

*Prof. Dr. BORISLAV GAVRILOV,  
Head of Department of Early Modern and Modern History, Sofia  
University*

### **War to end all wars**

The First World War came to me in a little unusual way. As any historian dealing with modern history, I was touched, more or less, by topics related to diplomacy and war in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. My PHD (1989) was dedicated to the wars of German unification and British public opinion. Several years later I compiled a documentary collection, entitled "Twilight of Old Europe" dedicated to the troubled decades leading to 1914. But my real entry in this topic came four years ago when a publishing house approached me with a proposition to translate David Stephenson's book "The History of the First World War." Driven by a desire to enter more deeply into the spirit of the era I watched several times over the superb BBC documentary series "The Great War" which is built around memories of living (at the time of its creation in the early 60s of XX century) participants. Today, one hundred years after the beginning of this colossal conflict, these people are gone, but their voices and lessons that are taught by the war are still with us.

They didn't call it "First world war" until the Second One came along. So it's worth mentioning, that the last century, through its great cataclysms, offers two very clear, but unfortunately, contradictory lessons. The First teaches us never to rush into a fight, the Second never to back down from a bully. Every time a Western politician with any historical sense faces a crisis, he has to decide whether he should back down and search for whatever compromise he can find, for fear of

repeating 1914, or step up and slug somebody, for fear of repeating 1939. John Kennedy, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, had Barbara Tuchman's "The Guns of August" as a warning at his desk.

The origins of the war, which, in six weeks of the summer of 1914, took Europe from a long peace to mutual massacre, are exhausting to read about, in part because there is no real protagonist. There is no Lincoln or Napoleon, no Bismarck or Hitler. The familiar facts remain largely unchallenged: a Bosnian Serb terrorist named Gavrilo Princip, probably with the help of some elements in the Serbian government, organized an assassination attempt against the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife when they were on an official visit to Sarajevo, the capital of the recently annexed Austro-Hungarian dependency of Bosnia, on June 28, 1914.

Two kinds of "inevitablism" have long held sway as explanations for the deeper sources of the catastrophe. One, made famous by Lenin, and still cited by some historians on the left, is that the war was the certain consequence of imperial overstretch and colonial rivalry: Germany's *Weltpolitik* put it into competition with the French and particularly the British for colonies and imperial power, and this drive for new markets and new resources turned an essentially economic rivalry into a military one. Of this hypothesis, nothing really remains. The German *Weltpolitik*, the new historians tell us, for the most part drew Germany away from the European heartland, into minor skirmishing on the periphery. The globalization of the world economy, in turn, which in the first decade of the last century had reached a peak to be equalled again only in our own time, depended on peace. The bankers and industrialists were the last people in Europe who wanted a war. Capital's overwhelming desire was

for peace and continued globalization. It was Lord Rothschild who entreated the *Times* of London to tone down the belligerence of its articles, and right up to the end the governor of the Bank of England was begging the Liberal cabinet minister Lloyd George, “with tears in his eyes,” to keep Britain out of war. What does survive of the leftist version is a smaller and more succinct point: in every European country, the center-right establishment, faced with some kind of social-democratic or socialist challenge, reasoned that a national call to arms would be the one sure antidote to internal division. In every case—even in France, where the lines of division ran deepest—this turned out to be true, and “class division melted like butter in the frying pan of nationalism”.

The other inevitablism, made famous by Barbara Tuchman in “The Guns of August” and later given a memorable name in her book “The March of Folly,” is that the war was made inescapable by a Laocoön-like entanglement of treaties and alliances and military mobilization plans. In addition, the workings of the German “Schlieffen” plan have long been thought to have swept everyone up into battle before anyone had entirely decided to go to war. The plans called for so many men to be mobilized in such specific stages that, once the trains began to roll, nothing could have been done to stop them. The rulers of Europe went away on absent-minded July holidays to their old familiar spas, but the troops and trains kept on rolling in the background. The serpents were around the throat of liberal civilization before anyone had clearly imagined what might happen.

So it was not a march of folly at all. It was a march of fools. That is, it was not a tragedy of errors and misunderstandings that carried the unknowing participants toward an end that they could not envision. It was

the deliberate decision of individuals who thought they knew just what they were getting into. The causes of the First World War, the newer scholarship often implies, can be understood in classic game-theory terms, with all the players trying to maximize their own interests. Except that this was a game being played by terribly inept players.

Part of the problem was personal. You could not have chosen a worse bunch of guys to have the fate of Europe in their hands. There is Kaiser Wilhelm, the deformed lesser member of the dominant royal family of Europe, intensely jealous of his cousin Edward VII and his Francophile ways (although Edward had died by 1910, the icon still shone), and determined to act in a manly and warriorlike way, yet caught in a bizarre cycle of peevishness, belligerent insecurity, and a superstitious fatalism that he thought of as “religious.” There is Count Conrad, who genuinely seems to have acted in part because he was in love with a married woman and imagined that success in war would help his romance. Even Herbert Asquith, the British Prime Minister, who for some reason gets off very lightly in British histories, seems hopelessly inadequate to the occasion. Although he, of all people, should have had the brains and the presence of mind to grasp what was coming—and he did; he went for a solitary drive, “filled with sadness,” on the day the war began—he hewed to the customs of cabinet government, conceding the initiative to Lord Grey, his foreign secretary, and was remarkably passive throughout the crucial July days. (He paid the worst possible price for his failure, losing his eldest son in the war.)

Another problem with the game was procedural. There were no decisive conferences, no crucial cabinet meetings when soldiers and politicians met and brutally sorted through likely outcomes and risks. And, where

the “game players” of the Cold War had the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki directly in front of them, there was no comparable image of achieved destruction to make utterly clear what would happen if mass armies fought with machine guns in the heart of Europe. Moltke, it is true, had said in 1906 that a future war would be a “long wearisome struggle with a country that will not be overcome until its whole national force is broken.” Still, a mad military optimism reigned.

And in fact the previous century had been filled with wars, and none of them left behind much more than a scar and a memory of honor. The worst recent war in Europe, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, had made a deep imprint on the French psyche, but it was immediately followed by the decade that resides in our imagination—courtesy of the Impressionists, but courtesy of the facts, too—as idyllic. How bad could a war be? The Germans thought that, more or less, it would be like 1870; the French thought that, with the help of the English, it *wouldn't* be like 1870; the English thought that it would be like a modernized 1814, a continental war with decisive interference by Britain's professional military; and the Russians thought that it couldn't be worse than just sitting there.

Above all, the tragedy was that their goal was not to look weak. Even in Strachan's dry and unemotional narrative, one wet and emotive word rings out again and again, and that word is “humiliation.” The game was not to prevail—for all the players, save perhaps some of the Germans, knew that none of them could—but to avoid being seen as the loser. There are, in the recorded words, few references to rational war aims, even of the debased, acquisitive kind; instead, you find a relentless emphasis on shame and face, position and credibility, perception of

weakness and fear of ridicule. “This time I shall not give in,” Kaiser Wilhelm repeated robotically (to the arms manufacturer Krupp) in July of 1914. Lloyd George, on the British side, a key actor in favor of war, called for the mobilization of a million men lest Britain not be “taken seriously” in the councils of Europe. It was not runaway trains but a fear of being humbled, “reduced to a second-rate power,” that drove the war forward. The keynote is insecurity, an insecurity that arose, above all, from the German paranoia about encirclement, matched by Britain’s insecurity about its naval power.

It was common in the past century to see the war as a blunder into which the masses were herded like sheep while the poets and philosophers grieved in vain. The new histories suggest that the war was welcomed in 1914, and particularly by the literate classes, as a necessary act, a chance to restore seriousness of purpose after the two trivial decades of the Edwardian Belle Époque. In “His Last Bow,” Sherlock Holmes’s last adventure, which is set in the summer of 1914, Holmes says to Watson, “It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast. But it’s God’s own wind none the less, and a cleaner, better, stronger land will lie in the sunshine when the storm has cleared.”) These were not words forced on a pliant population; they were words rising from a dynamic ideology. Even Thomas Mann used the vocabulary sympathetically: war was a moral necessity, “both a purging and a liberation.” In England, particularly, any vestiges of the era of Wilde would be swept away at last, and the reign of Kipling secured. The intellectuals of 1914 didn’t want the moral equivalent of war; they wanted war as a way of driving out moral equivalence—ending relativism and decadence and materialism and all the other familiar evils of a shopping

and pleasure-seeking society. They exulted in the moral clarity of the coming confrontation after the debasing decades of bourgeois pleasures, and welcomed the end of their long holiday from history.

The scale and suddenness of the killing that began that summer still has the power to amaze us. The war began on August 4th. By August 29th, there were two hundred and sixty thousand French dead. The first battles were as bad as the last. A German lieutenant led his company into battle in Lorraine that month and, coming under French fire for the first time, looked around after a minute “to see how many are still fit to fight. The bugler, who has remained by my side like a shadow, says to me sadly, ‘Herr Leutnant, there is nobody there any more!’ ” Almost the entire unit had been annihilated at first contact.

The means of annihilation are familiar. The machine gun, in particular, created a zone of death that would simply saw a soldier in two if he entered it. At Waterloo, an infantry soldier could fire twice a minute. The machine gun fired six hundred rounds a minute. Even the infantry rifle now could fire a dozen times a minute, and at a mile’s range.

Although the Battle of the Marne was a classic battle of maneuver, the Western Front that emerged in its wake in northern France was the largest and most terrible standoff in history. Both Strachan and Stevenson want to remind us that this really was a world war, not limited to the Somme and Verdun, and they make insistent tours of the war’s many other fronts, from Moscow to Gallipoli. Yet, as Paul Fussell observed many years ago in “The Great War and Modern Memory,” it is the Western Front that draws us back again and again: all the other fronts were, as the brutal logic of German military thinking recognized, peripheral. The Western Front was the lethal situation, the Wasteland,

and something entirely new in human history: the years-long, two-sided siege of an entire civilization.

The front stretched for four hundred and seventy-five miles, with ten thousand soldiers per mile. The front line actually consisted of three lines of trenches, and the trenches were as deep as thirty feet. The trench networks were sometimes separated by a no man's land of only five or ten yards. The defensive edge offered by the machine gun and the trench system was overwhelming, and the only way to counter it was through infantry assaults, in which soldiers got up out of the trenches and walked toward the other side. In theory, these assaults were "prepared" by artillery barrages. But, in the first two years of the war, at least, the artillery was not sufficiently developed to do much more than break up the barbed wire on the other side. On one day during the Battle of the Somme, in the summer of 1916, more than fifty thousand British troops died walking directly into German fire, without advancing the front by a single foot. In fact, the entire front, which cost the lives of more than three million human beings, moved scarcely five miles in three years. And the war blind – killing those who supported it and those who are against: Rudyard Kipling's son John died on the Western Front in 1915; Oscar Wilde's son Cyril died there nine months later.

The rational expectation might have been for the horror and the futility of the war, which were evident as early as the winter of 1914, to lead to a negotiated settlement. But, with the bloody human logic of wartime, the stalemate of 1914 only helped seal in place an ideological justification. At the moment for remorse and repentance, all that appeared were new and higher-minded rationalizations. The more men died, the more urgently a cause had to be found for them to die for. The

obvious absurdity of the original moral calculations—that a quick result would teach the German militarists a lesson or, on the other side, put the French empire out of business—led people to make new, desperate ones. In Britain, it was only after the first battles of the trenches that this became “the war to end all wars,” a war for liberal freedoms against authoritarianism and militarism. In Germany, it became a war not for French territory but for organic *Kultur* against cosmopolitan *civilisation*.

And so the question remains: Were they right to fight? What would have happened if the British neutrals had held fast on August 3rd and not gone in? A Europe overrun by a triumphant German militarism is only one possibility. A Communist revolution in France is a secondary possibility, with unknowable consequences. Another is that the end of 1914 would have produced the exact same situation without the British that it did with them: a quick bloody stalemate, and the possibility of an intervention and an early armistice.

Yet it is hard to see even a victorious German Reich costing liberal civilization quite as much as its defeat did. Wilhelmine Germany was, if not liberal, at least plural: the internal forces pulling at German militarism—democratic and liberal and socialist and, particularly, scientific—were extremely strong. The logic of German militarism may have meant that there would be a war sooner or later. But, just conceivably, the force of German civil society—of science and reason, in that age of Einstein and Freud and Planck and Warburg—would have tempered the force of militarism. The experiment never had a chance. What is hard to imagine is a worse consequence: Britain and France demoralized and depleted, Germany humiliated but not vanquished, Russia robbed of any chance of

liberal reform and turned over to a gang of psychopathic fanatics. What exactly would have been worse than that?

History does not offer lessons; its unique constellations of contingencies never repeat. But life does offer the same points, over and over again. A lesson is many-edged; a point has only one, but that one sharp. And the point we might still take from the First World War is the old one that wars are always, in Lincoln's perfectly chosen word, astounding. They produce results that we can hardly imagine when they start. It is not that wars are always wrong. It is that wars are always wars, good for destroying things that must be destroyed, but useless for doing anything more, and no good at all for doing cultural work: saving the national honor, proving that we're not a second-rate power, avenging old humiliations, demonstrating resolve, or any of the rest of the empty vocabulary of self-improvement through mutual slaughter.

Kipling learned this the hard way and in the best poem that he ever wrote about war and its consequences, we can see that in a simple couplet produced after his son was killed:

If any question why we died  
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

No one has ever thought that the First World War didn't have meaning, in the sense of an effect on things that came after, and purpose, in the sense that it happened because people believed it to be necessary. The questions persist. Were this purpose and this meaning worth the expense of life, the deaths of all those nineteen-year-old boys? One of the things that twentieth-century philosophy learned, in the wake of the

war, is that big words are empty uniforms without men to live out their meanings, and that high moral purposes have no value outside a context of consequences. As the new century begins, the First World War seems as present, and just as great a pity, as it ever did.