

The Great War: 110 years since onset of the First World War, a reflection _____

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Abstract

From the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia, to the declaration of war of Germany to Russia, followed by declaration of war from Germany to France, and finally declaration of war from Britain to Germany, it passed no more than 11 days. 11 tense days before European powers rushed into the bloodiest conflict by far. Rightfully this was called the Great War. Started by deluded leaders, with vague goals for indefinite time. War that solved no problem and caused many new ones. Based on fear and misperception, leaders turned an improbable conflict into inevitable one. For the first time, almost the entire globe was on war which did not spare civilians. A war that marked ending of five Empires, shifting of political centre away from Europe, and birth of USA as next superpower.

Keywords: *the Great War, First World War, Empires, secret diplomacy, Central Powers, Entente*

The August 2024, marked 110 years since a hasty European conflict turned into a World War or, as it was called in the beginning, the Great War. This war changed the world forever. In the military field, for the first time most of the world was engulfed in war, innovative weapons were used which, with further sophistication,

remained in use until now, belligerents were entrapped in trenches which did not move until the end of war, the world suffered millions of victims and civilians were not exempted from military actions.

But much more dramatic were changes in the international politics. Five empires collapsed, British, German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman. This marked fall of the *ancient* regime and coming of a new Europe. But much uglier Europe. Relatively tolerant and diverse Empires gave way to “petty, ambitious, and squabbling states. Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov yielded to Horthy, Hitler, and Lenin” (Herwig, 1997, p. 1).

When it ended, it became an imperative for leaders, and even more so for scholars, to name the causes of this horror. What, but also who, caused the war that wasted so much blood and bankrupted the Europe.

This paper will not discuss on who caused the war, i.e., who is to be blamed. Although, who caused it, is crucial and very sensitive topic which bears emotional burden. This is made even harder when, after the time passed by, with more intellectual endeavour, with more academic perspectives in sight, it is becoming less clear as who was guilty. More and more voices speak that there are more than actually one party or one alliance to blame. Treaty of Versailles named Central powers as responsible. But was this really so clear and self-evident? This may be a question for another paper.

But this article will discuss as what caused the war. This will be done by, first, discussing on some political factors which lead to the war, or caused war. And secondly, by presenting some peculiarities, or distinguished features of this war.

For the causes of this war scholars debated extensively. If for other conflicts and wars, there were not enough sources and materials to study, for the First World War, the surplus of materials is a problem. There are so many pages published after the war that it is difficult to distinguish valid information from those aimed at whitewashing one’s side. Immediately after the war, each party was heavily engaged to exonerate itself and present itself as a victim rather than aggressor. Thus, a plethora of documents were printed while thousands of others were altered so as to suit this victim’s image. This heavily distorted the real picture and genuinely impeded inquiry as what were the main causes leading to this calamity.

However, there is a wide consensus among the scholars that polarization of Europe or division of Europe in two distinct and rival camps, was among the most prominent causes of the war. Two decades earlier, Bismarck turned the Europe into a theatre of alliances and agreements which brought European countries together intertwined into at least one sort of cooperation. This ensured balance of force, and preservation of peace. No state was strong enough to overwhelm the others while no other state was entirely left aside which would feel the need to look for alliances to protect itself. For example, there was an alliance between German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, one was a Treaty between Three Emperors,

namely Russian, German and British Emperors, etc. France was kept in a 'soft' isolation. It was not threatened by German army any longer but neither could it look for military build-up to seek forceful return of Alsace and Lorraine. Russia was in a vague friendship, kept close with diplomatic approach while kept away from mingling with European affairs. While Britain was content with all this and silently stayed away from the continent as long as its maritime dominance was not challenged and its colonies were intact. In this environment, the Europe saw crises come and go while European war was avoided. Such was the case with two Balkan Wars, crisis in Africa over colonies between Britain and France, etc. This was a craftsmanship of Bismarck who, through his Realpolitik, achieved unification of Germany and avoided big European armed conflict.

Major crack in this arrangement came with the dismissal of Bismarck by the new German Emperor, Wilhelm II. Not long after the dismissal, as it was not enough, Kaiser withdrew German Empire from the Treaty of Three Emperors. France, relieved now from German clamp, immediately initiated what will become, first, a French-Russian agreement in 1891, and a year after a military treaty. According to the clauses of this military treaty, if Germany or Austria-Hungary mobilised, automatically, Russia and France would mobilise too. This was a first move toward polarization of Europe into two camps, one with German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, joined later by Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria, which would be called Central powers. And the other camp with Russian Empire and France, joined later by British Empire, USA and much later by Italy, which would be called as Entente. Each party would deepen the cooperation with its allies while at the same time widening the gap with the rivals. This was also called by the historians as secret diplomacy. This is most frequently, and most commonly, mentioned as major cause leading to the Great War.

Arms race was the next logical step after polarization and secret diplomacy. Arno J. Mayer writes that, European countries increased their military spending fifty percent only in the five years preceding the war (1967). Each party, from the fear of isolation and of lagging behind, increased preparation for war and started seeking alliances. But what states did not foresee is that their fear from attack and military build-up was perceived as threat and aggression by other states causing them to do the same. Step by step, a general impression was made that, with all these preparation at progress, the war was inevitable. All the time while all parties were fearing it. France, beside its preparation for war was also heavily inducing and financing Russia to do the same. Millions of francs in loans and direct investments were issued to Russian Empire so that it increases its fighting capacities and, in case of war, relieve France from a part of mighty German army. "Although the French government had not expected or intended that these loans would supply an essential element of support for a military and diplomatic alliance, this turned out to be the case." (Joll, 2007, p. 57) Similarly, British Empire was also alarmed



on an eventual war although greatly engaged in pacifying European parties and heavily working with both camps to deescalate.

Secret diplomacy, followed by arms race, paved the way for the next step in escalation - mobilisation. Parties soon found themselves retrieving from shelves and reviewing the so called 'war plans'. This at that time meant detailed outlining as when, how and, most importantly, against whom the fighting takes place. Most famous of all was "Schlieffen" plan, which depicted the German Empire fighting in two fronts. This would later prove as a self-fulfilling prophesy. According to this plan, Germany would have to fight and quickly vanquish France before swiftly returning its military weight to settle accounts with Russian Empire before the latter would utilise its biggest assets, endless number of soldiers and its vast territory. How rigid was Schlieffen plan shows following case; before commencement of hostilities, France withdrew its forces several miles behind its border, and was clearly showing signs that it does not intend to attack German Empire. To this, a relieved Keiser Wilhelm proposed to Helmut von Moltke, Chief of German General Staff, to adjust accordingly and limit the war only with Russian Empire. To this proposal, Moltke, as it was revealed later by eyewitnesses, "with 'trembling lips' interjected: "The deployment of a host of millions of men cannot be improvised" (Herwig, 2014, p. 59) because going only after Russia would, in the words of Moltke the junior, instead of an army, we would have a chaotic mass. France, on the other hand, as August 1914 was closing, further intensified issuing the loans to Russian Empire so it can enter the war sooner rather than later. In all this, Britain could not see itself as idly watching while balance of force in the continent was being destroyed.

War plans were not just an administrative matter. Just a calendar of deployment with names and locations. War plans were above all, especially in German Empire, subjugation of civilians to soldiers. State institutions would transform into giant war machines and the decision making would move to officers and state resources would have to satisfy war aims. In a word, civilian life including diplomacy would come second to army and war. Most important of all, when these plans would come into movement, even if they wished so, it would prove that they could not be stopped.

Fear that war was inevitable and impending terror that one could be in disadvantage if no early preparation is made, fed on each other. In Austria-Hungary, in Russia, and in Germany, every attempt of diplomats for peaceful negotiation was met with angry faces of generals and their warnings of dire consequences if their technical advice is not heeded. In these tumultuous and unclear times, no diplomat or statesmen wanted to be responsible if their country would be caught in surprise. And, as it so often happens, increase of brinkmanship in one side caused increase of brinkmanship in the other. When arms spoke in one camp, calls for refrain by diplomats on the other side, were seen nothing else but

cowardice. Hence the saying that when you have a hammer in hand, all problems seem as nails.

Therefore, step by step, decision after decision, the gap was widening and situation was becoming more and more fragile. In this situation, any spark, no matter how small, could ignite the flame in Europe. And that spark did come. It came with assassination in Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914. Therefore, it is not a surprise that from the assassination in Sarajevo until the first declaration of war, of Austria-Hungary to Serbia, did not pass more than a month. While within the week after that, Great Powers declared war on each other. As Liddell Hart wrote “[f]ifty years were spent in the process of making Europe explosive. Five days were enough to detonate it” (1997, p. 1). Or as the French business weekly *La Semaine Financière* commented on 1 August “[i]t has only needed a week to bring Europe to the eve of a catastrophe unique in history (Joll and Martell, 2007, p. 256)

After writing on some causes of the war, we can dedicate following lines to some distinct peculiarities of this war. One of them being, without any doubt, delusion of the leaders of the time. Most of the leaders made their decisions based on their fears or wishful expectations rather than calm assessment of the situation. Three were most common expectations of the time. First, that the war was inevitable, second, that it would be short, and third, that the advantage lies in the initiative, or who strikes first.

In following paragraphs, we will dedicate more on each of these peculiar features. First and most common one was that this war was thought by the leaders as inevitable. By presenting the war as inevitable, it was accepted by the general populace easier. The impression was made that with every nation preparing, with inflammatory speech rising, the war was the only way out. And the sooner the better, before the enemy gets the upper hand. The idea was established that in this situation, protection of fatherland was not only necessary, but also an honour. So, every nation was waiting anxiously. When the declarations of war followed, it was received not with terror, but with a relief. All that doubt and suspense was now gone. “The continuing international tension and the strains of the armaments race each contributed to a mood in which war was accepted almost as a relief” (ibid, 301)

Second peculiarity of this war is that it was expected to be short. It was a wide misperception that the war would be short, few months the most. German Chancellor Bethman von Hollweg once foresaw the war a ‘short quick storm’, as quoted by British historian Lancelot Farrar in his work “The Short War Illusion” (1973). German Emperor told to some of his soldiers while departing for war, that “you will return before the leaves fall from the trees” (Stoessinger, 2007, p. 1). Furthermore, as Farrar writes, war seemed to be a means of achieving the objectives which eluded diplomacy (1973). In other words, leaders opted for war because to them, war was quicker in achieving aims than long and cumbersome diplomatic efforts. So, the war would, in a way, serve the diplomacy. This was the



wish which turned into conviction, a conviction turned to a decision. And this proved to be one of the biggest illusions that would cost the Europe, and the world, dearly.

Third peculiarity of this war was that leaders of the time, most of them, believed that the victory belongs to the one who strikes first. Since the war was inevitable, the sooner the better. Each party, from the fear of lagging behind, was preparing for war and preferably for assault. Although, from the documents and correspondence revealed after the war, none of the parties aimed at aggression, on the other hand, they were all fighting 'for survival, 'for the honour', for 'a place under the sun', etc. This way, they escalated the situation and precipitated the war, each in its own way, while fearing from the attack from outside. In the end, a war that was in the beginning improbable, in the end became inevitable. Therefore, the illusion that the war was inevitable, became a prophesy. A self-fulfilling prophesy.

Austria-Hungary was increasingly calling for a preventive war against its Serbian neighbour, which was made responsible for the organization of the assassination of the Crown Prince. For a long time Danubian Empire was seeing its neighbour as aggressor with increasing appetite toward its territories. Several times has Austria-Hungary accused Serbia that it was inciting Slav subject inside the Empire for irredentism and turmoil. When the assassination took place, it was seen as a good time for a quick settlement of accounts with a problematic neighbour before anyone else would be able to react (Herwig, 1997). Chief of General Staff of the Austria-Hungarian army together with its cabinet advised main generals to prepare a punitive expedition, limited in time and scope, by avoiding spill over to the region. This gives sense why the ultimatum was given with such harsh conditions for such a short deadline. Because, historians believe that generals were convinced the war would be short and chances of success would increase with swift and soon initiative, not giving Russia enough time to prepare. By the time they would prepare, expedition would be over.

Austria-Hungary, before taking this gamble, wanted to know the mood of German Emperor. The grief in Vienna reached its peak. With the assassination, Vienna considered that its neighbour went too far. Even moderate voices inside the capital opted for military response. Would it be a 'short punitive expedition' or a 'limited war', because a long, devastating war was excluded in all accounts, would largely depend on German response. In other words, would German Empire contain Russian Empire while Vienna would settle accounts with Serbia? Therefore, the decision would be *de facto* made in Berlin. Most adequate man to seek for German support was thought to be Count Hoyos, Chief of Cabinet of Foreign Minister of Austria-Hungary.

To the surprise of all, German response was a *carte blanche*. As why this unreserved support was given is not clear and remains a little mystery even today. Was it because of shifting mercurial character of the Kaiser, or was it to take a stand

after diplomatic failures suffered by Germany in Africa while attempting to gain colonies? Or was it to take a stand after the scandal in Fashoda? Or was it caused by disappointment of imagined encirclement of Germany from other European Powers since even after its colossal economic and military power, Germany was not being given its proper seat in the political world. Keiser was frequently quoted to say that the Germany was being prevented from taking its rightful 'place under the sun'? Or was it entirely something else, is still a mystery. But what is certain is that the German Emperor gave his unreserved support, his Nibelungentreue, and Austria-Hungary had free hands to deal with its neighbour.

Many decades after the war, historians drew another reading of this response. Diplomats of the time wrote that “[l]ong before 1914 it was obvious that Austria’s existence was threatened. Everyone saw her as the next sick man of Europe after Turkey ... From 1908 on almost everyone anticipated the long-awaited general war would probably arise over a Russo – Austrian quarrel involving Serbia. From 1912 on the Russians and Serbs repeatedly told their Western friends that Austria’s collapse was imminent, and that they intended to have the lion’s share of the remains” (Schroeder, 1972. p. 142)”. German diplomats and generals were very vocal; that Vienna has to choose, energetic response or quiet death. So, reading between the lines in the German response, the document was more than just a reply. It was more of an obligation. Austria was free to act, but to act forcefully, and not diplomatically. Or it would lose its last ally – German Empire.

Austria-Hungary wanted a support and, instead, received an obligation. They wanted to know German stance in the case of war but instead Germans decided on their behalf. Before German reply, Austria-Hungary had many options in the table. Now it had a dilemma; either accommodate with Serbia in a friendly neighbourhood tone and lose the position as an ally to German Empire, or implement the German reply into action and risk a war with Russian Empire. The Ambassador of the German Empire to London said to his Foreign Minister, as registered in his diaries, and discovered after the war that if the Monarchy, let the Sarajevo murder, the strongest of all provocations, pass without doing anything, then its rapid decline would be just a matter of time (Ritter, 1962). Left without much of a choice, in a position of a declining Great Power, Austria-Hungary, maybe unintentionally, left its fate to be decided and sealed by German Emperor. Now it was only matter of time.

Europe saw crises before 1914 which made European nations speak about possibility of war. They verbally confronted and accused each other for malicious intentions. Even, at times, many intellectuals and generals, once crisis were seen on the horizon, they started to speak on the inevitability of war. But when August 1914 came, it caught by surprise most of the Europeans and very few could give sense to what was happening. “The outbreak of the war surprised and depressed us all. We may well have been previously convinced that the anarchy of the capitalist



world would eventually lead to a bloody clash between the European powers, but the moment of catastrophe found us completely unprepared” wrote one French socialist (Joll and Marten, 2007, p. 256).

Turmoil in the Balkans, two Balkan wars, loss of territories of Ottomans in the Balkans, all passed and Great Powers could peacefully engage in their resolution. Their disagreement over these matters started and finished in silence. Disagreement and discontent between European powers were evident also in division of African colonies. They too were resolved without resorting to arms. But when the incident in Sarajevo came, it proved to be different. Even those fuelling to war propaganda, when war declarations were announced, found themselves bewildered. Edward Grey, who in some moments during the crisis contributed for its precipitation, although usually refrained and calm, in a moment of despair said the word which still echoes today ‘the lamps are going out all over Europe, we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.’

In concluding this paper, we can say that after all anxiety and propaganda, the war came indeed, in the beginning of August 1914. All those working for it, they saw it realise. But, to their surprise, it unfolded very quickly and was very far from what they imagined it. Alliances were forged with friends they wished, against foes each despised, with all available means. But the war was entirely different from expected. The war was expected to be short, with swift victory and covered in glory. On the contrary. It was long, it did not end with victory and certainly it was not swift, nor it was glorious.

The war lasted for four years by eroding every angle of society. Claiming millions of lives including here civilians. Even, some who sang odes to it could not live to see its end. Many leaders and generals who decided for war were replaced along the way and eventually overshadowed by calamities of it. While the war was causing mayhem to the European and wider population.

Neither did the victory come as hoped for. It did not even look as victory. When the war stopped, which maybe never really ended, nations who came out of it were so shocked and disappointed that they did not think of celebrating victory. They were hating the war, more than the former enemies. More than victors, nations were exhausted. Instead of hating the enemy, they were loathing their former leaders who brought about the disaster.

Least of all, this war had glorious ending. From those, who from comfort of their homes and offices, when war was in the sight, saw themselves covered in glory on the road home, most of them did not return at all. And those who did, did so plunged in despair and in confusion. Many did not know what they fought for. They met an enemy in the trenches while when they departed, they left a transformed one there. They left one society home but met another. When departing they were accompanied with trumpets and given flowers but when they returned, they met a society disappointed and desperate. War changed everything.

Worst of all, this proved to be only the beginning. Diverse and relatively stable and tolerant monarchies gave way to nationalist states, ethnic hatred and social Darwinism. Kaiser would be replaced with Hitler while Russian Tzar with Lenin and later with Stalin. And the incoming incumbents would just begin with the true nightmare. They would send millions to their death and millions of others to the internment.

Rightfully, this was called the Great War. Started by deluded leaders, with unclear goals and utterly unaware of the time this war might last. This war solved no problems and caused many more. Leaders made a conflict, which was in the beginning improbable, turn to unavoidable. And threw their countrymen from the luxury, good life and innovation of the time to the muds of the trenches where millions of youngsters would meet their end. Pity of this war is best illustrated with the case when British and German soldiers on the Christmas Eve got out of the trenches and exchanged cards and gifts only to return to killing each other on the day after. Rightfully, renowned historian Christopher Clark, called the leaders of that time as sleepwalkers.

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