

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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22 February 2014

The Lessons from World War I

This coming summer the world will observe the centennial of the “Guns of August,” historian Barbara Tuchman’s phrase for the beginning of World War I. Most historians would argue that this was a war that should never have been. A few weeks ago, I read historian Margaret MacMillan’s gripping *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914*. She charts quite methodically the events and culture that produced the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914, which ended nearly 100 years of peace. (The last major European war had been the Napoleonic wars, which ended in 1815.) How could the major European powers permit one of the most horrific wars in history to occur? The carefully constructed balance of power that originated with the 1815 Congress of Vienna had broken down. Rulers with huge egos took diplomatic steps that made war almost inevitable. A complex system of alliances rendered meaningful diplomacy virtually impossible. Radical extremists threatened the stability of an ordered European world. New technologies made killing people in large numbers now “scientific” and impersonal. Despite a significant worldwide peace movement, the drums of war beat loudly in 1914 and overwhelmed reason and common sense. The result was a war with 9 million combatants dead, many more wounded and innumerable civilian casualties. World War I radically altered history and in effect created the modern world: Four major empires died as a result of the war—that of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The basic geography of Europe and the current Middle East is a product of this war. And of course you cannot understand the rise of Adolf Hitler without a deep understanding of World War I. Are there important lessons to be learned from the outbreak of this horrendous conflict? Yes, for as Margaret MacMillan argues, “The approaching centenary of 1914 should make us reflect anew on our vulnerability to human error, sudden catastrophes and sheer accident.”

There are at least four parallels between 1914 and 2014 that should cause deep reflection. (1) Globalization. The world of 1914 was linked in ways unheard of only a few decades earlier. Geographically, the world was linked by railroads and steamships as well as by telephone, telegraph and radio. Globalization not only fostered the benefits of international trade, it also made possible the spread of radical and extremist ideologies. In 1914 the technology of globalization made possible the spread of fascism and Soviet Communism and fanatical nationalistic passions, which led to assassinations and bombings worldwide (e.g., the assassinations of President William McKinley, Empress Elizabeth of Austria and of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary, which was the spark that set off the war). In 2014, the radical ideologies associated with extreme Islam are spread by the Internet and other social media, and recent terrorist attacks have been nurtured by the globalization of communication. Finally, as MacMillan further demonstrates, “globalization can heighten rivalries and fears between countries that one might otherwise expect to be friends. On the eve of World War I, Britain, the world’s greatest naval power, and Germany, the world’s greatest land power, were each other’s largest trading partners.” But as Germany cut into Britain’s markets and increased its influence

with Britain's colonies, Britain felt threatened. (2) Some historians are comparing the relationship between Germany and Britain in 1914 with that of China and the United States today. China is increasing its economic and financial influence from Asia, throughout Africa and even into the Caribbean. Further, China is translating its growing economic power into military might. There is little doubt that China is now challenging the US in each one of the world's regions. That challenge is not only economic; it is also a military challenge. Especially in the Pacific, there is a clear arms race ensuing between these two great powers. And, in some ways, Japan plays a role similar to that of France before World War I—a declining regional power, allied tightly with America. (3) There is a significant similarity between the Balkans in 1914 and the Middle East today. In 1914, Serbia financed and armed Serbian nationalists within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Russia and Austria were both causing dissension and instability on one another's respective borders. Today, the clash between Sunni Muslims and Shiite Muslims in Syria is really a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran's support of Hezbollah and Hamas to extend the Shiite crescent cannot go unnoticed. (4) There is a haunting similarity between Britain in 1914 and the United States in 2014. There is no question that under President Obama, America has withdrawn somewhat from the world. *The Economist* concludes: "Obama has pulled back in the Middle East—witness his unwillingness to use force in Syria. He has done little to bring the new emerging giants—India, Indonesia, Brazil and, above all, China—into the global system. This betrays a lack of ambition and an ignorance of history . . . Unless America behaves as a leader and the guarantor of the world order, it will be inviting regional powers to test their strength by bullying neighboring countries." Throughout the world, there is a growing consensus that the United States is turning inward, and that perception is just as dangerous as the truth that the US is indeed doing so. For example, suppose North Korea's highly unstable leader believes that the US is no longer a reliable ally of South Korea and may not honor its alliance. Would this perception cause him to do something that could produce war? There is an increasing tension between China and Japan? If China perceives that the US is indeed turning inward and may not honor its alliance with Japan, might China be willing to pursue a more militant policy toward Japan? Europe continues to worry that US withdrawal from the Middle East is leading to the growing presence of Iran and Russia in the Middle East—to everyone's peril. There is little question that Obama's policies toward Syria have increased the clout of both Russia and Iran in Syria.

Columnist Richard Cohen makes this astute observation: "In 1996, Madeleine Albright popularized a phrase used by President Clinton. She repeatedly called the United States the 'indispensable nation.' The phrase lends itself to mockery, but it is dead-on. Nowhere is the United States more indispensable than in the Far East, where a rising China, acting like pre-World War I Germany, is demanding respect and flexing its muscles. It's all too familiar: rising nationalism, excessive pride, irrationality ready in the wings and America going into its habitual hibernation." I would strongly argue that this also applies to the Middle East as well. As with any analogy, drawing equivalence between 1914 and 2014 is somewhat precarious. But there are a few red flags that the world should notice. As I read MacMillan's book, I was struck by significant comparisons between these two periods. Personally, my greatest concern is America's role in the world of 2014. After World War I, America withdrew into a quasi-isolationism—and the coming of World War II proved how dangerous that really was. America's "isolationism" of 2014 is not as extreme as post-1914, but there is an evident emotional isolationism that comes from exhaustion in Iraq and Afghanistan. The world is

noticing that emotional isolationism and is beginning to act accordingly. In that sense, there is a helpful comparison between Britain in 1914 and America in 2014. Wise, discerning leaders learn from history. May that be true of our leaders today. May God give them that needed discernment.

See *The Economist* (21 December 2013), p. 17; Margaret MacMillan's essay in the *New York Times* (14 December 2013); and Richard Cohen in www.washingtonpost.com (4 February 2014).