

Amateur leaders, not evil men, brought ruin to the world

All Europe was at war and no one really knew why. Sixteen million people would die as the blood-soaked years passed.

by Conrad Black



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any, left, and his cousin Czar Nicholas II of Russia are seen in a photo from 1905.

This Sunday the world observes the centenary of the end of the First World War, a war of previously unimagined destructiveness. Pre-war Europe was largely directed by royal personages related to each other. The German emperor, William II, was a cousin of the Russian emperor, Nicholas II, and their grandmother and grandmother-in-law in the case of

Nicholas, was Victoria, queen and empress, grandmother also of Britain's King George V, cousin of the Kaiser and the Czar.

The world blundered into war on a sequence of hair-triggers. On June 28, 1914, the heir to the Habsburg throne of the 700-year-old dynasty that ruled in Vienna, then evolved from the spuriously named Holy Roman Empire to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Austria-Hungary had abruptly annexed Bosnia, contrary to popular wishes. The German emperor gave the venerable Franz Josef, emperor in Vienna for 68 years, and his divided government "a blank cheque" to exact revenge on Serbia, the Slavic power that had inspired Bosnian resistance to Vienna and the assassin, Gavrilo Princip. The Austro-Hungarian demands were accepted apart from the insistence on the prosecution of Serbian pan-Slav activists, practically regardless of evidence.

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At this, Serbia balked and asked the assistance of its pan-Slav guarantor, Russia, which had just received a visit from the president and prime minister of France, Raymond Poincare and Rene Viviani. These two countries were allies opposite rampant imperial Germany and what had become its somewhat calcified, polyglot, client-empire governed from Vienna and Budapest. The French leaders urged the Russians not to be bullied. The world was generally sympathetic to Vienna and to Franz Josef, and few countries were prepared to express much toleration of assassination. Berlin and Vienna thought Russia was bluffing in its professed support of Serbia against the full Austro-Hungarian demands, and on July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.



The Nine Sovereigns at Windsor for the funeral of King Edward VII. Standing, from left to right: King Haakon VII of Norway, King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, King Manuel of Portugal, Kaiser

Wilhelm II of the German Empire, King George I of The Hellenes (Greece) and King Albert I of the Belgians (Belgium). Seated, from left to right: King Alfonso XIII of Spain, King-Emperor George V of the Great Britain and King Frederick VIII of Denmark. Postmedia News

Russia mobilized against Austria-Hungary, but when Kaiser Wilhelm demanded that Russia not threaten Germany, his cousin the Czar raised his order to a general mobilization. Germany declared war on Russia on Aug. 1. These immature despots, not evil men, but utterly irresponsible and neurotic in the case of the German emperor, and plodding and unworldly in the case of Czar Nicholas, thus had begun the greatest war between Europe's great powers since Waterloo 99 years before, with no justification and not a discernible thought as to where this might lead. (Of course, the Habsburgs, Romanovs, and Hohenzollerns were all out four years later, and the entire Romanov family, down to young children, would be murdered before it was all over.) Belgium declined to give Germany free passage into France for its armies, after France had declined to assure Germany of its neutrality in the event of Germany being at war with France's ally, Russia. Germany invaded Belgium, a country British statesmen had largely devised and had always guaranteed, and Germany declared war on France on Aug. 3. Great Britain, loyal to its guaranty of Belgium and to its alliance with France, after one of the memorable addresses of British parliamentary history by the foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, declared war on Germany on Aug. 4. As the British ultimatum to Germany expired, Grey said, from his office looking out at Whitehall: "The lights are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them on again in our time." In Canada, prime minister Robert Borden interrupted his Muskoka holiday, returned to Ottawa and took action that confirmed that Canada was at war when Britain was.

All Europe was at war and no one really knew why. The task of explaining this horrible, stalemated war required greater and more imaginative explanation as blood-soaked years passed. It would be horrible trench warfare in France and Belgium, where

men had to charge machine guns and artillery, to, as one sardonic British writer put it, take thousands of casualties "to move the army commander's drinks cupboard half a mile closer to Berlin." Thus did this horrible war continue, year after year. The German emperor finally threw all caution to the winds and agreed to unrestricted submarine warfare on neutral shipping, which was bound to bring the United States into the war. President Woodrow Wilson, a great intellect and former president of Princeton University, addressed the Congress on April 2; as always, America could be relied upon to raise the sights and spirit of the very war-enervated world: "The world must be made safe for democracy ... the right is more precious than peace ... To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles which gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other." It was the greatest American public address since Lincoln's second inaugural, and not for the last time, an American leader inspired the world.



Woodrow Wilson, right, takes the oath of office for his first term of the U.S. presidency in Washington on March 4, 1913. The Russian monarchy collapsed, as did the Austrian, and finally the German. The Kaiser fled to the neutral Netherlands, where he resided until his peaceful death in 1941. The supreme commander of the Allied armies was Marshal Foch of France, the Eisenhower of the First World War. As an officer-candidate in the Metz military school he had learned from the booming of the German guns at the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871 that Metz had become a city of the German Empire. Forty-seven years later, at the head of, in British military historian Basil Liddell Hart's words, "the greatest host in human history," 300 divisions, nearly six million battle-hardened soldiers, he restored Metz to the French Republic. Foch was one of the heroes of my youth and there is

a bust of him beside me as I write. (It is an illustration of the durability of our longest-serving prime minister, W.L. Mackenzie King, that when he held a dinner in honour of General Eisenhower in 1946, he dusted off an address he had given at the same place in honour of Marshal Foch 25 years before and only changed the names of people and countries.) Canada became a full-scale ally in the First World War, and received world-recognition for its success at Vimy in April 1917, when all four of our divisions were able to attack together and gain an important victory.



A photo taken on Nov. 11, 1918, shows signatories of the Armistice treaty between the Allies and Germany: German Matthias Erzberger, the Count Alfred von Oberndorff, British Captain Ernst Vanselow, First Sea Lord Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss, the British representative, French general Maxime Weygand, Foch's Chief of staff (first row, second from left) and Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Allied supreme commander (first row, second from right) posing in front of Ferdinand Foch's own railway carriage in the Compiegne forest, at Rethondes, northern France.

Sixteen million people died and 21 million were wounded in the First World War, including 67,000 Canadian dead and 150,000 wounded. Almost all our forces were volunteers, and Canada was itself never under threat. This was a distressing total of dead and wounded for an overseas country of only eight million people, but, with the Australians and New Zealanders, a uniquely heroic sacrifice of brave and idealistic people for a principle and not even for national self-defence. We fought for the cause of freedom throughout the world, and barely 50 years after Confederation, gained recognition as an important and independent state and one of the founding members of the League of Nations.

We fought for the cause of freedom throughout the world

The ending was, as Foch said, "Not a peace but a 20-year

ceasefire." We would all go at it again, and to greater success, in the Second World War, as Borden, Clemenceau, Lloyd George, and Wilson, talented leaders though they were, were not as distinguished as King, de Gaulle, Churchill and Roosevelt, who led the democratic world to victory. By sanguinary increments, we advance human liberty and promote international law. Canada has done its part and more. We have only engaged in just wars, on issues of principle, for no gain for ourselves, and have always fought with distinction and always on the winning side. It is a national history that incites pride but not chauvinism.

May our glorious dead of the wars of the past century enjoy eternal rest with the Prince of Peace, and may they repose always in the honoured and grateful memory of the country and the civilization for which they made the highest and noblest sacrifice. Remember them on November 11.

Note: Following my column last week, there have been many inquiries about how to assist Dr. Brian Day in his splendid effort to resist the persecution of the government of British Columbia over the right of his clinic to provide sophisticated medical services to those discouraged by the long waiting lines in the public health service for surgical procedures. Such contributions would be very gratefully received and should be made to the Canadian Constitution Foundation, Attention Cambie Case, second Floor, 515 11th Avenue, Calgary, Alta., T2R 0C8. A charitable receipt will be issued. This brave and public-spirited doctor cannot be forsaken and left to face the oppression of the British Columbia government unassisted. This is a cause of intelligent public policy and elemental human decency.

First published in the