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Going to War: Europe and the Wider World, 1914-1915

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On 29 October 1914 the Ottoman fleet engaged the Russian Black Sea fleet in battle, with the minor skirmish resulting in the sinking of a Russian gunboat and a mine-layer. Two days later the Ottoman fleet bombarded the ports of Sevastopol and Odessa; the route to an Ottoman clash with Russia, and subsequent entry into the First World War, was now set. By 2 November Constantinople had entered into what would become, in the American diplomat and historian George Kennan's over-used phrase, the 'seminal catastrophe' of the twentieth century. The damage inflicted in these actions was relatively minor, certainly in comparison to the destruction unleashed over the next four years in the Middle East and the vast battles at that point taking place in France, Flanders and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, the violence involved in the story of the Ottoman entry into the war neatly encapsulates the complexities of the shift from war to peace experienced by a variety of states, empires and peoples in 1914.¹

At the very least, the shelling of the Black Sea ports places the Ottoman entry into the Great War into a very different origins narrative to that learned by most British schoolchildren, one that begins with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on 28 June 1914, and ends with German troops marching into Belgium in early August. This Eurocentric description of the descent into war serves to illustrate only a small snapshot of what would become, very rapidly, a *world war*. Crucially, it misses the global imperial outlook of the states which took up arms; all the main belligerents were imperial powers, either possessing multi-ethnic and multinational empires inside Europe or colonies overseas. Even Belgium ruled over a vast colonial empire in central Africa, the maladministration of which had exercised

¹ Hew Strachan, *The First World War: To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 677-679; Eugene Rogan, *The Fall of the Ottomans: The Great War in the Middle East, 1914-1920* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), p. 51. For a detailed assessment of the extent of the destruction of the Great War across the Middle East and its effect on the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, see Leila Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

liberal opinion in Britain for much of the early twentieth century. The Ottoman naval attack on Sevastopol was thus not just another violent act in the litany of death and destruction seen in late summer and autumn 1914 across Europe but was emblematic of the imperial and world war unleashed since the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. In many respects, this was a Russo-Turkish imperial clash subsumed within the Great War, as much concerned with long-term rivalries over the control of the Caucasus and maritime access to the Mediterranean, as it was with the Great Power alliance blocs then already at war in Europe.

The complexities of this imperial world at war are captured neatly in the confused national identities and allegiances of the Ottoman fleet in 1914. The fleet's commander, Admiral Wilhelm Souchon, was German, as were the crews of the fleet's two newest warships, the *Goeben* and *Breslau*, which had eluded the Royal Navy in a dash across the Mediterranean. The Ottoman Empire's war began under pressure from Berlin, with the assistance of German naval personnel, and used the latest German naval equipment intended to give the Turks a qualitative edge over their Russian opponents at sea. The Great War, so often seen as heightening the intensity with which national identities were drawn, also reflects the inherently transnational nature of war and the blurring of these identities.²

Moreover, the shelling of 29 October reveals a very different chronology to the opening of the First World War for some of the states that became involved. For the Young Turk regime in Constantinople the war unleashed in Europe had been observed at a distance, despite mounting German pressure to intervene in support of the Central Powers. Having experienced a series of military disasters in the Balkan Wars there was little desire to rush into another potentially debilitating and destabilising conflict. The heightened emotions of the July Days thus played out very differently in the cities, towns and villages of Anatolia, the Levant and Arabia, where the sense of international crisis lasted well into the autumn. This is a point worth considering more broadly, as a number of states that would later emerge as major belligerents did not enter into hostilities in summer 1914. Italy, for example, did not join the Entente's military cause until May 1915 and, more famously and more pertinently for the Franco-British war effort, the USA did not take up arms until April 1917, and even then only as an 'associated power'.

The first six months of the Ottoman Empire's Great War were not the glorious military endeavour that some had envisaged. An attempt to interdict the British imperial lifeline of the Suez Canal in February 1915 was easily repulsed by Indian Army and Territorial Force units with minimal interruption to the flow of supplies

² Ute Frevert, 'Europeanizing German History', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, 39 (2005), pp. 12-13.

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and personnel. At the same time in southern Mesopotamia, Britain, using at first only a single brigade of the Indian Army, had secured its hold on the Abadan oilfields and then expanded its control towards Basra. The Ottoman Empire was not only failing to project force to distract Britain in Germany's long-hoped-for *Weltkrieg*, but was also under incremental attack from the forces of London and Delhi. More seriously for the Young Turks, their focus on the Caucasus and the clash with Russia resulted in disaster in winter 1914-15. At Sarikamish the Turkish 3rd Army was eviscerated in a series of battles, resulting in 75,000 casualties; as many as 30,000 of these were ill-prepared and ill-equipped soldiers who froze to death. The one success of the Ottoman war effort by April was the defence of the Dardanelles, first against an Anglo-French maritime incursion, then against a series of landings which barely made it off the narrow beachheads established on 25 April. Gallipoli demonstrated that Enver Pasha and the Young Turks did not hold the monopoly on military incompetence in the opening phases of the First World War.³

Within the space of little over half a year the Ottoman Empire had observed the cataclysmic early battles of the European war, mobilised its own territories for war across multiple fronts, and engaged in a series of offensive and defensive battles, with mixed success. Until Mustafa Aksakal's superlative study of Young Turk decision making in the run-up to war was published in 2008, much of the historiographical focus on the Ottoman Great War had been on the empire's experience of conflict in 1914-15, with particular emphasis on Gallipoli. The reasons why some members of the government thought it was a good idea to throw the state into such a struggle were barely considered. As Aksakal makes clear, Constantinople did not walk blindly into the war and nor did it become a belligerent solely as a result of German encouragement. For many prominent Young Turk figures, and a reasonable proportion of the empire's educated elite, war was perceived as a chance to build a new, modern state, one that would be capable of resisting great power encroachment.

In many respects the wider historiography of the First World War has taken the opposite turn to that on the Ottoman Empire's early war. Although there are a number of illuminating studies on the battles of 1914-15, the mobilisation of European states, and the popular responses to the outbreak of war, based largely around challenging the concept of war enthusiasm, these have been eclipsed by the vast literature on the reasons *why* Europe descended into war in 1914.⁴ The

³ For a general survey of the Ottoman Empire's war with a particular focus on the operational level, see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2014).

⁴ Examples of literature on the early war experience include: Spencer Jones (ed.), *Stemming the Tide: Officers and Leadership in the British Expeditionary Force 1914*

decisions for war were debated during the conflict itself, and the Allies' desire to apportion blame motivated the notorious war guilt clause of the Treaty of Versailles. It was with Fritz Fischer's *Germany's War Aims in the First World War* (1967), and its illustration of a very particular sense of Germany's early twentieth-century history, that the debate over the origins of the war really began to flourish among historians. Since then the argument over the war's origins has become increasingly intense, with the focus of the discussion on the extent of German responsibility for the conflict.

By the centenary of the war's outbreak this debate shows no signs of being any closer to a resolution. Christopher Clark's magisterial interjection into the argument, and the response it generated, represents the latest phase of the historiographical discussion. In a study that attempts to cover the breadth of national positions in 1914 on war, Clark provides a nuanced take on the question of German responsibility. Ultimately his thesis apportions blame away from the Kaiser's regime and more widely around the great powers, few of whom appear in his narrative as having fully considered the implications of their foreign policy choices.⁵ The ambition of Clark's take on the Europe of 1914 is noteworthy, even if the ultimate assessment feels somewhat like an exculpation of the notoriously militaristic regime in Berlin. Nevertheless, Clark's study has reinvigorated the debate, even if it lacks the analytical subtlety and chronological depth of other assessments, such as that of William Mulligan which locates the crisis of 1914 in a longer history of international relations problems and attempts at multilateral solutions.⁶

It is evident that despite the spilling of much ink, historians of the First World War are no closer to a settled discourse on its origins. This is, however, precisely what draws so many scholars and interested members of the public to the question itself; the lack of a definitive answer to why Europe turned its back on peace in summer 1914 is what fascinates. Nonetheless, as Annika Mombauer has argued, a number of key themes have begun to emerge in the historiography. Most importantly these include placing Austria-Hungary back into the centre of the origins debate, and a general acceptance that Berlin and Vienna – both in terms of their political and

(Solihull: Helion, 2013); Jonathan Krause, *Early Trench Tactics in the French Army: The Second Battle of Artois, May-June 1915* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Nick Lloyd, *Loos 1915* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006); Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).

⁵ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

⁶ William Mulligan, *The Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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military establishments – saw war as a viable option for solving their foreign policy problems in 1914.⁷

Rather than contribute to the ever-expanding literature on the origins of the war, this issue reflects the approach to the early years of the First World War more commonly seen in histories of the Ottoman Empire: that rather than asking *why* states went to war in 1914 we should be asking *how* they went to war. This, by its very nature, is thematically a question that not only concerns the world of 1914 but the broader history of the Great War and conflict in the modern era. The processes by which states such as Germany and Britain mobilised their war economies, for example, would be replicated, refined, challenged and altered by the USA in 1917-18. Similarly, the issue of how imperial polities recruited and used their colonial military and labour forces were faced by France and Britain in 1914 and then again in 1939.

Despite the burst of writing on the war's origins, the twenty-first century has also seen some renewed interest in the manner in which states conducted the early years of the war. The seminal contribution of John Horne and Alan Kramer on the spate of German Army atrocities as they swept into France and Belgium in 1914 demonstrates the complexities of the opening military campaigns.⁸ Unlike the stereotypical image of 1914-18 as a war of trenches, mud and little battlefield movement, the campaigns on the Western Front at the outset were highly mobile with large numbers of civilians caught up in the resulting violence. A fear of popular insurrection, deeply inculcated in the German military and popular psyche, resulted in a rash of deliberate reprisals against civilians believed – in the vast majority of cases wrongly – to have taken up arms against the invaders. Although the Second World War is often seen as the archetypal conflict in which non-combatants were on the receiving end of mass violence, the work of Horne and Kramer makes clear that many elements of similarity & connection can be found in the events of 1914. Beyond France and Belgium, the destruction and deportations of the Russian Army's retreat in 1915, much of which was interlaced with anti-Semitism, and the Ottoman Empire's genocidal campaign against the Armenians in 1915-16 reflect this wider dynamic of a blurring of the lines between combatant and non-combatant, or perceived 'friends' and 'enemies' of the state.

More recently, the historiography of Britain's early First World War experience has been enriched by Catriona Pennell's analysis of how the British population responded

⁷ Annika Mombauer, 'The First World War: Inevitable, Avoidable, Improbable or Desirable? Recent Interpretations on War Guilt and the War's Origins', *German History*, 25 (2007), pp. 78-95.

⁸ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

to a European war.⁹ It is clear that no one narrative encapsulates the 'British' response to war in 1914; instead it was a moment that saw a multiplicity of reactions, reflecting in part the very complexity of Edwardian society. The early war experience for the British people was, however, characterised by volunteerism assuming a new prominence in social and political discourse. The army swelled rapidly from a small professional force, principally concerned with imperial warfighting and policing, to a mass entity capable by 1916 of taking an equal share in large-scale continental battles. Volunteering was not limited to the male population of military age, but also defined a wider British reaction to the war. For example, voluntary groups quickly formed to produce, collect and organise comforts for the troops at the front line. Pennell's assessment of Britain in 1914 is also impressive for its inclusion of Ireland into a national and imperial narrative; too often the Irish story of the early twentieth century is portrayed in terms of its exceptionalism. 1914 was instead a moment of unity between the Irish and the wider British reaction to war, with the tensions of nationalist and Ulster politics dampened in the cause of producing a unified national war effort.

This special edition of the *British Journal for Military History* reflects the emphasis found in the works of Horne and Kramer, and most recently Pennell, by trying to uncover the complexities of how states and empires, and their peoples, set about the task of going to war. The six articles that follow reflect three different themes within the scholarship on the First World War's opening phases in 1914-15. These cover the issues of mobilisation, the often neglected particularities and complexities of the Eastern Front, and the global, or imperial, turn now emerging in the war's wider historiography.

Mobilisation for war could take many forms, being not just a military process and a question of how to get men into uniform and to the battlefield, but also a social and cultural phenomenon. Alisa Miller, ranging across a variety of European states in 1914, looks at how culture was mobilised to make the shock of war comprehensible to the people expected to fight in it and to endure its hardships. In 1914 art and literature highlighted continuities between the world before the July Crisis and the Europe of war that became the norm by the autumn. At the same time novelty was emphasised, with the figure of the refugee capturing for many of those living in the Entente the destruction and horror that war could bring. 1914 is thus fascinating as a moment in which states mobilised their military machines, but also as one in which the minds of their peoples were mobilised for war.

⁹ Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

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Christopher Phillips demonstrates, however, that there is still more to be said about the military mobilisations that took place in 1914. In particular, the logistical support mechanisms that kept armies in being have been little examined, and the British Army's use of canals and rivers to supplement its road- and rail-based logistics systems has all but been forgotten. The BEF in 1914-15, although it struggled with the sharp end of European war, proved to be innovative in its approach to supplying its newly emerging mass formations. In contrast to the arguments of Lloyd George in the interwar years, Phillips makes clear that the BEF proved to be an open-minded organisation, willing to draw on civilian expertise where it could best help enhance its warfighting capabilities.

Despite the fascination of the centenary commemorations with the experiences of the BEF, the war of 1914-15 can no longer be characterised simply as a Western European struggle. In Eastern Europe a much more fluid battlespace emerged in which troop densities were far lower, allowing commanders to seize opportunities to fight the manoeuvre campaigns and battles they had always envisaged as the hallmark of future wars. Stephen Walsh sets out to unpick the complexities of Russian strategic and operational military planning in 1914. A variety of options were available to Stavka, but these were shaped by the overriding strategic imperatives of the French alliance, which required a rapid assault soon after war began to tie down German forces in the east, and the need to demonstrate Russia's status as a great power on the battlefield. The opening battles revealed the inherent weaknesses of a Russian Army that was still years away from matching the capabilities of the other European great powers. It was also an army with a command problem, in which strategic ambitions were not matched by tactical and operational abilities; Russia promised much to the Entente in the First World War, but failed to deliver.

Paul Latawski makes clear that the complexities of war in Eastern Europe were not all a product of poor generalship. National and imperial identities, in their broadest and most malleable senses, ensured that mobilisation for war unleashed forces that would ultimately tear the dynastic empires of the region apart. The armies that clashed on the Eastern Front did so over the territory that had historically been occupied by the Polish state until the late eighteenth century. Not only were the Polish lands one of the many battlezones of 1914-15, but Poles fought on both sides throughout the war, being conscripted into the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Armies and serving in a variety of paramilitary organisations. Many of the Poles mobilised in the war would in its aftermath form the backbone of the re-born Polish state's military, and a number emerged as key political figures, most notably Jozef Piłsudski. The outbreak of war in 1914, coupled with the intensity of violence on the Eastern Front, therefore ensured that questions of Eastern European nationalism appeared with a new vigour during and after the First World War.

The past 20 years of scholarship on the First World War has seen a number of trends emerge, from responses to the cultural turn, to the integration of home fronts and war fronts into national stories. One of the most prominent of these trends has been a growing emphasis on the global nature of the Great War, with imperial historians, especially of France and Britain, making a strong case for 1914-18 as, above all, a war of empires.¹⁰ This special edition, in part, captures a sense of the global dimensions to the war. Robert Johnson's article focuses on the Indian Army's preparations for war before 1914 and then the sepoys' experience of the shock of combat on the industrialised battlefields of the Western Front. The Indian Corps by late 1915 was arguably demoralised and depleted by a series of bloody battles, but had served its imperial strategic duty of acting as a stopgap until Britain could mobilise its Kitchener Army formations. As Johnson argues, the problems seen in France and Flanders were not unique to that theatre: the operations in East Africa and Mesopotamia also revealed the deficiencies of the Indian Army's pre-war organisation, which was focused more on sustaining low-casualty and low-intensity imperial campaigns rather than the long and bloody operations that emerged as the norm in 1914-15.

Edmund Yorke's article examines the First World War in one of its remotest theatres. East Africa saw the war's longest single campaign conducted by the German commander General Paul von Lettow Vorbeck. Although battles in this theatre never reached the scale of those seen in France and Flanders, the geographical spread of military activity and its impact on the colonial territories in the region was significant. This was in some respects a far from modern war, aping many of the characteristics of the colonial wars of the nineteenth century. Its impact on African society was, though, highly modern, in that this was one of the theatres in which the First World War's 'totalising logic' reached its greatest intensity.¹¹ As Yorke illustrates through a case study of the nascent colonial state in Northern Rhodesia, vast swathes of the African population were recruited – often forcibly – as carriers to service the British

¹⁰ For examples of the global turn in First World War studies, see Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty (eds.), *Empires in World War I: Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Context* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); James E. Kitchen, Alisa Miller and Laura Rowe (eds.), *Other Combatants, Other Fronts: Competing Histories of the First World War* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011); Hew Strachan, 'The First World War as a Global Conflict', *First World War Studies*, 1 (2010), pp. 3-14; Santanu Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (eds.), *Empires at War: 1911-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹¹ John Horne, 'Introduction: Mobilizing for "Total War", 1914-1918', in John Horne (ed.), *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe During the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 3.

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colonial military machine as it tried to defend the territory and from 1916 attempted to take the war into German East Africa. The costs of mobilising such large proportions of the population were felt in heightened tensions between Africans and white settlers, which by the second half of the war produced potent anti-colonial revolts. The seeds of colonial crisis were sown in the decision to prioritise the winning of a ‘total’ and imperial war ahead of preserving the colonial state.

The articles presented in this special edition are intended to contribute to the vibrant debates on the First World War – in terms of mobilisational, broader European, and imperial questions – that have flourished since the 1990s. By choosing to concentrate on *how* states and empires went to war, and the challenges that they encountered in 1914-15, the volume seeks to push the centenary debate away from the nebulous question of *why* the war started. Much of the writing on the war’s origins appears to take the reasons for the outbreak of war as the central historical question of the twentieth century. Despite the musings of the British education secretary Michael Gove in 2014, it seems unlikely that many members of the public have swallowed unquestioningly Private Baldrick’s assertion on this matter – that it all started when a man called Archie Duke shot an ostrich because he was hungry – rather than engaging with some of the historiographical arguments evinced by numerous prominent public historians.¹² The sales figures for Christopher Clark’s recent foray into the debate demonstrate clearly that large swathes of the British and European public are better informed about the origins of the First World War than Gove has given them credit for.¹³ Nonetheless, in order to fully understand the First World War we need to push beyond the question of origins to understand the complexities of the early war years. In 1914 war came as a shock to Europe and to the imperial polities that were linked to it. There are, and probably never will be, any definitive answers to the question of why the war broke out. Equally, a universal experience of the early war years, or even one with common themes, is difficult to construct. The intention in this volume is to give a sense of the complexities of entering and fighting a ‘total’ war, the richness of diversity in early war experiences, and the comparative debates that emerge from an examination of Europe and the wider world’s war in 1914-15.

¹² For a superb analysis of the state of First World War teaching among British school teachers, in the fields of history and English, see Ann-Marie Einhaus and Catriona Pennell, *The First World War in the Classroom: Teaching and the Construction of Cultural Memory* (AHRC Final Project Report, May 2014), available at <http://www.intheclassroom.exeter.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/FWW-in-the-Classroom-final-project-report.pdf>

¹³ ‘100 Years After 1914: Still in the Grip of the Great War’, *The Economist*, 29 March 2014.

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