Opening Extract from...

A Short History of the First World War

Written by Gary Sheffield

Published by Oneworld Publications

A Short History of the First World War

Gary Sheffield

ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Paperback Original

Published by Oneworld Publications 2014

A CIP record for this title is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78074-364-6
eISBN 978-1-78074-512-1

Typeset by Siliconchips Services Ltd, UK
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd.
Croydon, CR0 4YY

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

Dedicated to the memory of my father-in-law, Clifford John ('Cliff') Davis (1924–2013), who served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War.

Contents

List of Illustrations and Maps

All illustrations are courtesy of the Spencer Jones collection.

All maps courtesy of Barbara Taylor.

Preface

The First World War was an event, or rather a series of events, of such importance that it can be a struggle to find words that adequately express its significance. It destroyed the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires. It led to the establishment of a Marxist-Leninist state, the Soviet Union, and sowed the seeds of fascism in Italy and Germany. The British and French colonial empires were simultaneously driven to the zenith of their power, in the process creating the conditions that would, within a couple of generations, lead to their collapse. It killed millions and brought the world, albeit not directly, to an even greater conflagration.

The war also freed nationalities previously confined within larger states to establish independent countries: Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Ireland. It facilitated the rise of the United States of America to global power and so made capitalist democracy an ideological force to contend with Soviet Marxist-Leninism, setting the scene for the Cold War. Britain, as a direct result of the war, became more thoroughgoingly democratic. The use of war to achieve political goals was discredited in the democracies, while being regarded as legitimate and even desirable by fascists and communists. Cultural life – literature, theatre, film, art, music – was irrevocably marked. After the guns of August opened fire, nothing was ever quite the same.

Harry Patch, the last surviving British soldier of the First World War, died in July 2009. His death, noted a distinguished historian, 'consigns Britain's part in the First World War into history'.[1] Technically, this is correct, but in reality, the scars are still too raw, passions still too high, for 1914–18 simply to slip away into history. One hundred years on, the meaning of the war, or whether the war

had any meaning at all, is still bitterly contested. In the year of the centenary of the outbreak of the war, history wars were waged on page and screen. Scholarly controversies previously confined to seminars and learned journals became, to the bemusement of some academics, front page news.[2] The First World War still feels more like current affairs in much of the English-speaking world and in some parts of Europe.

Politicians, actors and pop stars felt compelled to share their views on the conflict. In May 2013, a letter from a group of actors, musicians, poets and politicians was published in the *Guardian*, a liberal-left British newspaper. It attacked the UK government's remembrance programme, declaring 'Far from being a "War to end all wars" or a "Victory for democracy" this was a military disaster and a human catastrophe'.[3] This promptly became known in some circles as the 'Luvvies' Letter'. Paul Lay, the editor of *History Today*, responded by tweeting 'Tell you what, instead of asking historians about remembering the war, let's ask the luvvies'. He followed it up with another tweet: 'Next: Jude Law, Kate Hudson & Brian Eno present paper on treating acute lymphoblastic leukaemia'.[4] Lay's point was exaggerated but typically astute. Historical research and analysis are highly specialised activities. More than most historical events, the First World War prompts people to go public with views based on emotion, limited knowledge and flawed understanding.

Anticipating the interest that the centenary was likely to cause (although not, I confess, either its scale or the venom with which some respond to their preconceptions being challenged), being asked to write an introductory book on the First World War appealed. Faced with the task of writing a short book on a huge subject, I decided to concentrate on three main themes. First, I consider the once-again contentious origins of the conflict. Then follows the largest section, devoted to the military history of the war: I make no apology for putting it centre-stage. Third, I consider the war as a 'total' conflict. Finally there is a brief coda that attempts to trace the influence of the First World War on the post-war world. I am well aware that this approach means some important topics

are covered either very briefly or not at all. In the end, I had to be ruthless in my selection of topics and material. Nevertheless my hope is that, by integrating narrative with analysis and drawing upon up-to-date research, this book will give the reader a working understanding of not only what happened in 1914–18 but how and why.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Dr Michael LoCicero for providing initial drafts of some sections. It has been a pleasure working with Fiona Slater, my editor at Oneworld. Barbara Taylor drew the excellent maps. My new colleagues at the University of Wolverhampton have provided a wonderfully supportive working environment, and in particular I would like to thank Professor Stephen Badsey for sharing his expertise and Dr Spencer Jones for commenting on a draft of the text. Any mistakes that remain are, of course, my responsibility. The Sheffield and Davis families, as ever, provide a bedrock of love and support. My wife, Viv, has been as supportive as ever, uncomplainingly putting up with me writing yet another book. I thank her for that and so much more. This book is dedicated to the memory of her Dad.

Gary Sheffield
22 April 2014
Twitter: @ProfGSheffield
Website: http://www.garysheffield-historian.com

1
The Coming of War

Was anyone guilty?

Writing in his war memoirs in the 1930s, David Lloyd George asked 'How was it that the world was so unexpectedly plunged into this terrible conflict?' The man who had been Britain's Prime Minister in the second half of the First World War answered his own question: it had been a tragic accident. 'Nobody wanted war' but 'nations backed their machines over the precipice'.[1] Lloyd George reflected the view common at that time, eloquently expressed in 1929 by the American historian Sydney B. Fay: 'No one country and no one man was solely or probably even mainly, to blame'. Fay went on to condemn the so-called 'War Guilt clause' of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which stated that 'the aggression of Germany and her allies' was responsible for the war.[2]

These verdicts on the origins of the war represented far more than a semi-retired statesman sounding off in his memoirs or an academic pontificating from his ivory tower. They struck at the meaning of a conflict that had caused the death of millions. If the war was accidental, did that mean it was also preventable and, by extension, that those millions had died for nothing? The result of an appallingly destructive war was a post–1918 world that was less than ideal. This fed into a sense of futility, that the war had not been worth fighting. In 2012, a very influential book on the origins of the war was published by a respected academic that came to essentially the same conclusion as Lloyd George and Fay. In *The Sleepwalkers,* Christopher Clark argued:

> The outbreak of war in 1914 is not an Agatha Christie drama at the end of which we will discover the culprit standing over a corpse in the conservatory with a smoking pistol. There is no smoking gun in this story; or, rather, there is one in the hands of every major character. Viewed in this light, the outbreak of war was a tragedy, not a crime.

Avoiding the allotting of war guilt is in vogue. In a newspaper polemic, another academic, Richard J. Evans, agreed with Clark that 'it's time to get away from the blame game' and went on to depict the war as futile: 'the end of the war in 1918 was a victory for no one… The [British] men who enlisted may have thought that they were fighting… a war to defend freedom: they were wrong'. Margaret MacMillan devoted over 600 pages of a book to discussing the origins of the war without coming to a firm view on who was to blame for causing it.[3] One review of *The Sleepwalkers* asserted that Clark's arguments 'effectively consign the old historical consensus to the bin'.[4] They do nothing of the sort: Clark's book is neither more nor less than a contribution – albeit one that has attracted much attention in lay circles – to a major historical debate. That debate goes on.

All historical writings must be judged in the context of the period in which they were produced. By the late 1920s, a reaction to the war had set in. The Treaty of Versailles was discredited in some quarters, reviled by British and American liberals as too harsh (an argument that of course appealed to Germany) and ruthlessly savaged by the economist John Maynard Keynes in his influential polemic of 1919, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace.* Lloyd George's war memoirs, no less than the writings of the war poet and former infantry officer Siegfried Sassoon, belong to the category of 'literature of disillusionment'. Fay was writing against a background of a general questioning of the wisdom of the USA's belated entry into the war. Similarly, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, as a decade-and-a-half of war in Iraq and

Afghanistan comes to an end, there is widespread disillusion with the use of armed force as an instrument of policy. But we should try to see the First World War as contemporaries viewed it and seek to avoid excessive use of hindsight and the imposing of twenty-first century values on individuals who lived one hundred years ago.

Reviewing *The Sleepwalkers* and another book that argues that the decision-makers of 1914 made errors of 'omission, not commission', the historian Holger Herwig pointed out that this line of argument 'dangerously leads us back' to Lloyd George's idea of the Great Powers somehow stumbling into war.[5] To take the 'stumbling' view is to ignore fifty years of research. Herwig is right. The evidence is compelling that Germany and Austria-Hungary bear the primary responsibility for beginning the war.

The rise of German power

The origins of the war stretch back at least to 1871. In that year, in the course of a comprehensive defeat of Napoleon III's France, which up to that point had been the continent's dominant military power, the German states (except Austria) were united into one state under Prussian leadership. The King of Prussia became Wilhelm I, Kaiser (Emperor) of Germany. Such a seismic shift in the balance of power often results in conflict or, at the very least, international instability; 1871 was an exception. Under the guidance of the 'Iron Chancellor', Otto von Bismarck, a new international equilibrium was created. Rather than seeing the unification of Germany as the platform for aggression, Germany became a status quo power. Although France was never reconciled to the loss of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine as a result of 1871, Bismarck was adept at keeping France diplomatically isolated. Furthermore, Britain did not regard the emergence of the German Empire as a threat to its security and Berlin came to understandings with Austria-Hungary and Russia.

Figure 1 Wilhelm II, German Kaiser and King of Prussia (reigned 1888–1918).

Things changed with the accession of Kaiser Wilhelm II to the throne in 1888. A grandson of Queen Victoria, and so half English, Wilhelm was a destabilising influence in international affairs. He was possibly mentally unbalanced (on meeting him in 1891 the then British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, wondered whether the Kaiser was 'all there'), loved dressing up in fancy uniforms and had a mercurial personality. Wilhelm wanted to rule as well as reign. Dismissing Bismarck in 1890, Wilhelm rapidly proved, as the loosest of cannons, that he was not up to the job. His maladroit interventions on the international scene worsened a situation created

by the new direction in German foreign policy that began in the 1890s. *Weltpolitik* (world policy) was a drive to gain colonies and expand German power and economic influence. In the process, Bismarck's carefully constructed system of alliances was sacrificed. The Reinsurance Treaty between Germany and Russia, a cornerstone of Bismarck's policy, was allowed to lapse by Wilhelm. Worse, in 1892, France and Russia became allies. Initially, this was, from the point of view of the two powers, simply a prudent counterpart to the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. However, as international tensions intensified in the early years of the twentieth century, the Dual Alliance took on additional significance, especially because Britain emerged as a potential partner for France and Russia.

The security of Britain and its vast maritime empire was ultimately dependent on supremacy at sea. Traditionally, the British army had been relatively small and weak, the Royal Navy strong and powerful. Sensitivity about rival naval powers meant that the Low Countries of the Netherlands and Belgium were of particular strategic interest to the British and it was a long-standing policy aim that this area should not fall under the control of a hostile power. This was related to another tenet of British foreign policy, to oppose powers that attempted to achieve hegemony in Europe. Pursing this objective had seen Britain fight against the France of Louis XIV and Napoleon. In the second half of the nineteenth century, in the absence of such a threat, Britain could afford the luxury of 'splendid isolation', holding aloof from continental entanglements. The Empire, not Europe, was where potential threats lay and the most obvious likely enemies were France – the traditional foe – and Russia. France and Britain had almost come to blows in 1898, when rival imperial aspirations in Africa culminated in the Fashoda incident, a clash over a disputed area of Sudan. Russia and Britain were long-time rivals in the area of Afghanistan and Persia and fears of a Russian invasion of the Indian Raj never quite disappeared. Germany, on the other hand, before about 1900, was generally seen as a friendly state.

However, in 1898 Germany passed the first of its Naval Laws, which aimed to build up a powerful fleet, signalling the beginning of a naval arms race. The architect of the High Seas Fleet, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, playing on Wilhelm's jealousy of his mother's land, told the Kaiser that the plan was to mount such a challenge to the Royal Navy that Britain would 'concede to Your Majesty such a measure of naval mastery and enable Your Majesty to carry out a great overseas policy'.[6] The policy was disastrous. It poisoned relations with London, which accepted the challenge. In 1914, the Royal Navy was well ahead of its German rival in numbers of capital ships. Although there were other milestones along the path of the growth of enmity and suspicion between Britain and Germany, such as the Kaiser's noisy support for the Boers during the Second South African (or Boer) War (1899–1902), the avowed German challenge to British naval security was the most important single factor.

A high-profile mark of the diplomatic revolution that occurred in the first years of the new century came with the signing of the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France in 1904. This was a long way short of a military alliance and was not primarily aimed at Germany. The agreement was a largely successful attempt to settle long-standing problems, particularly colonial rivalries, but it was also highly significant in bringing together two states that as, the decade wore on, became increasingly fearful of German ambition and aggression. In 1905 and again in 1911, Germany sought to flex its muscles over Morocco, which France regarded as being in its sphere of influence. From a detached perspective, Germany's attempt to gain compensation from the expansion of French influence might seem to be on the same moral plain as French imperialism, if (inevitably) handled in a clumsy fashion by the Kaiser. But at the time, the two Moroccan crises were perceived as signs of Berlin's dangerous brinkmanship. And so, with Germany posturing against French imperialism and challenging British naval supremacy, France and Britain edged closer. Secret high-level negotiations

were initiated between the French and British military. The resulting plans provided for a British army to be deployed to France on the left of the French army in the event of war in the west with Germany, and for the French navy to concentrate in the Mediterranean, leaving the defence of France's northern coastline to the Royal Navy. These agreements were achieved in the absence of a formal, binding alliance, which caused the French deep anxiety in early August 1914, when it briefly appeared that Britain would stay out of the war.

In August 1907, Britain came to an agreement with another colonial rival, France's ally, Russia. This helped ease tensions over the competition for influence in Persia and Central Asia, which suited Russia, as it allowed the Czarist government to concentrate its energies on recovering from the twin disasters of defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1904–05 and the abortive 1905 revolution. As the Liberal Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, commented in 1906, an agreement with Russia would 'complete and strengthen the Entente with France and add very much to the comfort and strength of our position'.[7] As with the Entente Cordiale, the new accommodation with Russia fell well short of an alliance. Nonetheless, the Triple Entente of France, Russia and Britain increasingly began to look like a power bloc. Superficial appearances, however, were misleading. Britain would only support France under certain circumstances. Furthermore, the British commitment was merely moral – there was no treaty obligation.[8] Grey favoured a consensual approach to resolving international disputes, along the lines of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, whereby the representatives of the Great Powers would meet to defuse crises. For example, after the 1912 Balkan War, Grey helped broker a peace settlement at a conference in London during which he by no means always favoured his Entente partners, siding with Austria over some key issues.[9] The fact that Britain was to enter the war in August 1914, and thus turn the Entente into a genuine power bloc, owed much to the maladroit German strategy of invading Belgium.