A dark silhouette of a World War I soldier in profile, facing left. He is wearing a helmet, a high-collared uniform jacket, and a large pack on his back. He holds a rifle vertically in front of him. The background is a solid, vibrant orange.

**The Battles of  
World War I:  
Everything  
You Need  
to Know**

**CHRISTOPHER  
CATHERWOOD**



THE BATTLES OF  
WORLD WAR I:  
Everything You Need to Know

CHRISTOPHER CATHERWOOD

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*To the memory of my great-uncle  
Harold Lloyd-Jones  
1898–1918,  
who never saw the Allied victory,  
and to his wonderful great-niece-in-law,  
my wife Paulette*

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By Christopher Catherwood

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Copyright

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# FOREWORD



The year 2014 heralds the centenary of the beginning of perhaps the most important war in history. Because of World War I many of the extraordinary events and creations of the twentieth century came about. Outstanding examples would include: the Russian Revolution, the rise of Nazism, World War II, the origins of the state of Israel and the creation of several new countries without regard for ethnic mix or ancient rivalries.

Many excellent books have been published recently to begin the commemorative process for this landmark centenary event. Most of them have one thing in common – they are substantial in length. Some of these books, such as those by Max Hastings and Margaret MacMillan, also take us no further than the end of 1914. If they were to cover the whole war they would be several volumes. This is indeed the case for the series that Professor Hew Strachan at Oxford University is now writing.

What, though, if you want just a straightforward overview of some of the key battles of World War I? In an ideal world we would have time to read long books, but in practice there is always a place for something shorter and more succinct. This book aims to fulfil the quest for the latter: a work that gives the key battles and their outcomes in nutshell form.

Brevity, of course, means that some things need to be left out. Regimental histories are great at telling us what brave lieutenant or sergeant accomplished what heroic feat, but with battles containing hundreds of thousands of troops from dozens of regiments, such microscopic detail becomes impossible. Thankfully the Imperial War Museum believed from early on in oral history. The memories and letters of countless British soldiers are not only there to inspect but have been published as well. Precise accounts of individual regimental movements down to unit level are best left to such works. But the bigger picture is also important, and the interpretation and significance of the various confrontations lie at the heart of this particular book.

Inevitably some memorable battles have also had to be omitted. Much of the war in Flanders and northern France from late 1914 until the summer of 1918 consisted of futile attempts by the British and French to batter through German lines. Millions of soldiers died in the horror of the trenches, in the attempt to gain but a few yards of enemy land. And the outcome of many of these battles, each one seen at the time as being so vitally important for the descendants of those who took part in them, sadly ended up being just as fruitless. Only the truly epic clashes such as the Somme or Passchendaele stand out, often, tragically, because of the sheer scale of the carnage involved.

In addition, I have not given details of the Home Front, which has been ably documented in a recent book by Jeremy Paxman. In concentrating on individual battles I have mentioned their context, so some of the background wider history of the war does come in through that route.

Some other issues are important to note.

~~Firstly, no one ever seems to agree on precise casualty figures. Even standard works disagree with each other, and one of these, by Correlli Barnett, shows that this can sometimes lead to discrepancies of several *million* deaths. The figures for Britain and its colonies tend to be somewhat more precise, but the reporting of German and Russian figures can differ wildly. Wikipedia is tremendously helpful as a starting point. However, some of the details there need to be checked against other statistics for a different point of view.~~

Secondly, town names change, and sometimes have changed more than once. St Petersburg briefly became Petrograd, then Leningrad for many years before becoming St Petersburg again. Towns in German Poland changed their names, as did cities in Austrian-ruled Galicia or Bohemia. I have tried to use the name that was employed at that time.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that, if we are to get a balanced picture of the *whole* war, we need to look beyond the Western Front. Communism came to power as a result of the stalemate on the *Eastern* Front. So desperate were the Germans to get Russia out of the war that they sent Lenin back home from exile in Switzerland. The plot worked. The Communists under Lenin took power and withdrew from the conflict. But the world then had seventy-four years of the USSR. During that time millions were killed by the secret police. What became the Cold War lasted from the 1940s down to more recent times.

This book is being written against the backdrop of acute conflict in the Middle East. Many attribute this tragically fairly normal state of affairs to the creation of Israel in 1948. But with no British capture of Jerusalem in 1917 there would have been no Israel to create thirty-one years later. Similarly, without the capture of Damascus in 1918 there might have been no Syria in existence to have a civil war in our own time.

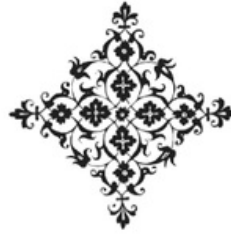
This is an overview, therefore, of battles on both Eastern and Western Fronts. By and large I have not given many eyewitness accounts, since these are readily available in much longer books listed in the bibliography, online through the BBC or Imperial War Museum. Maps are a necessary aide to understanding the geography of war. Today's interactive online maps are superior to classic static ones. The bibliography lists some of the more helpful of these. This work is, if you like, a starter course, designed to whet the appetite for people to gain the aerial photograph view of the war and its causes. The results of World War I are still with us a century later, so that is the focus of much of our book. It looks not just at the key battles of long ago, but at the impact that they have had on the world we live in today.



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INTRODUCTION

HOW WAR BEGAN



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# CHANGING PERSPECTIVES



*In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row*

‘In Flanders Fields’ (1915) by John McCrae, probably the best-known poem of the First World War, reminds us all too vividly of the horrors of that conflict. To the poet’s images we can add men sitting in trenches preparing to go ‘over the top’, cratered landscapes resembling the moon, poison gas and lists of the dead found in nearly every town square, church and school. A generation of young men lost – and to what purpose?

These memories of the First World War remain with us, even though the last veteran died a few years ago. Every year we still stand silent on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, and recall all our war dead. With more recent deaths in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan fresh in our national consciousness, it has become easier to understand again the human sacrifice and sense of loss with every ending of life in combat. War does not seem so remote to us any more. We can therefore get a better grasp of what happened in 1914–1918 than during the recent long years of peace. World War I is relevant again.

Some wars can be described easily. World War II was started by Nazi aggression; about that we have few doubts today. But World War I remains as complex as ever in how it began. Even a century later, debate still rages over who started it and why. We can all see why war broke out in 1939 and why stopping Hitler was necessary. But with 1914, nagging doubts still persist. How did ninety-nine years of peace since Napoleon come to an end, and with such terrible results?

In order to understand this, we need to look at three questions:

- 1) Why were France and Germany enemies in the first place?
- 2) What led to war in 1914?
- 3) Was war inevitable?

We will explore these three questions in the chapters that follow. Historians, like the politicians of an earlier era, still cannot fully agree on who was responsible and why. Yet it is an important discussion even today. We still live with the consequences of the ‘Great War’ of 1914–1918.

One legacy of this war is the situation in today’s Middle East. At the time of writing, fighting is raging in Syria. Once part of the vast Ottoman Empire, Syria was seized by the French as a spoil of war, despite that region being liberated by Australian, British and Arab forces towards the end of World War I. Many of the major problems of the Balkans in the 1990s and the endless violence of the twenty-first-century Middle East stem from the outcome of the battles that we will be

examining in this book. There is general agreement that World War II was caused by the inconclusive end to the fighting in 1918. So too, one can argue, was the Cold War. In fact some historians see the various global conflicts as one, either a new Thirty Years' War (1914–1945) or as a 'Short Twentieth Century' of perpetual uncertainty mixed with actual fighting (1914–1989). So the events of 1914 did not just begin four years of war but decades of conflict, certainly up until 1945 and arguably extending to as recently as 1989 and the end of the Cold War.

While the interest in World War I has remained constant, the interpretations of its events have been numerous. History is just like fashion – always changing! The facts remain the same, but how we interpret them changes continually. Someone puts forward a point of view, which everyone believes for a while. Then some revisionists come along and say that the old view was a major misinterpretation, and that a new theory is the one that really represents why something happened. Debate continues and numerous books and articles get written. Finally, many years later, and with much more perspective available as the original events become more distant in time, a final consensus emerges that either takes a middle view between the extremes, or decides that the original view was right in the first place!

Of few events in history is this truer than of the First World War. Reputations come and go. A general is a hero one moment and a lunatic the next. Battles seen at one time as victories become devastating defeats at another. To take one example, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig began as a towering hero, following which he was seen as a donkey leading brave lions to their needless deaths. Now, nearly a hundred years after the battles he commanded, he is finally seen as a leader who did his utmost best with the terrible cards he was dealt. Similarly Churchill's terrible errors of judgement at Gallipoli are now seen in the light of the lessons he successfully learnt. Because he saw that the army and the navy should co-ordinate their efforts – as had not happened at Gallipoli – in 1940 he was able to co-ordinate Britain's military effort, save his country from defeat and thereby redeem his reputation.

On what, then, do historians concur? They certainly tend to agree that an old rivalry between France and Germany was a crucial factor in the lead-up to the First World War. In order to understand this we must return to events some decades earlier, and to a war that took place in 1870.

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## A CONFLICT BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES



At the start of 1870, France was an empire, ruled over by Emperor Napoleon III, the nephew of the great Napoleon Bonaparte. There was no such country as Germany at this time, only a number of independent German states. There was a powerful kingdom in the north of that region, namely that of Prussia, that stretched from the Dutch border in the west to the Russian in the east. Alongside Prussia there were several much smaller kingdoms (such as Bavaria), grand duchies, principalities and some states of just a few square miles. These nations had been part of the thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire, which lasted from 800–1806, and which for the last 400 years or so had a ruler from the House of Habsburg – one of the most important European royal houses – as its emperor. The attempt by the Austrians to control the future of a potential new German state had been destroyed at a battle in what is now called the Czech Republic, at Sadowa in 1866. The Prussians also coveted being at the heart of a genuinely German nation, in their case one from which Austria would be excluded.

In 1870 Napoleon III fell into a trap laid by the Chancellor (or prime minister equivalent) of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck. This enabled an army under Prussian leadership, but also consisting of troops from the other smaller kingdoms and duchies, such as Saxony and Hesse, to invade French soil. On September 1st 1870 France was completely routed at the Battle of Sedan, a town in northern France. Napoleon III was captured and later deposed and France became a republic, as it has been ever since. The commander of the victorious coalition army was a Prussian general, Helmuth von Moltke, the Elder, who then became one of the most revered soldiers in his country's history.

On January 18th 1871, all the kings, grand dukes and princes whose forces had won at Sedan gathered together for a significant occasion just outside Paris. This gathering only reinforced France's humiliation at the loss of territory. In the Hall of Mirrors in the vast Palace of Versailles, the building constructed to glorify the seventeenth-century French King, Louis XIV, a brand-new country called Germany was created. The Prussian king now became emperor of the new German Empire. It was in fact the Second Reich (the Holy Roman Empire being the First Reich), although few people called it that at the time.

The war that had just happened was called the Franco-Prussian War. But it could equally be called the War that Created Germany. For over a thousand years Germany or its equivalent had been part of larger units, such as the Holy Roman Empire, which included, for example, what is now Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic and much of northern Italy in its wider territory. At last, Germany was a country in its own right.

The Germans now added to their new nation areas that had originally been part of the Holy

Roman Empire for centuries, but for many years had been an integral part of France. The area we call Alsace, centred on Strasbourg, had been French since as long ago as 1648. Lorraine, centred on the town of Nancy, had swapped sides several times but had been definitively French since the early eighteenth century. Both Alsace and Lorraine were now ceded to the new German Empire.

One key thing must be remembered about this war: Britain played no part. In many other parts of the world, such as the scramble to obtain colonies in Africa, the United Kingdom and France had been rivals for much of the nineteenth century and were not on friendly terms. Now that rivalry was lessening, but still no British soldier would die to help France. And the new little kingdom of Belgium, independent only since 1831 when it broke away from the Netherlands, was neutral, such status having been guaranteed by both Britain and France in a treaty of 1839.

France therefore lost a major war, its emperor and substantial territory to a country that had not existed prior to 1871. This was a total humiliation, and one that the French resolved would never happen again. They drew up a series of plans, the latest of which, by 1914, was called Plan XVII. This made clear that if France and the new German state were ever to be at war, France would immediately invade its former territories – Alsace and Lorraine – in a bid to win them back and also knock Germany out of the fight. But it was not just the French who were making plans.

Having beaten the French easily in 1870, the Germans also drew up plans to ensure that they would be able to do so again. The Prussian General Moltke retired, but one of his successors in charge of the army, Field Marshal Count Alfred von Schlieffen, drew up a master plan on his retirement to ensure that Germany would be able to defeat France easily within forty days. This was critical because as France became friends with the Russian Empire, which lay to the east, the danger existed that the German Empire could find itself at war on two fronts at the same time. We shall look at this in much more detail in the next few chapters, since the infamous Schlieffen Plan was to fail utterly. This was all the more poignant, as the leader of Germany's armies in 1914 was none other than Count Helmuth von Moltke, the Younger, the nephew of the great victor of the 1870s.

In 1914 war did break out, with Germany fighting on two fronts at the same time, against both France and Russia. Everyone, especially the Germans and French, remembered the events of 1870. As the German war machine now went actively into operation, the question was: would France be defeated again?

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## THE ROAD TO WAR



On the question of who was responsible for the Great War, the victorious Allies in 1919 had no doubts: the Germans started the war and would now pay for it. The Treaty of Versailles, which concluded the main conflict with Germany, had some controversial clauses. Some of the Allies claimed large payments, or reparations, from Germany to pay for the huge losses that Britain and France had suffered as a result of four years of fighting. This was tied to the infamous ‘war guilt’ clause of the Treaty that specifically accused Germany of starting the conflict and of responsibility for it. Consequently the Germans associated what they believed to be false guilt with the vast payments that they were forced to make to the British and French. Who caused the outbreak of war in 1914 thus became a political issue rather than a simple matter of historical debate.

Everybody agrees that the trigger that led to war was the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by young Bosnian Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip. The leaders of Austria-Hungary were furious and determined to humiliate the Serbs, whom they deemed responsible for the act, whether indirectly (the government) or directly (the ‘Black Hand’, rogue elements of Serbian intelligence). Since the path to war clearly began with this shooting and the Austro-Hungarian reaction, questions of ‘who started it’ might seem a bit odd. Surely, one would think, it was the Austrians who began the conflict? But this is perhaps an overly simplistic way of looking at it. What we should ask instead is this: what was it about the events leading up to World War I that resulted in such a massive and international conflict? Balkan wars had occurred before the Great War without major international involvement. In fact, several had taken place only just prior to 1914, with terrible loss of life but with no Great Power intervention. In 1870 the kingdoms and duchies that were soon to form Germany had invaded France, again without any British action. What was it that made the events in Sarajevo different?

The main suspect has always been the network of alliances that came into being in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bismarck, the creator of Germany in 1870, had been careful to ensure that his country did not have enemies on both sides. He had therefore linked Germany to the other two imperial nations, Russia and Austria-Hungary, in the League of the Three Emperors. But in 1890, the young new Emperor of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had very different ideas, dismissed Bismarck’s caution in international affairs. Germany was still allied to Austria-Hungary, but any sense of friendship with Russia evaporated, so that in 1894 old-fashioned despotic tsarist Russia signed an alliance with modern, republican, democratic France. Since Poland had been carved up and abolished in the late eighteenth century, this meant that Germany had a hostile power to the west in France and to the east in Russia – what is called ‘encirclement’ – enemies on both sides.

Meanwhile, Britain's alliances were also changing. Historically Britain's enemy had been France. The core state of Germany, the kingdom of Prussia, had been the British ally against French aggression, most notably at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. As recently as 1898 Britain and France had almost gone to war with each other over an oasis in the African desert at Fashoda. But in 1904 the two old enemies had patched up all their differences with the Entente Cordiale. And in 1907 Britain, who had spent much of the nineteenth century hostile to Russia – as during the Crimean War – patched up its differences with the Russians, and reversed centuries of alliances.

All attempts to create a close British-German friendship, however, foundered time and again. As the German economy prospered, Britain was seen not as a potential ally but as a rival. Germany after its unification in the 1870s, soon became the industrial, economic and scientific powerhouse of Europe. But it was a new country, and increasingly resentful of Britain, which, in addition to its own economic might, was the world's most powerful country with the biggest overseas empire of its age. When the British invented a brand-new kind of battleship, a dreadnought, the Germans decided that they too wanted to have a fleet that matched the Royal Navy. An arms race now ensued, pitting Britain against Germany, just at the very time when Britain and France were friends and not hereditary enemies.

Therefore by 1914 old alliances of ancient vintage had gone and new ones replaced them. But the question arises: how much did these ties in reality bind the countries involved to go to war?

Cutting short volumes of debate and decades of argument, the main thrust of ideas today is that the states that declared war on each other in August 1914 did not fully understand modern warfare. Once an army mobilised, for instance, it was very difficult to get it to stand down again, especially since the comparatively recent invention of railways made transportation much faster than in the past.

And here we need to remember two key things:

- 1) There had been no major Europe-wide war since Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815, almost a century earlier: all nineteenth-century wars had been local and had not escalated into wider conflict.
- 2) European nations completely failed to take on board any of the lessons of the American Civil War, which should have showed clearly what modern weapons could do. 1914 saw new technology combined with pre-Civil War ways of thinking.

Therefore, in allowing the new system of alliances to determine their actions, the European nations really had no idea of what they were letting themselves in for if war broke out. In Britain and Germany, for example, the overwhelming consensus was that war would be over by Christmas. The carnage and millions of deaths were beyond the comprehension and wildest imagination of all those leaders involved in the decision to go to war, and of the men who cheerfully signed up to fight in what everyone thought would be a short and fleeting conflict.

As a result, the escalation of events between Sarajevo at the end of June and the outbreak of hostilities in August, while clear in retrospect to those of us who know what happened next, simply never occurred to the participants *at the time*. In hindsight they are deeply guilty, but they had no idea of what they were unleashing or of the long-term consequences of their actions. It is only through hindsight that we now understand why World War I is so important. Not only were they launching the 'Great War' but everything that stemmed from it: World War II, the Holocaust, the

Cold War, Stalin and Mao's purges, the Middle East conflict and all the horrors with which we are still living today.

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In essence, one can say that war was caused by the way in which the alliances formed locked countries into their membership. War with one country under such a system automatically led to war with that nation's allies. Russia went to war with Austria-Hungary because the latter had attacked Serbia. As a result Germany went to war with Russia and, as the Russians were allied with France, the French also went to war with Germany.

This, however, is still too simplistic. Although Britain and France had signed agreements with Russia, the British Empire was not obliged to enter the war. The United Kingdom had been neutral when France was defeated in 1870 by what became the newly formed German state. But Britain had signed an agreement that guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium in 1839. At that time the fear was of a French invasion of Belgium, as no such state as Germany then existed. When it came to 1914 the French were so anxious not to violate Belgian neutrality that they waited until after the Germans had breached it.

As for other countries, Italy had been allied to Germany and Austria-Hungary since 1882, but in 1915 decided to switch sides and join Britain and France in order to gain territory from Austria. The Ottoman Empire, which ruled over most of today's Middle East and, until 1913, also over much of Europe and North Africa, had been on the same side as Britain and France in the nineteenth century. But the Ottomans' deadliest enemy had for well over a century been Russia – who was now allied to France! So weeks after the war began, the Ottoman Empire switched from its historic allegiance to France and the United Kingdom and entered the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary. So too did the Ottomans' recent former enemy Bulgaria, who had fallen out with Serbia over the spoils of the Ottoman collapse in Europe. Until the war began, therefore, Italy had ignored the alliance system and both Bulgaria and the Ottomans had been outside it.

So, in brief, the powers aligned at the beginning of the Great War were: the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, against the Triple Alliance of France, Russia and the British Empire. Later the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria joined the Central Powers, while Italy (which until 1915 had been theoretically linked to the Central Powers), Japan and the US joined the Allies.



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## WAS WAR INEVITABLE?



Was war inevitable? Could Britain have kept out of the war as historian Sir Richard Evans suggested on BBC television in 2014? The United Kingdom had not entered into the conflict in 1870. But now, it seems, the situation had changed.

Andrew Adonis, the former Transport Secretary in Gordon Brown's Cabinet, was originally a historian, and he has written about the British Foreign Secretary of 1914, Sir Edward Grey:

Because Sir Edward Grey was such a nice man, historians have followed contemporaries in excusing the fact that he was such a disastrous minister: arguably the most incompetent Foreign Secretary of all time for his responsibility in taking Britain into the First World War, having failed in July 1914 to do all within his power to stop the conflagration. We cannot know what would have happened had British policy been more effective. Probably it was within the power of Asquith and Grey to have kept Britain out of the war. Possibly they could have prevented it entirely, dissuading Germany from supporting Austria in the chain reaction, which led from Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo on June 28th to the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August. However, since virtually any alternative would have been better than what followed from the calamity of July and August 1914 – namely, a European Thirty Years' War, complete with communism, fascism, genocide, the Holocaust, slavery and the partition and subjugation of Eastern Europe for a further half-century – they deserve little benefit of the doubt.

His views are quoted here at length since it seems that this could, if correct, be a wholly new and vitally needed perspective on World War I. What it argues cogently is that the entire war was unnecessary and could have been avoided, with all that followed from such prevention. So-called 'counterfactual' or 'alternative history', made popular in writing – such as that of Winston Churchill giving Robert E. Lee victory over the Union armies at Gettysburg – loves to ask what would have happened if things had been different. One of the most popular of these counterfactuals is 'what if Princip's bullet had missed in 1914?' Fascinating and fun though that is to ask, it is actually the wrong question. This is because it presumes that the alliances pre-August 1914 locked everyone into inevitable action. Once Sarajevo had happened, this question implies, the Great Powers of Europe were doomed!

But the Adonis thesis, while highly controversial with many historians, is arguably worth full consideration. Even with the Archduke's assassination, war need not have happened. For here one could also agree with the new historical view that *Germany really was guilty after all*. History, as demonstrated in previous chapters, often gets argued over in cycles, and now many would make the

case that it was German ambition that triggered war in 1914, far more than the system of alliances.

~~Again to cut much complex historical narrative and debate short, the Germans actually wanted to have a war, and what happened at Sarajevo gave them the excuse that they wanted. If the Archduke's murder had not occurred, there would have been some other trigger that provided the German Empire with an excuse. In particular they wanted to knock out the Russian Empire before that country's armaments programme really got under way and made a German invasion of Russia more problematic. (This is, of course, exactly what Hitler found when he invaded the USSR in 1941 and duly lost the war as a result.)~~

For the problem was not the system of alliances per se but the plans that many of the countries had made as to what to do if war began. Here they were locked into unworkable strategies, as the unfolding story of this book will make clear. What sunk Germany was the Schlieffen Plan, about which the next chapter will have much to say. The key thing here is that it involved German troops invading France *through Belgian territory* (and in the original plan through the Netherlands as well). Belgium being neutral, a German attack was a clear breach of that country's internationally guaranteed status, which Britain had sworn seventy-five years ago, in the Treaty of London, to uphold. Britain had ignored France's plight in 1870, but this was another matter. Germany's invasion of Belgium directly threatened the United Kingdom's security, just as possession of the same part of Europe had done during the great wars fought by Marlborough in the early eighteenth century. However, the British leadership – Asquith the Prime Minister and Grey his Foreign Secretary – completely failed to warn Germany in time of the dire consequences of invading Belgium.

The key question, therefore, is not what would have happened if Princip had missed, but this: would Germany still have gone to war if the Germans had known in good time that invading Belgium would mean war with Britain? True, Germany wanted war with Russia, and since France and Russia were allied, that inevitably meant war with France as well. And in turn that meant Germany fighting a two-front war, against France on its west and the Russian Empire on its east. War with the British Empire, however, was another matter – even though the United Kingdom was primarily a naval, not a land-based, military power. So it is a wholly legitimate question to ask. And the 'Adonis thesis' that Germany would *not* have risked war if they had known that Britain was certain to get involved, becomes an important one to ponder, however controversial it might be. In this case the war would never have begun and the world would now be a profoundly different place from the rubble that emerged in 1918.

All this ties in with another new version of history, one that blames Russia for setting the ball rolling and playing unwittingly into the hands of the Germans. Once again the old 'alliances' theory is put under pressure; although Russia mobilised against Austria-Hungary for the latter's threat to and invasion of Serbia, *there was no alliance between Russia and Serbia*. Russia was not going to war on behalf of an ally, but to avenge a humiliation six years earlier in 1908. In the nineteenth century Russia had portrayed itself as the friend of the Slavic peoples of the Balkans. But in 1908 when Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia, the Russians effectively did nothing to prevent it. Now in 1914 they were determined to act, and in going to war with Austria-Hungary they were making up for their failures six years earlier.

Thus the original sequence of events June to August 1914:

a) Princip assassinates the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

b) The enraged Austrians give an impossible ultimatum to the Serbs, which in turn brings Russia into the war.

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c) Because Russia and Austria-Hungary are at war, Germany sides with their ally, and thus goes to war with Russia and France.

d) By invading France via Belgium, the Germans bring Britain into the war as well.

However, this traditional account leaves out three vital things:

1) The Germans wanted a pre-emptive knockout war with Russia and thus also with that country's French ally.

2) The British failed adequately to make clear to Germany the dire consequences of war through Belgium.

3) Russia need not have gone to war to help Serbia but did so out of choice rather than necessity.

The original account blames the hotheads in Vienna, determined to crush Serbia whatever the consequences. This version clearly makes Austria-Hungary the creator of World War I, since it was their invasion of Serbia that brought in Russia and thus Germany and France as well. According to this interpretation, therefore, Germany is innocent – and both Hitler and the millions of Germans who supported him were right to say that the Allies were unfair in blaming Germany for starting the war and insisting on reparation payments in the Treaty of Versailles.

But the archives now show that Germany wanted an excuse for war, and that Russian militarism played into their hands by bringing the Russian Empire into the war against Germany's ally Austria-Hungary. So even if Russian aggression lit the actual fuse, it is Germany that is truly to blame, because there was no way in which an empire as ramshackle and multi-ethnic as that of Austria-Hungary could have fought the Russians on its own. They had to have German support, and this they received, thereby giving the Germans the excuse for war with Russia that so many wanted.

So this is where some recent thinking on Britain and its role enters in. Germany would not have given the Austrians permission to attack Serbia if the Germans had known that this in turn would lead inevitably to war with both Britain and its entire empire. (Remember in those days war with Britain meant war against Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well, not to mention India.)

What, then, if the British had made abundantly clear to the Germans from the outset that war with France would mean war with Britain as well? Might this have happened?

a) Germany tells Austria-Hungary not to invade Serbia and to accept the Serb compliance with the bulk of the Austrian ultimatum.

b) Austria-Hungary accepts Serbia's apologies.

c) Russia therefore has no excuse to attack Austria-Hungary.

d) Germany therefore realises that the price for attacking Russia is too high – that of British involvement against them.

e) Germany therefore stays at peace and leaves France and Russia alone.

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f) World War I does not happen and the German excuse to invade Russia finds no outlet.

g) Hitler dies as an obscure artist in Munich. Stalin is arrested by the democratically elected Russian government and dies in obscurity in prison while Lenin dies a disappointed exile in Switzerland.

h) The Ottoman Empire survives in the Middle East, with the small Jewish minority in Palestine living peacefully with its mainly Christian Arab neighbours.

i) Theodore Herzl dies in Britain, one of the 50 million Jewish people living happily in Europe with their Gentile neighbours. Germany's most distinguished scientist Albert Einstein is elected President of Germany.

How very different the rest of the twentieth century would have been.

It is of course equally possible that a German-launched war would have happened within a few years nonetheless. But it would have been in very different circumstances. The Austro-Hungarian Empire might well have still collapsed, but through internal civil war, with the Hungarians resisting the rule of the new Emperor Karl.

What all this shows is that World War I was never inevitable, but arose from conscious choices, most notably the deliberate sins of commission by Germany and those of omission by Britain, with Russian decisions also playing a pivotal role. And today, even one hundred years later, we still live with the consequences.

In conclusion, one other thought is worth pondering. As historian Max Hastings argues in his book *Catastrophe* on 1914, Germany, while no Third Reich, was nonetheless an aggressive and militaristic nation. Once war actually began, in contrast to my counterfactual peace above, it was worth fighting the German Empire. Hastings shows that victory for the Kaiser in such a conflict would have created a Europe in which democratic values would have struggled to prevail. Britain would have been horribly isolated and the USA would have remained cut off from Europe, a despotic Old World that most Americans had fled.

So, better that the war had never happened, but once it did, better that Britain and eventually the USA became involved, for the sake of the values for which they stood.

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PART ONE

WAR ON MANY FRONTS



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# THE BATTLE OF THE FRONTIERS



August 2nd–26th 1914

In his famous five-volume work *The World Crisis*, Winston Churchill wrote presciently on the opening of the conflict: ‘The War was decided in the first twenty days of fighting, and all that happened afterwards consisted in battles which, however formidable and devastating, were but desperate and vain appeals against the decision of Fate.’

In terms of a description of what was to happen on the front lines between the German and Allied positions after the Battle of the Frontiers was over, this account cannot be bettered. As we shall see, the nations of Western Europe (and after 1917 their American associate) did not manage to break out of a terrible stalemate for four bloodstained years, in which hundreds of thousands of courageous men died to gain what was often no more than just a few yards of soil.

But what determined where those trenches would be situated, strung out as they were from the Atlantic Ocean to the Swiss border, across southern Belgium and northern France? And why, unlike in 1870 and a more famous German victory in 1940, did the French manage to defy fate and hold out against their invaders? The next few chapters will explain the reasons why.

Churchill was almost right in ascribing the outcome to a mere twenty days. Most historians reckon that the ‘Battle for the Frontiers’ lasted from August 2nd to August 26th, just four days longer. Churchill was right, as we shall see, to ascribe the outcome of the war to the very earliest engagements between the two enemies, the Allies (the United Kingdom, France and Russia) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary and soon thereafter the Ottoman Empire).

Churchill’s view would in many ways seem obvious. Max Hastings, one of the doyens of British military history, agrees in his book *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War in 1914* with the wisdom of following a Churchillian understanding of events. Some academic historians have found this approach slightly simplistic, and there are of course always tiny exceptions to every generalisation if one wants a highly nuanced perspective. But the simplest explanation in a glance at the events of August 1914 would seem to coincide with what one can call the Churchill/Hastings idea: that Germany tried to invade and conquer France in rapid time, and in failing to accomplish that goal assured their own eventual defeat four years later.

Plans can be realistic. But they can also be fantasy if all the possible contingencies are not taken into account.

There is an excellent case for saying that the carefully laid down and minutely prescribed Schlieffen Plan, in which the Germans were placing total faith, was in truth based on fantasy, not reality. For all depended upon three factors:

1) an extraordinarily tight timetable,

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2) that nothing would happen that was not already in the plan itself and, above all,

3) that the German army would manage to vanquish its foes.

One small delay, unexpected event or successful piece of French resistance and the whole edifice of Schlieffen was in danger of falling down like a pack of cards.

We shall be looking at the outcome of the Schlieffen Plan in detail as the next few chapters of this book unfold. But let us go back to the beginning, when the Germans still had belief and hope and the war that they had long anticipated now became a reality.

On August 3rd and 4th the German invasion of Belgium began. Belgian neutrality had been strictly observed in 1870 and now it was ignored. And because of that decision, Britain did what it had not done in 1870 and joined in the war, because of the Treaty of 1839 that guaranteed Belgium's inviolability. On August 2nd the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg had also been invaded. This tiny country was also theoretically neutral, under the rule of its Grand Duchess. But it fell along with its great fortress, and entered German hands.

Whether Britain would perhaps have gone to war in 1914 just to protect France is a moot point one much discussed by historians and strategists ever since. But most people agreed that Belgium was sacrosanct, and so the United Kingdom and thus (in those days) its Empire as well declared war on Germany.

Now a key part of Schlieffen had become unstuck, since no allowance for Britain entering the war had been made. While the British Expeditionary Force, Britain's own troops were, as we shall see later, tiny compared to the French and German behemoths, even the BEF's very existence did tip the scales in France's favour in a way for which Schlieffen had not planned. Within a few days many other declarations of war had taken place, one of these being that of Japan against the Central Powers, a factor that considerably increased the scope of what had been simply a European war. As well as ignoring the likely British action, Schlieffen did not allow for anything like the Belgian degree of resistance that now ensued. This was still the honeymoon period of the war, with millions of troops going into battle all expecting that the war would be over by Christmas. Reading what people wrote or expressed back in the summer of 1914 is extraordinary. The degree of optimism which was mutually contradictory as it was held as absolute truth by each side, was so soon to be crushed. The millions cheering their country's forces were in the ultimate fool's paradise. This makes 1914 utterly different from 1939, when everyone knew all too well what might be coming next.

Belgium had an army that was not much bigger than the size of the British Expeditionary Force now embarking from England. But the country possessed some of the most powerful forts in the world, in particular that protecting the city of Liège. Today, with air power a major component of any war, faith in fortifications seems somewhat quaint. In those days, however, it was a vital part of a nation's protection, from Belgium to Austria-Hungary over to Russia. In addition, Liège had some outer forts, so a great deal would need to be captured to render the entire system inoperable.

The original Schlieffen Plan had required Germany to breach Dutch as well as Belgian neutrality. Wiser counsels had prevailed and that idea within the Plan had been sensibly dropped. But the issue remained – should the invading German armies wheel past Liège and opt to take the fortress later once they were well on their victorious way to Paris, or should the fortress and its

satellites be seized first?

On August 5th German troops began the bombardment of Liège. General Gérard Leman decided to hold the fortress until the last, and so a longer siege than had been anticipated now began. Fortunately for the Germans, one of their greatest commanders now came to the rescue of the invaders. This was General Erich Ludendorff, an expert in logistics and in possible alternative ways of winning a war. He decided to employ Zeppelins, the huge airships that had been invented in Germany not long before. The fortress was not seriously damaged but many civilians died in the air raid, the first of many who would be slaughtered by a German army decreasingly concerned with human rights.

By August 7th the main citadel had been breached, but several of the smaller forts were still holding out zealously. Ludendorff now decided to utilise the 'Big Bertha', a massive gun manufactured by the German armaments firm Krupp, one that was to remain notorious over the years ahead. And one interesting codicil: the 'Big' of 'Big Bertha' was a reference not to the physical size of Bertha Krupp, after whom the guns were said to be named, but to that of the artillery pieces themselves! On August 12th the Big Berthas began to fire, with powerful shells specially designed to break through substances such as concrete. This worked where all else had failed. On August 16th even the forts were compelled to surrender. Since the poor Belgian commander General Leman had been knocked out, he was truthfully able to say that he had not himself agreed to give in to the German assault.

Vital days had now been lost, but the French were determined still, against all evidence to the contrary, to stick to their Plan XVII and launch a major offensive against the Germans in Alsace and Lorraine. Meanwhile British troops had landed, as described later in the chapter on the Battle of Mons. This meant that although the Schlieffen Plan had gone awry, no major army existed to prevent the Germans from their planned assault, now into France itself.

The Germans were, while in occupation of most of Belgium, terrified of a resistance movement. Therefore they decided on draconian measures to ensure that the Belgian people did not manage to carry out acts of sabotage or other forms of resistance. Countless atrocities now took place. In the town of Dinant, for example, no fewer than 612 civilians were massacred. Shockingly, when 384 similarly innocent people were butchered, the atrocity happened in broad daylight in the town square.

In Louvain, then as now one of the great intellectual centres of Europe, far worse horrors were perpetrated by an increasingly jumpy and paranoid German occupying army. One of the world's finest libraries was in this city and was now burnt to the ground, with no fewer than 230,000 rare and irreplaceable books being destroyed. Some 209 civilians were simply massacred and tens of thousands of citizens forced to evacuate the area.

This created huge international outrage against Germany, critically including large waves of disgust in the still neutral United States. While leading German intellectuals such as the scientist Max Planck were embarrassed by their fellow countrymen, the path to the even greater atrocities of the Holocaust and the Russian Front of future years had now been taken. The Allies had a major propaganda coup and the war was still only a few days old.

So far as the French were concerned, however, the main war was still hundreds of miles away in Alsace-Lorraine! Much hard fighting took place there, since the German armies now under attack did not wish to remain inactive. Soon, French troops that were supposed to be liberating Alsace-Lorraine found themselves in ignominious retreat.

The French commander actually near the real fighting on the Belgian border, General Charles



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