

Towards the Flame

Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia

D.Lieven

April 16 - May 6, 2017

Who was ultimately responsible for the First World War (and by extension the Second World War)? One candidate that stands out is Germany, and if not Germany the guilt is collective laid at the doors of incompetent diplomacy and fervent nationalism. George Kennan in his book 'The Fateful Alliance' puts much of the blame on the breaking away of Russia from the Triple Alliance and its rapprochement to France, its old enemy¹. Kennan's account is masterly written and very engaging and to some extent covering the same ground as that of the present book, although not as extended in time, concentrating on the alliance itself and its gradual consolidation, thus in particular not engaging in the drama of 1914. However, Lieven has had access to much more documentation than was available to Kennan, and have thus the potential of a much fuller story, not easily accommodated within a volume of reasonable extension. Clark, in a much more recent book, makes a case for exonerating the Germans of their guilt, bringing forward many other candidates, such as the French adventurism eager as they were to avenge themselves of the humiliation of 1870-71, not to mention many smaller and totally irresponsible players, such as the Serbs. In fact he introduces the book by vividly presenting to the hapless reader the barbaric antics of this immature nation of savages. The intentions of Clark may be commendable but hardly convincing, and in effect he introduces his book with the caveat that a definite establishment of guilt is hardly feasible, but of course it is clear where his sympathies lie. Similarly Lieven presents the outbreak of the war from a purely Russian point of view, and even if he has no ambitions to settle the matter of guilt, it should be clear from his account and sympathies, that Russia had no desire to start a war, and in fact would turn out to be the country who suffered from it the most.

As we all know there were five major players of the First World War. The British, the French, the German, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and Russia. Two of those countries were of the west, two of the east, and one, the most formidable in the middle. The British were not really of Europe, it was a transoceanic empire, which after the split of the Hanoverian line², did have no direct anchorage on the European continent. But of course its Royal family was as interrelated as any other European Royal family to any other Royal family, which gives the First World War a certain piquancy as one great family feud, to which we will have occasion to return. Britain had no strong army, but of course

¹ Russia was never at war with Germany or any of its predecessors, although in Germanic-Slavic mythology, the battle at Grunewald in the early 15th century was an epic battle pitting the Teutonic forces against the Slavic.

² The Hanoverian constitution did not recognize a female head of state, and thus rejected the young queen Victoria in 1837

a formidable navy that in the lingo of the time 'ruled the seas'. Almost ruptured by a century of civil strife and religious wars, it came of its own during the 18th century, and was the first country to have an Industrial revolution playing out in the next. Being out of Europe it was really rather aloof of European affairs, and had been expected to remain so. France is an entirely different story, During the 17th century it was the most powerful state in Europe, having with the military aid of Sweden, brought the rivalry with the Habsburg Dynasty (which would split into a Spanish, soon to be come marginal and irrelevant, and an Austrian) to a favorable conclusion. In the east Poland-Lithuania was the powerful country of the 16th century, with Russia in disarray after the aggressive convulsions of Ivan the Terrible. It would be challenged and cowed by Sweden in the 17th century, whose bullying would eventually lead to its own destruction as a major power, to be replaced first and foremost by ascending Russia, but also by the regional power of Prussia. The ascendancy of Prussia and Russia was tolerated by the Austrians, and led to the extinction of the once powerful Poland-Lithuania, thus showing that great powers who could not keep ahead of its rivals, were doomed, a lesson which must have made a profound impression³. Now the power structure of Continental Europe was made to collapse as a result of the glory of Napoleon. It did not last, and the victorious Russian army made it all the way to Paris, something that Stalin was not able to repeat. This made Russia for the first time a truly European power, and yet as such it was considered as something barbaric and Asiatic, a stigma it has never really been able to shed, although its St-Petersburg elite was more European than Europe, spoke French better than the French⁴, philosophized with greater earnestness than the Germans⁵ Maybe as a reaction of never being fully accepted, there emerged the idea of the special mission of Russia as an incarnation of the Slavic soul. Similar ideas on a Germanic basis occurred in Germany among the intelligentsia, one may only refer to Thomas Mann and his distinction between Civilization und Kultur. This can be seen as special manifestations of the general idea of nationalism emerging out of and wedded to liberal ideas of the 19th century. This was both a fruit of and a reaction against the Enlightenment, and they would play an important role in late 19th century and early 20th century politics. The 19th century saw the decline of French, Russian and Austrian political power, and the rapid and spectacular ascendancy of German cultural, economic, scientific and hence military and political power. France never recovered from the Napoleonic adventure, and would suffer further humiliations under the farcical reign of the eponymous nephew, after which it would in spite of hysteric rhetorics, never be able to claim any semblance of past greatness⁶. Russia saw much of its prestige and nimbus suffer during the Crimean War, and the ill-conceived war against distant Japan was a tremendous loss of prestige and almost toppled the regime. The Austrian empire tottered along during the 19th century, and almost came apart in 1848, but was saved by the Russians. It lost

³ Sweden was close to suffer a similar partition at the height of the Napoleonic wars. Russia got, as always?, its large bite, but Denmark was too powerless to reclaim its part.

⁴ Alexandre I was certainly correct in noting that his French was superior to that of the Corsican upstart

⁵ As we all know Marxism sprouted deeper roots in Russia than Germany.

⁶ The hankering after former days of glory is still very much with the French. Their possession of nuclear weapons, and the need to occasionally test them, does a lot to their self-esteem.

against Prussia as the leader of the 'German Nation'⁷, of which it had traditionally served as the titularly emperor, and it caused a split and a rebirth as the K.u.K (Kaiserliche und Königliche) - the Austrian-Hungarian dual monarchy. It was a truly multi-ethnic empire, unified under the Habsburg banner, and thus particularly vulnerable to the nationalistic movements of the 19th century. All three were empires on the decline, especially that of Austria-Hungary. Such retreats create vacuums into which others can expand. In this case the opportunity was taken by the newly unified Germany under Bismarck, the chancellor of 'Blut und Eisen' who was foremost a master diplomat, not a Napoleonic marshal⁸. The ascendancy of Germany was the major event of the second half of the 19th century and it threatened to fundamentally change the balance of power on the European continent, and thus make for a politically volatile situation. This fact also serves as the foundation of the issue of German war guilt. Germany being seen as the only country who could actually not only sustain a major war but even to benefit from it. This is of course not an uncontroversial statement. The author seems to subscribe to it, at least to the extent of thinking that Germany could have won, had the Germans not acted as bluntly and ravaged Belgium and hence antagonizing the British into action. Thus coming to grief through stupid and inept tactics. Clark on the other hand, temperamentally inclined to side with the Germans, takes them to task for having dithered on the Belgian issue, instead of having acted more decisively and not have lost valuable momentum! .

Bismarck, who looked upon Russia with some sympathy bequeathed the Triple alliance to his successors, consisting of Germany, Austria and Russia, as old allies against Napoleon. For the Austrians this was a natural alliance having more or less renounced its leading status, while for the Russians the situation was more complicated. Being part of it, would make it subservient to the Germans and demote it to a second-rate power, on the other hand it did not have the power to stand up to the Germans on their own, hence when the successors of Bismarck allowed the Triple Alliance lapse it was natural for them to send feelers to the French in order for them to enjoy some freedom of action. On the other hand it is hard to think of the motivation of the French as being otherwise than an attempt to encircle Germany, When all is said and done it was an unnatural alliance (thinking outside the box), and it took years for it to set roots, the subject of which is exactly the above mentioned book by Kennan.

For a Swede, the notion of Russia is a scary entity. A huge country spread out over the whole of Eurasia, with its depth on the other side of the Urals⁹. A veritable ocean liable to inundate its neighbors with the excess of its population and centrifugal force. For a Swede the history lessons of Peter the Great and the debacle of Poltava loom large in childhood memory. Then there followed a further sequence of humiliations after the loss of the Baltic provinces. The shaving off of eastern Finland, only to have the eastern part

⁷ More accurately 'the Holy German Empire' a notion stemming back from Charlemagne, out of which the concept of a German nation was born.

⁸ ostensibly he abhorred war and its heroics, and saw war in Clausewitzian terms, i.e. as diplomacy carried on by other means.

⁹ There was once an interview with a German soldier from Stalingrad. He relayed the awe he felt as the Germans had advanced to the edge of European Russia, and before him lay an infinity of Russia, extending indefinitely beyond into the very east.

of the country excised in its entirety a generation later. Then there were Communism. Communism was scary to the child, not because of Socialism, of which he knew nothing, but because it was Russian. (It later came to a surprise to me that Communism had German roots, that the Russians, who only recognized themselves and their achievements, did in fact honor a German.) There were the relayed memory of the Finnish Winter War, where of course the Russians were evil enemies incarnate seemingly invincible. (How surprised was I not when I later learned how the Invincible Russian armies, who had resisted Charles XII and Napoleon, were quenched by the Germans during the First World War.) Then the subjugation of Eastern Europe, mixed with their invincibility as manifested in Ice-hockey during my later childhood. The Hungarian crisis, the first crises I was made aware of. The Sputnik (technologically invincible as well), Chrustjov with his shoe, the doomsdays bombs of Nova Zemlja, the Cold War, the Cuban Missile crises, the quenching of the Prague spring. The Soviet Union was a closed country, people were suppressed and oppressed, victims as well as perpetrators, I gradually became to appreciate. Those prejudices go very deep, and one may consider it sad that a young man, along with his contemporaries, were presented with such a hateful picture of the Russians. But I do not think it is unique for Sweden. People of the Baltic States, to say nothing of the Poles, must entertain even stronger fears and hatreds of things Russian. Germans are not that popular in Poland, but the Russians are even resented more. What did Stalin really do during the fourth partition, by far the most violent and brutal of them all. Yet for all this negative propaganda there is fascination with things Russian and their culture. My mother who had bequested to me her own fear of Russia (in her childhood Russian atrocities along the Bothnic coast, were very much still alive in collective memory over a century later, while in southern Sweden there were no such direct memories) also introduced to me the treasures of Russian literature, which fascinated me deeply in my late teens and early twenties, concomitant with a romanticization of the Russian psyche, which would have been impossible, I suspect without this background of fear and loathing. The human psyche is indeed subtle and complicated. Thus the book being a presentation of the Russian point of view of the events leading up to the First World War (the collapse of the regime as a consequence thereof, only receives a cursory treatment) holds a special fascination to me, as it allows me to take on the perspective of barbaric enemies, however, intellectually I may distance myself from such a crude conception. But the reader is not only the mature adult, but also the child, because the child within man is never completely discarded, and this gives the reading an emotional coloring it otherwise would have lacked.

Reading the account I am surprised at the number of Russians with German names. Their diplomatic crops was indeed civilized, in no way that different from their German counterparts, in fact, there was a large ethnic overlap. What happened to those 'Germans' after the revolution? Were they executed or exiled as foreign elements? Socialism, ostensibly an eminently international movement, returned in many ways Russia into a barbaric 'asiatic' past¹⁰ And then the Russian Royal family. Ostensible of Romanov roots, the descendants of Peter the Great, sprung from the Russian soil, they had over the centuries

¹⁰ I did not completely lack direct contact with Soviet reality. In 1968 I participated in the IMO (International Mathematical Olympiad) and was ushered into the 'Lions Den'. I found Moscow a bleak and 'Asian' city, as if haphazardly spread out on the infinite Russian steppes, while I found Leningrad

been so much diluted with European Royal blood, as to be indistinguishable from it, and the monarchs of Germany, England and Russia were all cousins! In fact so close in appearance were the British King George and his Russian counterpart that they could be taken for twins¹¹. In what sense did Tsar Nicholas represent his subjects? Certainly not by blood, if that manner of speaking should have any meaning whatsoever. Yet he deeply identified with the Slavic mission, and had as many intellectuals a very romantic view of the Russian peasantry¹². Was it all sentimental hogwash? Yes and No. Sentimental nonsense, in many ways, but important for legitimacy both in his own eyes as well as those of his subjects. And sentimental or not, it would play an important role in the thinking of issues.

The lasting impression of the detailed account, almost exclusively, as in Kennan, devoted to the diplomatic game, is one of caution almost to the point of timidity. None of this hectoring of invincible strength I had as a child been led to associate Russia with. Not an empire bent on world dominion, but of course well aware of its interests and concomitant dignities, as well as of its vulnerability, because a stagnant empire, which is unable to expand is doomed. The Ottoman empire was a retreating one, hence a tottering one, and its collapse would of course present opportunities, which by their very nature, also involved inevitable conflicts and dangers, because the empire as it would collapse would threaten to drag its neighbors with it. Russia was as England a geographically vast empire, but while the British empire was of the Oceans, with its holdings overseas, the Russian was for all intents and purposes a landlocked one, with all its colonial holdings contiguous with the mother country. True, northern Siberia has a vast coastline, but it is useless for any serious purposes¹³. This leaves the Baltic, the Black Sea, and the far East by the Kamtchatka Peninsula¹⁴ which proved to be sadly inadequate as shown by the debacle in 1905. Thus there was a potential conflict with Britain. From the Central Asian holdings of the Russian Empire there was a 'Drang nach Süden', and the British felt that their holdings in India might be at risk from Russian expansion. Luckily there were Afghanistan which served as a block for both powers, but as to Persia there was a definite potential for conflict. It was temporarily held in check by a provisional division of spheres of influences, a northern one for Russia and a southern one for Britain. As to the Austrian empire, there was a definite source of conflict as to the influence on the Balkan states. Russia had been instrumental in the liberation of Bulgaria, and at the time,

much more congenial, much more of a 'European' city. My lasting impression was, however, one of being touched. It might be a formidable country, a doomsday threat, but a colossus with feet of clay and an inferiority complex.

¹¹ In a famous portrait reproduced in the book with both kings donning the same military uniform, the illusion is almost perfect

¹² As did of course Dostoevski and Tolstoy, while Chekhov as being much closer to them by tradition as well as profession, being a descendant of recently liberated serfs as well as being a doctor, had a far more realistic one.

¹³ Global warming may change that. The ice free ports of the Kola peninsula were only developed by Soviet times, and provided some relief during the Second World War

¹⁴ Until the mid 19th century there were also Alaska and holdings along the North American Pacific, but of limited use and sold off.

when European politics was still dominated by Bismarck, Austria had claimed its share by occupying Bosnia. However, when that occupation turned into a regular annexation some thirty years later, it caused a lot of bad feeling among the Russians, who felt that they had been tricked. Now of course the ultimate dream of the Russians (maybe still not entirely abandoned) was to conquer Constantinople, both to command the straits, but also for reclaiming Christendom, reviving the old geographical extension of the Orthodox Church, bringing with it a lot of prestige. How would Austria react to such developments? Furthermore the German approach to the Turks, mainly economically, planning to build a railway to Baghdad, but also a military one, which made the Russians very nervous.

Anyway economic ties with Germany were extensive, to the benefit of both countries, and the Russians thought that for Germany to wage war against them would be madness. (But madness can never be ruled out, not even in diplomacy). The Russian, with the German aid, had started a delayed process of industrialization. The French also chipped in, but it seems not without strings attached. It is hard not to see the French dealings with Russia, as being subservient to a military strategy of encirclement to serve their own purposes ¹⁵.

Did the Russians, as well as all the other mayor players, ineptly stumble into the war? At least from the Russian point of view, as presented by the author, there was commendable caution and tact, as well as a deep sense of responsibility. The diplomats seems as skilled as during any time, and certainly comparing to recent political maneuvers in the Middle East, they acted with much more restraint. Of course the minor players such as the Balkan states and Italy, not to be forgotten, were exploiting the volatile situation to their own petty advantages. Serbia, was a case in point, by any means a so called 'rough state' in contemporary terminology. The Austrians were losing patience with the tiny but aggressive country, and the Russians felt a deep commitment based on a romantic notion of their Slavic mission¹⁶. Yet modern countries and leaders pay more than lip service to similar ideals with unpredictable consequences.

In retrospect it is very easy to point out what went wrong and devise alternative courses of action, which certainly would have prevented what actually did happen, but would have created other situations for which proper handling would only be obvious in retrospect. The last twenty-five years or so before the conflagration, were expansive times indeed, creating a degree of globalization not matched until recently. It was a time when you could travel without passports, and when Russia was, for all what has been suggested, nevertheless part of the European House, something from which it has been debarred ever since the Revolution. But it was undeniably a time of constant tension and war may have erupted from any number of crises. Had the Austrians acted with some more constraint as to their ultimatum to the Serbs and thereby tying the hands of the Russian, August 1914 would certainly not have occurred, but what would have prevented a March 1915, or December 1916? Counterfactual speculations quickly bifurcates into a morass of

¹⁵ Thus in my personal view, the French should shoulder a large responsibility for the war.

¹⁶ During the break up of Yugoslavia, the Serbs were thrown into the role of the bad guys, although it did engender loyalty not only among the Eastern Slavs, including many Russians (such as the distinguished mathematician Shafarevich), but also among the Greeks. Maybe the Orthodox church served as a powerful unifier of emotions,

possibilities, all contradictory. But did not people learn from the war? Its second phase proved that they did not. In fact wars seldom teach lessons, and to the extent they may do, it is only temporarily, because after all war is adventure, in need of very strong deterrents. Will the nuclear deterrent be strong enough in our time, the author speculates.

May 7-11, 2017 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se