The War that ended Peace

How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War

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The beginning of the 20th century the World had entered an era of globalization. Never before had production, agricultural and industrial, reached such levels, never before had international trade been so extensive, binding together states in mutual ventures and agreements. With such intimately connected economic and financial prospects across international borders, which were so easily crossed by individuals, passports being unheard of, war simply seemed impossible. It would be too irrational, cause such havoc, and simply be unthinkable. Europe had enjoyed a long reign of peace since the fall of Napoleon. True there had been skirmishes, but of regional nature. The Crimean War, was far from European soil. While the carefully orchestrated military engagements of Bismarck in the process of unifying Germany, were clearly cases of war used as an extension of diplomacy. Limited with well defined purposes. Bismarck was no Napoleon. He seemed rather indifferent to military honor, in spite of coming out of the conservative Junker estate, the epitome of the Prussian. But sound instincts and intelligence allow you to transcend political ideologies. However, the war against France in 1870-71 went out of bonds. The German victory at Sedan was as definitive as the humiliation of the French emperor and his army. But after the collapse, the French rose in national pride to counter the Prussians. There was a harsh peace treaty, replete with reparations and territorial losses, which may have been against the wishes of the more farsighted chancellor, but he was no dictator. The loss of Alsace and part of Lorraine would poison relations between Germany and France for a generation, and make the latter seeing Germany as their main enemy, and actively make them court the Russians to form that unlikely and fateful alliance.

MacMillan has read widely and her book is essentially a compendium of all her reading. It is a straightforward account with no real attempts of making a synthesis nor to advocate any possible explanation. The parallels she makes with contemporary politics are at best trivial at worst embarrassing. You do not get the impression that you are listening to the arguments of a historian. Apart from a thematic organization, there are no extended arguments. Thus, although the compilation serves as a useful recollection of predominantly the political and diplomatic events the prewar years, it does not in any essential way add anything that you did not know.

The standard explanation of the war is that we had the newly united Germany, which in the midst of Europe emerged as a giant, with a large population, and a very active and dynamic economical life. It was a country who had come late to the scene, and certainly deserved in the words of its chancellor Bülow, a place in the sun. A place this highly militaristic society, in which Prussia constituted the chore, was prepared to get by force if necessary. That the German emperor Wilhelm II was wilful and bombastic and had had the bad judgement to dismiss Bismarck close upon his ascendency to the throne, certainly

did not help matters. MacMillan takes it for granted that he had a lot of actual power, and that he was actively seeking a rather belligerent policy. It is true that he was active in advocating a naval race with the British, which irritated them no end, but it is also true that he was a windbag, and that he had to be handled by ministers with tact and firmness. And when it came to taking a tough stand, he was liable to back away, once he sensed things were becoming to serious, which earned him a reputation for cowardice.

The rapprochement between the French, and the previous ally - the Russians- put Germany in an awkward and vulnerable position. Although the pact was presented as one of defense, attack is usually the best defense, and thus the Germans felt being encircled and if it came to war, forced to fight one on two fronts, which was a nightmare. To prepare for the worst the chief of the general staff - Schlieffen - had developed an elaborate plan of mobilization on two fronts, to be followed by a war, in which the idea was first to take care of the French, tolerating losses in the East, and then add all the might towards the Russians. For this to be effective one had to develop an infra structure of railroads in order to effect a quick movements of troops. The French and the Russians clearly thought of this as rather threatening.

The position of the English was unclear. Traditionally there was rivalry between the English and the colonial powers of France and Russia. With the French in Africa. In fact it almost came to blows between France and England in Sudan. And with the Russians in the east. Persia and Afghanistan foremost, with the latter being a gateway down to India, thus threatening the most prized colonial possession of the English.

France was an old power on the decline. It had never recovered from the Age of Napoleon, and suffered, as already noted, a most humiliating defeat against the Prussians. Its status as a great power was seriously challenged by the newly unified Germany. Russia was a great 19th century power, its finest hour being the defeat of Napoleon, with the aid of the Prussians and the British. But its track record as the century unfolded was not that impressive. There was the Crimean War, and then in 1905, most disastrously the defeat against the upstart nation of Japan. This was the first time a European power came to grief against, what would be seen as marginal and distant land, normally seen as mere material for colonial annexation.

The English had natural ties with German lands. In fact for about a century it was tied to Hanover in a royal union. It had also been the policy of the British to ally themselves with the second strongest continental power in order to maintain a balance. Besides, it could, thanks to its great navy, stay rather aloof when it came to continental affairs. Would it really have to take sides? Could it not maintain its neutrality, which after all accorded it the maximal flexibility. So in fact, although courted by the French and the Russians, to enter into the Triple Entente, the foreign secretary Grey refused to make commitments. Thus until the very end it was not clear which way it would tip.

Germany finding itself isolated, and unlike the British, not splendidly so, had only one resource - the Austrian-Hungarian empire. By tying itself to it, the rewards were bound to be outweighed by the liabilities. It was not clear that the empire, the weakest of the main powers, would add much to the military strength, on the other hand it would obligate it to commit themselves to issues of no interest to them. The add-on of Italy into a Triple Alliance, was seen, and rightly so, as not serious, the Italians being far too volatile and

unreliable, in addition to being embroiled in an old conflict with Austria about territory. The decision early on during the reign of Wilhelm II not to renew the pact with Russia is seen, at least by hindsight, as a big blunder, no doubt caused by a desire for the new administration to distance itself from the Bismarckian heritage.

But alliances are not enough to cause a war, after all they are designed to prevent one. There is needed something extra, and it is not hard to find. The situation on the Balkans was if anything volatile. The Ottoman empire had been in decline since the end of the 18th century. The only empire which had been able to seriously challenge European hegemony. In the beginning of the 19th century wars of independence on the Balkan peninsula were initiated. It was a matter not only of Christian countries shedding Muslim suzerainty, but in the case of Greece, we are talking about the cradle of European civilization. The liberation of Greece was hence endowed with particular romantic sentiments, and one invariably thinks of lord Byron. The Greeks were not Slavs, although their orthodox church was close in spirit with the Russian church, and for obvious reasons more or less identical with that of the Serbs, Bulgars and Rumanians. The Russians, for obvious sentimental reasons, sided with the Serbs and the Bulgars, and saw it as its responsibility to support them in their ambitions. Furthermore it was in their interest that the Ottoman empire would totally disintegrate and by seizing Istanbul, restore not only the city to its rightful origin as Constantinople, but more to the point secure complete control of the straits. Being essentially a landlocked country, its coast to the Black Sea was of paramount importance, and thus the straits of crucial strategic relevance. As to the Austrian-Hungarian empire, this awkward Dual-Monarchy, it did not have the same interest in the disintegration of the Ottoman empire. The emergence of small independent Slavic states caused a disturbance. To annex them, as was finally done with Bosnia in 1908, would court conflict with Russia, to let them be, would lead to a state of unrest. The nascent Balkan states, especially Serbia, were dominated by shrill nationalism, ready to take action. The author's comparison with modern jihadist, is far too simplistic. The situation in the Balkans led to many diplomatic conflicts among the great powers in the years before 1914. There were two Balkan wars, just preceding 1914. The first in 1912, where Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria successfully battled the Turkish forces gaining substantial territorial rewards. The second was caused by a quarrel concerning their spoils. Throughout those years the Balkan countries acted impetuously and irresponsibly on the diplomatic stage, and perpetrated serious atrocities on the ground. In retrospect it is very hard to summon any sympathy for them, unless countries are to be seen as people, and hence some as passing through a phase of being unruly children.

The story of the First World War is basically one of diplomatic incompetence unleashing a military situation which no one could properly handle. Since 1870 there had been tremendous improvement in military technology, favoring the defense and hence making impossible any decisive victory. War would become a matter of slow attrition. Not one of valor and brilliancy, but a relentless mechanical grinding down, where valor counted for little, and brilliancy more often than not an irrelevant distraction, thus depriving war of any of the romanticism with which it had traditionally been endowed. But of this there were no understanding among the men of power.

So who were the men who decided on the fate of Europe? First we have the sovereigns.

The German, the Russian and the English. All three, incidentally, closely related[1]. The English monarchs wee constitutionally constrained, and thus basically served ceremonial purposes, while the German and Russians enjoyed a high degree of formal power. While Clark does admit the complications that their rights as sovereigns entailed, he claims that their actual influence was exaggerated, MacMillan takes their power more at face value. Then there were the professional diplomats and military commanders, and finally the press and its creation - the public opinion. A lot of space can be devoted to present the personalities of the actors as well as describing their antics. The German Kaiser lends himself particularly to such treatments. Then a lot of space can be used to describe the various diplomatic crises. Morocco, Bosnia, The Balkan Wars, each of which were amenable to diplomatic defusion, up to the last triggered by the famous assassination in Sarajevo, leading to the ultimatum to Serbia, and the refusal of the angered Austrian-Hungarian empire to accept its response, or at least to subject it to international mediation. One thing leading to another.

MacMillan does not point the finger at any particular nation, although the Germans come across as blundering diplomatically initially and thus painting itself into a corner. What would a Bismarck not have accomplished, but even if he had been retained, it is unrealistic to have expected him to be at his full power at the age of ninety-nine. The actions all seem reasonable from the perspective of individual players, who no doubt found themselves at sea, overwhelmed by the dynamics of the situation. In particular the momentum of mobilizations, following strict procedures. A reader of today may be struck by the emphasis on national honor, although this probably still plays a far more important role today than we would like to acknowledge. Another crucial component in diplomatic considerations, were the fear of being overcome and hence the felt imperative to be the first to act, as not to be taken advantage of. Thus once things were called in motion they seemed impossible to stop, although of course we are not talking about forces of nature, but contrived movements, which could have been called off by orders by people of authority.

MacMillan does not have the ambition to explain only to present, and thus merely to amass a compilation to be plowed through not to be critically considered.

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[1] Edward VII was an uncle to the Kaiser, while his son George was also a cousin to the Czar, and in fact the two exhibited such a resemblance that they could have been taken for twins.