

THE **HISTORY** ESSAY



New recruits on the march in 1914. The notion that such men fought and died 'for nothing' is a fallacy, says Max Hastings

1914: WHY BRITAIN HAD TO GO TO WAR

The First World War is often damned as a bloody exercise in futility, but it was an essential fight for freedom, despite the heavy price of victory

By Sir Max Hastings

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Every great historical event becomes shrouded in myths and legends, and few more so than those of the summer of 1914, whose sunlit brilliance mocked mankind by providing the setting for the onset of the first of the 20th-century's human calamities – what was then called the Great War.

The year 2014 will mark the centenary of that conflict, and already a controversy about how it should be commemorated has erupted in Britain. I have a special interest, because I have spent the past three years writing a book about how the war came about and what took place on the battlefields.

There is a widespread delusion that the two world wars belong to different moral orders, that the conflict of 1939–45 was entirely worth fighting – a 'good' war – whereas that of 1914–18 was a 'bad' one. The British people have always held to the belief that until 1941 we defied the vast evil of Nazism alone, then defeated Hitler (albeit with some reluctant Russian and American help). The second struggle was nothing like as bloody as its predecessor, so people fool themselves, because we had better generals who would not make futile sacrifices of our soldiers. The nation looks upon 1939–45 as its finest hour.

But our ideas about the First World War are much more confused. Few Britons have much idea why Europe took to arms, though they may know that a Ruritanian bigwig with an extravagant moustache got shot. The most widely held belief is that the war was simply a ghastly mistake – an exercise in futility for which all of the powers involved shared blame, its folly compounded by the murderous incompetence of the generals.

This is the 'poets' view', first articulated by the likes of Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen. Amid the mud and blood, they felt that no discernible cause was worth the ghastly slaughter that was taking place – that it would be better to end it on any terms rather than continue to pursue a meaningless victory.

Today, many British people – and, arguably, our government – feel almost embarrassed that we finished up on the winning side. There is a real prospect that the country and its leaders will treat next year's centenary as an occasion for parading mere regret, even apology. Yet we have the chance to offer a very different message: that, though the war was indeed a vast tragedy, there was a cause at stake that had to be defended – that Britain could not credibly have remained neutral while Germany secured hegemony over the continent.

In 1914 Germany's Kaiserreich was a highly militarised autocracy whose victory would have been a disaster for freedom and democracy. Civilisation has as much reason for gratitude that the allies prevailed in 1918 as in 1945, even if victory in the first clash proved shockingly impermanent because only a generation later Germany, under Hitler, had to be fought again.

Consider a precis of what happened in 1914. On 28 June Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was shot dead by a young Bosnian Serb terrorist in Sarajevo. The men in charge of Austria felt no special sorrow for Franz Ferdinand, whom they disliked, but they saw in the outrage a pretext for settling accounts with Serbia, a chronically troublesome neighbour who incited Austrian minorities to revolt. Serbian army officers had provided the weapons and perhaps also the impetus for the assassination plot.

One aspect of 1914 that to our generation seems bizarre – indeed, incomprehensible – is that European governments then regarded conflict not as a supreme horror, but as an acceptable instrument for pursuing policy objectives. Many interpretations of events are possible, but one that is untenable is that war happened accidentally. Every European government believed that it acted rationally.

In the first days of July, Austria decided to invade and then dissolve Serbia. Russia regarded this little Slavic nation as under its protection, so Vienna dispatched an envoy to Berlin to ensure the kaiser's backing should the Russians interfere. On 5 July, Wilhelm and his chancellor gave the Austrians what historians call 'the blank cheque' – an unqualified promise of German support.

This was incredibly reckless. Some modern historians offer elaborate arguments to shift blame, but it is impossible to escape the simple fact that the German government endorsed Austria's decision to unleash a Balkan war, and did so before the allies – the Triple Entente of France, Britain and Russia – had lifted a finger.

Some scholars, including several German ones, are convinced that the kaiser's regime always intended to precipitate a general European war. I would not go as far as that. I think that the Germans would have been content with a local war – for Austria to crush Serbia without anybody else getting involved – but they were willing to accept the huge risk that a general European conflagration would follow. Why?

Germany was profoundly unstable. It was ruled not quite as an absolute monarchy, but as an autocracy in which a partially unhinged emperor loved to posture as a warrior. Wilhelm II's generals planned from the premise that war had served their country well, with three great victories in the previous half-century – against Denmark, Austria and France. They also recognised that democracy threatened their control of their own country. There was now a socialist majority in the German parliament that was

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Kaiser Wilhelm II in c1900. After signing Germany's mobilisation order, "with his unflinching instinct for the wrong gesture", he requested that champagne be delivered to his suite

vehemently hostile to militarism and promised to soon end the kaiser's dysfunctional personal rule.

Conservative leaders believed that a triumph abroad could check the socialist tide. They also made a critical mistake, typical of their age: they underrated the dominance that their country was achieving over Europe through industrial prowess, without firing a shot. Germany was powering ahead of Britain, France and Russia by every economic indicator, but the kaiser and his generals measured power by counting soldiers and were fixated by Russia's growing military strength. Their calculations showed that, as early as 1916, the Russians would achieve a decisive strategic advantage.

It was this prospect that caused Moltke, Germany's army chief of staff, to growl at a secret strategy meeting in December 1912, chaired by the kaiser: "War, and the sooner the better." In 1914, the Germans were confident that they could achieve victory over Russia and its ally, France. They discounted Britain, third party in the so-called Entente, because its army was tiny and, as Wilhelm cleverly observed of its navy, "dreadnoughts have no wheels".

When in July 1914 Russia made it plain that they would not stand by and watch while the Austrians crushed Serbia, Germany did three things that provide further circumstantial evidence of its irresponsibility, if nothing worse. First, it began jamming wireless communications between St Petersburg and Paris. It also persistently lied to every European government, denying prior knowledge of the contents of Austria's ultimatum, and claiming that its ally had

no designs for territorial gains at the expense of a defeated Serbia. Finally, Germany rejected out of hand a British proposal to address the Balkan crisis through a four-power conference, because they recognised that this would be almost bound to condemn Austria-Hungary. None of these actions suggests a nation aiming for a peaceful diplomatic outcome.

The Austrians declared war on Serbia on 28 July, and started bombarding Belgrade. The Russians mobilised three days later. Apologists for Germany point out that the tsar's armies thus moved a few hours before the kaiser's did. But the Russian government saw no choice: the vast distances of their country meant that it must take longer for their forces to concentrate and they were terrified the Germans would literally steal a march on them.

The mood of triumphalism that now overtook Berlin's corridors of power scarcely indicated the behaviour of a responsible German government, eager to preserve European peace. After Kaiser Wilhelm signed Germany's mobilisation order at 5pm on 1 August, with his unflinching instinct for the wrong gesture he ordered champagne to be served

to his suite. A Bavarian general was visiting the Berlin war ministry when news of Russian mobilisation came through, and wrote in his diary: "Everywhere beaming faces, people shaking hands in the corridors, congratulating one another on having cleared the ditch."

Russia had acted in accordance with the freely avowed hopes of Germany's military leadership; they now simply expressed fears that France, Russia's ally in the Entente, might decline to follow suit, fail to 'enter the trap'. Wilhelm despised the French as "a feminine race, not manly like the Anglo-Saxons or Teutons," and this undoubtedly influenced his lack of apprehension about fighting them.

The French knew that the German war plan required a swift and crushing defeat of their own army before turning on Russia. Sure enough, Berlin sent a message to Paris, saying that unless France surrendered its frontier fortresses as a guarantee, its neutrality would not be accepted. Instead – and inevitably – France mobilised.

As for Britain, even at this late hour a clear majority of its government as well as its people still opposed involvement in a European war. They had no sympathy for either Serbia or Russia. Many felt a real fellow feeling towards Germany. Old Lady Londesborough, the first Duke of Wellington's great-niece, told Osbert Sitwell: "It's not the Germans but the French I'm frightened of."

But then, suddenly, everything changed. Berlin made a huge blunder. The Schlieffen plan demanded an assault on France through Belgium, of whose neutrality Britain was a guarantor. Berlin formally notified London of its intention to invade Belgium. It was this decision that caused the British government to send an ultimatum to Germany, committing the country to war unless the invaders drew back – as of course they did not.

“During the invasion of Belgium and France, the German army committed massacres of 6,000 innocent civilians, mandated at the highest level in Berlin”

It is sometimes said that Belgian neutrality was a mere pretext rather than the real reason for Britain joining the war. I disagree. Although Herbert Asquith, the prime minister, Winston Churchill, the first lord of the Admiralty, and Edward Grey, the foreign secretary, wanted to fight in support of France to preserve the European balance of power, much of their Liberal party was firmly opposed – until the Germans invaded Belgium. On 4 August, Britain became the last major European power to enter the struggle.

What followed was so appalling that some people profess to believe that Germany’s 1914 triumph on the battlefield would have been a lesser evil. Yet the Kaiserreich’s record abroad was barbarous even by contemporary standards. It mandated in advance, and applauded after the event, the 1904–07 genocide of the Herero and Namaqua peoples of German South-West Africa, a far greater enormity than any British colonial misdeed, and responsible for at least 100,000 deaths. The kaiser decorated the senior officers who carried it out.

During the 1914 invasion of Belgium and France, the German army committed systematic massacres of 6,000 innocent civilians, most executed as hostages in reprisal for guerrilla activity, which was a figment of German imagination. The killings were mandated at the highest level in Berlin.

Germany’s 1914–18 conduct cannot be directly compared with later Nazi behaviour, because there was no genocidal intent. But it

conveys a disturbing image of the character of the regime that aspired to rule Europe. A few historians today argue that Britain could have remained neutral. I cannot agree. The dominating instincts of Germany’s leadership would hardly have been moderated by the conquest of the continent that would almost certainly have resulted from British neutrality. The kaiser’s regime did not enter the war with a grand plan for world domination, but its leaders swiftly identified massive rewards they wanted, as the price for halting their armies.

On 9 September 1914, when Berlin saw victory within its grasp, Germany’s chancellor drafted a shopping list. France was to cede to Germany its iron ore deposits; the frontier region of Belfort; a coastal strip from Dunkirk to Boulogne; and the western slope of the Vosges mountains. Her strategic fortresses would be demolished. Just as after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, cash reparations would be exacted sufficient to ensure that, in the words of Germany’s chancellor, “France is incapable of spending considerable sums on armaments for the next 18 to 20 years”.

Elsewhere Luxembourg would be annexed; Belgium and Holland transformed into vassal states; Russia’s borders drastically shrunk; a vast colonial empire created in central Africa; and a German economic union extending from Scandinavia to Turkey.

Sir Michael Howard points out that Germany’s war aims in the First World War fell not far short of its objectives in the



German troops advancing. Their invasion of Belgium gave Britain no choice but to enter the struggle, argues Max Hastings

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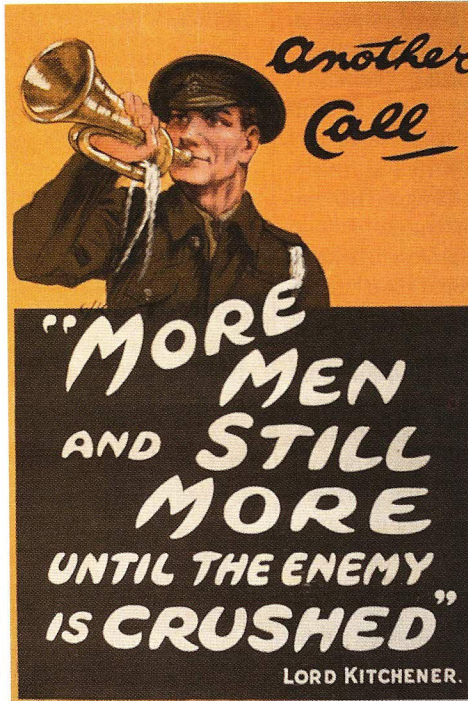
“Our government and the media should break free from the weary, sterile ‘futility’ clichés, and acknowledge that Britain played a necessary and honourable part in the First World War”

Second. Had it vanquished its only important continental rivals in 1914, it is wildly unlikely that Berlin would have offered a friendly accommodation to a neutral Britain, or acquiesced in the global status quo, dominated by British naval and financial power. Could any responsible allied government have granted Germany such a peace as the kaiser, together with his generals and ministers, sought and continued to seek until 1918?

The ‘poets’ view – that the merits of the cause became meaningless amid the horrors of the struggle and brutish incompetence of commanders – has been allowed to distort modern perceptions. Many other British veterans deplored the idea that Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon spoke for their generation. One such revisionist was an old soldier named Henry Mellersh. He wrote in 1978 that he rejected the notion “that the war was one vast, useless, futile tragedy, worthy to be remembered only as a pitiable mistake”. Instead, said Mellersh: “I and my like entered the war expecting an heroic adventure and believing implicitly in the rightness of our cause; we ended greatly disillusioned as to the nature of the adventure, but still believing that our cause was right and we had not fought in vain.”

Mellersh’s view was far more widely held by his contemporaries than the ‘futility’ vision of Owen, Sassoon and their kin, none of whom ever outlined a diplomatic process whereby the nightmare they so vividly depicted might be ended. The majority of combatants recoiled from the miseries of the battlefield. But their sentiments should not be misread to suggest that this meant that they wished to acquiesce in the triumph of their enemies.

George Orwell wrote 30 years later that the only way to end a war quickly is to lose it. Almost every modern military scholar of 1914–18 agrees that it is an illusion to suppose that there was ever an easy path towards winning the struggle, even had a commander of Napoleonic gifts led the allied armies. In any clash between great 20th-century industrialised nations, an enormous amount of dying had to be done to prevail. What was different in 1939–45 was not that Britain and America had better or more humane commanders than in the earlier conflict, but that the Russians accepted almost all the sacrifice necessary to destroy Hitler – 27 million dead – and killed 92 per cent of the German army’s total war dead. In 1914–18, by contrast, though the



A 1914 poster exhorts Britons to enlist in the army. Some 800,000 British servicemen died in the following four years

Russians and Serbs suffered enormous loss of lives, the peoples of Britain and France also paid a terrible forfeit, double that of 1939–45 for us, up to treble for the French.

The historian Kenneth Morgan, neither a conservative nor a revisionist, delivered a powerful 1996 lecture about the cultural legacy of the two great conflicts, in which he argued that “the history of the First World War was hijacked in the 1920s by the critics”. These were led by the economist John Maynard Keynes, an impassioned German sympathiser. He castigated the supposed injustice and folly of the 1919 Versailles Treaty, without devoting a moment to speculating about what sort of peace Europe would have had if a victorious Germany had been making it.

No sane person could suggest that next year – the centenary of the outbreak of war – should become an occasion for celebration. But our government and the media should break free from the weary, sterile ‘futility’ clichés, and acknowledge that Britain played a necessary and honourable part in the First World War.

We should feel no embarrassment about the sensitivities of our foremost modern EU partner in acknowledging that the kaiser’s Germany represented a malign force, whose triumph had to be frustrated. More than 800,000 British servicemen who perished between 1914 and 1918 did not die ‘for nothing’. Their sacrifice represented the first of two dreadful blood-payments made by the democracies in the 20th century to secure Europe from German domination. **H**

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Sir Max Hastings is a former editor of *The Daily Telegraph* and *Evening Standard*. His latest book, *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War 1914*, was recently published by HarperCollins

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