THAT ENDED EA

How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War

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Winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize

The Great War still casts its shadow both physically and in our imaginations. Tons of ordnance are still buried in the battlefields and every so often someone — an unlucky farmer ploughing in Belgium, perhaps — is added to the casualty lists. Every spring after the ground has unfrozen, units of the Belgian and French armies have to gather up the unexploded shells that have been heaved up. In our memories too the Great War, thanks in part to an extraordinary outpouring of memoirs and novels and paintings, but also because so many of us have family connections to it, remains that dark and dreadful chapter in our history. Both my grandfathers fought in the war; one in the Middle East with the Indian Army, the other a Canadian doctor in a field hospital on the Western Front. My family still has the medals won then, a sword given by a grateful patient in Baghdad, and a hand grenade which we played with as children in Canada until someone realised that it had probably not been disarmed.

We also remember the Great War because it is such a puzzle. How could Europe have done this to itself and to the world? There are many possible explanations; indeed, so many that it is difficult to choose among them. For a start the arms race, rigid military plans, economic rivalry, trade wars, imperialism with its scramble for colonies, or the alliance systems dividing Europe into unfriendly camps. Ideas and emotions often crossed national boundaries: nationalism with its unsavoury riders of hatred and contempt for others; fears, of loss or revolution, of terrorists and anarchists; hopes, for change or a better world; the demands of honour and manliness which meant not backing down or appearing weak; or Social Darwinism which ranked human societies as if they were species and which promoted a faith not merely in evolution and progress but in the inevitability of struggle. And what about the role of individual nations and their motivations: the ambitions of the rising ones such as Germany or Japan; the fears of declining ones such as Great Britain; revenge for France and Russia; or the

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struggle for survival for Austria-Hungary? Within each nation too there were the domestic pressures: a rising labour movement, for example, or openly revolutionary forces; demands for votes for women or for independence for subject nations; or conflict between the classes, between the believers and the anti-clericals, or between the military and civilians. How did these all play their part in keeping Europe's long peace or moving it towards war?

Forces, ideas, prejudices, institutions, conflicts, all are surely important. yet that still leaves the individuals, not in the end that many of them, who had to say yes, go ahead and unleash war, or no, stop. Some were hereditary monarchs with great power – the Kaiser of Germany, the tsar of Russia or the emperor of Austria-Hungary; others – the President of France, the Prime Ministers of Britain and Italy – were embedded in constitutional regimes. It was Europe's and the world's tragedy in retrospect that none of the key players in 1914 were great and imaginative leaders who had the courage to stand out against the pressures building up for war. Somehow any explanation of how the Great War came must balance the great currents of the past with the human beings who bobbed along in them but who sometimes changed the direction of the flow.

It is easy to throw up one's hands and say the Great War was inevitable but that is dangerous thinking, especially in a time like our own which in some ways, not all, resembles that vanished world of the years before 1914. Our world is facing similar challenges, some revolutionary and ideological such as the rise of militant religions or social protest movements, others coming from the stress between rising and declining nations such as China and the united States. We need to think carefully about how wars can happen and about how we can maintain the peace. Nations confront each other, as they did before 1914, in what their leaders imagined was a controlled game of bluff and counter-bluff. yet how easily and how suddenly Europe went from peace to war in those five weeks after the assassination of the archduke. During previous crises, some as bad as the one of 1914, Europe had not gone over the edge. Its leaders – and large parts of their people had supported them had chosen to work matters out and to preserve the peace. What made 1914 different?

Let us start by imagining a landscape with people walking through it. The ground, the vegetation, the hills, the streams, these are all Europe's key components, from economies to social structures, while the breezes are the currents of thought that were shaping European views and opinions. Assume that you are one of the walkers, you will have choices ahead of you. The weather is fine although you can see a few small clouds in the sky. The way lies easy ahead across an open plain, you know that you have to keep moving because the exercise is good for you and because you eventually want to reach a safe destination, you also know that as you go along you may have to take some care. There might be unfriendly animals about, there are streams to be forded and there may be steep cliffs ahead. It does not occur to you though that you could possibly go over one of them to your doom, you are too sensible and too experienced a walker.

yet in 1914 Europe did walk over the cliff into a catastrophic conflict which was going to kill millions of its men, bleed its economies dry, shake empires and societies to pieces, and fatally undermine Europe's dominance of the world. The photographs of cheering crowds in the great capitals are misleading. The coming of war took most Europeans by surprise and their initial reaction was disbelief and shock. They had grown used to peace; the century since the end of the Napoleonic Wars had been the most peaceful one Europe had known since the Roman Empire. True there had been wars, but these had been far-off colonial ones like the Zulu wars in southern Africa, on the periphery of Europe like the Crimean War, or short and decisive like the Franco-Prussian War.

The final lurch towards war took just over a month between the assassination of the Austrian archduke at Sarajevo on 28 June and the outbreak of a general European war on 4 August. In the end, the crucial decisions of those weeks which took Europe to war were made by a surprisingly small number of men (and they were all men). To understand how they acted as they did, however, we must go further back, to look at the forces that had shaped them. We need to understand the societies and institutions of which they were the products. We must try to comprehend the values and ideas, emotions and prejudices, which informed them as they looked at the world. We also have to remind ourselves that, with one or two exceptions, they had very little idea of

what they were getting their countries and the world into. In that they were very much in tune with their times; most Europeans thought a general war was either impossible, improbable, or bound to end quickly.

As we try to make sense of the events of the summer of 1914, we must put ourselves in the shoes of those who lived a century ago before we rush to lay blame. We cannot now ask the decision-makers what they were thinking about as they took those steps along that path to destruction, but we can get a pretty good idea from the records of the time and the memoirs written later. One thing that becomes clear is that those who made the choices had very much in mind previous crises and earlier moments when decisions were made or avoided.

Russia's leaders, for example, had never forgotten or forgiven Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908. Moreover, Russia had failed to back its protégé Serbia when it confronted Austria-Hungary then and again in the Balkan wars in 1912–13. Now Austria-Hungary was threatening to destroy Serbia. What would it mean for Russia and its prestige if it stood by yet again and did nothing? Germany had not fully backed its ally Austria-Hungary in those earlier confrontations; if it did nothing this time, would it lose its only sure ally? The fact that earlier and quite serious crises among the powers, over colonies or in the Balkans, had been settled peacefully added another factor to the calculations of 1914. The threat of war had been used but in the end pressures had been brought to bear by third parties, concessions had been made, and conferences had been summoned, with success, to sort out dangerous issues. Brinkmanship had paid off. Surely this time in 1914 the same processes would start to work. Only this time brinkmanship did not work. This time Austria-Hungary did declare war on Serbia with Germany's backing; Russia decided to support Serbia and so went to war with Austria-Hungary and Germany; Germany attacked Russia's ally France; and Britain came in on the side of its allies. And so they went over the edge.

The outbreak of war in 1914 was a shock but it did not come out of a clear blue sky. The clouds had been gathering in the previous two decades and many Europeans were uneasily aware of that fact. Images of thunderstorms about to break, dams about to burst, avalanches ready to slide, these were quite common in the literature of the time. On the other hand, they had, many of them, leaders and ordinary citizens alike,

a confidence that they could deal with the threats of conflict and build better and stronger international institutions to settle disputes peaceably and make war obsolete. Perhaps the last golden years of prewar Europe are largely a construct of later generations, but even at the time the literature also had images of the rays of sunlight spreading across the world an humanity marching towards a more prosperous and happy future.



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