

1914 and 2014: should we be worried?

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A century ago this autumn the first battle of the Marne ended Germany's attempt to crush France and its ally Britain quickly. In that one battle alone the French lost 80,000 dead and the Germans approximately the same. By comparison, 47,000 Americans died in the whole of the Vietnam War and 4,800 coalition troops in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. In August and September 1914 Europe, the most powerful and prosperous part of the world, had begun the process of destroying itself. A minor crisis in its troubled backyard of the Balkans had escalated with terrifying speed to create an all-out war between the powers.¹ 'Again and ever I thank God for the Atlantic Ocean,' wrote Walter Page, the American ambassador in London; and in Washington his president, Woodrow Wilson, agreed.

On both sides of the Atlantic, however, most thought the war would be over by Christmas. As the conflict was breaking out, the explorer Ernest Shackleton was heading off for the Antarctic. When he returned to the island of South Georgia in the summer of 1915 after a harrowing voyage, he asked who had won.² He was stunned to learn that the fighting continued, that the Western Front had turned into a giant stalemate. The Great War, as it was then known, lasted for four years, consuming men and resources on an unprecedented and horrific scale and drawing in most of the European nations as well as far-off ones such as Japan. Wilson, who had said that Americans were too proud to fight, eventually brought his country in on the side of the Allies because he had become convinced that German militarism was a threat to the world.

When the guns finally fell silent on 11 November 1918, Europe and the world were very different.³ Russia was in the grip of the Bolsheviks, whose communist regime was going to last for another seven decades; Germany had become a republic; Austria–Hungary was disintegrating; and the Ottoman empire was about to vanish. New nations such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were being born and old names, among them Poland and Georgia, were reappearing. Europe's powers, even the victors France, Britain and Italy, had spent down their wealth. Worse, they had destroyed millions of their citizens, among them many of their

¹ See e.g. Christopher Clark, *The sleepwalkers: how Europe went to war in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Margaret MacMillan, *The war that ended peace: how Europe abandoned peace for the First World War* (London: Profile Books, 2013).

² *Lapham's Quarterly*, 18 Oct. 2013.

³ See David Reynolds, *The long shadow: the Great War and the twentieth century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

best and their brightest, brutalized their own societies, and thrown away the great benefits and power that a century of peace and progress had lavished on Europe.⁴

We are different, though—aren't we? We in the twenty-first century would not be capable of such folly. We know the potential costs of war. We have built a strong international order. Our leaders have plenty of experience in managing crises and bringing about international accord. Our nations and societies are too intertwined, too aware of the benefits of peace, and much too rational to do anything as foolish as that world of 1914.

Perhaps we should not be quite so sure. The parallels between 1914 and 2014, while not exact—they never are in history—are unsettling. We too live in a time of rapid globalization; we have, still, a faith in progress and the ability of science and reason to solve problems, from the depletion of our natural resources to the sudden fluctuations in the economy; and we too think that large-scale war is impossible. The anniversary of 1914 is a good moment to think again about how complacency, the wrong decisions or sheer accident can result in sudden catastrophe.

A golden age of security?

The Great War wasn't what was meant to happen. Europe was enjoying the longest period of peace in its troubled history. True, there had been colonial wars in the nineteenth century; but those were far away and most had been won easily by the European powers. Russia had fought Ottoman Turkey and its allies Britain and France in the Crimean War; but that had taken place on the periphery. Those few wars in the heart of the Continent, between Austria–Hungary and Prussia or between the German Confederation and France, had been short and mercifully decisive. Peace had given Europe the opportunity to prosper as the march of science, technology and industry had transformed its nations, making them richer and more powerful. Cities were cleaner, food was better and more plentiful, consumer goods flowed endlessly from workshops and factories, and people were living longer. He grew up, said the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, in a Golden Age of Security.⁵

When they speculated about what the new twentieth century might bring, Europeans—and Americans too—saw an even more golden future. Not only was science unlocking the secrets of human nature; human beings themselves were getting better, in a better world. Then as now, trade and investment were tying the world's economies together; cheap transport and relatively open borders made it possible for millions to move about the globe; and new means of communication, telegraphs and the popular press, like the internet today, spread ideas and culture. The growth of international law, the increasing use of arbitration to settle disputes among nations, disarmament conferences, NGOs such as the Red Cross and international organizations, whether of lawyers, churches or parliamentar-

⁴ See David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: the First World War as political tragedy* (London: Basic Books, 2004).

⁵ Stefan Zweig, *The world of yesteryear* (London: Pushkin, 2009), p. 26.

ians, all brought hope that old hatreds and rivalries could be overcome so that humanity could continue to enjoy peace and prosperity indefinitely. Bertha von Suttner, the unloved child of an ancient aristocratic Czech family, devoted her considerable energy and talents to the cause of peace and persuaded her friend, the explosives manufacturer Alfred Nobel, to endow a peace prize. Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish American billionaire, built a vast peace palace in The Hague to house the permanent court of arbitration which still meets there.⁶

Globalization, it seemed, was creating a new, interdependent and peaceful world. In the opinion of the crusading journalist Norman Angell, there was no way the world could now afford to go to war. Its economies had become so interdependent that war would ruin them all. War simply did not pay, a theme he developed at length in his best-selling *The great illusion*.⁷ Bankers and economists largely agreed with him, taking as given that a large-scale war could last for only a short time before the funds ran out and Europe's economies seized up as trade and investment fell off sharply. They had yet to learn how effectively governments could squeeze resources out of their societies and direct them towards war.

In 1914 it was largely taken for granted that Europe would remain the centre of the new world that was emerging, although it was acknowledged that the rising powers in both East and West would gradually have a greater role to play. Russia was rapidly modernizing and moving tentatively towards constitutional government. It had a good chance of being a prosperous and progressive nation by the middle of the twentieth century. Japan had abandoned isolation and its old ways, and was busily transforming itself into an Asian economic and military power. The United States had recovered from its civil war and in the last years of the old century was starting to translate its growing economic strength into military strength; it was also increasingly ready to project its power beyond its borders, often in the name of promoting its values and spreading democracy. In spite of its own colonial past, the United States now acquired its own colonies—in the Pacific and the Caribbean—and assured its influence over its neighbours.

America's old enemy Britain was entering a period of decline, but that would be gentle; for many years to come, it was assumed, Britain's economy and its navy would surely still be the most powerful in the world. And Britain's vast empire, especially the old white dominions such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand, should gradually evolve into a willing partnership—much as many in the United States today hope for a worldwide alliance of democracies. And although international relations experts in our own times warn darkly that periods of transition between declining powers and rising ones are dangerous times for the world, Britain and the United States had managed their changing relationship peacefully. After a tense stand-off over Venezuela in 1895, the British had backed down and ceded dominance in the New World to the United States.

⁶ See Charles Chatfield and Peter van den Dungen, *Peace movements and political cultures* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988); Richard Laurence, 'Bertha von Suttner and the peace movement in Austria to World War One', *Austrian History Yearbook*, vol. 23, 1992, pp. 181–201.

⁷ Norman Angell, *The great illusion* (London: Heinemann, 1912); see also Martin Ceadel, *Living the great illusion* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009).

At the centre of Europe another rising power, the new country of Germany, was booming, its industries and exports rivalling those of Britain. The great industrialist Hugo Stinnes said that his nation only needed to wait and it would soon control Europe economically; but here the transition was not peaceful.⁸ Germany has indeed come to dominate Europe—but only after the dreadful detours of two world wars. The Germany of today is the one that might have evolved out of Kaiser Wilhelm's kingdom if only the conservative elites and the Kaiser himself had been prepared to let it happen—and if war had not thrown everything up in the air. Yet the change in the balance of power between Germany and Britain need not have ended in violent conflict. A partnership between Europe's biggest land power and the world's biggest naval one made all sorts of sense, but this time wiser heads did not prevail.

The slide to war

And why did they not? There are many, perhaps too many, explanations for why Europe chose war over peace in 1914. We, a hundred years later, may want to start by paying attention to the fact that globalization did not, as it turned out, necessarily make the world a more peaceful place. Paradoxically it heightened national competition and rivalries. Britain and Germany were each other's largest trading partner, but that did not automatically make them friends. In 1896 a best-selling British pamphlet, *Made in Germany*, painted an ominous picture: 'A gigantic commercial State is arising to menace our prosperity, and contend with us for the trade of the world.'⁹ British children were playing with toys, even lead soldiers, made in Germany, and all you could hear at the opera were German singers singing German compositions. Equally popular books warned of German invasion plans, of guns hidden in preparation under London and of the 50,000 waiters in British restaurants who were really German soldiers. Many Germans reciprocated. The naval and colonial lobbies argued that Germany ought to have its place in the sun, in Europe of course but as a global power too. It was Britain, selfish and complacent in its possession of its own great empire and secure in the knowledge that the British Navy was the most powerful in the world, which stood in the way. And the close family ties between the German and the British royal families did not mitigate the mutual antipathies—quite the opposite. Wilhelm II, impulsive, erratic and insecure, believed that his uncle King Edward, 'the arch-intriguer and mischief-maker in Europe',¹⁰ was encircling Germany with a hostile alliance. Edward, along with many of his subjects, saw Wilhelm as a bully who was bent on dominating Europe. Their two countries found themselves in a naval race which helped to divide Europe into two armed camps and added to the increase in tension before 1914.

⁸ Gerald Feldman, 'Hugo Stinnes and the prospect of war before 1914', in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds, *Anticipating total war: the German and American experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 84–5.

⁹ Paul Kennedy, *The rise of the Anglo-German antagonism, 1860–1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), p. 104.

¹⁰ Michael Balfour, *The Kaiser and his times* (New York: W. W. Norton, p. 265).

There were other national rivalries as well to trouble those last years of peace. Germans were afraid of the Slavs and of growing Russian power to their east (and in those days there was no Poland to act as a buffer between them). The French could not forget their humiliating defeat at the hands of the German Confederation in 1870 and the fact that the new nation of Germany had been proclaimed in 1871 in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the palace of Louis XIV who had once dominated Europe. The Germans, said learned scholars, were crude and violent and unreasonable. Germans had their own stereotypes. The French would never accept German superiority; they were dangerously unpredictable, frivolous and corrupt. (A German treatise on the subject obligingly gave its readers advice on where to find evidence of such frivolity and corruption in Paris.) Within the great multinational empires of Austria–Hungary and Ottoman Turkey and, indeed, in Germany and Russia too, burgeoning nationalisms were pressing against the old structures in the name of independence.

National rivalries were played out in the media, in those days mainly print although film was just starting. One of the unforeseen side-effects of the spread of democracy was that public opinion now became a factor in international relations, and not always on the side of calm and reason. (Think of the way nationalist feeling in China and Japan today complicates relations between those two nations.) Lord Salisbury, the British Prime Minister at the end of the 1890s, complained of having ‘a huge lunatic asylum at one’s back’. Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympics in 1896 to promote universalism and international fellowship, but the Games rapidly became one more arena for national competition.

More dangerously, nations vied with each other to amass colonies. Britain, as the owner of the biggest empire, tended to dismiss the ambitions of others and state smugly that it had enough, but it nevertheless joined in the scramble for Africa in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and snapped up previously unclaimed bits of Asia and the Pacific. It clashed with France in Africa and with Russia in Asia and on a couple of occasions came perilously close to war with both. As the new century started, the expected disintegration of China stimulated fresh competition. Closer to Europe, Russia and Austria–Hungary fell out over the remaining European territories of that other failing state, Ottoman Turkey. We no longer approve of colonies but there is surely a resemblance—and the same dangers—in the competition today among the powers to acquire agricultural land in places such as Tanzania or South Sudan, or for control of resources in, for example, Central Asia.

Most dangerously of all, the decade before 1914 saw a rapidly expanding arms race. Germany and Britain built more battleships; Russia, France and Austria–Hungary increased the size of their armies; and all the powers, minor ones included, spent more and more on increasingly sophisticated and expensive weapons. These, they all said, were to protect themselves; but what looks defensive from one perspective can look like a threat from another.

Tied in with nationalism were the ideas of Social Darwinism. This pernicious misapplication of evolutionary theory to nations—assuming that they are distinct

species and that the fittest survive—is still with us today in far-right circles, but in the nineteenth century it was both respectable and widely accepted. Nations, like animals or plants, so it was believed, were engaged in a struggle for survival, and they had hereditary enemies. So Germans and French or Germans and Russians were bound by nature to fight. Such thinking prepared Europeans, especially those in command of the armed forces, psychologically for war. In certain countries, Germany notably, the military were presented as the noblest element in society, their values such as discipline and a willingness to die held up as models for civilians.

Indeed, there were many who thought war could be good for societies, like a plunge into cold water or a short sharp shock. Perhaps progress was making Europeans soft. In 1892 Max Nordau, a young doctor from Budapest, published *Degeneration*, which attacked decadent modern art and claimed that European society was heading to ruin because it had forgotten traditional moral values. The book, which was translated into several languages, was wildly successful because it spoke to Europeans' deepest fears that things had somehow been going too well. There were other things to worry them too: a cycle of business slumps and a depression which lasted from the 1870s to the 1890s; the marked gap in most countries, including the United States, between the very rich and the poor; the growth of increasingly militant socialist movements. Talk of revolution was in the air (indeed, in Russia it very nearly happened in 1905 and 1906); and, much as we worry about a worldwide Islamist threat, people then worried about an international terrorist movement. Anarchists had thrown bombs onto the floor of the Paris stock exchange and into theatres; they had murdered, among others, US President McKinley, a president of France, two Spanish prime ministers, the Empress Elizabeth of Austria–Hungary and Tsar Alexander II of Russia.¹¹ War, so too many conservatives thought, might be a way of counteracting the threat from within. It could provide the excuse, as the Kaiser was given to saying, to impose martial law, dissolve parliaments, and crack down on radicals and revolutionaries. Better still, it might bring the nation together in a common cause. That temptation for governments is still with us today.

By 1914 war had become thinkable, even for some desirable. Europe went through a series of international crises in those last ten years of peace: twice over the fate of Morocco, where Germany and France and their respective allies faced each other; once over Bosnia, which Austria–Hungary annexed in 1908, to the fury of Serbia and Russia; and finally during two wars in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913. Each time the alliances grew tighter and the commitments stronger. Germany found itself backing its weaker partner of Austria–Hungary because it did not want to risk losing its one sure ally; that meant it was drawn into Austria–Hungary's rivalry with Russia in the Balkans. Not for the last time Germany was to discover that the stronger power cannot always control its weaker partner. Yet Germany could not easily abandon the alliance for fear of losing prestige. And,

¹¹ See Philip Blom, *The vertigo years: change and culture in the West, 1900–1914* (London: Basic Books, 2008); Alexander Butterworth, *The world that never was: a true story of dreamers, schemers, anarchists and secret agents* (London: Bodley Head, 2010).

as its foreign minister Gottfried Jagow said mordantly in the midst of the July 1914 crisis: 'It is also arguable whether we are likely to find an alliance with that crumbling constellation of States on the Danube a good investment: but I say with the poet—I think it was Busch—"If you no longer like your company, try to find other, if other there be."' ¹²

In the opposing camp France and Russia, which had signed a defensive alliance in the 1890s, also grew more dependent on each other: France for Russian manpower to balance the threat from Germany, Russia for French capital to invest in its railways and industries. In Britain Sir Edward Grey, the high-minded but devious foreign secretary, insisted that his country kept a free hand and had made no commitments on the Continent. He himself disliked foreign countries and visited Europe only once during his long term in office. (The current British government shows much of that same ambivalence towards Europe.) Nevertheless, he saw Britain's new friendships with France (in the Entente Cordiale of 1904) and Russia (in 1907 when the two sides agreed to end their imperial rivalry) as fundamental to the protection of British interests. He managed until 1912 to avoid telling his Cabinet colleagues that he had authorized conversations between the British and French military in which the two sides were making detailed arrangements for the deployment of British troops on the Continent should a general war break out. When the crisis came in 1914 and the French received an ultimatum from Germany, Grey assured a colleague that there was nothing on paper and told a weeping French ambassador that Britain had no formal obligations to France. Yet, as Grey himself finally admitted before the House of Commons, Britain had built up 'obligations of honour' over the years. ¹³

In each crisis—and they were coming more frequently—the powers used threats to intimidate one another and the resentments piled up. Germany forced Russia to back down in the Bosnian crisis, something Tsar Nicholas II told his mother he could never forgive. In the First Balkan War of 1912, both Austria–Hungary and Russia mobilized parts of their armed forces near their common borders. 'Bluff, everything a bluff,' Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, the German foreign minister, wrote that year to a friend. 'War could only happen if one were so unfathomably foolish to bluff so badly as to be unable to go back down on it and had to shoot. I really consider none of the current statesmen an example of such oxen.' He died before he could see what happened in 1914. ¹⁴

Europe's decision-makers and their publics became used to the idea that war might break out. Across the Continent, each time tensions grew high, men's clothing shops took to putting stout boots and woollen socks in their windows, people lined up to get their savings out of banks, and housewives hoarded food. Among the German high command there was talk of preventive war against a

¹² Karl Max Lichnowsky and F. S. Delmer, *Heading for the abyss: reminiscences* (London: Constable, 1928), pp. 379–80.

¹³ See Keith Robbins, *Sir Edward Grey: a biography of Earl Grey of Fallodon* (London: Cassell, 1971); F. H. Hinsley, ed., *British policy under Sir Edward Grey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁴ Holger Afflerbach, 'The topos of improbable war in Europe before 1914', in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds, *An improbable war? The outbreak of World War I and European political culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2007), p. 179.

rapidly rearming Russia before it became too strong. Shortly before the final crisis of 1914 the chief of the German general staff, Helmuth von Moltke, complained to a German diplomat: 'If only things would finally boil over—we are ready; the sooner the better.'¹⁵

Such willingness to enter war seems madness from the perspective of the twenty-first century. And we, of course, know what happened: there were no short, decisive battles followed by a ceasefire with the troops marching home in time to enjoy Christmas with their families, but repeated unsuccessful attacks and counter-attacks and, on the Western Front, battle lines that scarcely moved until 1918. Did Europe's leaders, the military experts above all, not realize that the advantage in battle had swung to the defence, or that Europe's alliances were so evenly balanced that neither was capable of overwhelming the other?

The unwinnable war

The great advances of European science and technology and the increasing output of Europe's factories during its long period of peace had made war more deadly and destructive and attack much more costly. Timing is so important in history, and in 1914 the technologies—from powerful armed aircraft to tanks—which could overcome strong defensive positions did not yet exist. What did exist, though, were shovels, barbed wire and powerful guns. Armies could dig themselves in and wait for the enemy to come to them. Between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the outbreak of the Great War the killing zone—the area of fire through which attacking soldiers would have to move—expanded dramatically. Thanks to better explosives (made by Nobel, among others), improved metallurgy and rifling, guns from the individual soldiers' weapons to the heavy artillery fired faster, further and more accurately. Napoleon's soldiers had to fire standing up and their muskets could usually only hit targets 50 yards away; by the end of the century soldiers fired lying down and their rifles were accurate over half a mile. A single soldier with one of the new machine guns, as a French general said ruefully during the Great War, could stop a battalion of heroes.

Russia's equivalent to John D. Rockefeller, the tycoon Ivan Bloch, warned of the changing nature of war. In a massive six-volume work published in 1898, in articles and in public lectures, he did his best to make the world realize that the next general war was likely to be a dreadful stalemate which would exhaust both sides. It would be, he said bluntly, 'a catastrophe which would destroy all existing political institutions'. Europe's leaders largely ignored him. As a banker, a pacifist and a Jew, what did he know of war? 'Namby-pamby so-called humanitarianism', said one British general after hearing him lecture.¹⁶

Yet even if they dismissed Bloch, surely Europe's military could have looked at the evidence from recent wars—the American Civil War, for example, where

¹⁵ Angelika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 135.

¹⁶ T. H. E. Travers, 'Technology, tactics and morale: Jean de Bloch, the Boer War, and British military theory, 1900–1914', *Journal of Modern History* 51: 2, 1979, p. 268.

attackers had taken much larger losses than well-entrenched defenders. ‘Those savage encounters do not deserve the name of war,’ said a European general dismissively, ‘and I have dissuaded my officers from reading the published accounts of them.’¹⁷ Closer to home, there was the 1870–71 war between France and the German Confederation, where in one battle 131,000 French had dashed themselves fruitlessly against a line held by 48,000 Germans. And examples of the power of the defence continued to mount up: in the South African War of 1899–1902, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, and the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913. Nevertheless, in 1914 the military plans of all the European powers were predicated on taking the offensive. ‘The defensive’, said a British major-general in 1914, ‘is never an acceptable role to the Briton, and he makes little or no study of it.’¹⁸

The military, to be fair, were only demonstrating an all-too-familiar human propensity to resist change and ignore or explain away evidence that did not fit their inclinations or their theories. Think of the assumptions made by the American military after Vietnam that they would never again have to fight a war of counter-insurgency—with the result that in the occupation of Iraq and more recently in Afghanistan they had to learn how to do so all over again. Consider the passionate attachment so many of the world’s navies have to aircraft carriers and battleships, in spite of the evidence of their growing vulnerability to underwater or airborne missiles—or even, as the experience of the USS *Cole* showed in 2000, to terrorist attacks. Or how, as the scientific evidence mounts that carbon emissions are affecting the climate, we continue to ignore the consequences, even to deny that there are any.

Europe’s military leaders could not have been completely unaware of the changes in war, but they groped for ways of maintaining the offensive: by better training to motivate the soldiers, by amassing greater numbers to throw into attacks (the rule of thumb by 1914 was that for success you needed eight attackers to every defender), or by breeding faster and stronger horses so that cavalry could still be decisive on the battlefields. In the end too many of them were prepared to gamble on their offensives because they could not see any alternatives. Honour—their own and that of the nation—demanded that they at least try. ‘It will be a hopeless struggle,’ said Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Austria–Hungary’s chief of staff in 1914, ‘but it must be pursued because so old a Monarchy and so glorious an army cannot go down ingloriously.’¹⁹

The bias towards the offensive in military plans, and the need for the armies on the Continent to call up their large reserves, had the result of putting increased pressure on those making the decision about whether or not to go to war. The military argued passionately that every minute counted. John F. Kennedy faced similar arguments from his military and many of his civilian advisers in the Cuban Missile Crisis, but he had the courage to stand up to them. It may have helped that he had just read Barbara Tuchman’s *The guns of August*, about how Europe had gone

¹⁷ Ivan Stanislavovich Bloch, ‘The wars of the future’, *Contemporary Review*, no. 80, 1901, p. 314.

¹⁸ Travers, ‘Technology, tactics and morale’, p. 271, n. 22.

¹⁹ Lawrence Sondhaus, *Conrad von Hötzendorf: architect of the apocalypse* (Boston: Humanities Press, 2000), p. 140.

to war in 1914.²⁰ If mobilization was delayed, so it was claimed then, the enemy could be on the borders and ready to fight while its target was only half ready. And being half ready, with soldiers searching for their units and their equipment, was, it was asserted, tantamount to defeat. The tsar and his government were always under particular pressure to start mobilization because Russia's distances and its inadequate railway network meant that the period from the call-up of the reserves to full readiness at the borders was twice as long as for its potential enemy Germany and ten days longer than for Austria–Hungary.²¹

Europe's general staffs also reacted with alarm to the prospect of giving way before the enemy and exchanging land for time. Yet in many earlier wars that had been an effective strategy, with armies choosing to retreat in order to regroup and attack an enemy as it moved further and further from its base and its supply lines became more and more attenuated. That is what had finished Napoleon when he invaded Russia in 1812, and would later finish the Nazis in the Second World War. In 1914, unlike America in 1962, Europe's civilian leaders proved unable to stand up to their militaries and resist the pressures to get their armies assembled and into the field, even though doing so brought war that much closer.

The civilians also failed in another way: in not informing themselves of what the military were planning. In the case of Germany this had particularly bad consequences. By 1914 German military planners took it for granted that they would have to fight a two-front war against Russia and France, to the extent that the general staff had no plans for fighting on only one front; in consequence, a conflict with either enemy was likely to turn into a more general one. Furthermore, for convenience and because it made strategic sense, German troops would march through the neutral country of Belgium on their way to what was expected to be the encirclement and defeat of France's forces. That made it more than likely that Britain would enter a war to defend Belgium and fight alongside France. In the event, the German invasion of Belgium also helped to turn American opinion against Germany.

Europeans in 1914 were largely unaware of the dangers built into the military plans and assumptions. They had also been lulled into complacency by the long period of peace and the fact that many earlier crises had been successfully surmounted. That July, as Europe lurched down the path towards war, most were confident, as they had been in earlier moments of tension, that they—or rather their leaders—could manage the situation. Jean Jaurès, the leading French socialist and a man of great wisdom, said: 'Europe has been afflicted by so many crises for so many years, it has been put dangerously to the test so many times without war breaking out that it has almost ceased to believe in the threat and is watching the further development of the interminable Balkan conflict with decreased attention and reduced disquiet.'²²

²⁰ Barbara Tuchman, *The guns of August* (New York: Dell, 1962).

²¹ See Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The war plans of the Great Powers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979); Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, *War planning 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²² George Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War: the collapse of the Second International* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 108.

Making the right choices

Are we in danger of the same complacency today? We survived the Cold War, although there were the close calls of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the shooting down of KAL 007 in 1983. Old enemies such as Russia and the United States have learned to coexist, or perhaps even become friends, like China and the United States. There have been regional conflicts, but they have so far been contained. But can we count on the future looking much the same?

One thing we should never forget is the importance of leadership and the role of personalities—and that of accident. It was Europe's and the world's misfortune that in 1914 it had such mediocre leaders. A premature death had removed Kiderlen-Wächter as German foreign minister; he might have been able to stand up to the German high command. In 1911 an assassin had shot and killed Pyotr Stolypin, Russia's forceful and wise Prime Minister. His successor in 1914 was an ineffectual nonentity. In France the politician Joseph Caillaux, who was a leading advocate of friendship with Germany, had been obliged to resign from the government in the spring of 1914 when his wife shot and killed an editor who was hounding them.

Germany was ruled by a man who was afraid of appearing weak and who, under the imperfect German constitution, had the final say on making war. Kaiser Wilhelm, who for all his bluster had come down on the side of peace in previous crises, knew that officers in his beloved army mocked him as The Timid. 'This time I shall not give in,' he said repeatedly to his friend the industrialist Alfred Krupp in July 1914 as Austria–Hungary asked for a promise that Germany would back it even to the point of war.²³ Russia had a ruler in Nicholas II who was irresolute, yet deeply committed to the glory and honour of his family and his country, which he saw as one and the same thing. At times Vladimir Putin resembles him in his refusal to make reforms and in his insistence that Russia is a Great Power despite its manifest social, economic and political problems. Britain had a Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, who was tired of office and who left the management of foreign affairs largely to Grey, who, for his part, failed to recognize in time that the crisis was a serious one and hesitated to make Britain's position clear. Far off in Washington, Woodrow Wilson, that complex and remote figure, was preoccupied with the last illness of his wife. He offered at the last minute to mediate and stressed the moral superiority of the United States, but the situation in Europe was well beyond his capacity or that of his country to fix.

It has frequently been argued that Britain could, in those last weeks, have done much more to bring the crisis under control. It is true that Grey did not grasp early enough how serious matters were and that his colleagues were preoccupied with the very real threat of civil war over Irish home rule. Even after the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia he continued to hope that the Concert of Europe might still have some life in it and that Italy, Germany and Britain might cooperate to

²³ Lamar Cecil, *Wilhelm II, vol. 2: Emperor and exile, 1900–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 193–6.

encourage Austria–Hungary and Russia to work together in the Balkans. On the other hand, would it really have deterred Germany from attacking France through Belgium if Britain had undertaken a firm commitment to intervene on the side of the French and the Belgians? The German military largely discounted the British army as a serious force and expected to defeat France rapidly before a British naval blockade could begin to strangle the German economy. In any case, Grey could not have made any commitment or threat before he obtained Cabinet approval, and until 3 August the Cabinet was deeply divided over what to do.

In 1914 Europe didn't muddle through again. Austria–Hungary decided that the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to its throne, in the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo was one provocation too many from the nationalists backed by shadowy forces in the little independent state of Serbia. This time that nest of vipers would be destroyed. The one man in Austria–Hungary who might have halted the rush towards war was Franz Ferdinand himself. His death left his old, ailing uncle, Franz Joseph, alone with the hawks who now clamoured for action. Russia, Serbia's protector, had been humiliated in an earlier Balkan crisis, and so decided that this time it must not back away.²⁴ Germany could have stayed on the sidelines but many of the generals wanted war, partly because they calculated that if they were going to fight Russia they had better do it while they still had a hope of success. It was the same calculation that Japan made in 1941 when its rulers decided to attack a rapidly rearming United States. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg was no Bismarck, capable of standing up to pressure.²⁵ And Bethmann, normally a fatalist, was in a particularly low state because his wife had just died. So Germany stepped in to defend Austria–Hungary by fighting Russia and simultaneously attacked France and Belgium. In the last piece of the bloody puzzle, Britain finally decided on 4 August to enter the war against Germany.

In 1914 Europe could have gone either way, towards peace or towards war. True, there were domestic tensions, national rivalries, and an arms race to threaten order and stability; but these have existed in other periods, including our own. And, on the other hand, there were strong arguments in favour of peace—above all, that war was becoming too costly and might not settle anything. There are always choices; in 1914 Europe made the wrong ones, and the consequences are still with us. Let us hope that we do not follow a similar path. We should never take peace for granted or assume that we are too civilized to fight. The Europeans made that mistake in 1914.

²⁴ See Clark, *The sleepwalkers*; MacMillan, *The war that ended peace*.

²⁵ See Konrad Hugo Jarausch, *The enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the hubris of imperial Germany* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973).