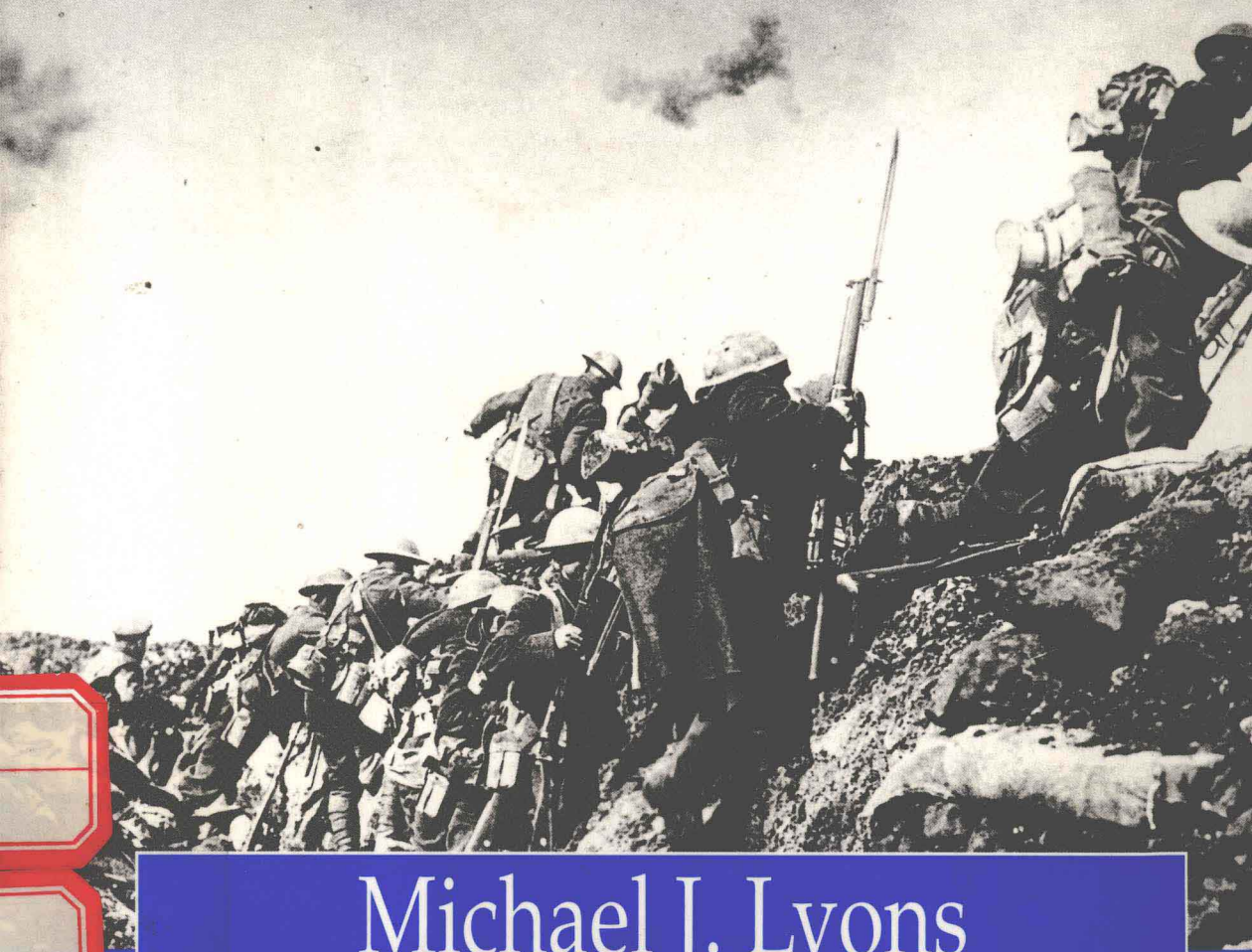


WORLD WAR I

A Short History



Michael J. Lyons

WORLD WAR I A Short History

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PREFACE

Eighty years have passed since Europe stumbled into World War I. Few people realized in the fateful summer of 1914 that this conflict would eclipse all previous wars both in scope and in horror. It initiated the world into the age of modern warfare and revealed the appalling capability of a highly industrialized society to inflict disaster on itself with the aid of a new and terrible technology. The battered generation that survived the four years of slaughter and devastation that followed represented both a somber aftermath and a tragic prelude to an even greater conflict. And, although World War II came to overshadow its predecessor, World War I was the real turning point in the history of the twentieth century. It changed Europe and the world so fundamentally and created such instability that it paved the way for the

second conflict and all the new problems that it spawned.

The story of how Europe blundered into the abyss of 1914 and engaged in the ghastly orgy of death and destruction has been told many times before. But, as in the case of World War II, few of the multitude of books in print are suitable for the college classroom. Most general histories are far too long, while the innumerable scholarly monographs on more selective topics are usually intended for an audience of professional historians. In *World War II: A Short History*, which Prentice Hall first published in 1989, I presented a general history of that conflict in a relatively brief format and in a manner that I hoped would be informative, interesting, and clear to both students and the general reader, while still being useful to the professional historian. Members of all three audiences responded

positively to that effort, encouraging me to undertake a similar treatment of World War I. Again I have sought to produce a narrative that is clear, informative, and readable. The reader will determine whether I have succeeded.

Any general history of World War I must offer an analysis of the factors, both long-range and immediate, that helped plunge Europe and ultimately much of the rest of the world into hostilities. This process is one of the most controversial topics in all of history. My first three chapters focus on the many developments that helped create an atmosphere conducive to the outbreak of war over a period of several decades before 1914. Although these "long-range causes" seem to imply that the conflict was inevitable, the actual descent into violence came as the result of the failure of the European powers to solve the crisis that erupted in the summer of 1914. Chapter 4 attempts to provide a balanced account of the tragic mistakes, moves, and counter moves during that crisis which led directly to the outbreak of war.

The majority of the remaining chapters deal with the conflict itself, including not only strategy and tactics on the various fighting fronts but also the belligerent powers' resort to "total war." By taking this approach, they sought to mobilize all their resources, both material and human, for the awesome task of securing victory. In pursuit of that elusive goal, millions of people lost their lives and millions more were maimed or suffered psychological wounds, which that generation referred to erroneously as "shell shock." Never before, and seldom since, has the world experienced such concentrated carnage, while the drain on the economies and national wealth of the belligerents was also unprecedented. The immense strain of this awful struggle produced many momentous changes and none more far-reaching than the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the

triumph of communism in that country. In that same year the United States entered the war, and its vast financial and economic resources as well as its abundant supply of personnel left no doubt that it had emerged as the leading power in the world.

The final two chapters relate the grim effects of the war, including the peace settlement as well as the political and economic disruption, and in some cases chaos, that developed in the wake of the conflict. Europe and the world would never be the same again.

I must express gratitude to a number of people for their support of this project. My thanks go especially to Steve Dalphin, executive editor of Prentice Hall's College Division, for providing the opportunity to undertake the task. I am also indebted to the readers who found my manuscript worthy of publication. A special acknowledgment goes to A. Harding Ganz of the Ohio State University, Newark Campus, for his wise criticism and many valuable suggestions. My daughter, Mary, a professional artist, performed a most beneficial service by drawing many of the maps that make the narrative more meaningful. Amy Ochoa, our departmental secretary, carried out the yeoman work of preparing the finished version of the manuscript. She always demonstrated exceptional efficiency, speed, and good humor despite my seemingly insatiable appetite for revision.

I also wish to acknowledge the support of my friend, colleague and department chair Larry Peterson as well as Robert Littlefield, who, as acting dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, granted me release time to pursue this enterprise. My friend and colleague, David Danbom extended his encouragement as well as the constant example of his devotion to research and writing. Joan, my charming wife, great friend, and exceptional travel companion, as always was a major source of inspiration. She also remained remarkably tolerant of the stacks of

notes, books, and general debris that for so long adorned my working area at home. My children, Mike and Nancy as well as Mary, all provided their most welcome support and warm encouragement. Finally, I must express a bit of stubborn pride in the fact that, in an age of computers, I typed all of

my many drafts on a venerable 1949 model Smith Corona portable with a broken *x* key. As for errors, I have tried with all my might to banish them altogether. I am sure, nevertheless, that some still lurk in the following pages. Of course, I alone am responsible for them.

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CHAPTER

1

EUROPE BEFORE 1914: THE POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC SETTING

In early 1914, the continent of Europe was the focal point of the entire world, a distinction it had enjoyed for centuries. To be sure, the United States had recently become the leading industrial power, but in most forms of human endeavor it still looked to Europe for inspiration. Most of the world's great industrial, military, and naval powers were European states. Much of the remainder of the globe was still subject to European domination in the form of colonies and spheres of influence. Europe's trade was massive and worldwide in scope. Its intellectual and cultural achievements were still the envy of most other countries. All of this would change dramatically as the result of a conflict that broke out on the Continent in the summer of 1914. It proved to be of unprecedented ferocity and lasted more than four years. The generation that suffered through it called it the Great War. We remember it as World War I.

There had never been a war remotely like it. In terms of lives lost, destruction inflicted, and revolutionary impact on the survivors, it was unique. In the following years historians tried to explain the causes of this appalling catastrophe, and the answers proved elusive. Even though the better part of a century has elapsed since the conflict began, the question of who or what was responsible still remains highly controversial.

AN ATMOSPHERE FOR WAR

It is clear that the war began because the leaders of the European Great Powers made a number of crucial decisions during a crisis triggered by the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, on June 28, 1914. But these fateful actions were conditioned to a large extent by other factors that had created an

atmosphere in which war was a distinct possibility, although hardly inevitable. Some of these factors had their origin long before 1914 in the political, economic, and social development of Europe during the nineteenth century.

Among them were the often turbulent relations between the Great Powers and the rise of nationalism in Central Europe. The various European countries had engaged in political and economic rivalry, both on the Continent and in other parts of the world, for centuries. By the mid-eighteenth century five of these nations had emerged as Great Powers—Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia. For most of the remainder of that century an almost perfect balance of power prevailed among them. But, during the period of Napoleon Bonaparte's rule in

the early nineteenth century, France completely upset the balance and dominated the Continent for the better part of a decade. Napoleon's excessive ambition eventually led to disaster, however, and the other four Great Powers joined forces to defeat him by 1815. The subsequent peace settlement stripped France of its conquests but refrained from depriving the country of any of its original territory. France kept its position as one of the five Great Powers in the newly restored European equilibrium.

Two of the Great Powers, Austria and Prussia, shared a distinction that set them apart from the others. The Austrians and Prussians were ethnically German, even though both countries included non-Germans within their borders. For centuries Austria



FIGURE 1-1 Napoleon Bonaparte. National Archives

and Prussia had been the two most powerful of the 300 separate German states that comprised the exceedingly loose federation known as the Holy Roman Empire. But Napoleon had sharply reduced the number of German states by merging many of the smaller units with larger ones, and in 1806 he abolished the Holy Roman Empire altogether. Following Napoleon's defeat, the peacemakers at the Congress of Vienna chose not to restore the empire. Instead, they created the German Confederation, consisting of only 39 states, which were almost as loosely linked as those of the defunct empire.

In creating the German Confederation, the peacemakers had spurned the pleas of a nationalist movement that had developed among certain elements of the German states during the period of Napoleonic control. German nationalists urged an end to the centuries-old political fragmentation of Germany by the creation of a united and powerful German nation. But their desires conflicted with those of the conservative statesmen who drafted the peace settlement of 1815. These men feared nationalism as a force that would bring renewed turmoil to the Europe they were trying to stabilize after almost 25 years of war. Their alarm increased as nationalism also took root in Italy. The Italian peninsula, like Germany, had experienced political division for many centuries, and during the period of Napoleon's ascendancy, Italian nationalists had dreamed of a united Italy. The Congress of Vienna shattered their hopes by restoring a dozen separate Italian states and placing two of them—Lombardy and Venetia—under Austrian rule. Austria, Prussia, and Russia also shared a mutual desire to stifle the growth of Polish nationalism. The three Great Powers of Eastern Europe had erased Poland from the map by partitioning its territory among themselves in the late eighteenth century. Each of

them had much to lose if a revived Polish state should somehow rise from the grave.

The rulers of Austria found nationalism especially distasteful. The Austrian Empire consisted of a collection of territories in Central Europe inhabited by many different ethnic groups. Over the centuries the House of Hapsburg, the ruling dynasty of Austria, had gradually gained authority over these peoples. But the ruling group, the Austrian Germans, represented a relatively small minority of the total population in this multinational empire. In 1815, the Hapsburgs saw nationalism as a danger to the very existence of their country. While nationalism posed the prospect of unity for Germany, Italy, and Poland, it held the potential to destroy the Austrian Empire, fragmenting it into small states, none of which could remotely approach the status of a great power. Not surprisingly, Austrian leaders remained bitter enemies of nationalism in general. Success for a nationalist movement anywhere in Europe would pose an example for the various ethnic groups within the Austrian Empire. But in 1815 nationalism remained only a potential threat. It had not yet taken root in most of the national groups of the empire. As the years passed, however, the situation changed, and dissatisfaction over Austrian domination increased.

NATIONALISM AND REVOLUTION

Try as they might, the Hapsburgs could not permanently prevent victories for the cause of nationalism. Three waves of revolutions struck various parts of Europe in the 1820s, 1830, and most emphatically in 1848. Some of these uprisings were inspired by nationalism. A Greek revolt against Turkish rule in 1821 led to the creation of an independent Greece, and in 1830 the new state of Belgium gained freedom from the Netherlands. In

1848 revolution erupted in France as well as the Italian and German states, including both Prussia and Austria. Italian nationalists hoped to create a united Italy, while in Germany an assembly of representatives from the various states actually drafted a constitution for a united Germany. Nationalist revolts also broke out among the Czechs and Magyars (Hungarians) within the Austrian Empire. The former sought cultural autonomy and local self-government in the Czech-inhabited region of Bohemia. The latter initially demanded autonomy within the lands constituting the Hapsburg-ruled Kingdom of Hungary but later fought for outright independence.

All of the revolutions of 1848 caught by surprise the conservative governments of the countries involved. There was a universal tendency for the rulers to panic and either flee into exile or grant concessions. But the victories of the revolutions were short-lived. The rebels fell victim to squabbling among themselves, opening the way to conservative counterrevolutions. By 1849, most of the revolutions had failed, and conservative regimes had regained power. For the time being, there was to be no united Italy or Germany, no autonomous Bohemia or independent Hungary.

But the cause of nationalism did not die. In Italy, it found a new leader in Camillo di Cavour, premier of the northern Italian state of Piedmont-Sardinia. Under his direction, Piedmont-Sardinia gained an alliance with Napoleon III of France in 1858. This pact led to a victorious war with Austria the following year, even though Napoleon deserted his Italian ally after the initial successful battles and made a separate peace. By 1861, a united Italy had emerged, although the northeastern province of Venetia remained under Austrian rule and Rome continued to be governed by the pope, who had the protection of a French

military garrison. The new Italy won recognition as a Great Power, but in view of its limited economic and military resources, it was perhaps only an honorary member of the Great Power club.

GERMAN UNIFICATION

Within a decade a united Germany also came into existence, but the new German state did not include Austria. Hapsburg antagonism to nationalism had made certain that if Germany were ever to be unified, it would be done under Prussia's leadership. For many years Prussia deferred to Austria and remained almost as hostile to German nationalism as were the Hapsburgs. But, in 1862, Otto von Bismarck, an exceptionally able leader, became the chief minister in the Prussian government of King William I and soon became the architect of German unity. A conservative Prussian aristocrat and originally not a German nationalist at all, he seemed an unlikely candidate for this role. In fact, his first aim was not to unify Germany but to strengthen Prussian power within the German Confederation.

Although his intentions are not completely clear, it appears that Bismarck actually thought in terms of enticing the Austrians into an agreement which would partition Germany along the Main River, with Prussia dominant in the north and Austria in the south. But when the Hapsburgs, who had long thwarted all attempts at greater German unity, showed no interest in such a settlement, he resorted to armed conflict instead—the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. Bismarck prepared for the war by skillful diplomatic maneuvering, which discouraged the other Great Powers from supporting Austria and even lured Italy into joining Prussia in the conflict. With the enemy isolated, the Prussian army, led by its brilliant chief of staff, General Helmuth von Moltke, won a

decisive victory over Austrian forces in the Battle of Königgrätz (or Sadowa), and Austria agreed to an armistice.

In the ensuing peace settlement, Bismarck took no territory from the Hapsburgs for Prussia but forced Austria to give up its membership in the German Confederation. He then dissolved the Confederation and established a new North German Confederation that was clearly under Prussian domination. Italy received Venetia as its reward for siding with Prussia.

While winning his victory over Austria, Bismarck recognized the growing support of many Germans for a united Germany. He decided to satisfy their desires by merging the remaining south German states with the North German Confederation. But

he was determined that this united Germany would bear the unmistakable imprint of Prussian power and would be headed by the Prussian royal family, the Hohenzollern dynasty.

Bismarck's new ambition brought Prussia into conflict with France. The French looked with growing concern on the rapid increase in Prussia's strength, seeing it as a threat to their own expansionist ambitions as well as a danger to France itself. In July 1870, Bismarck engineered a diplomatic crisis and provoked France into declaring war on Prussia. The Franco-Prussian War resulted in disaster for France as Moltke again led Prussia to victory. His troops outmaneuvered the French, encircled one army, then another, and forced each of them

FIGURE 1-2 Otto von Bismarck, architect of German Unification. National Archives

