

**„World War I: Why did European Diplomacy Fail  
– Could it Happen Today?“**

To answer those two questions right away:

- European diplomacy failed because foreign ministers and diplomats embraced a logic of war.
- Yes it could happen today, but not in Europe; maybe in other parts of the world.

So let's first answer the question of what war meant for European diplomacy in 1914.

**I. What did war mean for European diplomacy?**

1. War was seen as a **prolongation of politics by other means**. International relations were dominated by a logic of war; war was seen as part of history, considered as inevitable; the soldier and diplomats acted together in shaping international relations. Open questions were decided by negotiations or through war. In 1914 foreign ministers and diplomats in the countries concerned relied on war.

The French Revolution was essential as far as the attitude of the people towards war was concerned: before the French Revolution, war was considered as the “game of the kings. One of the major results of the French Revolution was the transfer of sovereignty from the king to the nation, to the peoples. In the same way, any as the army became a people's army; the wars became national wars. In the age of nationalism war became a national endeavor, or as Chris Hedges saw it, “war is the force that gives us meaning”

Not only politicians and the military saw it that way, that was also the attitude expressed by artists and writers, as Geert Buelens wrote in his book “Europas Dichter und der Erste Weltkrieg”. The Italian artistic movement called “the

“futurists” is a typical example. They considered war as the “sole hygienic solution in the world”. The army should educate the nation. It was only logical that the “futurists” considered personal liberty as subordinated the well being of the nation. Similar philosophy was expressed by Ford Madox Hueffer, who was convinced that England must be a world power or parish. His countryman Rudyard Kipling and Siegfried Sassoon expressed the same opinion. Representatives of such nationalistic attitudes in France were Maurice Barrès Charles Maurras and Charles Péguy.

Even the churches did not hesitate to stand up in favor of war. In this sense the catholic Cardinal of Vienna Friedrich Gustav Piffl instructed the Austrian catholic's in a pastoral letter that Austria was entering “a just war in 1914” and in many churches the prayer “our vater was concluded by – protect Austria and punish England.

The concept of honour embraced by elites at the beginning of World War I was rooted in ancient times, still very similar to the honour code of medieval knights, even of ancient heroes. The great Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, subsequently attributed the outbreak of WWI to irrational and pre-capitalist desires for self-glorification and violent self-assertion, prevalent among the aristocracy.

The military code of honour still drew a parallel between a personal insult and international humiliation. Emperor Franz Joseph was a typical example of this attitude. After the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on 28 June, he demanded satisfaction and said: “If we must go under, we better go under decently.” Similar attitudes dominated the thinking in other countries: When the British suffered 60,000 casualties at the battle of Ypres, the acting Commander wrote in his diary: "What a glorious day in the history of our country."

## **2. Great developments were decided by war:**

Three wars were an essential part of German unification:

- the war fought by Prussia and Austria against Denmark in 1864;
- the war fought between Prussia and Austria in 1866 decided by the battle of Königgrätz;
- the war between Prussia and France, in 1870/71, which ended with the proclamation of the German Empire in Paris.

Italian unification was also linked to war:

- the battle of Magentia and Solferino were fought in 1859 by Austria on one side and Italy and France on the other;
- after the battles of Magentia and Lissa in 1866, Austria lost the province of Venetia to Italy.

During the same period, other wars took place:

- the war between the USA and Spain in 1898;
- the Boer war in South Africa with the British;
- the war between Japan and Russia in 1904/05.

In addition, the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire was accompanied by wars:

- the Italian war in Libya in 1911;
- the first Balkan war in 1912;
- the second Balkan war in 1913.

These local wars were rather short and decisive.

### **3. The concept of security and power was based on military strength**

Security was considered in military terms; power was calculated according to the number of soldiers, battleships and the size of the territory. In some cases this way of thinking was dramatically counter-productive:

- after 1900, the German Reich started a costly naval competition with Britain that could never be won. British naval spending was three times the German figure in 1904, and still more than the double in 1913. Whereas Bismarck presented himself as an “honest broker”, the German Kaiser Wilhelm II talked of “Weltherrschaft”. The build-up of the German Navy could in no way threaten

British sea-dominance, but it had the terrible effect of mobilizing the British establishment against Germany.

- The annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina for Austria-Hungary had a similar negative effect. The driving force behind this action was the Austrian Foreign Minister Count Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal. He thought that Austria could intimidate the Serbian minority within the country and impress Serbia and the other powers by changing the existing status of occupation (since the congress of Berlin) by extending Austrian sovereignty to Bosnia and Herzegovina by force.

The result was devastating for Austria:

This action led to an outburst of national enthusiasm in Serbia; the strengthening of pro-Serbian networks within Bosnia and Herzegovina and most of all to the alienation of great powers.

#### 4. International relations based on the logic of war led to the **formation of military alliances**

In 1879 the “Dual-Alliance” between Austria-Hungary and the German Reich was concluded. Germany was bound to come to Austria’s assistance if Russia attacked her first. In 1882 this alliance was turned in to a “Triple-Alliance” by including Italy.

In 1894 a military alliance between France and Russia was concluded. Why did Russia take this step?:

Britain was Russia’s rival in the Far East and in Central Asia; and there were signs of a rapprochement between Great Britain and Germany. France’s financial institutions heavily supported the construction of a modern infrastructure in Russia; and the French wanted to contain Germany. The Russians, on the other hand, wanted to block Austria-Hungary in the Balkans.

In 1904 the Entente between France and Britain was formed, which was extended in 1907 by including Russia. An Entente is not a military alliance as such, but the basis for closer cooperation.

To what extent did those alliances contribute to the outbreak of WWI?

It is a characteristic of an alliance that a local conflict can turn into a continental war. As the two systems of alliances confronted one another in 1914, the imbalance concerning military strength was clear from the beginning: according to

Paul Kennedy, the war expenditures of the British Empire, France and Russia amounted to 81.8 billion US dollars; this alliance could mobilize 30.7 million forces. On the other hand, Germany and Austria-Hungary raised 58.3 million US dollars for the war effort and could “only” mobilize 22.2 million forces.

5. Every country had its own **reason for why it wanted to go to war and its own group pushing it in that direction**

Austria-Hungary wanted to punish Serbia and re-assert itself as a great power after a victorious war. Chief of Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf had been in favour of preventive wars against Serbia and Italy for years. The German Chief of General Staff Helmuth von Moltke was convinced that Russia would get stronger and stronger in the years to come. For this reason Germany had to start a war as long as it still had a chance to fight on two fronts: The Schlieffen-Plan was developed.

In 1914, the Russian army was double the size of that of Germany, amounting to 1.5 million men, which was more than 300,000 troops larger than the Austrian and German armies together. The Russian figure was to exceed 2 million troops by 1917.

In Russia, the War Minister [Vladimir Sukhomlinov](#) tried to prevent the infiltration of “civilian attitudes” into military decision making. In 1912 he had already expressed the view that “War was inevitable”; and that war would bring Russia “nothing but good”, as Christopher Clark wrote in his excellent book, “[The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914](#)”.

In France, taking revenge for the loss of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871 was a driving force in foreign policy. In 1912, Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré adopted a pro-military attitude; the Chief of the General Staff Joseph Joffre advocated a preemptive strike against Germany through Belgian territory.

And in Italy, the Futurists announced in their famous manifesto in 1909: “We will glorify war - the world’s only hygiene”. And Giovanni Papini, an essayist, writes: “We must love war with all our male hearts.”

In May 1914, Colonel Edward House, the special advisor of the American President, reported to President Wilson: “Militarism run stark mad in Europe”.

There was a cult of military display; a strong belief that war would be the final solution.

Maybe the decision makers in those days were not fully aware of what war really meant; but they were active in preparing it, they embraced a logic of war, they were not "Sleepwalkers."

## **II. Why did European diplomacy fail?**

The outbreak of WWI must be considered as a failure for European diplomacy, as diplomacy is the business of peace. This failure can be attributed to three courses:

- Personal failure of leading players responsible for foreign policy and diplomacy.
- Ideologies mobilized whole nations; pushed diplomacy towards radical goals and made it less flexible. Nations were totally mobilized to wage total war, which could only be won by a total victory. There was no possibility left for compromise
- There were new forces that influenced decision-making in diplomacy like the media and public opinion

### **1. Leading personalities in diplomacy embraced a logic of war**

The mindset was formed by the "world of yesterday", as Stefan Zweig said. Policies were oriented towards confrontation, the disastrous effects of modern warfare were not taken into account.

The German Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, the Russian Czar, all cousins, regarded themselves as "Rulers by the grace of God". They disregarded the suffering of the people. This was certainly one of the reasons why their dynasties were overthrown by the end of the war.

Emperor Franz Joseph was 84 years old and had reigned for 66 years, when he signed the declaration of war on 28 July, 1914, in his summer resort in Bad Ischl. During the July-Crisis, when the bureaucracy in Vienna discussed what steps to take against Serbia, Foreign Minister Count Leopold von Berchtold always had to take a seven hour train ride to Bad Ischl to report to the Emperor, who was not willing to use a telephone. Berchtold's main endeavor in those days was a formulation for the ultimatum the Serbs could not accept.

The German Kaiser Wilhelm II, the grandson of Queen Victoria, was erratic and eccentric. At one time threatening the whole world, another time proclaiming his friendship and peaceful intention towards Britain, but time and again, he was responsible for diplomatic plunder.

In Vienna as in Berlin, since the overthrow of Metternich and the resignation of Bismarck during the decades before WWI, not one single statesman emerged: Wilhelm II and Franz Joseph were surrounded by devoted bureaucrats, to whom they also entrusted the running of the government (according to the excellent description by Anton Mayr-Harting in his book "Der Untergang").

There were diplomats on all sides and on all levels who made their contribution to preparing the war:

- The French Foreign Minister, Theophile Delcassé, hated Germany so much that he did not want to step on German soil when his train once stopped in Berlin on his way to St. Petersburg
- The Russian Foreign Minister and then Ambassador to Paris, Alexander Izvolsky, had similar feelings towards Austria-Hungary
- The Russian envoy in Belgrade, Nikolai Hartwig, used his strong political influence in the Serbian capital to mobilize against Austria
- The British Foreign Minister, Edward Grey, had already informed the German Ambassador in London in 1912, that in the event of war between Germany and the Franco-Russian alliance, Britain was likely to fight on the side of Germany's enemies.

Apparently diplomats on all sides embraced a logic of war.

## 2. The time before WWI was a period, when **ideologies and national feelings influenced foreign policy to quite an extent**

Nationalism, Pan-Slavism and the idea of revenge in France had moved diplomacy from an activity behind closed doors into the public eye.

- The roots of nationalism lay in the French revolution, which proclaimed the rights of the people. In Central Europe, romanticism glorified national history  
In the fight against Napoleonic domination, especially in Germany, feelings of national identity and romanticism arose. Another root for nationalism came from the discovery and development of one's own language  
Nationalistic ideas found a special expression in foreign policy in the way that one's own country was considered as superior and supposed to occupy a powerful place in the concert of nations.
- Pan-Slavism is a special expression for nationalism among Slavic nations. Language, literature, tradition and history should unite Slavic people under Russian leadership, especially in the Balkans.  
These ideas were first oriented against the Ottoman Empire, then again Austria-Hungary, where half of the population was of Slavic origin.  
The book "Russia and Europe" (1869) by [Nikolay Yakovlevich Danilevsky](#) had a great influence on the Czech, Serbian, and Bulgarian intelligentsia.

Austria-Hungary was in a special way affected by Pan-Slavism:

The Slavs within the monarchy were striving for more autonomy and closer links to other Slavic brethren. Serbia wanted to include the Serbs living in Austria in a "Greater Serbia"; and Russia was the political and spiritual power behind those movements.

- When France not only lost the war against Germany in 1871, but also the provinces Alsace and Lorraine, the idea for revenge became a driving force of French foreign policy. After that war France had not only lost the status as a pre-eminent power, but also its prestige and grandeur. Under the motto "Never talk about it, but always think about it", the French wanted to take revenge against Germany and concluded the "Entente cordiale" with Britain and a military alliance with Russia. In doing this, France succeeded in encircling and isolating Germany.

That was one main reason, why WWI was so devastating:



19<sup>th</sup> Century ideologies were the driving force in going to war, where the soldiers were confronted with 20<sup>th</sup> Century weapons.

3. A third phenomenon that influenced diplomacy before WWI were the **press and public opinion**, new factors in decision making

A populist movement in France wanted revenge for the lost war of 1871. Public opinion in other countries contributed to the escalation of the conflict and made compromise almost impossible. Decision makers influenced public opinion and were driven by it, whereas in former times foreign policy was the “*domaine réservé*” of the monarchy. Press wars were already a prelude to real wars and domestic interest determined foreign policy decisions.

Answering the question why European diplomacy failed in 1914, one can see the war-oriented attitude of leading personalities; the new ideologies led to aggressive policies and a powerful public opinion, which rendered diplomatic solutions almost impossible.

### **III. Can it happen again?**

As we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, one basic question must be asked: Can 1914 be repeated? Every day we hear about wars being waged in nations from Central Africa to Central Asia. But this is only part of the picture. Basic thinking on international relations has changed dramatically in a century. While some nations still practice *realpolitik*, for many governments the personal well-being of the citizen is now the foundation of foreign policy. In Europe, we had a revolution in foreign affairs that replaced power politics with welfare thinking; a logic of war with a logic of values; a foreign policy based on the power of the state to serve the citizen.

After the terrible suffering of both world wars, the drive to build a welfare state, pioneered in Europe, is now the basis for legitimacy in international relations. While sovereignty remains important in relations between nations, ensuring the personal welfare of the individual citizen is the primary goal. The venues for this welfare-oriented foreign policy include international conferences, involving new classes of players, stakeholders like NGOs, the media and multinational

companies. This has led to the globalization of the concept of human security and pushed a new social model onto the world stage.

The United Nations best embodies this transformation, with its special mandates in development, trade, the environment and the welfare of children. And since 1949 the Council of Europe has worked to help build a new international order: for the first time in history, citizens of the Council's member states were granted the legal basis for pursuing their rights before an international body, the European Court of Human Rights. This is perhaps the most striking example of how the welfare of the citizen has superseded the power of the state.

War, in this context, has been rendered unthinkable to Europeans. For most of us in the West, when we discuss security, we are talking about social security and pension funds. While America may take an independent, traditional view on security issues, and go to war to defend its national interests, Europeans participate in military operations as international peacekeepers, in which the mission of the soldier is not about his country's foreign policy. American elections are won or lost by the promise to "make America strong again"; in Austria and other European countries, elections are won by those who promise to develop the welfare state even further.

To be sure, with the United States as the only remaining superpower able to conduct its foreign policy in the classical sense, waging war and concluding peace at its discretion, power politics has not disappeared. Arms spending, the international weapons trade and the various current wars suggest that many countries remain determined to follow the *realpolitik* course to national glory. We therefore live in a very divided world.

Many countries still wage war at will. But many others live in a post-Westphalian world, dominated by the aspirations of millions to improve their daily lives. For these citizens, going to war again like in 1914 is simply not possible.

#### **IV. The war's long lasting legacy**

The Chinese Prime Minister, Chou en Lai, was once asked what he thought about the French revolution, almost 200 years after its outbreak. His answer: "It is too early to tell".

100 years after the outbreak of WWI, we can say that there are some immediate impacts and some long lasting effects:

- The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia took place in 1917; later on, the Soviet Union dominated half of Europe until 1991 and supported world revolution.
- Three dynasties were overthrown: the Habsburgs; the Hohenzollern (together with two dozen other German dynasties) and the Romanovs.
- Three Empires were destroyed: the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman and the Russian Empire.
- WWII can be considered as a direct result of WWI, as it was not possible to establish a real peace after 1918. During the peace conferences, John M. Keynes had already noted: "The Peace Treaties were not wise; could not be implemented and were a danger to Europe." He already foresaw the next World War.

## **1. Geopolitical effects**

### **a. The Destruction of Central Europe**

For centuries, the Holy Roman Empire and the Austrian Monarchy had been essential players in the concert of Europe. They were an essential part of the balance of power; and as in the case of Austria, defended against invasions from the east.

After the "Great War", Germany was weakened so much that it could not be considered a player any more. The Germans felt humiliated and absolutely did not accept the clause in the Treaty of Versailles, which stipulated that only Germany was responsible for the outbreak of WWI. In Germany, there was a wide-spread consensus on that question and the opposition against it helped radical forces to gain legitimacy and votes.

The Austro-Hungarian monarchy was replaced by independent states which were often internally unstable for the years to come. The wars in the Balkans in the 1990's showed that the region was still not settled.

### **b. The decline of Europe**

Another geopolitical effect of WWI was the decline of Europe. Britain and France were certainly victorious powers. Britain replaced the Ottoman Empire in the Near East; the land route to India was established, and the Indian Ocean became a British Ocean. But whereas Britain was the banker of the world in 1914, it now had difficulties to pay its war debts. Economically, Britain did not regain its 1913 levels until 1929, and then came the Great Depression. The financial power had moved from London to Wall Street; the American Navy already outnumbered the British and the Dominions obtained the right to a separate foreign policy.

In 1920, the Soviets organized a congress of the oppressed people “to support movement against the European colonial powers.” “When the colonies rise, Europe will crumble” announced Gregori Zinoviev, the President of the Komintern.

France was the second victorious power; she got back Alsace and Lorraine; tried to play the dominant force on the continent for some time and was entrusted the trusteeship over Syria, Lebanon and Cameroon. But that could not prevent the steady deterioration of the internal situation in France. In 1940 German tanks were able to crush the French army in six weeks.

With the victorious powers exhausted and the centre of Europe destroyed, the continent could never regain the role it played before 1914.

### **c. Geopolitical development outside of Europe**

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire transformed the Middle East and mandated territories were created. In 1917, “a national home“ was promised to the Jewish people. But as David Gilmour wrote, “Peace could never be found in that region: France and Britain liked to boast of their administrative skills as colonizers, but French policy in Lebanon led to predictable conflict and eventually to a ferocious civil war, while British policy in Palestine introduced a bloody antagonism that was showing few signs of abating nearly a century later.”

The rise of the USA became a dominant factor in international relations for years to come: America became the most powerful nation on the planet. The US Navy construction already amounted to 3 million GRT in 1918, compared to 1.3 million GRT for Great Britain. Already in those days, the USA had the power to intervene in every corner of the earth. Besides that, the American President Wilson strongly influenced the concept of a future world order.

In addition, Japan was included as a player in international relations.

## **2. Effects concerning internal developments in different states**

### **a. War is seen in a different way**

During WWI, 4100 soldiers were killed every day; terrible atrocities were committed. That meant a 9/11 on a daily basis. The failure of the ruling elites led to a total break-down of the value system people believed in. For the great majority of people affected by the war, life had just become unbearable. The millions affected by the war saw future confrontations with much less enthusiasm than they demonstrated in August 1914.

### **b. The radicalization of political life**

In the immediate aftermath of the World War, Germany suffered such a terrible inflation that on some days the exchange rate between one USD and one German Mark was 1:1 billion. A main consequence of the Great Depression was terrible unemployment. Trust in government and authority before the war was replaced by hatred. The economic and social impact on an impoverished society was detrimental and resulted in a physiological impact: a total radicalization of political life. Extremist political parties took over, all over Europe: the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917; the Fascists in Italy in 1922, Hitler and the Nazis in Germany in 1933. The Great War, of which the aim was "to bring democracy to Europe" (President Wilson), brought dictatorships from Estonia to Spain and domestic events more and more determined international relations.

## **3. Efforts concerning a future peaceful international order**

A League of Nations was created.

Point 14 of the 14 Points of President Wilson stipulated: An association of nations should be established in order to guarantee political independence and territorial integrity. The covenant of the League of Nations became part of the Peace Treaty of Versailles. The declared goals were: a peaceful settlement of conflicts in the future to prevent wars and to achieve disarmament.

This system did not work: too many did not participate, especially the USA, or were excluded or withdrew. The League was too weak to resist the impact of aggression created by domestic radicalism. The big powers did not give up the “logic of war” on which their foreign policy was based.

A new kind of technical cooperation was developed after WWI. An International Labor Organization was established, which would survey international labour standards. An Agreement on civil aviation was concluded and the International Postal and Telegraph Union was set up.

They were forerunners for all those international organizations which, after WWII, aimed to improve the well-being of the people within the frame of the United Nations. Despite the fact that it was not possible to establish a peaceful order after WWI, the first step concerning a new dimension of international relations, concerning the well-being of the people was taken.

Part of this new dimension was the tendency to ban war as an instrument of international policy: The Locarno Treaty (1925) should have guaranteed the Western-German border with France and Belgium, and included Arbitration Treaties. The Briand-Kellogg Pact (1928) did renounce wars as an instrument of national policy and the convention of London took an effort to define aggression.

Which of all those initiatives have succeeded – is it too soon to tell?

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