
Opening Extract from...

A Brief History of the First World War

Edited by Jon E. Lewis

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For Tristram and Freda Lewis-Stempel. Peace be with you.

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INTRODUCTION

It was, it is often forgotten, a *world* war. Despite the still haunting images of Flanders' trenches with "soldiers bent double, like sacks", the fighting of 1914–18 was not confined to a corner of northwest Europe, but took in eastern and southern Europe, the Middle East, Africa and even China and Japan. Fifty million men from thirty nations donned uniform. When the last bullet sounded on 11 November 1918, nine million of the combatants lay dead, alongside five million citizens.

The world had seen nothing like it, and it was the hope of the survivors that their war was the "war to end all wars". This hope was dashed even before the Armistice, because the Great War – as its participants called it, in awed honour of its bloody magnitude – had let roll events which ripple to this day. Out of the four-year-conflict came the Russian Revolution, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, the decline of Britain, the supremacy of America and the instability of the Middle East (even the 2003 Gulf War can be tracked back to the mandate over Iraq given to Britain at the 1919 Peace Conference). Less obvious, but no less profound were the ripples the war caused in the minds of men and women. In 1914 youth rushed to the colours in an enthusiastic fever of patriotism and public duty. There would never be, to echo the phrase of the latter-day British poet Philip Larkin, "such innocence again". Those who survived the fighting would never again be so deferential to

their masters, so accepting of their lot, so reverential of the word – be it political, or religious – from on high.

Little, if any of this, was obvious as the world ran and slipped to war in July and August 1914. Almost everyone expected a quick and glorious *guerre de manoeuvre*. Seeing off his troops, the Kaiser assured them they would be home ''before the leaves have fallen''; the British were only marginally less optimistic with their ''Home for Christmas'' cheerio.

Such self-deceit came easily, for the major European powers had next to no acquaintanceship with modern war, with the mass-slaughter which came courtesy of mass-produced machine-guns and artillery. Only a few leaders, notably Kitchener and Moltke, foresaw the long struggle, although even a glimpse at the history of the American Civil War would have cautioned that the industrialization of warfare tended to produce stasis on the battlefield (there had even been trenches in the Blue–Grey conflict). So it was that the soldiers of 1914, like their Civil War forbears, dug for cover in the face of modern arms, notably on the Western Front where the ratio of such arms was especially high. There, within a year, the soldiers' impromptu slits in the earth burgeoned into a trench system which stretched from the English Channel to Switzerland along which one could, in theory at least, walk ''bent double'' all the way.

If the Great War was not the first modern war, it was unique in its scale and in its ''totality''. And the more the War endured, the more ''total'' it became. This totality lay partly in its global nature – for the war soon spewed out from Europe to the Middle East, to the belligerents' colonies, and then entangled the USA – but more in the way it subsumed the home society, through mass conscription in the war effort, and the way in which bombing and blockades brought the war home. German U-boats almost starved Britain into surrender in early 1917, whilst Britain's reciprocal surface blockade was a factor in German's exhausted surrender in 1918. Meanwhile, 1,413 British civilians were killed in Zeppelin raids. There was no corner of life untouched by the war. Similarly, the economies of the belligerents became perverted towards the production of military *matériel*; 52% of British GNP in 1918, for example, went on defence expenditure. Over the course of the war as a whole,

Britain spent approximately 23 billion dollars (at 1913 prices) on its prosecution.

For all her industrial might, Germany could not hope to match such largesse. Wars are not necessarily won by the side with the biggest pockets, but the longer a war endures the more likelihood that money will win out (another lesson from the American Civil War). Imperial Germany, in all probability, lost the war in August 1914 when she failed to deliver the KO to France; she definitely lost it in 1917, when America entered on the Allied side, with her double-sized divisions and her economy double the size of Germany's. (By 1917, incidentally, Germany was having to release men *from* the front to work in arms-related factories; the Allies, notably Britain, recruited women to make up shortfalls in the industrial and agricultural workforce.) Futhermore, Germany was badly hampered by her choice of Allies, with the decrepit Austro-Hungarian Empire being a particularly weak and impecunious sister.

In hindsight, the wonder of World War I is less why Germany lost, but how Germany came so close to winning. The answer lies largely in the efficacy of the German army. Against stereotype, this was not led by clockwork Prussians, but extraordinarily effective and responsive junior officers and NCOs, who out of the long stalemate on the Western Front even conjured a new form of "storm trooper" warfare, as seen in the Michael Offensive of Spring 1918, which reached to within 37 miles of Paris.

This was the Germans' last grasp at victory. They had bested the Russians in the East, they had routed the Italians at Caporetto, but they were unable to break through in the West. They lost 973,000 men in the attempt; effectively the German army bled itself to death in March–June 1918. When the Allies counterattacked, the Germans had no reserves left on the Western Front. Bloody practise of war – especially on the Somme – had also made the British Army outstandingly able: Germany's peer if not Germany's superior. Germany could find no cheer on other fronts either, with a succession of Allied victories in Italy, Syria and Bulgaria, whilst their home front was falling into demoralization, discontent, even revolution. Suddenly, in late October the German-led Central Powers bloc collapsed. The war was

over, bar the paperwork of surrender, which was duly signed on the 11th of November. The war was finished. So too was the old order of things.

The following pages are a record of the Great War, from the opening shots at Sarajevo to the signing of the armistice at Compiègne, in which the participants are left to speak for themselves. For their words communicate, so much better than the second-hand sentences of historians, the experience of the war, what it felt like to be in an aerial dog-fight over the Western Front, to lead a charge of Arab irregulars, to dodge Zeppelin bombs in Sheffield, to abandon ship after a U-boat attack in the Atlantic. In keeping with an understanding of the totality of the First World War, a great diversity of witnesses has been presented from as many theatres as could be contained within the pages of this single volume, from Prussian generals in Africa to royal servants in Russia, from French officers at Verdun to English nurses in London, from American war correspondents in Belgium to Australian sappers at Gallipoli. Their accounts are testimony to the various aspects of the war in which they found themselves, but I have also tried to remember that wars, even world ones, are but the story of the fate of individual humans. Consequently, throughout the pages which follow I have sought to give the experience of particular individuals in the wider narrative. It is through such individual identification, I think, that we can better understand the suffering, the bravery, the fear and the hopes of the men and women who lived, fought and died in the Great War.

Part One

1914

The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.

Sir Edward Grey, British
Foreign Secretary, 3 August 1914

INTRODUCTION

If the First World War has an exact beginning, it was the balmy Sunday of 28 June 1914 in a remote Balkan town, when a Bosnian Serb student, Gavrilo Princip, aimed his pistol at Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Two shots rang out – the first of the First World War – and the heir to the rackety Hapsburg empire was lying dead in his car in a street in Sarajevo. In truth, the incident was obscure, only enough in itself to start another interminable Balkan War, but in a Europe riven with imperial rivalry, arms races and diplomatic alliances it served as a pretext for war. A month after Sarajevo, Austria-Hungary took her revenge and declared hostilities against Serbia. Russia mobilized to defend her Serbian ally, Germany declared war on Russia, then on Russia's ally, France. When Germany invaded "poor little Belgium" on 4 August Britain – almost against its will – was sucked into the fray on the side of France and Russia. And the world was at war.

Dare to say it, the populace of Europe – and not just its political class – was mad for the war. You only have to read Sergyei Kurnakov's account of war fever in St Petersburg to see that, or Herbert Sulzbach's account of a week in Germany in late July. Most of civilian Europe, in 1914, were poor innocents about war; Britain, for instance, had not fought a land war in Europe for a hundred years. (Professional soldiers were more sanguine in August 1914: "Send out my mother, my sister and my brother/ But for Gawd's sake don't send me," sang the regular British Army.

But then the British Army had recently fought the Boer War and knew better than anyone the butcher's bill of modern war.) Few imagined the war would last more than a few months. "Over by Christmas" was the popular phrase. All over Europe millions of men were cheered on their way to the front lines, while millions of others, faces flushed bright with patriotism and adventure, rushed to the recruiting office. The more prescient, such as Britain's Lord Kitchener, realized that the war would likely take years – and therefore encouraged more young men to volunteer – especially after Germany's failure to knock out France in the West in the first weeks of the conflict. The doughty resistance of the French – who lost some 200,000 soldiers over seven days – and the British Expeditionary Force at the Marne in September 1914 stopped the German attack in its tracks. After the "First Ypres" battle – which virtually destroyed the original 100,000-strong BEF – both sides on the Western Front tried repeated outflanking manoeuvres, with the result that by October 1914 a double line of defensive entrenchments stretched from the English Channel to Switzerland. The resultant trench warfare has become the defining image of the Great War. For four years, the combatants hurled shells and bullets across the dividing yards of No Man's Land, each in the effort to budge the other, the numerical inferiority of the Kaiser's army offset by the simple fact that it held the high ground along the front.

In the vastness of the East, the war took a more open and fluid form from the outset. Enjoying numbers if not *matériel*, the Russian "steam-roller" slowly moved laboriously into Prussia and Austrian Galicia. And was promptly de-roaded by the Prussians at Tannenberg. Against Austria-Hungary, an empire as ramshackle as itself, the Russians had more success. Until, that is, the Germans came to the aid of the Hapsburg armies. Why the Germans were so successful on the Eastern Front can be put down to the brilliance of its high command, pure luck, or even the ineptness of the opponent; a more telling reason is caught in the newspaper report of Karl Von Wiegand of 8 October, which details German machine guns blowing down ill-armed Russian ranks like a "terrible gust of wind". The Germans, though still peculiarly attached to cavalry, were fighting a modern war with modern means.

The shock of the new was evident on the Western Front too, though there both sides boasted modern war machines. The result was warfare unlike any other, for it was industrialized slaughter, with armaments and munitions manufactured on fantastic scale by the belligerent powers. Small wonder, perhaps, that those who fought and survived the Western Front battles of 1914 were only too glad to call a Christmas truce. The war was not over by Christmas, it was just that those who did its fighting wished it was.

THE ASSASSINATION OF ARCHDUKE FRANZ FERDINAND, SARAJEVO, 28 June 1914

Borijove Jevtic

The spark which ignited the First World War. Franz Ferdinand was the heir to the Hapsburg throne. The assassin was Gavrilo Princip, Serbian nationalist. Jevtic was one of Princip's co-conspirators.

A tiny clipping from a newspaper mailed without comment from a secret band of terrorists in Zagreb, a capital of Croatia, to their comrades in Belgrade, was the torch which set the world afire with war in 1914. That bit of paper wrecked old proud empires. It gave birth to new, free nations.

I was one of the members of the terrorist band in Belgrade which received it and, in those days, I and my companions were regarded as desperate criminals. A price was on our heads. Today my little band is seen in a different light, as pioneer patriots. It is recognized that our secret plans, hatched in an obscure cafe in the capital of old Serbia, have led to the independence of the new Yugoslavia, the united nation set free from Austrian domination.

The little clipping was from the *Srobobran*, a Croatian journal of limited circulation, and consisted of a short telegram from Vienna. This telegram declared that the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand would visit Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, 28 June, to direct army manoeuvres in the neighbouring mountains.

It reached our meeting place, the cafe called Zeatna Moruana, one night the latter part of April, 1914 . . . At a small table in a very humble cafe, beneath a flickering gas jet we sat

and read it. There was no advice nor admonition sent with it. Only four letters and two numerals were sufficient to make us unanimous, without discussion, as to what we should do about it. They were contained in the fateful date, 28 June.

How dared Franz Ferdinand, not only the representative of the oppressor but in his own person an arrogant tyrant, enter Sarajevo on that day? Such an entry was a studied insult.

28 June is a date engraved deeply in the heart of every Serb, so that the day has a name of its own. It is called the *vidovnan*. It is the day on which the old Serbian kingdom was conquered by the Turks at the battle of Amselfelde in 1389. It is also the day on which in the second Balkan War the Serbian arms took glorious revenge on the Turk for his old victory and for the years of enslavement.

That was no day for Franz Ferdinand, the new oppressor, to venture to the very doors of Serbia for a display of the force of arms which kept us beneath his heel.

Our decision was taken almost immediately. Death to the tyrant!

Then came the matter of arranging it. To make his death certain twenty-two members of the organization were selected to carry out the sentence. At first we thought we would choose the men by lot. But here Gavrilo Princip intervened. Princip is destined to go down in Serbian history as one of her greatest heroes. From the moment Ferdinand's death was decided upon he took an active leadership in its planning. Upon his advice we left the deed to members of our band who were in and around Sarajevo under his direction and that of Gabrinovic, a linotype operator on a Serbian newspaper. Both were regarded as capable of anything in the cause.

The fateful morning dawned. Two hours before Franz Ferdinand arrived in Sarajevo all the twenty-two conspirators were in their allotted positions, armed and ready. They were distributed 500 yards apart over the whole route along which the Archduke must travel from the railroad station to the town hall.

When Franz Ferdinand and his retinue drove from the station they were allowed to pass the first two conspirators. The motor cars were driving too fast to make an attempt feasible and in the crowd were Serbians: throwing a grenade would have killed many innocent people.

When the car passed Gabrinovic, the compositor, he threw his grenade. It hit the side of the car, but Franz Ferdinand with presence of mind threw himself back and was uninjured. Several officers riding in his attendance were injured.

The cars sped to the Town Hall and the rest of the conspirators did not interfere with them. After the reception in the Town Hall General Potiorek, the Austrian Commander, pleaded with Franz Ferdinand to leave the city, as it was seething with rebellion. The Archduke was persuaded to drive the shortest way out of the city and to go quickly.

The road to the manoeuvres was shaped like the letter V, making a sharp turn at the bridge over the River Nilgacka. Franz Ferdinand's car could go fast enough until it reached this spot but here it was forced to slow down for the turn. Here Princip had taken his stand.

As the car came abreast he stepped forward from the kerb, drew his automatic pistol from his coat and fired two shots. The first struck the wife of the Archduke, the Archduchess Sofia, in the abdomen. She was an expectant mother. She died instantly.

The second bullet struck the Archduke close to the heart.

He uttered only one word; "Sofia" – a call to his stricken wife. Then his head fell back and he collapsed. He died almost instantly.

The officers seized Princip. They beat him over the head with the flat of their swords. They knocked him down, they kicked him, scraped the skin from his neck with the edges of their swords, tortured him, all but killed him.

Then he was taken to the Sarajevo gaol. The next day he was transferred to the military prison and the round-up of his fellow conspirators proceeded, although he denied that he had worked with anyone.

He was confronted with Gabrinovic, who had thrown the bomb. Princip denied he knew him. Others were brought in, but Princip denied the most obvious things.

The next day they put chains on Princip's feet, which he wore till his death.

His only sign of regret was the statement that he was sorry he had killed the wife of the Archduke. He had aimed only at her husband and would have preferred that any other bullet should have struck General Potiorek.

The Austrians arrested every known revolutionary in Sarajevo and among them, naturally, I was one. But they had no proof of my connection with the crime. I was placed in the cell next to Princip's, and when Princip was taken out to walk in the prison yard I was taken along as his companion.

"A STONE HAS BEGUN TO ROLL DOWNHILL": A GERMAN DIARY, 28 June–25 July 1914

Herbert Sulzbach, German Army

Frankfurt-am-Main, 28 June 1914
Archduke Francis Ferdinand has been murdered, with his wife [the Duchess of Hohenberg], by two Serbs at Sarajevo. What follows from this is not clear. You feel that a stone has begun to roll downhill and that dreadful things may be in store for Europe.

I am proposing on 1 October to start my military service instead of going to Hamburg as a commercial trainee. I'm twenty, you see, a fine age for soldiering, I don't know a better.

July 14
I travel to Würzburg, report to the 2nd Bavarian Field Artillery Regiment and get accepted.

Böhm, the German airman, has scored a world record with 24½ hours of continuous flight.

July 23
Ultimatum delivered to Serbia by Austria-Hungary. No strong action by Austria appeared to have been taken since the assassination of 28 June until suddenly this note was presented, containing ten demands which among other things were supposed to allow Austria herself to take action on Serbian soil against activities hostile to Austria. Serbia has to accept the ultimatum within 48 hours, otherwise Austria reserves the right to take military action. A world war is hanging by a thread.

July 25
Unbelievably large crowds are waiting outside the newspaper offices. News arrives in the evening that Serbia is rejecting the

ultimatum. General excitement and enthusiasm, and all eyes turn towards Russia – is she going to support Serbia?

The days pass from 25 to 31 July. Incredibly exciting; the whole world is agog to see whether Germany is now going to mobilize. I've hardly got enough peace of mind left to go to the bank and do my trainee job. I play truant as though it were school and stand about all day outside the newspaper offices, feeling that war is inevitable.

JEAN JAURÈS IS MURDERED, PARIS, 31 July 1914

Robert Dell

Jaurès was leader of the French Socialist Party and the founder of *L'Humanité*. He had championed the working-classes against Clemenceau and was anti-militaristic. Many considered him unpatriotic. It would turn out, in fact, that Jaurès' assassin espoused no cause, and was merely mad, but the murder only exacerbated the mood of foreboding hanging over Europe.

Grave as is the international situation even the probable imminence of war has been overshadowed for the moment in Paris by the appalling crime this evening of which I was an eyewitness. It is impossible to one who knew M. Jaurès, whom one could not help loving, to write about it calmly with the grief fresh upon one. I was dining with a member of my family and a friend at the Café du Croissant, the well-known resort of journalists in the rue Montmartre close to many newspaper offices including that of *L'Humanité*. M. Jaurès was also dining there with some Socialist deputies and members of the staff of *L'Humanité*. He came in later than we did. I spoke to him just as he entered and had a short conversation with him about the prospects of war and peace. Like everyone else, he feared that war was probable, but he still had some faith that Sir Edward Grey might succeed in inducing Germany to be conciliatory. If some sort of conference could be arranged, he thought, peace might even yet be secured: and if the French Government would bring pressure to bear on Russia and the German Government on Austria an arrangement might be possible. He added, however, that he feared the French Government might not do that. What a crime war will be and

what a monstrous folly. The last words that he said to me was an inquiry about M. Anatole France, who, he said, must be deeply distressed by the situation.

At about half-past nine, when we were just finishing dinner, two pistol shots suddenly resounded in the restaurant. At first we did not understand what had happened, and for a moment thought that there was shooting in the street outside. Then we saw that M. Jaurès had fallen sideways on the bench on which he was sitting, and the screams of the women who were present told us of the murder. It should be explained that M. Jaurès and his friends were sitting on a bench with their backs to the open window of the restaurant, and the shots were fired from the street through the window. M. Jaurès was shot in the head, and the murderer must have held the pistol close to his victim. A surgeon was hastily summoned, but he could do nothing, and M. Jaurès died quietly without regaining consciousness a few minutes after the crime. Meanwhile the murderer had been seized and handed over to the police, who had to protect him from the crowd which had quickly collected in the street. At that hour in the evening the rue Montmartre is filled with newsvendors waiting for the late editions of the evening papers.

It is said that the murderer is a member of the Royalist society Action Française, but I have not yet been able to discover whether this report is true or not. A more cold-blooded and cowardly murder was never committed. The scene in and about the restaurant was heartrending; both men and women were in tears and their grief was terrible to see. It is as yet too early to say what the effect of the murder will be, but it may be considerable. M. Jaurès has died a victim to the cause of peace and humanity.

WAR FEVER IN ST PETERSBURG, 1 August 1914

Sergyei N. Kurnakov

There was a crowd in front of a newspaper office. Every few minutes a momentous phrase scribbled in charcoal appeared in the window: "ENGLAND GIVES UP PEACE NEGOTIATIONS. Germany invades Belgium. Mobilization progressing with Great Enthusiasm." And at 7.50 p.m.:

"GERMANY DECLARES WAR ON RUSSIA."

Spontaneously the crowd started singing the national anthem. The little pimply clerk who had pasted up the irrevocable announcement was still standing in the window, enjoying his vicarious importance. The people were staring at the sprawling words, as if trying to understand what they actually meant as far as each personal little life was concerned.

Then the edges of the crowd started breaking off and drifting in one direction, up the Nevsky Prospect. I heard the phrase "German Embassy" repeated several times. I walked slowly that way.

The mob pulled an officer from his cab and carried him in triumph.

I went into a telephone box and called up Stana.

"Yes, it's been declared . . . I don't know what I am going to do yet . . . All right, I'll be over about midnight."

I did not like the way her receiver clicked; there seemed to be contempt in it.

When I got to the St Isaac Square it was swarming with people. It must have been about nine o'clock, for it was pretty light yet – the enervating, exciting twilight of the northern nights.

The great greystone monstrosity of the German Embassy was facing the red granite of St Isaac's Cathedral. The crowds were pressing around waiting for something to happen. I was watching a young naval officer being pawed by an over-patriotic group when the steady hammering of axes on metal made me look up at the Embassy roof, which was decorated with colossal figures of overfed German warriors holding bloated carthorses. A flagstaff supported a bronze eagle with spread wings.

Several men were busily hammering at the feet of the Teutons. The very first strokes pitched the mob to a frenzy: the heroic figures were hollow!

"They are empty! . . . A good omen! . . . Another German bluff! . . . We'll show them! . . . Hack them all down! . . . No, leave the horses standing! . . . The national anthem! . . . Lord, Save Thy People!"

The axes were hammering faster and faster. At last one warrior swayed, pitched forward, and crashed to the pavement one hundred feet below. A tremendous howl went up, scaring a

flock of crows off the gilded dome of St Isaac's. The turn of the eagle came; the bird came hurtling down, and the battered remains were immediately drowned in the nearby Moika river.

But obviously the destruction of the symbols was not enough. A quickly organized gang smashed a side door of the Embassy.

I could see flashlights and torches moving inside, flitting to the upper storeys. A big window opened and spat a great portrait of the Kaiser at the crowd below. When it reached the cobblestones, there was just about enough left to start a good bonfire. A rosewood grand piano followed, exploded like a bomb; the moan of the broken strings vibrated in the air for a second and was drowned: too many people were trying to outshout their own terror of the future.

'Deploy! . . . Trot! . . . Ma-a-arch!'

A troop of mounted *gendarmes* was approaching from the other end of the square. The crowd opened up like the Red Sea for the Israelites. A new crowd carrying the portrait of the Emperor and singing a hymn was advancing slowly towards the *gendarmes*. Their officer halted the men and stiffened at the salute; this was the only thing he did towards restoring order. The bonfire was being fed by the furniture, books, pictures, and papers which came hurtling through the windows of the Embassy.

The emblazoned crockery of state came crashing, and the shattering sound whipped the crowd into a new wave of hysteria.

A woman tore her dress at the collar, fell on her knees with a shriek, and pressed her naked breasts against the dusty boots of a young officer in campaign uniform.

"Take me! Right here, before these people! Poor boy . . . you will give your life . . . for God . . . for the Tsar . . . for Russia!"

Another shriek, and she fainted. Men and women were running aimlessly around the bonfire . . . Is it an effect of light and shadow, or do I really see high cheekbones, slanting eyes, and the conic fur caps of Aladin Mirza's horde?

Whew! . . . I let out the breath I had been holding unconsciously during the entire bacchanal.