

THE FIRST

WORLD

WAR

HEW STRACHAN



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hew Strachan is the Chichele Professor of the History of War and a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford University. The editor of *The Oxford History of the First World War*, he is writing a three-volume history of the First World War, the first volume of which was published in 2001 to wide acclaim. He lives in Scotland.

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For Pamela and Mungo

Who may not have lived through the First World War but have had to live with it



The Western Front

WINTER 1914-15





Africa in 1914

0 500 1000 miles
0 500 1000 km

German held territory





INTRODUCTION

In Britain popular interest in the First World War runs at levels that surprise almost all other nations with the possible exception of France. The concluding series of *Blackadder*, the enormously successful BBC satirization of the history of England, saw its heroes in the trenches. Its humor assumed an audience familiar with chateau-bound generals, goofy staff officers and cynical but long-suffering infantrymen. The notion that British soldiers were ‘lions led by donkeys’ continues to provoke a debate that has not lost its passion, even if it is now devoid of originality. For a war that was global, it is a massively restricted vision: a conflict measured in yards of mud along a narrow corridor of Flanders and northern France. It knows nothing of the Italian Alps or of the Masurian lakes; it bypasses the continents of Africa and Asia; and it forgets the war’s other participants — diplomats and sailors, politicians and labourers, women and children.

Casualty levels do not provide a satisfactory explanation for such insularity. British deaths in the First World War may have exceeded those of the Second, and Britain is unusual, if not unique, in this respect. The reverse is true for Germany and Russia, as it is for the United States. However, even losses of three-quarters of a million proved to be little more than a blip in demographic terms. The influenza epidemic that swept from Asia through Europe and America in 1918 — 19 killed more people than the First World War. By the mid- 1920s the population of Britain, like those of other belligerents, was recovering to its pre-war levels. In the crude statistics of rates of marriage and reproduction there was no ‘lost generation’.

But the British, and particularly the better educated classes, believed there was. The legacy of literature, and its effects on the shaping of memory, have proved far more influential than economic or political realities. In 1961, Benjamin Britten incorporated nine poems by Wilfred Owen in his *War Requiem*, which he dedicated to the memory of four friends who had been killed in 1939 — 45. The work was first performed at the consecration of the Coventry Cathedral in 1962. The old cathedral was a casualty of the Second World War, not the First, but Britten was following an established pattern in conflating the commemoration of the two wars. Armistice Day for the First World War, 11 November 1918, and the act of remembrance on the nearest Sunday to it, was appropriated to honour the dead of 1939-45. Today Remembrance Sunday embraces not only every subsequent war in which Britain has been engaged but also more general reflections on war itself, and on its cost in blood and suffering. The annual service at the Cenotaph in Whitehall is therefore deeply paradoxical. A ceremony weighted with nationalism, attended by the Queen and orchestrated as a military parade, bemoans wars fought in the nation’s name. It cuts away war’s triumphalism, and in the process seems to question the necessity of the very conflicts in which those it commemorates met their deaths.

Wilfred Owen himself embodied some of these paradoxes. Owen was killed in action on 4 November 1918: his mother did not receive the news until after the fighting was over. The war bore a heavy burden for Owen and made him. He returned to the front line when he could probably have avoided doing so, telling his mentor, Siegfried Sassoon, ‘Serenity Shelley never dreamed of crowning me’. The war gave him the material which transformed him into one of the greatest English poets of the twentieth century. For schoolchildren throughout Britain his verses are often their first and most profound encounter with the First World War. Niall Ferguson’s interpretation of the conflict, *The Pity of War*, published on the occasion of the armistice’s eightieth anniversary in 1998, used Owen’s words in its

title. But it is worth recalling what Owen makes explicit but his readers tend to overlook — that his subject was war as a general phenomenon, more than the First World War in particular. *Dulce decorum est pro patria mori*, that ‘it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country’, is, he insists, ‘an old lie’. By quoting Horace, Owen places himself along a continuum that embraces two millennia; he says little, if anything, about the peculiarities that explained the horrors of the war in which he himself served and died.

Owen did not achieve canonical status until the 1960s: Britten popularised him. The first edition of his poems, prepared by Sassoon in December 1920, sold 730 copies. A further 700 copies, printed in 1921, were still not sold out by 1929. By then the collected poems of another victim of the war, Rupert Brooke, had run to 300,000 copies. Brooke knew his Horace as well as Owen did, but for Brooke ‘The Soldier’ death in battle was both sweet and fitting. Of course Brooke’s continuing popularity reflected in large measure the desire of wives and mothers, of parents and children, to find solace in their mourning. They needed the reassurance that their loss was not vain. But it makes another point — that the First World War was capable of many interpretations, and that until at least the late 1920s those different meanings co-existed with each other. Every adult across Europe, and many in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Australasia, had his or her own sense of the war’s significance. The conviction that the war was both wasteful and futile was neither general nor even dominant.

When the great powers of Europe embarked on war in 1914 popular conceptions of combat were shaped more by the past than by prognostications of the future. The literature of warning, both popular and professional, was abundant. But hope prevailed over realism, and in truth the circumstances of the outbreak created little choice: for every nation the war seemed to be one of national self-defence, and the obligations on its citizens were therefore irrefutable. By December 1916 the nature of the war, its costs and casualties, and their threat of social upheaval, were self-evident. But even then none of the belligerents seized the opportunity of negotiation which the United States held out. The differences in values and ideologies look less stark than they seemed then only because we have been hardened by the later clashes between Fascism and Bolshevism, and between both of them and western liberalism. The very fact of the United States’s entry into the war in April 1917 makes the point. Woodrow Wilson had been ‘too proud to fight’. He was deeply opposed to the use of war for the furtherance of policy, and the evidence of the battles of Verdun and the Somme in 1916 should have consolidated that belief. So when he took the United States into the war he laboured under few illusions as to the horrors which men like Wilfred Owen had experienced at first hand. But he concluded that the United States had to wage war if it was to shape the future of international relations. It may have been a vision which the Senate rejected in the war’s immediate aftermath, but it still inspires American foreign policy.

This is of course the biggest paradox in our understanding of the war. On the one hand it was an unnecessary war fought in a manner that defied common sense, but on the other it was the war that shaped the world in which we still live. When the First World War began, historians, especially in Imperial Germany, identified a ‘long’ nineteenth century, starting with the French Revolution in 1789 and ending in 1914. For their successors that was when the ‘short’ twentieth century began, and it ended with the conclusion of the Cold War in 1990. The subsequent conflicts in the Balkans brought home to many the role played by the multinational Habsburg empire in keeping the lid on ethnic and cultural difference before 1914. Between 1917 and 1990 the Soviet Union’s ideological confrontation with the west performed a not dissimilar function. But the Soviet Union was itself an heir of the First World War, the product of the Russian revolution. Its authoritarianism established a form of international order, especially in eastern Europe after 1945. The sort of localised war which had

triggered world war in 1914 was suppressed precisely because of that precedent: the fear of a big war now contained and defused the dangers inherent in a small one. However, for eastern Europe there was another lesson from the First World War, and it was a very different one from that with which it is commonly associated in the west today. War was not futile. For the revolutionaries, as for the subject nationalities of the Habsburg empire, the war had delivered.

In the Middle East, the reverse applied. The war satisfied nobody. The British and French were given temporary control of large chunks of the former Ottoman empire, thus frustrating the ambitions of Arab independence. Moreover, contradictory promises were made in the process; in particular Arthur Balfour, the former British prime minister, declared that the Jews would find a homeland in Palestine. The roots of today's Middle Eastern conflict lie here.

The First World War solved some problems and created others; in doing so it was little different from any other war. The other major English-language work published on the eightieth anniversary of the armistice, John Keegan's *The First World War*, concluded that 'principle . . . scarcely merited the price eventually paid for its protection'. This is the pay-off for his opening assertion: 'The First World War was an unnecessary and tragic conflict'. Liberals with a small 'l' say that of many wars, and with good reason. But is it really more true of the First World War than of any other war? And what do principles represent, if in the last resort they are not worth fighting for? We may wonder why the belligerents of 1914 were ready to endure so much, but we do so from the perspective of a new century and possessed of values that have themselves been shaped by the experience both of the First World War and of later wars. It behoves us to think as they did then, not as we do now.

TO ARMS



AUSTRIA-HUNGARY: AN EMPIRE UNDER THREAT

The weekend of 12 — 14 June 1914 was a busy one at Konopischt, the hunting lodge and favourite home of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Here he could indulge his passion for field sports, and here he and his wife, Sophie, could escape the stultifying conventions of the Habsburg court in Vienna. Although he was heir apparent to his aged uncle, Franz Josef, the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, his wife was treated according to the rank with which she had been born, that of an impoverished Czech aristocrat. On their marriage, Franz Ferdinand had been compelled to renounce royal privileges both for her and for their children. At court dinners she sat at the foot of the table, below all the archduchesses, however young; at a ball in 1909, an Austrian newspaper reported, ‘the members of the Imperial House appeared in the Ballroom, each Imperial prince with a lady on his arm according to rank, whereas the wife of the Heir to the Throne was obliged to enter the room last, alone and without escort’.¹

Franz Ferdinand and Sophie were expecting two sets of guests, and got on well with both of them. The first, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, treated Sophie with a warmth that provided a refreshing contrast with Habsburg flummery. He had been under thirty when he ascended the throne in 1888, and his youth and vigour had inspired the hopes of a nation which saw itself as possessed of the same qualities. Germany was younger even than its ruler, having united under Prussia’s leadership in 1871. By 1914, however, the paradoxes of Wilhelm’s character, at once both conservative and radical, seemed to be manifestations of inconsistency rather than innovation. Born with a withered arm and blighted by an uncertain relationship with his English mother, a daughter of Queen Victoria, the Kaiser was a man of strong whims but minimal staying power. Ostensibly, he had come to admire Konopischt’s garden; in reality, he and Franz Ferdinand discussed the situation in the Balkans.

This, the most backward corner of Europe, was where the First World War would begin. The problems it generated, which preoccupied Wilhelm and Franz Ferdinand, were not Germany's; they were Austria-Hungary's. Vienna, not Berlin, was to initiate the crisis that led to war. It did so with full deliberation, but the war it had in mind was a war in the Balkans, not a war for the world.

By 1914 Austria-Hungary had lost faith in the international order established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, whose robustness had prevented major war on the continent for a century. For twenty years, between 1792 and 1815, Europe had been racked by wars waged at France's behest; they had challenged the old order, and they had promoted or even provoked nationalism and liberalism. For the Habsburg Empire, whose lands stretched from Austria south into Italy, and east into Hungary and Poland, and which claimed suzerainty over the states and principalities of Germany to the north, national self-determination threatened disintegration. In 1815 it therefore sponsored a settlement whose principles were conservative - which used the restoration of frontiers to curb France and elevated the resulting international order to suppress nationalism and liberalism. Rather than run the risk of major war again, the great powers agreed to meet regularly thereafter. Although formal congresses rapidly became more intermittent, the spirit of the so-called Concert of Europe continued even when it transpired that the forces of nationalism and liberalism could be moderated but not deflected. After the revolutions that broke out in much of Europe in 1848, war occurred more often. Conservatives realised that liberals did not have a monopoly on nationalism, although for the multinational Austrian Empire the effect of nationalism remained divisive. In 1859 it lost its lands in Lombardy to the unification of Italy. Seven years later, it forfeited control of Germany to Prussia after the defeat at Königgrätz, and in the aftermath it struck a deal with Hungary which acknowledged the latter's autonomy, recognising that the Emperor of Austria was also the King of Hungary. But, despite these challenges, the ideals of the Concert of Europe persisted. Wars remained short and contained. Even when Prussia invaded France in 1870 and emerged as the leader of a federal German state, the other powers did not intervene.

However, the writ of the 1815 system did not embrace Europe's south-eastern corner. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the entire Balkan peninsula, as far west as modern Albania and Bosnia and as far north as Romania, was part of the Ottoman Empire. From its capital Constantinople, the Turks ruled the modern Middle East, with further territory in North Africa, Arabia, and the Caucasus. As a result, many of the Balkan population were Muslim and therefore outside the purview of what the Tsar of Russia, in particular, had seen as a Christian alliance. Indeed, Russia itself had invaded the Balkans, and on the third occasion, in 1878, the representatives of the great powers convened in Berlin and recognised three independent Balkan states, Serbia, Montenegro and Romania, and expanded the frontiers of two more, Bulgaria and Greece. The Concert of Europe had put its seal on the decline of Ottoman power in the Balkans, but it had left a situation in which the international order in the region depended on the forbearance and cooperation of two of its number, Russia and Austria-Hungary.



The crowned heads of Europe assembled in 1910 for the funeral of Edward VII of Britain. His son and successor, George V, seated in the centre, exposes his back to the Kaiser, whom Albert, King of the Belgians, is eyeing up from the right. 'Foxy' Ferdinand of Bulgaria, standing second left, remains a deadpan.

For Austria-Hungary the situation in the Balkans was as much a matter of domestic politics as of foreign policy. The empire consisted of eleven different nationalities, and many of them had ethnic links to independent states that lay beyond its frontiers. Austria itself was largely German, but there were Italians in Tyrol, Slovenes in Styria, Czechs in Bohemia and Moravia, and Poles and Ruthenes in Galicia. In the Hungarian half of the so-called Dual Monarchy, the Magyars were politically dominant but numerically in a minority, hemmed in by Slovaks to the north, Romanians to the east, and Croats to the south. In 1908 the foreign minister, Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal, had annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, still formally part of the Ottoman Empire, at the top end of the Balkan peninsula. He had hoped to do so without disrupting Austro-Russian cooperation in the area, but he had ended up compounding Austria-Hungary's problems in two ways. First, Russia had disowned the deal. Thereafter, the interests of the two powers in the region competed rather than converged, and this was

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