

# Iraq, Syria, and Today's Other Killfests: The Great War as the Tragic Gift that Keeps on Giving

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The conflict in Iraq started a century ago. One hundred years ago on June 28, to be exact. So did the civil war in Syria. Along with Russia's dismemberment of Ukraine. The bloody collapse of Yugoslavia. The disastrous Soviet experiment. And the enduring fight between Israelis and Palestinians.

All of these conflicts, and much more, grew out of World War I.

At the turn of the 20th century Europeans expected to live the good life in what they called La Belle Epoque. Countries were industrializing, economies were expanding, trade was growing, empires were loosening.

Then Serbian terrorist Gavrilo Princip fired two shots, lighting the fuse to a global conflagration, leaving death, destruction, poverty, misery, and tyranny in its wake. We continue to pay the price for perhaps the most effective act of state terrorism in human history. Yet on the hundredth anniversary of this horrific moment Bosnian Serbs erected statues, unveiled mosaics, and held banquets for the man who destroyed much of the modern world.

The 1800s were a time of conflict. Early the next century, however, all of the major powers were enjoying the benefits of peace, despite periodic eruptions in the Balkans. Globalizing markets spread prosperity. Optimists spoke of the economic impossibility of war. Socialists predicted that the working class would unite across national boundaries to prevent conflict. The empires of Austro-Hungary, Germany, and Russia seemed ready for liberal, democratic reform.

But on June 28, 1914 19-year-old Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip shot Franz Ferdinand, heir to the ramshackle Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife Sophie. The crime resembled a comic-opera, with imperial authorities and Serbian conspirators matching each other in flamboyant

incompetence. But Franz Ferdinand's handlers made the final mistake, as the royal couple ended up in a stopped car in front of Princip.

Princip targeted Ferdinand because the latter intended to improve the status of the Slavic peoples in a polyglot state dominated by Austrian and Hungarian elites. If Ferdinand had succeeded, Princip's hope for an expanded Serbian nation would have been for naught. Croats and Muslims had no sympathy for the conspirators. After the assassination anti-Serb rioting engulfed Sarajevo. However, the damage was done. Death warrants for some 17 million people across the continent and around the world were signed in Ferdinand's blood.

The fuse was long between the murders and the war. The intervening weeks were filled with ultimatums, threats, plans, conversations, alternatives, mobilizations, and pleas. No one truly desired war. However, otherwise decent human beings appeared at their most stupid while holding Europe's future in their hands.

Fear caused statesmen to make reckless demands. Hubris caused leaders to assume others would give way. Despair caused officials to surrender to circumstances. Even after governments belatedly recognized the danger they found that "control has been lost and the stone has begun to roll," as German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg haplessly put it, and roll unstopably. Statesmen finally shocked into action to maintain peace were told it was too late: the massive war machines had no brakes, the mobilization plans would accept no delay. Many leaders came to believe war to be inevitable, and that if it was going to come, it might as well come then. Crowds cheered as soldiers mobilized and marched off to war.

The conflict was unforgivably reckless, myopic, and stupid. Contrary to the history written by the victors, blame was widely shared.

Great Britain enjoys the best reputation because it was on the winning side and, equally important, ran the war's most brilliant PR operation. While the British could claim the most liberal state, despite their vast colonial holdings, Germany's franchise was in fact broader. Wilhelmine Germany, too, was a constitutional state bounded by law, despite its flawed political structure. Its colonial holdings were much smaller due to its much later start.

Belgium looked to be the most innocent, but actually was the most murderous to people outside of its borders: millions of Africans died in the Belgian Congo, perhaps the most malgoverned of all European colonies. France, also a colonial empire, was a revenge-minded democracy, determined to seize back territory lost four decades previously -- which centuries before had been stolen from defeated German states. Paris shared Berlin's lack of moral scruples about war but was more concerned about international, and especially British, opinion. Austro-Hungary was less democratic, but the empire's complicated governing structure contained important checks and balances within.

Also a member of the Entente was the anti-Semitic despotism of the Tsar. Grotesquely inefficient with occasional liberal impulses, it was an embarrassment to the "war for democracy." Far worse was its small protégé, Serbia, which staged the act of state terrorism against Austro-

Hungary. Serbian Military Intelligence targeted Ferdinand and armed the wannabe assassins, including Princip.

On the side of the Central Powers was the Ottoman Empire, sclerotic, incompetent, and authoritarian. Of lesser note was Bulgaria, which completed the Quadruple Alliance, and Romania and Italy, which joined the Entente. The latter was democratic, but motivated by booty rather than principle. Rome joined the conflict only after being promised territory from the Austrian-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. With its eyes on German territories in the Pacific, Japan also joined the Entente.

The best that could be said of this disreputable menagerie of combatants was that the U.S. had nothing at stake which warranted associating with any of them. Washington should have let the great and not-so-great imperial powers battle it out over whatever it was that divided them. Certainly not democracy or militarism. Both sides had some of the former and too much of the latter. Certainly not human liberty and dignity. The records of both sides were mixed, to say the least. The war resulted from a toxic mix of nationalistic excess, territorial ambition, and nightmarish fears.

Unfortunately, America's president, the haughty, sanctimonious, and egotistical -- even monomaniacal -- Woodrow Wilson imagined himself as God's anointed to bring peace to the earth, and that required America to become a belligerent. Wilson also was outraged when Germany employed a new weapon, the submarine, against British shipping. However, Berlin had little choice, since London armed its passenger liners, filled their holds with ammunition, and ordered the ships to ram submarines which surfaced to verify the vessel's civilian status. For instance, the famed Lusitania mixed bullets with babies, and sank as a result of the secondary explosion of the munitions carried below.

After being safely reelected as a proponent of peace, Wilson pushed America into Europe's killfest. Rather than consider making peace, the war-weary allies waited for the Americans. But the Russian Empire didn't have enough time. In March 1917 the Tsar fell, replaced by a liberal coalition that foolishly continued the war. By November the Russian people had had enough and the Bolsheviks seized power. That tortured nation dropped out of the war, but almost immediately was plunged into an even more virulent civil war.

With Germany facing defeat an armistice was reached in November 1918. The vainglorious Wilson enunciated high-minded principles for peace, but was thoroughly out-manuevered at the Versailles Peace Conference the following year. The allies plundered the defeated while dictating a vengeful peace. The result proved to be merely an armistice for a generation. Like the journey from Princip to World War I, the path from Versailles to Adolf Hitler was long but clear.

Although Wilson gained his beloved League of Nations -- which his co-belligerents twisted into a guarantor for the victors -- Americans were less impressed by Wilson's willingness to sacrifice their sovereignty. The president, then debilitated by a stroke, rejected any compromise and the Senate rejected the treaty. Americans quickly defenestrated Wilson's discredited political legacy.

All of the major belligerents were foolish and myopic, but none more so than America. At least the European participants had recognizable, if not necessarily substantial, interests at stake in the crisis growing out of Gavrilo Princip's two gunshots. Moreover, the Europeans were bound by an earlier error: forging competing alliances which effectively transferred the decision to go war to reckless smaller states. This Rube Goldberg security structure turned a dual assassination in Sarajevo into a conflict spanning the globe.

Wilson's campaign to drag the U.S. into war made even less sense. The conflict impacted American commerce, but both sides were at fault. American financial institutions essentially bet on the Entente with extensive loans, but that was a private decision made during the war. Strategically, Washington had no reason to favor either set of imperial combatants. The U.S. would not be threatened by whoever won, and would gain little by participating even on the victorious side.

Wilson's real objective was global social engineering. Only by joining the conflict did he believe he could reorder the world for everyone's benefit. War would be banished, cooperation would be enshrined, the lion would lie down with the lamb. Wilson got his chance. But, alas, his effort backfired spectacularly.

The potentially reforming empires of Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia all disappeared. Eastern Europe was filled with what Germans called Saisonstaaten, or "states for a season" -- as many proved to be. The allies carved up the carcass of the Ottoman Empire, creating artificial entities like Iraq and Syria under British and French control, and giving Britain a mandate to occupy Palestine, which later became Israel.

Economic and social crises afflicted even the victors, while the virulent bacilli of communism, fascism, and Nazism were loosed among the losers. The Great Depression then spread immiseration widely. A generation later Europeans went to war again, causing far greater death, destruction, and dislocation. Today, territorial creations in the Balkans and Middle East continue to implode.

Winston Churchill -- who emerged as Britain's essential man in World War II -- observed in 1936:

"America should have minded her own business and stayed out of the World War. If you hadn't entered the war the Allies would have made peace with Germany in the spring of 1917. Had we made peace then there would have been no collapse in Russia followed by Communism, no breakdown in Italy followed by Fascism, and Germany would not have signed the Versailles Treaty, which has enthroned Nazism in Germany."

After a century the U.S. should learn geopolitical lessons from what then was called the Great War. For instance, **appeasement often works**. Political figures routinely intone "Munich" without understanding that episode's unique circumstances. In fact, before 1938 "appeasement" was a routine practice that oft avoided war. A little more "appeasement" in the summer of 1914 would have prevented World War I -- and its many spinoff conflicts.

**Using violence to achieve one's political ends usually backfires.** Princip's bullets hit home, but he died of tuberculosis in prison during the war. Serbia was occupied by Austria-Hungary. Though the Serbs gained influence in the new country of Yugoslavia that resulted from Versailles, Serbia was occupied by the Nazis during World War II and submerged in an independent communist state under severe Soviet pressure during the Cold War. Serbs were both perpetrators and victims during Yugoslavia's violent break-up two decades ago.

**Alliances often accelerate hostilities rather than deter conflict.** In World War I, the two competing blocs became transmission belts of war rather than firebreaks to war. Because all of the leading European countries were linked militarily, two gunshots in Sarajevo triggered conflict across Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and even eventually reaching America.

**War is no humanitarian exercise, no tool to advance liberalism.** Rather, "war is the health of the state," observed social critic Randolph Bourne. Germany pioneered the practice of "war socialism," which was adopted in some form by all of the belligerents. Many of the regulations survived the war, or were revived in future conflicts. Civil liberties were sacrificed everywhere: the conflict was the low point in American history for protecting dissenters. Wilson even asked Congress to criminalize criticism of the president.

**Intervention usually creates new, more difficult problems, begetting more intervention.** U.S. entry into World War I triggered a violent, destructive process which continues to draw in America and other nations. Most every military step, from entry into World War I to the invasion of Iraq, has spawned new geopolitical problems and new demands for military action. The cycle repeats, again and again, to this day.

The morning of June 28, 1914 dawned bright for most Europeans. By sunset a geopolitical cataclysm loomed. World War I demonstrated the importance of saying no. Any of the great powers could have stopped the march toward war. America could have refused to join the parade after it started. The world would have been a better place had one or all done so.

Today, Washington is filled with routine proposals for new interventions: bombing campaigns, foreign invasions, and military occupations. Most seem unlikely to trigger a new world war. But a century ago no one expected an assassination in a distant Balkan province to do so either. That is reason enough for Americans to make war truly a last resort.

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