

THE ACTUALITY OF THE PAST

WHAT IS HISTORY TRYING TO TELL US?

Christopher Clark

THE European continent was at peace on the morning of Sunday, June 28th, 1914, when Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie Chotek arrived at the Sarajevo railway station. Thirty-seven days later, it was at war. In its complexity and swiftness of escalation, the July Crisis of 1914 is without parallel in world history. On June 28th, the Austrian heir to the throne and his wife were slain in Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb students acting for a shadowy Belgrade-based ultranationalist network.

The Austrian government in Vienna resolved to serve an ultimatum on its Serbian neighbor. Berlin promised support for Austria on July 5th. Encouraged by Paris, Russia opted to defend its Serbian client by mobilizing against Austria and Germany. Unsatisfied by the Serbian reply to its ultimatum, Austria declared war on Serbia. Russia

mobilized against Austria and Germany. Germany mobilized against France and Russia. France asked London for help. On August 4th, 1914, following the German breach of Belgian neutrality, Britain entered the war.

World War I unleashed the demons of political disorder, extremism and cruelty that disfigured the twentieth century. It destroyed four multiethnic empires (the Russian, the German, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman), with consequences that are still being felt today. It consumed the lives of at least 10 million young men and wounded at least 20 million more. It disorganized the international system in destructive ways. Without this conflict, it is difficult to imagine the October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent rise of Stalinism, the ascendancy of Italian Fascism, the Nazi seizure of power or the Holocaust. It was, as historian Fritz Stern has

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put it, “the first calamity of the twentieth century, the calamity from which all other calamities sprang.”

This war did more than merely unsettle power relations in Europe—as Adam Tooze has argued in a powerful new study—it “unhinged” the global system in toxic ways, sowing the seeds of conflict and political and religious radicalization in East Asia and the Middle East and thrusting the United States into a position of unipolar hegemony that it had not sought and was not yet ready to embrace.

One can scarcely imagine a worse initial condition for the modern era of which we are the inheritors.

The debate over the origins of the ensuing World War I is old, indeed it is even older than the conflict itself. Even before the first shots were fired, Europe’s statesmen constructed narratives depicting themselves as innocents and framing their opponents as predators and breachers of the peace. Since then, the war origins debate has spawned a historical literature of unparalleled size, sophistication and moral intensity. In 1991, a survey by U.S. historian John W. Langdon counted 25,000 relevant books and articles in English alone. In 1937, British novelist Rebecca West, author of *Black Lamb, Grey Falcon*—one of a sustained literary reflection on the Balkans and their place in the history of twentieth-century Europe—travelled to

Sarajevo to see the places where the war began. “I shall never be able to understand how it happened,” she remarked to her husband as they stood on the balcony of Sarajevo Town Hall. It was not, she reflected, that one knew too little, but rather that one knew too much. We know a lot more now.

Yet if the debate is old, the issues it raises are still fresh. Indeed, they are perhaps fresher than ever. One might even say that the political crisis of July 1914 is less remote from us—less illegible—now than it was 30 or 40 years ago. When I first encountered this subject in the 1970s as a schoolboy in Sydney, a kind of period charm had accumulated in popular awareness around the events of 1914. It was easy to imagine the disaster of Europe’s “last summer” as an Edwardian costume drama. The effete rituals and gaudy uniforms, the ornamentalism of a world still largely organized around hereditary monarchy, had a distancing effect on present-day recollection. All this seemed to signal that the protagonists were people from another, vanished world. The presumption stealthily asserted itself that if the actors’ hats had gaudy green ostrich feathers on them, then their thoughts and dreams probably did too.

Nonetheless, what must strike any twenty-first-century reader who follows the course of the summer crisis of 1914 is its raw modernity. It began not with prancing horses and carriages, but with

a motorcade. No one who recalls the events of June 28th, 1914 on the Appel Quai in Sarajevo can fail to be reminded of Dallas in November 1963.

Our vantage point has changed in other ways too. It is perhaps less obvious now that we should dismiss the two killings at Sarajevo as a mere mishap incapable of carrying real causal weight. The attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001 exemplified the way in which a single, symbolic event—however deeply it may be enmeshed in larger historical processes—can change politics irrevocably, rendering old options obsolete and endowing new ones with an unforeseen urgency. And this is important, at least for historians, because the event, as an analytical category, has sometimes fallen out of fashion with the historical profession, which tended, during the 1960s to the 1990s, to favor structural over event-focused modes of explanation. Events, so the argument ran, were a soft, contemptible foam that the great waves of structural history carried on their backs. And yet the reality is that events can be hard, while structures can be soft and malleable.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the wider setting within which we reflect on these questions has changed fundamentally. Since the end of the Cold War, a system of global bipolar stability has made way for a more complex and unpredictable array of forces—a state of affairs that invites comparison with the Europe of 1914.

These shifts in perspective prompt us to rethink the story of how war came to Europe in 1914. Accepting this challenge does not mean embracing a vulgar presentism that remakes the past in order to meet the needs of the present. Rather, it means acknowledging those features of the past of which our changed vantage point can afford us a clearer view.

THE TEMPTATIONS OF ANALOGY

In the spring of 2011, I was in the midst of writing a book about the outbreak of the Great War. I had just embarked on a chapter about the Italo-Turkish War of 1911, a conflict that began when the Kingdom of Italy attacked and invaded the Ottoman territory known today as Libya. This war—now almost totally forgotten—was the first in which aircraft went up in reconnaissance to signal enemy positions to artillery batteries; it was also the first to see aerial bombardments, using bombs thrown from Italian airplanes and airships.

Scarcely had I begun to write about these events when there was news once again of airstrikes on Libya. Exactly one hundred years later, bombs were falling on Libyan towns and the headlines were full of the same names—Tripoli, Benghazi, Sirte, Derna, Tobruk, Zawiyah, Misrata—as the newspapers of 1911.

The correspondences were uncanny, but what did they mean? The answer is anything but clear. The conflict of 2011 was

fundamentally different from its predecessor one century before. The Ottoman Empire was no more. Behind the airstrikes of 2011 stood not Italy, but the multinational might of NATO. And the proclaimed purpose of the strikes was not, as in 1911, the conquest and annexation of an African colony, but the support of an insurrectionary coalition against the internationally unpopular regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi. The moral support—and legal warrant—provided by UN Security Council Resolution 1973 was neither possible nor imaginable one hundred years before. The Italo-Turkish War of 1911 triggered the chain of opportunist assaults on Ottoman Southeastern Europe known as the First Balkan War, sweeping away a system of geopolitical balances that had enabled local conflicts to be contained. It was a milestone (one of many) on the road to a war that would consume first Europe and then much of the world. There was and is little reason to suppose that the airstrikes of 2011 will bring such terrible consequences in their wake.

History does not repeat itself, but, as Mark Twain remarked, it does occasionally rhyme. What do these rhymes mean? They may merely be symptomatic of the narrow “presentism” of a Western culture that can see in the past nothing but endless reflections of its own preoccupations, a culture obsessed with anniversaries and remembrance. But we should not exclude the possibility that such moments of historical *déjà vu*

reveal authentic affinities between one moment in time and another.

In recent years, the affinities have been piling up. It is becoming a truism that the world we now inhabit increasingly resembles the world of 1914. Having left behind us the bipolar stability of the Cold War, we find ourselves struggling to make sense of a system that is increasingly multipolar, opaque and unpredictable. As in 1914, a rising power confronts a weary (though not necessarily declining) hegemon. Crises rage unchecked in strategically sensitive regions of the world—in some of these, like the recent stand-off over the Senkaku Islands in the Western Pacific, great power interests are directly engaged. No one who, from the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, follows the course of the summer crisis of 1914 can fail to be struck by the contemporary resonances.

Even the current furore, over WikiLeaks, NSA espionage and Chinese cyberattacks, has its early-twentieth-century counterparts: French foreign policy was compromised in the last pre-war years by targeted high-level intelligence leaks; the British worried about Russian espionage in Central Asia, and in the early summer of 1914 a spy at the Russian embassy in London kept Berlin apprised of the latest naval talks between Britain and Russia. The most scandalous case of all was that of the Austrian colonel Alfred Redl, who rose to head Austrian

counter-intelligence, but was himself an agent for the Russians and continued to provide them with high-quality military intelligence until he was arrested and allowed to commit suicide in May 1913.

Is history trying to tell us something, and, if so, what? In the summer of 2008, following a brief war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia, the Russian ambassador to NATO, Dmitri Rogozin, claimed to discern in the drama unfolding in the Caucasus a replay of the July Crisis of 1914. He even expressed the hope that the President of Georgia (whom he regarded as the aggressor in the quarrel) would not go down in history as “the new Gavrilo Princip.” In the aftermath of those killings, Serbia’s conflict with Austria-Hungary had drawn in Russia, transforming a local conflict into a world war. If Georgia succeeded in securing the support of NATO, could the same happen again?

These dark omens were never realized. NATO thought better of hitching its wagon to the star of the hot-headed Georgian President, Mikhail Saakashvili. After a limited U.S. naval demonstration in the Black Sea, the crisis died away. Georgia was

not early-twentieth-century Serbia, NATO was not Tsarist Russia, and Saakashvili was not Gavrilo Princip. Rogozin’s attempt to bolt the present onto a lop-sided analogy with the past was not an honest attempt at historically grounded prognosis, but a warning to the West to stay out of the conflict. It was both historically imprecise and hermeneutically empty.

Even in better informed and less manipulative hands, historical analogies resist unequivocal interpretation. The problem is only partly that the fit between the past and the present is never perfect or even close. More fundamental is the problem that the meaning of events in the past is just as elusive—and just as susceptible to debate—as their meaning in the present.

the Imperial Germany of 1914, as is often claimed? That contention is debatable, to say the least. But even if we decide that the analogy holds, what lessons should we draw from it?

If we take the view that German aggression above all else started World War I, we may conclude that the United States should take a hard line against contem-

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porary Chinese importuning. But if we see in the war of 1914–1918 as the consequence of interactions between a plurality of powers, each of which was willing to resort to violence in support of its interests, then we might also infer that we need to devise better ways of integrating new great powers into the international system. At the very least, 1914 remains (as it was for President John F. Kennedy during the Cuba Missile Crisis of 1963) a cautionary tale about how very wrong international politics can go, and how fast, and with what terrible consequences.

One thing is clear: there is no justification for looking down—in the spirit of what great British historian E.P. Thompson called the “infinite condescension of posterity”—on the decision-makers of 1914, as if these men were the blinkered representatives of a by-gone era. Some of the intricacy of the summer crisis of 1914 derived from structural problems and behaviors that are still part of our scene. In Russia, for example, the power to shape the course of Balkan policy during the years from 1911 to 1914 was constantly slipping from one node in the executive structure to another. In Paris, the permanent functionaries of the Quai d’Orsay waged guerrilla campaigns against their own ministers and senior ambassadors—during the tenure in office of British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, no fewer than 16 French foreign ministers came and went—two of them

came and went twice. Indeed, one can speak of a Heisenbergian uncertainty about the precise location of power in these complex structures.

Today’s governments are more transparent than their early twentieth-century predecessors. On the other hand, the volatile chemistry of leadership remains a factor with the potential to disturb, especially in the more authoritarian systems. And the recent divergence within the EU between the various Member States and various Union bodies, such as the Eastern Neighborhood Policy, over the measures to be adopted in Ukraine, recalls in some respects the complexity and unpredictability of decision-making processes before 1914. Finally, the Eurozone crisis of 2011 and 2012 showed how difficult it remains to reconcile the interest calculus of individual states with the collective flourishing of larger entities. It is notable that the actors in the Eurozone crisis, like those of 1914, were aware that there was a possible outcome that would be generally catastrophic (the failure of the euro). All the key actors hoped that this would not happen, but in addition to this shared interest, the actors also had special, and conflicting, interests of their own. Given the interrelationships across the system, the consequences of any one action depended on the responsive actions of others, which were hard to calculate in advance, because of the opacity of decision-making processes. And all the while, political actors in the

Eurozone crisis exploited the possibility of the general catastrophe as leverage in securing their own specific advantages.

UKRAINE: PARALLELS AND CONTRASTS

The current emergency in Ukraine—on this everyone seems to agree—is rich in historical resonances. But which histories in particular are pertinent to the recent events? The comparison with 1914 inevitably comes to mind in this anniversary year. And there are some striking analogies with the events of 1914, especially if one considers the theatre of the conflict. Like Bosnia-Herzegovina, the territory whose contentious status (it was unilaterally annexed by Austria-Hungary in 1908) ignited the Balkan flashpoint of 1914, the Ukraine of 2014 is a complex, post-imperial space marked by ethnic and political divisions and the absence of a deep history of homogeneous territorial sovereignty. Russia's deployment of proxy militants in this contested area might be taken to resemble—though only very distantly—the efforts of the Russian Empire from 1912 to 1914 to deploy the Balkan states as clients against Austria-Hungary. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the operatives of the Serbian irredentist movement Black Hand were co-financed through the Russian military attaché in Belgrade, though only as sources of military intelligence, not as combatants or subversives; the Austrian military, conversely, ran its own activist networks within Russian Poland.

Particularly interesting is the fact that Libya has been cited by many commentators on recent events in Ukraine as a way-station on Vladimir Putin's road to the seizure of the Crimean peninsula. At a now-famous press conference in Copenhagen in April 2011, Mr. Putin was asked to elaborate on his comment that the UN Security Council's resolution allowing airstrikes on Libya resembled "a medieval call for a crusade." He delivered a caustic attack on the NATO campaign against the Gaddafi regime, declaring that it violated the principle of sovereignty and the wishes of the Libyan people. Some commentators have concluded that Russia's loss of control over events in Libya hardened Putin's determination to oppose the West. Now, as then, events in northern Africa were a preamble to later developments.

In other respects, however, the alignments implicated in the Ukrainian emergency bear little relation to the geopolitical constellations of 1914. At that time, two central powers faced a trio of world empires on Europe's Eastern and Western peripheries. Today, a broad coalition of Western and Central European states is united in protesting Russia's interventions in Ukraine. And the restless, ambitious German Kaiserreich of 1914 scarcely resembles the EU—a multi-state *Friedensordnung* that finds it difficult to project power or to formulate external policy.

The Crimean War of 1853–1856 might offer a better fit. Here, at least, we can speak of a coalition of "Western" states united in opposition to Russian imperial ventures. This conflict, which ultimately consumed well over half a million lives, escalated when Russia sent 80,000 troops into the Ottoman-controlled Danubian principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. Russia argued that it had the right and obligation to act as the guardian of Orthodox Christians within the Ottoman Empire, much as it today claims the right to safeguard the interests of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

But here, too, it would be a mistake to push the analogy too far. In the 1850s, the Western powers feared that Russian predations against the Ottomans would destabilize the entire zone from the Middle East to Central Asia, undermining the security of the British and French world empires. Since neither the Ottoman Empire nor its English and French counterparts exist today, the mechanisms of trans-imperial destabilization are absent in the current crisis, which involves the relationship between Russia and one relatively isolated former client state on its periphery.

Pushing back further into the past, we can discern more distant precedents: the Russian annexation of the eastern half of Ukraine after 1654 and its evolution into Cossackdom over the next century and a half, and especially the push south into the Crimea from the reign of Peter the

Great onwards. This is the long, slow story of Russian territorial expansion, a process lasting centuries in which Muscovy acquired on average every year an area equivalent in size to modern Holland.

What none of these historical genealogies captures is the unruly dynamic of revolution and civil strife in Ukraine today, a phenomenon that evokes very different precedents. Following the news in the spring of 2014, it was difficult (for historians, at least) to ignore the many parallels with the English Civil War of the 1640s. Then, as now, an increasingly self-confident parliament confronted a controversial head of state. It was not the office of the king or president as such whose legitimacy was in question, but the conduct of the person discharging it. And, just as President Yanukovich fled to an undisclosed location after the breakdown of order in Kiev, so Charles I, having tried and failed to arrest the ringleaders of the parliamentary opposition, left London for Windsor in 1642, to return seven years later for his trial and execution. In both cases, news of a provincial tumult in support of the beleaguered sovereign (Irish Catholics in the English case, Ukrainian Russians in the Ukrainian) triggered a decisive escalation.

UKRAINE: THE ULTIMATE PSYCHODRAMA

The Ukrainian uprising has naturally tended to monopolize the attention of the European media. For mature Western democracies, the spectacle

of tens of thousands of citizens armed only with candles and posters asserting their rights against a corrupt and ruthless regime is the ultimate psychodrama. Nothing better replenishes the charisma of democracy than observing the violent convulsions of its birth.

The difficulty of the current crisis lies precisely in the folding together of these very disparate narratives: civil strife, geopolitical tension and imperial expansion. The arrangements put in place since the collapse of the Soviet Union have added a further layer of complexity. The EU has invested deeply in the process of democratization in Ukraine. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1998 exists to sustain political and economic transformation within the partner state. Ratification of a new Association Agreement, negotiated from 2007 to 2011, and incorporating a “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area” was made conditional upon the implementation of key domestic reform targets.

By contrast, NATO, as the alliance formed to protect Western interests in the Cold War, is focused firmly on the global balance of power, just as the Crimean coalition was in the 1850s. NATO and the EU are not coextensive and not identical in their interests. When the United States, Poland and the Baltic states proposed the extension of NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008, France and Germany objected, just as Prussia refused

to join the anti-Russian Western coalition of 1854 and 1855. Lastly, there is the complex political demography of Ukraine, itself the legacy of centuries of Russian penetration and settlement. The deep ethnic divisions in the country, the jigsaw of semi-autonomous regional republics, and the special constitutional and military status of the Crimean peninsula, make no sense without this history.

Any solution has to take account of the very different imperatives implied by these narratives. Using Ukraine as a proxy to box the Russians in would be insensitive to the history of the region and will merely lead to further instability. Letting the Russians do whatever they want would merely invite Moscow to use Ukraine as a proxy for pushing the West back—the war for South Ossetia, which broke out shortly after the decision not to grant Georgia NATO membership, showed how quick Moscow will be to capitalize on the irresolution of Ukraine’s Western partners. What is needed is a composite solution that takes account of all the interests, each with its deep historical hinterland, engaged in the conflict.

Are we in danger of blundering into a major conflagration in the manner of 1914? I don’t think so. There exists today no counterpart for the kind of “Balkan inception scenario” that fuelled escalation in 1914. The language of the EU foreign ministers and of the Obama Administration has

been marked, on the whole, by caution and circumspection. The responses of Western leaders to the crisis displayed a level of self-critical reflection and a readiness to adjust to new developments that would have been completely alien to their early twentieth-century counterparts. Even now, in the summer of 2014, as we enter a phase of muted escalation, the measured deployment of an incremental range of sanctions reveals a subtle repertoire of instruments that was not available to the early-twentieth-century predecessors of today’s statespeople.

Perhaps most importantly, something is absent in the current constellation that was absolutely decisive in 1914: at that time, the fragile equilibrium between the two European alliance blocks encouraged the two sides both to contemplate with relative equanimity the risk of a major conflict, and to fear that the failure to take action sooner rather than later might result in a condition of permanent inferiority. Today, the situation is quite different. There is no equilibrium. The West holds not all, but most, of the cards. We are not working against the clock, as so many of the decision-makers of 1914 felt they were.

This is not an argument for complacency. Putin’s Ukrainian policy has revealed many gaping weaknesses in the crisis management of the Western powers. The EU is still beset by uncertainties about

who or what has the power to determine the Union’s foreign policy—uncertainties that are heightened by the very diverse geopolitical outlooks of the Member States. And the situation currently unfolding in Ukraine could—as the ground-to-air missile attack on Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 recently demonstrated—still generate nasty surprises with the capacity to generate further cycles of escalation. Any game that involves heavily armed proxies in an area of high international tension is fraught with risk.

ORACLES AND LESSONS

We should be wary of one-dimensional, manipulative or reductive readings of the past, especially when these are mobilized in support of present-day political objectives. The recourse to history is most enlightening when we understand that our conversations about the past are as open-ended as our reflections on the present should be.

History is still “the great instructor of public life,” as Cicero once claimed. Being blind to the future, we have no other. Understanding the historical roots of today’s conflicts can complicate polarizing narratives, replacing calumny and propaganda with more nuanced and less emotionally charged arrays of causes and effects. But History’s wisdom does not come to us in the form of pre-packaged lessons. It reaches us in the form of oracles, whose relevance to our current predicaments it is our duty to puzzle over. ●