therefore, the key to the widening of the conflict really did lie with Britain and Germany. Had they undertaken a serious mediation, then Russia and Austria-Hungary could most probably have been brought to the conference table. But they did not. Was this, as some historians have argued, because they were bound tightly to a system of alliances that automatically came into action when one country came into conflict with another? Certainly by 1914 it looked as if Europe was divided into two armed camps. Up to the early years of the new century, Britain had regarded above all the Russians as their most serious potential enemy, largely because of the "Great Game" in Asia and the continual push of the Russians towards the Mediterranean and the Middle East. France was the subject of similar suspicions, and indeed fantasy novels warning the British public about

the country's lack of preparedness for a future war still saw France as the main threat well after 1900.

It was only from 1905 onwards that things began to change. The previous year, Britain and France had engaged in the famous *entente cordiale*, designed to avoid the two countries being dragged into the looming Russo-Japanese war on the sides of their respective allies (the British had previously concluded an alliance with Japan as part of their efforts to prevent Russian expansion in China). This involved settling the two nations' remaining colonial difficulties, and included an understanding that Morocco belonged to the French sphere of influence. In March 1905, however, Kaiser Wilhelm II landed at Tangiers, promised the Sultan to help him against the French, and told the French consul he knew how to defend German interests there. By doing so, he was trying to undermine French interests in Morocco at a time when France's ally Russia was in trouble with Japan, and he may have thought that this would persuade Britain that a strong Germany would make a better ally than a weak France, and that the *entente cordiale* should accordingly be abandoned. But as so often with the Kaiser's interventions, the move backfired; the British responded by supporting the French, and the German government was forced to back down. The resulting Treaty of Algeçiras gave the French most of what they wanted.

Even after this, few regarded the *entente* as more than an informal arrangement, and much less than an alliance. In 1911, however, the French, despite British attempts to restrain them, sent in an armed force to support the Moroccan Sultan against a rebellion, and were quickly followed by the Spanish, who took advantage of the situation to occupy part of Morocco themselves; it was these events indeed that sparked the Italian invasion of Libya later the same year, and from there the Balkan Wars of 1912-13.

While the Germans formally approved of the French occupation of Fez, they sent a gunboat to Agadir, prompting the British to dispatch a squadron of battleships in case this was the beginning of a German naval base on the Atlantic. The Germans demanded territorial acquisitions from France in equatorial Africa as the price of withdrawal, but received only an area of mosquito-infested swamp in Cameroon. The most significant aspect of the crisis was arguably the public statement by Lloyd George that "If Britain is treated badly where her interests are vitally affected, as if she is of no account in the cabinet of nations, then I say emphatically that peace at that price would be a humiliation intolerable for a great country like ours to endure." From this point onwards at the latest, the British government, Sir Edward Grey included, regarded Germany as the main threat to British interests, not Russia or France, a view already propagated by British Foreign Office officials, notably Sir Eyre Crowe, in 1907, when he penned a celebrated memorandum arguing that either Germany was 'consciously aiming at the establishment of a German hegemony at first in Europe and eventually in the world' or that 'the great German design is in reality no more than the expression of a vague, confused and unpractical statesmanship not realising its own drift.' Either way, he concluded, the result was the same.

The decisive factor here was the build-up of German naval power in the wake of the Navy Law of 1898 and subsequent similar laws. Previously there had been no effective German navy at all. But Kaiser Wilhelm and the new Navy Chief Admiral von Tirpitz were determined to build one that would boost Germany's prestige. At the same time, there was an increasing feeling among Germany's ruling elite, bolstered by pressure from newly emerging nationalist associations from the 1890s onwards, that the ragbag of small and insignificant colonies possessed by the German Empire was in no way suitable for a major Great Power; Germany, as Foreign Minister, later Chancellor, von Bülow, stated, needed its 'place in the sun', and in order to achieve it, the so-called 'world policy', or *Weltpolitik*, was inaugurated, in the course of which the German government and sometimes too the Kaiser intervened in world affairs, from the Boer War in South Africa to the Boxer Rebellion in China, in a way they had not done before.

Tirpitz's Navy Laws inaugurated a massive naval building programme, envisaged as stretching across decades, that aimed to produce, not a fleet of fast-moving light cruisers to defend or extend Germany's imperial interests, but a fleet of huge battleships, whose aim was to threaten British naval supremacy and potentially to inflict such damage on the British fleet through a confrontation in the North Sea that the British would be forced to agree to allow an expansion of the German overseas Empire by one means or another. As Tirpitz declared: "For Germany the most dangerous naval enemy at present is England. It is also the enemy against which we most urgently require a certain measure of naval force as a political power factor." But neither he nor the Kaiser, strangely, realized that the British would respond to this growing threat, which they did, first by increasing their own naval construction programme, and then, in 1906, partly in response to the defeat of the Russian navy by the better-built and better-equipped Japanese navy, by launching a new type of battleship, heavily armoured, fast-moving, and armed with a much larger number of long-range guns and torpedoes than the existing models: *HMS Dreadnought*.

By 1914 the British had 29 of these ships, many of them so much improved that they were known as *Super-Dreadnoughts*, while the Germans only had 17. Moreover, the whole *modus operandi* of the Royal Navy had been revolutionized in the process.

In 1897, the British navy, the largest in the world, was described as 'a drowsy, inefficient, moth-eaten organism' manned by men trained to sail ships in a peaceful world, to protect the country and the Empire against attack. Admirals and captains took pride in the appearance of their ships, often paying for their adornment out of their own pockets. Sailors spent long hours polishing the brasswork and captains avoided gunnery practice because it dirtied the paint. Captain Percy Scott, who invented modern naval gunnery techniques, was greatly frowned on when his ship scored 80% hits in practice when 30% was the fleet average. It was small wonder that Admiral 'Jackie' Fisher, the dynamic reformer appointed in 1902 to reform the navy, asked two years later the plainly rhetorical question: 'How many of our Admirals have minds?'

Fisher immediately stopped training in masts and yards, and in 1905 he made Scott's gunnery methods compulsory; the navy began recording more hits than misses for the first time. Fisher concentrated the fleet in home waters and promoted younger opposition. Yet despite opposition from what he called the 'gouty admirals' of the conservative school, Fisher was not really a modern thinker either. He introduced an obsession with weaponry and capital ships. In 1914 the Royal Navy still thought of a single decisive encounter in the North Sea, between rows of Dreadnoughts, of boarding parties, and a quick, total victory: a modern Battle of Trafalgar. Tirpitz thought along similar lines. Such a war did not materialize. There was only one such encounter, the Battle of Jutland in 1916, which ended indecisively because the opposing commanders were too worried about losing too many of their precious and expensive vessels. Instead the introduction of submarines, torpedoes, airships and planes led to a war of attrition in which the whip-hand was held by the power that used individual submarines to sink the merchant ships of its rival and so throttle its line of supply. Even after Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, at a time when over half a million tons of shipping carrying vital supplies to Britain were being sunk every month, the navy refused to convoy merchantmen because this was a task 'unworthy' of the Senior Service; nor did they have enough mines to protect the convoy lanes, or indeed much of an idea of what to do with the submarine menace. In the end, however, Britain survived, while it was Germany that suffered massive shortages due to the Allied blockade, resulting among other things in the death of 600,000 German civilians from malnutrition and related diseases in the course of the war.

Even though they won the naval arms race, the British did not lessen their suspicions and fears of German naval ambitions. The damage, in other words, had been done and was not easily to be undone. Anxieties on both sides were reinforced by the massive publicity surrounding the launching of every new battleship, underlining the hostile intentions of each towards the other. By 1914, therefore, the governments of both Britain and Germany, however divided they might have been about diplomatic tactics in the crisis, considered the other to be the major potential enemy in any broad European conflict. This was reinforced by the German decision in 1913 to expand its army, after a long period of focusing on building up the navy; the threat of German hegemony on the Continent was thus added to the naval-imperial threat, above all when German armies invaded Belgium and France, with the possibility of occupying a huge section of the continental coastline opposite the United Kingdom.

Long before this, however, influential figures in the British army had been planning for a land war against Germany on the European continent. The British civilian government avoided any formal commitment to military support of the French, and assumed all the way up to 1914 that the war would be a naval one as far as Britain was concerned. In 1907 Prime Minister Campbell-Bannerman told the French 'he did not think English public opinion would allow for British troops being employed on the Continent of Europe'. Grey and the cabinet thought in 1914 that if they sent military help to the French it would only be in the form of a token force of two or three divisions. In any case, they felt the details of military planning should be left to the professionals. As in Germany, they thus surrendered some of their freedom of action to the generals. Unknown to the cabinet, Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the General Staff, prepared as thoroughly as he could for a full-scale Continental war. He believed that Britain should introduce conscription and become a Continental military power. He spent his summers on cycling tours of the Northern French border with Germany and in the Low Countries, where he thought the next war would take place. Without informing the Cabinet, he conducted secret negotiations with the French army leadership which resulted in firm plans to send over a strong British Expeditionary Force in case of a German invasion, to put the troops wherever the French wanted them, and to send all six divisions available to him in the United Kingdom. Wilson despised democratic politicians; he knew that once the divisions were sent, more would follow; this implication of the plan was never discussed in Cabinet. Britain gained a Continental commitment entirely without consideration of the consequences.

Just as admirals thought that the war at sea would be a rerun of the great naval engagements of the past, so the generals thought the war on land would be something like the conflicts of the 1860s, opening with rapid, railway-borne advances to the front, followed by a decisive encounter in which the other side would meet with a shattering defeat along the lines of Sedan or Sadowa, and peace would then be concluded after a few weeks or at most a couple of months. Had they examined the key encounters of the Balkan Wars, however, or even the American Civil War or the Crimean War, in which the opposing sides had been relatively evenly matched, they might have thought differently. Since those days, too, barbed wire and machine-guns had

become standard defensive equipment, and as yet, internal combustion engines and armour-plating were not advanced enough to produce tanks that could effectively overcome these obstacles and restore movement to warfare. A few recognized these inconvenient facts, notably the Polish banker Jan Bloch, whose *Modern Weapons and Modern War*, published at the turn of the century, argued that in the next major war, 'the spade will be as important as the rifle' and forecast that the war of the future would be a stagnated confrontation in which quick victory would be impossible.

But nobody heeded this prediction, since generals, politicians, and civil servants were unable to accept its denial of easy victory. Social Darwinist doctrines had become widely accepted in European elites by the beginning of the twentieth century, and many, including for example Erich von Falkenhayn, the German War Minister, or Kurt Riezler, Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's secretary, saw international relations in terms of an inevitable struggle for the survival of the fittest waged between nations or even races, a corollary of imperialist thinking that also carried with it the assumption that the rival race, whether it was Slav, Latin or Teuton, was inferior, and therefore easy to defeat. By 1910 at the latest, the idea that a war was coming was shared by many. Admiral Fisher wrote of the atmosphere he created in the Royal Navy after 1902: 'We prepared for war in professional hours, talked war, thought war, and hoped for war.' The younger Moltke declared in 1912 that war must come 'and the sooner the better!', hoping to emulate his famous relative, though when real war actually came, he had a nervous breakdown and had to be relieved of his duties.

It was not just generals and admirals who regarded war as inevitable. As early as 1891, the son-in-law of the political French general, Boulanger, Auguste Driant, wrote to his regiment: 'I have always desired to fight with you the great War we all hope for.' War in this vision appeared as something not only inevitable but also positive. A German novelist wrote of August 1914: 'At last life had regained an ideal significance. The great virtues of humanity...fidelity, patriotism, readiness to die for an ideal...were triumphing over the trading and shopkeeping spirit...This was the providential lightning flash that would clear the air...The war would cleanse mankind from all its impurities.' In similar vein, British writers enthused about the opportunity that war would present: 'To die young, clean, ardent; to die swiftly, in perfect health; to die saving others from death, or worse - disgrace - 'to die and carry with you into the fuller, ampler life beyond, untainted hopes and aspirations, unembittered memories, all the freshness and gladness of May - is that not a cause for joy rather than sorrow?' The war appeared as a release, a liberation of manly energies long pent-up, a resolution to all the doubts and uncertainties, all the unresolved and insoluble problems that had plagued European politics and society in increasing measure since the late nineteenth century: a chance to do something glorious in a prosaic age.

Illusions such as these brought cheering crowds to the main squares of Europe's capital cities in August 1914 to welcome the coming of war. Look more carefully, however, and it becomes clear that most of those present were middle-class men, wearing straw boaters, rather than cloth-capped workers. In Europe's working class there were many reservations about the coming of the war. German Social Democrats organized anti-war demonstrations. The French socialist leader Jean Jaurès was assassinated on the very eve of a war he vehemently opposed. In Hamburg's pubs and bars, plainclothes policemen noted workers declaring their unwillingness to be used as cannon-fodder just because of the murder of an Austrian archduke.

Such reservations were swept away in the initial onrush of patriotic sentiment once the war actually began. But they returned as soon as the conflict began to become a war of attrition, and grew as it continued and the casualties increased to a point where almost no family was unaffected. The Great War was to sweep away many familiar features of nineteenth-century Europe. The German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman Empires vanished, leaving behind bitterly resentful new nations vying with each other for supremacy. The triumph of the Bolsheviks in Russia and the threat they posed to the rest of Europe radicalized political conflict everywhere. The sheer scale and cost of the war plunged Europe's economies into a deep crisis from which they did not fully recover until the 1950s. Old social hierarchies and habits of deference were swept away by the leveling effects of the machine-gun. The need for total mobilization brought the state into people's lives as never before. Above all, the war legitimized violence and military action as political weapons, and removed the restraints that had existed on political extremism before 1914; and it radicalized national and racial hatreds until they spilled over into genocide and mass murder, already prefigured in the Armenian massacres and Balkan conflicts of the late nineteenth century, but now expanded onto a previously unimaginable scale.

In 1815 and for a long time afterwards, European statesmen and politicians had concluded that international agreement and co-operation were the way to prevent a recurrence of social and political revolution, and that the massive destruction and loss of life that the French Revolution and its executor Napoleon had visited upon Europe had to be avoided by re-establishing social hierarchy and political order. They had been helped by the establishment of British world hegemony, which prevented colonial and imperial conflicts from disturbing the European peace. Such considerations had led European powers to fight only a limited number of wars, for limited goals, and with limited means, for most of the century.

By 1914, this situation had been transformed by the rise of the German Empire. It disturbed the balance of power, it brought colonial conflicts back into Europe with its claim for 'a place in the sun', it threatened British naval hegemony with its construction of a big battle fleet, and it was overtaking Britain economically. Under this pressure, the Concert of Europe was replaced by rival alliances, whose willingness to fight each other was increasingly driven by popular nationalist enthusiasm and a Social Darwinist belief in the virtues of war. War had been transformed in its aims from a Clausewitzian instrument of politics by other means, as it had still been in the hands of Bismarck, to an all-out conflict in which the aim was the total destruction of the enemy's political system, way of life and even in some cases very existence. Ideology became paramount in warfare, where it had been almost entirely absent since 1815.

The lessons of this transformation were not to be learned until after 1945, and perhaps even then far from completely. Ideology may have taken a back seat since the end of the Cold War and the abandonment of the doctrine of 'mutually assured destruction' in the nuclear standoff between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, but there are still powerful ideologies in existence that seek the total destruction of their opponents, and the nuclear arsenal is no less powerful than it was half a century ago, and is spreading to increasing numbers of countries. If there is one lesson to be learned from the experience of nineteenth-century Europe, it is the simple and even rather banal one that international co-operation is the key to avoiding conflicts and limiting them when they do occur. The United Nations and, still more, the increasing influence of international war crimes tribunals, have been steps in the right direction, but they have been very limited, hesitant, and uneven in their impact, and as we move through the twenty-first century, with conflicts still claiming many lives in places as far apart as Afghanistan and the Congo, it is clear that there is still a very long way to go.

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