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Volker R. Berghahn: Europe in the Era of Two World Wars

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Europe before World War I, 1895–1914

INDUSTRIAL ECONOMY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Considering its political, economic, and sociocultural consequences, it is no surprise that World War I has been called the “primordial catastrophe” (*Urkatastrophe*) of the twentieth century.¹ In the light of what happened during the war and in the two decades after its end in 1918, the escalation of physical violence presents historians with great problems, and to this day they are struggling to find plausible explanations. Europe had not seen mass death on such a scale since the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century. Millions of people perished, not to mention the destruction of material assets in a wave of violence that finally came to a cataclysmic end in 1945, ushering in a more peaceful period, at least for western Europe and the United States, though not for other parts of the world.

As far as Europe is concerned, its eastern half was separated off by the Iron Curtain, which became the front line between two extra-European superpowers commanding a huge arsenal of nuclear weapons. Despite this cold war between the West (First World) and the Soviet bloc (Second World) that at times seemed to be turning into a hot war, western Europe experienced an epoch relatively free of violence and devoted to material reconstruction and the creation of a new prosperity and political democracy. John Gaddis has called this era the “long peace.” It was to a degree; the killing of innocent civilians that had increasingly become the hallmark of the years 1914–45 continued in the Third World, while countless opponents of Stalinist rule died in the gulags and prisons of the Second World.

In light of the rupture that the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 caused in the development of Europe, some historians have been tempted to introduce counterfactual speculations. They have asked how the historical process might have evolved if war had not broken out at that point. Such speculations have been particularly fashionable with respect to Russia and Germany. As to Russia, it has been asserted that the political and economic reforms introduced by the tsarist regime with the abolition of serfdom in the 1860s and later proceeded before and after the revolutionary upheavals of 1905 would have successfully continued. There would have been no 1917 Bolshevik revolution and consequently no Lenin and no Stalin. In short, Russia’s development and hence that of world history would have taken a

different and, in any case, less violent path through the period covered in this book.²

Similar arguments have been advanced with regard to Germany: without World War I, no defeat in 1918, no Hitler, and no Holocaust. In a variation of Manfred Rauh's hypothesis that Germany found herself on the road to parliamentarism, Margaret Anderson concluded that without the catastrophe of World War I the peaceful democratization of the imperial monarchy would have unfolded successfully.³ A nonviolent "leap" into a parliamentary constitutionalism would have occurred, as in 1918: "Perhaps the death of the Kaiser at eighty-three would have sped a regime change—in 1941—analogue to Spain's after the death of Franco at the same age in 1975." She is circumspect enough to add that "we cannot know."⁴

While counterfactuals once again appear to have become quite popular, more recently promoted with respect to World War I by Niall Ferguson,⁵ it is probably more fruitful to start with other trends that were disrupted by World War I. Thus it may be said with much greater certainty that the dynamic expansion of industry and of the world trading system would have continued without the catastrophe of 1914. This industrial economy, it is true, being exposed to the vagaries of a capitalistically organized market for goods and services, underwent repeated upswings and recessions. Still, economic historians generally agree that even the years of the so-called Great Depression of 1873–95 in effect amounted to a period of retarded growth. Overall trade and industry increased even during those years of a widely perceived downturn. Continued growth was particularly marked in the branches of the so-called Second Industrial Revolution, that is, chemicals, electrical engineering, and machine manufacturing. Most important, from 1895, the world economy entered a boom period that, with a few short recessions, lasted until just before World War I.

Here are a few statistics relating to Europe's basic industries on which the prosperity of the new branches could be built. These figures also reflect the changing economic balances between the nations that were also affected by the dynamics of industrial expansion. In Britain, then the leading industrial country, annual iron production reached 6.5 million tons in the early 1870s, four times that of Germany (1.6 million tons) and more than five times that of France (1.2 million tons), with Russia trailing far behind at a level of 375,000 tons. By 1913 annual production of the German empire had not only increased almost tenfold (14.8 million tons), but it had also overtaken that of Britain (9.8 million tons). France's production had grown fourfold, but with 4.7 million tons the country was not that far ahead of Russia (3.9 million tons). As to coal mining, Britain was able to double its production between 1880 and 1913 and thus retain its lead over Germany (191 million tons, plus 87.5 million tons of lignite). In annual steel production, however, there was a marked change. In 1890, Britain was still well ahead of Germany (3.6 mil-

lions tons versus 2.2 million). In 1913, however, the Germans outproduced the British by a factor of three (18.6 million versus 6.9 million).

The expansion of industry—especially after 1895—left agriculture well behind. Thanks to rapid population growth, demand for agricultural produce rose in most regions of Europe, but farming was no longer as profitable as it had been in the 1850s and 1860s. In the years before 1914, the largest gains could be made in the industrial and commercial sectors. Agriculture fell behind. This development is reflected in the migratory patterns from the rural parts to the urban centers and the momentous growth of the industrial cities. They attracted millions of workers who were hoping to find a better life than their current one as land laborers on the large estates in East Prussia, Italy, and Ireland, or as smallholders on farmsteads that could barely support a family. Millions more Europeans emigrated to North America and other parts of the world.

Finally, the rapid expansion of domestic and foreign trade has to be considered. The volume of European exports doubled between 1870 and 1900 and—except for two brief recessions in 1900–1901 and 1907–1908—followed an upward trend. By 1913, two-thirds of trade took place among the nations of Europe. Some 13 percent of all goods went to North America. Import and export figures doubled and trebled. Africa and Asia participated in this internationalization of the world economy to the tune of 15 percent. However, as will be seen when we look more closely at the age of imperialism and colonialism, the terms of trade with the European powers were extremely unfavorable and largely imposed by the metropolitan countries, often accompanied by ruthless methods of political domination.

However much Europe as a whole benefited from the dynamic expansion of its industries and its global trading relations, the gains were very unevenly distributed among the domestic populations. It was above all the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie that was able to accumulate wealth. Their lifestyles and urban residences began to compete with those of the nobility, especially at the many smaller courts of Central Europe. There is the description of the British prime minister William Gladstone, who was quite used to the splendor of British upper-class social life in London. Having attended a party at the residence of the Berlin private banker Gerson Bleichroeder, he gave the following description of what he had seen: “The banqueting hall, very vast and very lofty, and indeed the whole mansion is built of every species of rare marble, and where it is not marble it is gold. There was a gallery for the musicians who played Wagner, and Wagner only, which I was very glad of, as I have rarely had the opportunity of hearing that master. After dinner, we were promenaded through the splendid saloons—and picture galleries, and the ball-room fit for a fairy-tale, and sitting alone on the sofa was a very mean-looking little woman, covered with pearls and diamonds, who was Madame Bleichroeder and whom he had married very early

in life when he was penniless. She was unlike her husband, and by no means equal to her wondrous fortune.”⁶

In comparison to the wealth of the upper-middle classes, the circumstances of the working class were, to be sure, much more modest. Still, in most European countries living standards were also rising among these strata. Many families could not only afford better nutrition and hygiene but were increasingly able to enjoy pleasures of the “little man,” such as tobacco and beer. Wages gradually rose and work hours in industry and commerce were slowly reduced from twelve to eleven or ten. This meant that many men and women, who had escaped the much more restrictive routines of labor in agriculture, gained more leisure time. There was more time to socialize with family and friends that was also reflected in the expansion of associational life. Ultimately, there was hardly a hobby in pre-1914 Europe that people could not pursue within an association or club in conjunction with like-minded people. In this sense, the currently much debated idea of a civil society may be said to have been fully developed well before World War I.

Sports became increasingly popular, but just as other clubs and associations tended to be segregated by social class, sports were also stratified. Soccer drew most of its supporters, active and passive, from the working class. The bourgeoisie, by contrast, preferred tennis, field hockey, and golf. But even among such traditionally aristocratic sports as horse racing popularization set in. And where equestrian sports were too expensive and exclusive, the British lower classes, for example, could go the local greyhound races hoping that by betting a few pennies on their favorite dog they might win some money. The idea of competition among clubs and teams created solidarities. Even if people were not actively engaged in a particular sport, they were keen to support their local team.⁷

The prosperity of the pre-1914 years stimulated other leisure activities: shopping and window shopping. While in the provinces shopping continued to be primarily the purchase of daily provisions and other goods in small specialized corner shops—at the same time an important means of local communication among neighbors—cities also had large department stores. These “palaces of consumption” used attractive displays and invited anonymous buying of often mass-produced clothes off the peg and household goods; or, during sales, they encouraged wandering in the aisles in search of a bargain. What was offered here at affordable prices was linked to another phenomenon that spread in the prewar years: rationalized factory production and the increasingly cunning marketing of cheap goods, particularly in the department stores.⁸

Many—though by no means all—of the innovations in the fields of mass production and selling had been developed in the United States, which had undergone a process of rapid industrialization in the final decades of the nineteenth century and by 1900 was among the most powerful industrial

nations. Between 1860 and 1900, its railroad network had grown from 35,000 to 250,000 miles, which not only stimulated the iron and steel industries but also opened up a large domestic market with a rapidly growing population. This in turn encouraged rationalization of production. Above all, it was Frederick Taylor and the Scientific Management movement that, by introducing time-and-motion studies and other ideas, propagandized improvements in factory organization and added financial incentives for workers and white-collar management to increase productivity.⁹ Engineers designed ever more fast-producing machines, while others labored to make the sales and accounting departments more efficient. Henry Ford, one of the pioneers of the automobile, developed not only the assembly line but also the idea of using a large part of the productivity gains of rationalized mass production to pay bonuses to his diligent workers and to reduce prices. Rather than pocketing all the profits himself, he passed rationalization gains on to the consumer.

His calculation was that even if average families did not have markedly more money in their pockets, their living standard would rise by virtue of the lower prices they would have to pay for goods, including those, such as consumer durables, that were hitherto out of reach. In this fashion, mass-produced items with reduced prices would be affordable to strata of society that had been spending their income on daily necessities. They might be able to buy a glass of beer, or a cigar, or visit to the local dance hall or cinema. Henry Ford was more ambitious, hoping to turn them all into owners of his popular car models that came off the assembly lines of his factories in Michigan. It was Ford's solution to the theory of domestic underconsumption that John A. Hobson had put forward at the turn of the century in his critique of costly British imperialism that, in his view, enriched the few and held back the prosperity of the many.

However, in this pre-1914 period there were also many obstacles to the realization of Ford's dream of creating a civilian mass-production and mass-consumption society that had little to do with imperialism. Looking at Europe, three must be mentioned here.

1. The trend toward a mass-based prosperity had a "civilizing" effect, as defined in our introduction, in regions of Europe that participated in the process of industrial and commercial expansion. Where this trend was powerful enough, earlier forms of violence and the relentless exertion of superior state power receded. Civilian mentalities and practices spread both in daily social intercourse and in political culture. This is not to downplay down the presence of violence in the urban and industrial societies of pre-1914 Europe, although it was in most cases no longer applied to arbitrarily kill and maim. Still, many families, whether middle class or working class, continued to be subjected to the superior muscle power of the husband and father. Where the majority of people in the urban centers were forced to live in one- or two-room apartments in huge blocks, the "rental garrisons," tensions

would often explode into physical attacks on the weaker family members. For pupils in schools and apprentices in the workshops, corporal punishment was common, never mind the bullying by fellow students in the schoolyard. Those arrested by the police on criminal or political charges could not expect to be treated with kid gloves, and in the judiciary the dominant principle was retribution, not rehabilitation. Striking workers had to flee from the blows of the police truncheon.

With the introduction of universal service millions of young men were recruited into a highly coercive institution devoted to the administration of violence in foreign and civil war. Army drill was harsh everywhere. Before 1914, all European nations were busily preparing for a foreign war that, in an increasingly tense political atmosphere, many thought might break out at any time. Production was not just for peaceful consumption but also for war and the extreme forms of violence that are the subject of subsequent chapters. And yet, notwithstanding arms races and mass armies, well-equipped with modern weapons, ordinary men and women went about their peaceful and nonviolent pursuits as before. In this sense, prewar Europe labored under a strange contradiction. In essence, a majority of citizens led civilian lives and consumed the nonmilitary goods that rising incomes afforded them. But this idea and its practice were permanently threatened by the production and stockpiling of armaments that, if used in a major war, would consume millions of soldiers and civilians.

2. The evolution of a civil society in Europe during the nineteenth century was initially carried forward by the middle classes and later also by the growing working-class movements. Time and again during those decades their aspirations collided with entrenched and institutionalized forms of compulsion that were most tangibly embodied in the universal service army as the *ultima ratio regum*, ready to be used not merely against foreign enemies but also against groups that challenged the socioeconomic and political status quo. And there was yet another contradiction rooted in the existing liberal-capitalist system. Although the prewar boom was clearly driven by the market forces capitalism had unleashed, it proved difficult to achieve a better distribution of the material gains. Those who, in the competition for greater personal prosperity, got the short end of the stick perceived the persistent social inequalities as unjust and unacceptable. Since this was increasingly also an age of political participation by the “masses” and of an expansion of the suffrage that proved irreversible, feelings of bitterness turned into protests. They found support from political parties that agreed with the criticisms of existing socioeconomic conditions and translated them into programmatic demands for change.¹⁰

Parts of the propertied classes and their intellectual and political mouthpieces who were alarmed by these developments began to promote the idea

of gradual reform, and in this they were joined by some more moderate leaders of the working-class movement. They had given up the notion of bringing about a social revolution toward which their more radical comrades were working. In their view, reforms should help overcome the most glaring inequalities and offer a more equitable sharing of the wealth being generated. To be sure, on the Left there were many who deemed capitalism constitutionally incapable of accepting and implementing such reforms. For them a fundamental change rather than reformism offered the only chance to rectify the material condition of the “masses.” They viewed capitalism as a brutal system of exploitation of wage earners by the owners of the means of production to which the only response was the creation of a counterforce and ultimately an overthrow.

Fear of a “revolution from below,” in which memories of the upheavals of 1789 in France, of 1848, especially in Central Europe, and of the short-lived Paris Commune of 1870–71 played an important role, mobilized the opposition not only to left-wing revolutionaries but also against bourgeois reformists. Various people proposed countering the demands for shared prosperity, greater social equality, and political participation with a policy of violent containment. In their eyes it was the main task of the police and judiciary, and as a last resort the army, to arrest the growth of the working-class movement and, if necessary, even destroy it. Assuming that this superior force would secure ultimate victory over the forces of radical change, they were even prepared to contemplate the possibility of civil war. The result was a polarization of politics in Europe before 1914, particularly in Central Europe, and the use of the repressive apparatus of the state against political demonstrations and strikes. When the suffragettes took their protest to the streets, they were dispersed by the police. Industrial workers who struck to demand higher wages and better working conditions were likewise roughed up and imprisoned. Since the demonstrators did not give up easily, there were injuries and even fatalities.¹¹ In short, while the societies of Europe became more complex and diverse, tensions and levels of violence increased.

3. However, not all those who saw a strategy of gradual reform within a liberal-capitalist market and civil society as no more than an invitation to the “masses” to advance further claims to participation favored the notion of a use of violence that would simply put the clock back. There were also influential voices who wanted to divert left-wing criticism of the hierarchical structures and injustices at home into the international system. In their eyes, overseas possessions opened up not only opportunities for sending the disaffected and disgruntled abroad as settlers, while increasing support among those who stayed behind by holding up to them the prospect of imperial

prestige and global influence, but also by promising them higher living standards thanks to the material gains from trade with the colonies.

The British entrepreneur Cecil Rhodes articulated this concept bluntly in 1895 when he remarked: “My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem, i.e., in order to save the 40,000,000 inhabitants of the United Kingdom from bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them in the factories and mines. The Empire is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists.”¹² In Germany, the naval officer and later navy minister Alfred Tirpitz wrote in a similar vein a year later, “In my view, Germany will in the coming century quickly sink back from its position as a great power if we do not push on now energetically, without losing time, and systematically with those general maritime interests [of ours], to no small degree also because the great national task and the economic gains that will come with it constitute a strong palliative against educated and uneducated Social Democrats.”¹³

There can be no doubt that the export of millions of migrants to the colonies and to North America before 1914 helped reduce social tensions at a time of high European birthrates and hence the potential for violent conflicts within the industrializing societies of Europe. Otherwise it might have been difficult to find employment for all of them at home. At the same time they acted as a “white bridge” with their former homelands who were deemed to require military and naval protection abroad. Those who stayed behind were told that the colonies contributed to rising prosperity, even if in fact it was rather more a minority of businessmen who actually reaped the benefits.

Considering that the costs of ruling and administering vast stretches of land overseas had to be borne by the broad masses of taxpayers, it is not surprising that critics like Hobson doubted at the turn of the century, just as many economic historians did later, that the colonies were profitable for the national economies of Europe as a whole. They thought it better to use expenditures spent on the upkeep of colonies for raising domestic incomes and for infrastructural improvements as a way of stimulating consumption at home. A typical nineteenth-century reformer, Hobson aimed to solve the “social question” not by following Rhodes’s recipe but by avoiding civil war by improving the lot of the mass of the population at home. Surmounting underconsumption within Britain (and by implication in Europe more generally) was tantamount to promoting internal and external peace and prosperous civilian lifestyles. Colonialism was for reformists like him merely grist for the mills of illiberal men who talked about putting up dams against the demands for greater social equality and political participation and were willing to use the physical power of the state.

However, the advocates of imperialism invented yet another justification for their quest. In their view, it was also a matter of bringing Christianity to the “primitive” peoples of Africa and Asia and with it an allegedly higher form of civilization. It was an argument that politicians, intellectuals, and churchmen liked to refer to in their speeches and writings. And here we are faced with yet another aspect of Europe’s development before 1914 without a treatment of which it is difficult to understand why World War I broke out in August of that year and why the subsequent years saw an explosion of violence that badly undermined the beginnings, most clearly discernible in the United States, of a civilian society that peacefully consumed its mass-produced goods and had a political system that, despite many continuing injustices and inequalities, was in principle representative and constitutional.

THE CURSE OF ETHNONATIONALISM AND COLONIALISM

Historians and social scientists have debated at length the origins of modern imperialism and the emergence of colonial empires, especially from the eighteenth century onward. To avoid their critics’ charge of putting forward crude generalizations and untenable theories, many of them more recently began to focus on the decades before 1914. The challenge was to explain why those decades witnessed a wild “scramble for colonies” in the course of which Africa and Asia were almost completely carved up among the European powers. At the same time the territories that were not directly occupied and settled remained or became part of so-called informal empires in which the metropolitan country wielded power and influence indirectly. Thus, the United States regarded large parts of Central and South America as their “backyard,” even if they did not have their own troop contingents and administrators there. Instead they relied on the collaboration of local elite groups.

Searching for the deeper causes of the European “scramble for colonies” before 1914, scholars have pointed to the dynamic expansionist drive inherent in capitalist industrialism. The assumption was that from the years of retarded growth in the 1870s and 1880s businessmen were in constant search of opportunities abroad. When around 1895 the “Great Depression” was replaced by another period of rapid economic expansion and prosperity, the pressure to open up new markets and for raw materials intensified. Even if, as we have seen, most of the growth in trade took place among the industrial countries themselves, Africa and Asia remained important partly as recipients of European exports but above all as suppliers of raw materials at artificially low prices that the metropolitan industries turned into finished and

high-value goods for the well-to-do classes but increasingly also for mass consumption.¹⁴

Apart from economic interests, nationalist and power-political rivalries must also be taken into consideration as propellants of the hectic acquisition of colonies in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ In light of the power and durability of the nation-state, much has also been written about nationalism as a force of societal and political integration. For a long time patriotic contemporaries but also subsequent generations of scholars viewed nationalism as a positive historical phenomenon. No doubt its achievements in overcoming localism and in bringing together people of diverse backgrounds, mentalities, and traditions have been impressive. This may be particularly true of the early phases of its development when it was still more cosmopolitan, accepting of ethnic difference, and hence less exclusive. Nationalism has also inspired many intellectuals and artists to produce major cultural works.¹⁶

However, if we contemplate the evolution of nationalism over the past two hundred years or so, the later balance sheet is rather more negative. Here the critics of the years before 1914 who advocated a tolerant internationalism and peaceful coexistence among the nations and warned against the dangers and the growing excesses of an exclusionary ethnonationalism that mushroomed in those decades have been proven right. What contributed to these excesses was the infusion of social Darwinist elements. There were those who, using Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species, began to interpret all human life as a ruthless "struggle for survival" in the course of which the strong subjugate the weak. For them it was but a small step to transpose this model not merely to the interactions of individual human beings but also to nations. Since the international system was basically anarchic and lacked any kind of central authority, nations were said to have no choice but to assert themselves within that system through power politics and the use of military force.¹⁷

The development of the science of genetics added a biological component to the notion of a power-political "struggle for survival." Even before the advent of social Darwinism, certain human communities and minority groups, inside and outside Europe, had been considered inferior. Genetics now gave this view a pseudoscientific foundation to support the notion of national superiority. Accordingly, the different European nations claimed to be genetically and culturally superior to their neighbors. Indeed, even within one's own society some intellectuals, academics, and politicians classified people as genetically inferior or superior. Here lie the origins of the pre-1914 eugenics movement that went as far as advocating the forced sterilization of men and women suspected of intergenerationally transmitted diseases and disabilities and of marginal people, the "asocials."

This became the credo of an ethnonationalism that, insofar as it was directed toward the inside, propagated both eugenicist and racist arguments

against “asocials” and others, on the one hand, and ethnic minorities, on the other. Thus Jews, as an identifiable minority, became the target of a racist anti-Semitism in different parts of Europe. To be sure, they had previously been the victims of religious, social, and economic Judeophobia that had pervaded European society for centuries. It was rooted in the teachings of the Christian churches and Catholicism in particular that stigmatized Jews as the “murderers of Christ.” Economic anti-Semitism also had a long tradition, turning Jews—especially in times of economic depression—into exploiters and usurers of impoverished non-Jewish peasants and craftsmen. Then came the pseudoscientific assertions of social Darwinism together with a biological racism that put them into a category as an allegedly inferior and dangerous group to justify their isolation and, as will be seen later, even their violent physical annihilation during the Holocaust.¹⁸

Judeophobes now invoked scientific research that “proved” Jews were genetically different and inferior. They were seen as “impurities” that poisoned the “blood” of the non-Jewish population. In short, Jews were not only used as scapegoats to explain personal or collective failure or economic difficulties by reference to the most outlandish conspiracy theories; they were also allocated an inferior place within a hierarchy of “races,” a group that (like “asocials”) endangered the genetic quality of the majority in whose midst they lived. Radical anti-Semites were prepared to use violent means to stop procreation and ultimately even to pursue the cold-blooded murder of all the Jews of Europe.

The notion that the world was divided into inferior and superior “races” was not only applied to the societies of Europe and its minorities, but also to Europeans’ relations with the non-European world. Just as eugenics and anti-Semitism captured a growing section of the population in the years before 1914, people were also taken in by the classification of “races” on a global scale. In this picture, the idea that the “white races” were at the top of the scale proved particularly popular. Beneath them ranged the people of Asia and Africa, who were assumed to be culturally and economically as well as biologically inferior. Although by the end of the twentieth century all these theories were thoroughly discredited, the widespread acceptance of prejudices and stereotypes concerning the “primitive peoples” of other continents demonstrates how much headway social Darwinism and biological racism had made in Europe before World War I. Although in retrospect the ignorance of the complexities of non-European cultures’ languages, religions, mentalities, and traditions was staggering, it was not confined to a few marginal scribblers whose pamphlets divided the world into superior and inferior “races.” Slowly their ideas were becoming accepted by many Europeans as a way of imagining how humanity was structured.¹⁹

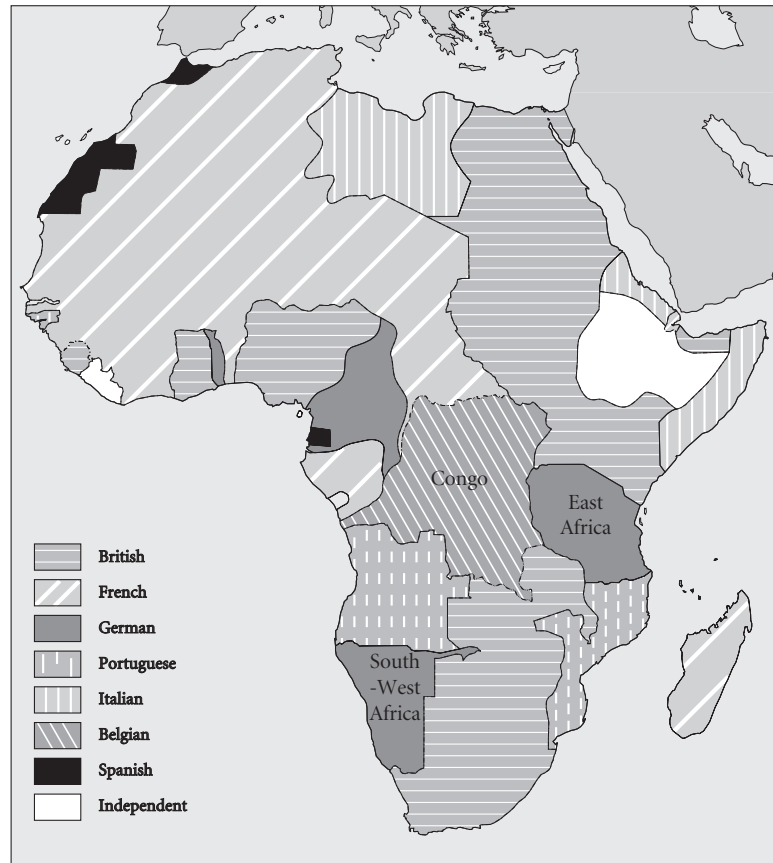
The final step the ethnonationalists took concerned their own national society in relation to their neighbors. It was self-evident to the Germans that

they ranked above the British, French, or Italians, just as Italy, France, and Britain placed themselves above the Germans. Similarly, the Hungarians or Poles felt superior to their neighbors. To be sure, the Japanese or Chinese in the Far East had long established similar hierarchies, and their sense of superiority toward the Europeans helped them to ward off, at least for a while, European claims to domination and colonies in a kind of reverse ethnonationalism. If it did not work militarily or economically, it did so at least culturally. In Africa, by contrast, the invasion of ethnonationalist Europeans in the “scramble for colonies” was so profound that it not only destroyed the local economies and political systems but in many cases the culture and members of entire colonial societies.

The impact of European colonialism became the object of more extensive research after 1945. This research revealed, albeit slowly, just how devastating this impact had been on the non-European world, Africa in particular. We do not propose to go back to the centuries when millions of men and women were forced into slavery and shipped off to the Middle East or to South and North America. Here—as in this chapter more generally—our focus is on the decades before World War I and the policies of violence that Europeans pursued overseas at that time. Given that Britain had the largest colonial empire, London’s practices of conquest and exploitation have long attracted historians’ attention. They have analyzed how superior military technology was used to quell indigenous opposition to British colonial rule. There is the case of the Zulus of southern Africa who were mowed down by machine-gun fire when facing colonial troops with their spears and shields. The bloodbath was incredible, in some ways anticipating those on the western front during World War I.²⁰ The wars in East Africa are less well-known. The suppression of the so-called Maji-Maji uprising in German East Africa cost between 200,000 and 300,000 lives, if we include those who later died from the devastation and dislocation caused by Germany’s colonial troops.²¹ When we turn to the western parts of the continent there is the case of a small monarchy, Belgium, that deserves more detailed scrutiny before we turn to German policy in South-West Africa, today’s Namibia.

In the early 1880s when other European nations acquired colonies all over the world, Leopold II, king of the Belgians, fixed his eyes on the inaccessible and largely unexplored Congo Basin. Through cunning diplomacy up to February 1885 and at the end of an international Congo conference held in Berlin, he succeeded in persuading the great powers, including the United States, to give him the huge territory of tropical rainforest in central Africa. Thanks to the energy of Henry Morton Stanley, the British explorer whom Leopold hired as his agent for the Congo, the king was able to conclude agreements with various indigenous tribes, which transferred land rights to him.²²

What happened subsequently under Leopold’s watch as “king sovereign” has been told most powerfully in Joseph Conrad’s famous *Heart of Darkness*.



1. European colonial possessions in Africa before 1914

He summarized the conditions under Leopold's rule in four words: "The horror! The horror!" The motives of the king can be put even more simply: greed and the determination to exploit the region to the hilt for his gain. In addition to the mahogany and other precious woods, the Congo was rich in ivory and caoutchouc. The latter was much in demand before 1914 in Europe and North America where the bicycle boom increased demand for bicycle tubes followed, with the rise of the automobile, by a strong demand for car tires.

Although the inhabitants of the Congo time and again rose up against the brutality of Belgium's colonial troops, there was never, as in East or South-West Africa, a large-scale war. The millions of men, women, and children who died under Leopold's rule were victims of innumerable smaller expeditions and "pacifications" in the course of which torture, shootings, and kill-

ings with rifle butts were common. Those able to flee from the marauding troops often died from hunger or disease. Repeatedly abducted women and children were led away on what can only be described as death marches.

Details of those horrors are still difficult to come by. But we do have the following account by Ilanga, a woman from the eastern Congo who reported:

The next morning soon . . . after the sun rose over the hill, a large band of soldiers came into the village, and we all went into the houses and sat down. We were not long seated when the soldiers came rushing in shouting, and threatening [chief] Niendo with their guns. They rushed into the houses and dragged the people out. Three or four came to our house and caught hold of me, also my husband Oleka and my sister Katinga. We were dragged into the road and were tied together with cords about our necks, so that we could not escape. We were all crying, for now we knew that we were to be taken away to be slaves. The soldiers beat us with the iron sticks from their guns and compelled us to march to the camp of Kibalanga, who ordered the women to be tied up separately, ten to each cord, and the men in the same way. When we were all collected—and there were many from other villages whom we now saw, and many from Waniendo—the soldiers brought baskets of food for us to carry, in some of which was smoked human flesh. . . . We then set off marching very quickly. My sister Katinga had her baby in her arms and was not compelled to carry a basket; but my husband Oleka was made to carry a goat. We marched until the afternoon when we camped near a stream, where we were glad to drink, for we were much athirst. We had nothing to eat, for the soldiers would give us nothing. . . . The next day we continued the march. . . . So it continued each day until the fifth day when the soldiers took my sister's baby and threw it in the grass, leaving it to die, and made her carry some cooking pots which they found in the deserted village. On the sixth day we became very weak from lack of food and from constant marching and sleeping in the damp grass, and my husband who marched behind us with the goat, could not stand up longer, and so he sat down beside the path and refused to walk more. The soldiers beat him, but he still refused to move. Then one of them struck him on the head with the end of his gun, and he fell upon the ground. One of the soldiers caught the goat, while two or three others stuck the long knives they put on the end of their guns into my husband. I saw blood spurt out, and then saw him no more, for we passed over the brow of a hill, and he was out of sight. Many of the young men were killed the same way, and many babies thrown into the grass to die.²³

In her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, Hannah Arendt offered an acute analysis of European colonialism and the racist-extremist forces behind it. Referring to Selwyn Jones's estimate, she wrote that some twelve million people perished in Leopold's Congo between 1890 and 1911.²⁴ More recently Adam Hochschild arrived at the figure of ten million dead during the period 1890–1920. Having closely studied the history of the Belgian Congo but also that of other parts of Africa, he con-

cluded that “if you were to ask most Americans or Europeans what were the great totalitarian systems” of the twentieth century, “almost all would be likely to say: Communism and Fascism.” However, there was, he continued, a third totalitarian system—“European colonialism—the latter imposed in its deadliest form in Africa. Each of the three systems asserted the right to control its subjects’ lives; each was buttressed by an elaborate ideology; each perverted language in an Orwellian way; and each caused tens of millions of deaths.”²⁵

Writing in 1968, Helmut Bley similarly highlighted these elements of European colonialism in his study of German South-West Africa: “The balance of power in Africa opened the way for a dogmatizing [*Verabsolutierung*] of the ideas and methods of modern control.” This, he added, led to a situation “in which the borderline with the totalitarian sphere had been transgressed” in South-West Africa. The colony “reached a stage in which all life chances of the Africans were subordinated to the will to rule and to the security interests” of the Europeans. Underlying these considerations was “the idea that the struggle would be conducted without the possibility of peace.” Consequently, “the Germans set their system of domination in motion on the premise that the position as masters could not be justified and that giving a minimum of social and economic leeway would trigger a process of emancipation among the Africans.” This is why they deployed “the socio-economic and socio-psychological insights of the time deliberately as instruments of domination.” In this process, their point of orientation was rather more “the general notions of social conflict that they had adopted from Europe than a specific colonialist idea of racial inequality.”²⁶

Unlike in the Congo, violence escalated slowly in South-West Africa until it culminated in a genocidal war against the indigenous populations that was quite cold-bloodedly planned. In 1892 there had been a campaign against the Nama people. Thereafter, though, Theodor Leutwein, the governor and representative of the kaiser, tried hard to create a well-ordered system of governance in the colony in which the indigenous people would have a firm place, even if it was not one of equality. Unfortunately his efforts were undermined time and again by the demands of the white settlers from Germany. Their notions of legal titles to their properties clashed with the traditions of the semi-nomadic Herero who, by virtue of their own ancient traditions, had used the territory for the grazing of their large and roaming cattle herds. Wolfgang Eckart has described the situation as follows: “Reckless expropriations of land and the ruthless exploitation of the indigenous population through fraudulent usury had by the end of 1903 . . . created a state of affairs in which it was merely a question of time when the Herero would rise who had been pushed from their own land and soil and had been driven into economic dependency.”²⁷

When this point had finally been reached in 1904, the struggle of the Herero against the troops that Berlin dispatched ended in a catastrophe in which the victims were not merely the armed Herero warriors but also women, children, and the elderly. The Nama, whose fight in the south was more like a guerilla war, lost 35–50 percent of their people between 1892 and 1911; the figure for the Herero rose to almost 80 percent. Recent research has modified the older argument that the Germans brutally drove the Herero into the Omaheke Desert then hermetically sealed off the region and left entire families to die in the food- and waterless desert. Rather what seems to have happened is that some who fled eastward before the advancing German troops hoped to traverse the desert to Bechuanaland on paths that were known to them. But since there were so many of them, the relatively few watering holes on their way became overused and depleted, delivering thousands to their death. Others were slaughtered on the spot.

Those who fled westward and finally surrendered had their belongings and cattle confiscated before they were put into camps in which the death rate was around 45 percent. This meant that of some 15,000 captured Herero and 2,000 Nama a mere 7,700 survived.²⁸ There are no reliable figures on total losses, not least because the estimates of the size of the Herero population before the war vacillated between 35,000 and 100,000. German official statistics for 1911 give the total number of registered Herero as 15,000. If we merely use the lowest prewar estimates, this would mean that “more than a third of the Herero were killed or died as a result of the war.”²⁹ The actual losses were probably much higher. This is also true of the Nama.

The behavior of the Germans raises two points that are relevant for the basic approach to this study in subsequent chapters and to the theme of violence. There is first of all the direct killing by the troops. Herero men, armed or unarmed, who fell into their hands were murdered without further ado. What differed from nineteenth-century conventional European warfare was that women and children were also summarily shot, often after abuse and torture. Those responsible for such actions appreciated that fundamental human norms were being violated and therefore tried to justify their actions. A white farmer who had shot a woman because she had stolen one of his sheep was asked by a judge why he felt it necessary to use lethal force. He replied: “Should we simply subject ourselves to theft?” His defense attorney then used the term “vermin” that, however ominous as a harbinger of the racism that was to come, was not unusual for this time and, as we have seen, related to the proliferating biological perceptions of human society. Planted in the mind of an ordinary white settler of European background, it was used to justify exploitation and murder.³⁰

At the height of the campaign against the Herero other outrageous but typical rumors began to circulate about native women who cruelly mutilated white captives and dead soldiers. These rumors in turn were used to justify

German atrocities. A German military doctor has left a description of scenes that were widespread during this war: “Bloodily glittering bayonets in their hands, blood-splattered uniforms: around them piles of culled enemies, wailing women, screaming children, and bleating cattle.”³¹ The torturing of the survivors then continued in the camps. Joachim Zeller has recently published an essay on the Swakopmund Camp with horrific photos.³² The title of his article (“Hundreds were driven to their deaths like cattle and [then] buried like cattle”) is taken from a report by a missionary. The report added that it was hardly possible to exaggerate the “crudity” and the “brutal behavior as masters [*Herrentum*]” that its author had witnessed.

During the most murderous period the daily death toll at Swakopmund from undernourishment and hard slave labor was around thirty. Whoever survived these conditions continued to be without legal protection and was subjected to whipping. The rape of women was also common. As Zeller demonstrates by reference to the cynical descriptions at the bottom of his photos, camp supervisors had a “disdain for human beings that was motivated by racism.” This disdain can also be seen in the way the skulls of fallen or murdered Hereros were treated. Herero women were forced to clean the skulls of skin with bits of broken glass. They were then collected for racist anatomical research and sent to institutes in Germany.

That something horrendous had happened in German South-West Africa in 1904 during the encounter between the Europeans and the indigenous populations can also be gauged from the ambivalent reports of some of the soldiers involved in the campaign. Here we find, next to descriptions of massacres, doubts about the “heroic” exploits of the colonial troops. With respect and even admiration they write about the tall and slender figures of the Herero warriors who did not fit the stereotypes of inferior “negroes” they had picked up back home. Physicians seem to have felt pangs of conscience as well. Wavering between pity and a heart of stone, one of them wrote: “They are a genuine calamity, those amputated blacks. They haven’t learned anything, they cannot work, and if, after their wounds have healed, they are discharged into the street, they just starve to death. Consequently they stay here and are fed with the others. Soon the state will even have to build homes for cripples.”³³

However, in order to grasp what happened in Africa under European colonial rule, we must also deal, apart from the mentalities and attitudes of the perpetrators, with those of their superiors and commanding officers. To begin with, there is Leutwein’s dilemma that reflects the failure of his attempt to establish order and stability between 1894 and the outbreak of the war ten years later and that explains why he was replaced by Lieutenant General Lothar von Trotha. “A persistent colonial policy,” he wrote, “no doubt requires the killing of all prisoners capable of bearing arms.” He himself would not resort to such methods. Nor, however, would he reprimand

the person who would do so. After all, “colonial policy is basically an inhuman matter. And ultimately it can only lead to a deterioration of the rights of the indigenous population in favor of those who forced their way in. Whoever does not agree with this, must be an opponent of colonial policy in general—a position that is at least logical.” At the same time, Leutwein continued, “it is not right, on the one hand, to deprive the natives of their land on the basis of questionable agreements and for this purpose to gamble with the life and health of fellow-citizens on the ground and, on the other, to praise [the virtues of] humanity in the Reichstag, such as some Reichstag deputies have done.”³⁴

Trotha, Leutwein’s successor, was not hampered by such inhibitions. After his victory over the Herero in October 1904, he published a proclamation that bluntly articulated European inhumanity: “The Herero are no longer German subjects. They have been murdering, thieving; [they] have cut off the ears, noses, and other body parts and now no longer want to fight because of cowardice.” Accordingly, “every Herero whether he is caught with or without a rifle, with or without cattle,” was to be shot. He continued, “I shall no longer accommodate women and children, drive them back to their own people or give orders that they be shot at. . . . [Signed:] The great general of the powerful.”³⁵

These words, it must be admitted, were a bit too much for Germany’s Reich chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, who had himself coined a few aggressive slogans when it came to selling German expansionist *Weltpolitik*. But Bülow’s qualms did not prevent Trotha from issuing another order to his troops in which he promised his men a bonus for each Herero killed. Only when it came to women, he added, should they aim above the target’s head. Since his order presumably meant that “no more male prisoners would be taken,” his troops’ violent practices were not to turn into “atrocities against women and children.” In other words, he was not prepared to erase the line between combatants and civilians completely. However, as we have seen, in reality all Hereros were treated as outlaws to be liquidated. It did not make much difference that Bülow, sitting in Berlin, began to worry about the public criticism that Trotha’s radicalism might unleash back home. Consequently, he asked the kaiser as supreme commander of all German troops to countermand Trotha’s orders because they “contradicted all Christian and humanitarian principles.”

The tension between those who wanted to uphold some standards of humanity and those who were prepared to abandon them—a tension, as we shall see, that began to weaken in the second half of World War I and had disappeared by the time of World War II—also emerges when we juxtapose Bülow’s attitudes with those of Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the General Staff. He, the father of the battle of annihilation (discussed below), was much more a kindred spirit of Trotha when he wrote that the commander of South-

West Africa needed to be supported if he “wants to destroy the entire [Herero] nation or drive it out of the territory. After what has happened, it will be very difficult for the blacks to live together with the whites, if the former are not to be kept permanently in a state of forced labor, i.e., in a kind of slavery.” Consequently, “the race war that has broken out can only be concluded with the annihilation of one party.”³⁶ A retrospective report, produced by the General Staff two years later, came to the conclusion, “The waterless Omaheke [Desert] was to complete what German arms had begun: the annihilation of the Herero people.”

Such statements raise the question as to whether the war in South-West Africa was genocidal not merely in its practice at the front but also in intent when we consider the orders the troops received. Many historians have answered this question in the affirmative; others have rejected this notion. Gesine Krüger has recently tried to distance the atrocities in the colonies before 1914 somewhat from the Nazi “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” in World War II. However, by referring to the definitions of genocide that Zygmunt Bauman and other social scientists developed, she, too, concludes that what happened in German South-West Africa was genocide. Tilman Dederling has compared the behavior of the colonial troops to that of the Wehrmacht in eastern Europe during World War II.³⁷

Two aspects must be added to these recent verdicts by historians in light of the criticism that the war against the Herero encountered in the Reichstag at the time. Both of them point to the violent experience Europe underwent in the future. The liberal economist Moritz Bonn wrote in 1909—and hence long before he had to flee from Hitler’s dictatorship—“As long as there are still people who deem such policies as necessitated by Nature, the danger will persist that they may also be used in other places. If the mistakes of Trotha’s colonial policy can be surrounded with a theoretical halo, nothing will protect us from it being repeated.”³⁸ Bonn probably did not have the faintest notion then that Europe itself might one day be one of those “other places.” Given that violence no longer had any boundaries, Bley pointed to the double boomerang effect of colonialism in and after World War I. In his view, the Germans approached South-West Africa initially with attitudes that “were rooted in the social unrest of contemporary Europe.” Later the “methods of treating human beings” practiced in the colonies ricocheted back “into the motherland.”³⁹

Bley’s thoughtful though depressing argument, derived from his study of colonialism, leads us back to Europe. Violence in the colonies, whether British, Belgian, German, French, or Italian, had assumed forms before 1914 that “consumed” not just combatants but also civilians. The next question to be investigated is what kinds of images of warfare Europeans developed concerning their own part of the world before total war hit them with real force after 1914.

PREMONITIONS OF TOTAL WAR

Given the complexities that marked the societies of pre-1914 Europe, it is not surprising that its inhabitants held very different views about a future war. At the one end of the spectrum stood the confirmed pacifists who worked for “a world without war.” The size of their organizations varied considerably from country to country. Roger Chickering, in a book that deals with the German Peace Society but is to some extent conceived within a comparative framework, has advanced the hypothesis that the relative numerical weakness of pacifist movements in Germany before 1914 mirrored the much greater attractiveness of associations that—though not always actively promoting war—nevertheless agitated for the preparation of war in the form of ever more exorbitant armaments expenditures.⁴⁰ He adds that the balance was tilted less in favor of militaristic forces, for example, in Britain and France.

In addition to the small number of pure pacifists, there was a larger group of liberals who did not reject war and violence as a matter of principle, but viewed military conflicts as self-destructive and therefore impossible to justify rationally, at least as far as the great powers that had fully developed industries and were involved in international trade were concerned. In Britain, the “first industrial nation,” Richard Cobden and John Bright argued as early as the mid-nineteenth century that war and industry were incompatible. Similar points were later made by liberals such as Herbert Spencer and Norman Angell, whose books were widely discussed and translated into other European languages. As mentioned in the introduction, Spencer had put forward the notion of two opposing types of society. The “militant” type was geared toward confrontation and struggle. It required centralization and the integration as well as subordination of the individual to the community. The other “industrial” type embodied a system in which the individuality of the citizen was defended and upheld against the state. Unlike the “militant” type, its *raison d’être* did not revolve around the preparation of war and violent expansion but around peaceful industrial production and trade.⁴¹

Angell in his best-selling *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to Their Economic and Social Advantage*, an expanded version of his *Europe’s Optical Illusion* and published in 1910, added the idea that the interdependencies that industry, commerce, and banking had created between the nations had become so great that war between them was no longer thinkable. Such a war, he warned, would disrupt the flow of peaceful trade and the production of civilian goods to such an extent that even the victors in a military conflict would in effect be among the losers. This insight, he thought, would in the future keep the great powers from

entering into war with each other. They would all recognize the greater benefits of peaceful exchange, consumption, and prosperity for all. If there were dangers of war they emanated, according to Angell, from countries that lagged behind the progressive nations in the development of trade and industry. Once they had joined the circle of the latter, major wars would be phenomena of the past.⁴² In the meantime, structures of international law, mediation, and conflict resolution needed to be developed.

These views were diametrically opposed to those of other contemporaries who regarded war as something evitable in human affairs. They saw war as the “father of all things” that contained both destructive and creative forces. Next to them were those who believed that an anarchistic international system that lacked a central authority and was propelled by social Darwinist power politics required constant vigilance. However, contrary to the radical militarists, they justified the demand for relentless war preparation with defensive arguments. The problem was that in the last years before 1914 their positions were articulated more and more aggressively so that through their propaganda they contributed to the sharpening of international tensions. In these circumstances a serious diplomatic crisis could easily be deepened by the martial posturing of nationalist associations and the right-wing press. This would in turn put pressure on governments to rattle their sabers. Suddenly, the political decision makers would find themselves in a conflict that might spin out of control. A chain reaction of this kind was, as we shall see, in fact set in motion in July 1914.

Between the pacifists and liberals, on the one hand, and the militarists and social Darwinists, on the other, stood the majority of ordinary citizens who could be mobilized for a defense of the fatherland to ward off an unprovoked attack, but no more. Finally, there were the large number of workers whose basic attitudes toward society and politics had come under the influence of the growing socialist movements. Unless they explicitly subscribed to a social democratic reformism, they did not reject revolutionary violence in principle; but with respect to the danger of a major war, they tended to set their hopes in the solidarity of the workers’ International. By appealing to the masses, The International would prevent a war between the advanced industrial countries in which the workers, drafted into the universal service armies, would be the cannon fodder and first victims of mass slaughter.⁴³

It is instructive to look at the images of war discussed among the people of Europe and among military experts in the decades before 1914 against the backdrop of these divergent attitudes toward war and violence. As far as the overwhelming majority of the population is concerned, it is safe to assume that they believed the next war would be similar to the previous one. To be sure, this was a naive view that did not take into account the changes in technology and military organization that had since occurred. Although

these changes had been considerable in the late nineteenth century, many Europeans nevertheless thought that a future war would look like the Franco-German conflict of 1870–71: there would be a clash of two large armies in which the stronger side would be victorious after a short while. These were the memories of the Franco-German war that were not applicable any longer, even at the end of that conflict. Yet, the fact that it had ultimately become a “people’s war” was repressed by the myth of a short “cabinet war.”

This myth is one of the reasons why Europe’s men joined up in large numbers in the summer of 1914 when their leaders called on them to defend the fatherland. Almost all of them were convinced that they would be home again by Christmas of that year.⁴⁴ If they had had a better understanding of what industrialized warfare of the twentieth century would be like, the recruits would probably have volunteered much more reluctantly and many might even have resisted being sent to the front.

Popular conceptions of future warfare were not merely the product of discussions among the regulars in pubs or of increasingly hazy memories of the Franco-Prussian War. They also appeared in novels, in short stories, and in serialized accounts in magazines that were read by a growing number of ordinary citizens in pre-1914 Europe. But such fictionalized speculations hardly reflected what was to come in World War I. True, there were the studies of the *guerre en ballon* and the deployment of new weapons. In Britain around the turn of the century a genre emerged that focused on the impending invasion of the British Isles, whether by ship or through a tunnel that had been secretly dug under the English Channel. By and large, these stories were geared more toward satisfying a demand for heroic exploits or a widespread enthusiasm for modern technology and its feats. They rarely gave a realistic picture of industrialized warfare.

Apart from Albert Robidas’s more ironic depictions, it was above all the well-known British writer H. G. Wells and the Polish-French banker and amateur historian Jean de Bloch who succeeded in painting a more accurate picture. Wells’s predictions were suffused with social Darwinist ideas about struggle, but he recognized the destructive potential of modern military technology. In August 1909, for example, he published an article in *McClure’s Magazine* in which he postulated that the invention of the airship would lead to tangible changes in the conduct of war. There were also visions of war “a mile above earth, between corps of artillery firing into huge bodies of inflammable gas, where the defeated plunge down to the ground a mass of charred pulp, [that] will become a thing too spectacularly horrible for conception. Will civilization permit it to exist? Or does this new machine mean the end of war?”⁴⁵

However, the thinker who probably came closest to anticipating correctly the terrible reality of World War I was de Bloch. In no less than six volumes

he not only examined the lethal power of weapons that had been developed since 1871, the machine-gun among them; his volumes also contain statistical analyses before he provides the following description of a future war between the great powers:

At first there will be increased slaughter—increased on so terrible a scale as to render it impossible to get troops to push the battle to a decisive issue. They will try to, thinking that they are fighting under the old conditions, and they will learn such a lesson that they will abandon the attempt forever. Then, instead of a war fought out to the bitter end in a series of decisive battles, we shall have as a substitute a long period of continually increasing strain upon the resources of the combatants. The war, instead of being a hand-to-hand contest in which the combatants measure their physical and moral superiority, will become a kind of stalemate, in which, neither army being able to get at the other, both armies will be maintained in opposition to each other, threatening each other, but never able to deliver a final decisive attack.⁴⁶

Although not many ordinary people read Bloch's lengthy depictions of the war that was to hit Europe in 1914, others were not naïve. In addition to the military, international lawyers had also considered the evolution of warfare since the early modern period. The first of them wrote in the wake of the Thirty Years War and its catastrophic consequences. For them, and for Hugo Grotius, one of the most eminent among them, there were two central questions: how and with what mechanisms might it be possible to prevent similar conflicts from happening again, and second, what principles and rules had to be put in place to regulate war if its outbreak could not be avoided and to contain excesses and atrocities of the kind that had devastated large parts of Central Europe between 1618 and 1648.⁴⁷

It is significant that these questions relating to conflict prevention receded into the background during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. International lawyers were more concerned with establishing, refining, and enforcing new laws that would govern the treatment of wounded enemy soldiers, prisoners of war, and, not least, noncombatants. It had become increasingly clear that women, children, and the elderly were not firmly protected against wartime violence. There was also the question of who was a combatant and who was a civilian and of the criteria that differentiated them.

If the protection of civilians grew weaker in the years leading up to 1914, this was due not only to the fact that the borderline between combatants and noncombatants had already disappeared in the colonies, as we have seen in the treatment of indigenous people in Africa, it was also because military professionals began to recognize the increasing totality of a war that might occur in Europe in the future that would "inevitably" also engulf civilians. In Hans Morgenthau's later definition, in the eyes of some experts war had

become even before 1914 a war of total populations against total populations for total stakes.⁴⁸

Thus, the military responded differently than the populations of Europe, who were fascinated by serialized stories of underwater invasions or battles in the skies or who fantasized in the alehouse over their fifth glass of beer. Among these experts was Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, whose strategy had defeated the French in 1870–71 and who continued as chief of the General Staff in united Germany. He never forgot that that conflict had turned, in its final phases, into a “people’s war” that had been propelled by the passions of modern nationalism. Its genie that had been let out of the bottle in the wars of liberation against Napoleon I in 1814–15 had more or less been successfully put back into the bottle at that point. But in the 1860s, if not before, it had reappeared. Worse from the point of view of upholding the idea of conventional warfare between two hostile armies, a “people’s war” in 1870 was no longer just the mass mobilization of soldier-citizens; it had also seen the emergence of the franc-tireurs and the involvement of large parts of the civilian population.

This time around, Moltke still succeeded in curbing the outbreak of massive popular resistance and in enforcing the peace that the French signed at Versailles. But as the experience of the short-lived Paris Commune had also demonstrated, this was no longer the age of cabinet wars. Moltke took away a dramatic lesson from this experience: future wars between great powers must never be allowed to degenerate into a long war of attrition. Conflict had to be brief and geared toward the total destruction of the enemy within a limited time and by using the latest weapons, technology, and railroads. However, toward the end of his years of service Moltke had come to the pessimistic conclusion that, given its location in the heart of Europe and threatened by a war on two fronts, Germany had little prospect of winning a lightning war of annihilation. This meant that the more important task for him became securing and maintaining peace.⁴⁹

His successors had listened attentively to the old field marshal as far as the strategic preparation of total war was concerned; but they could not follow him in the pacifist conclusions that he drew from his assessment of the geopolitical situation of the country.⁵⁰ This is why they continued to prepare for a European war and tried to escape from the danger of a war of attrition from which no one would emerge victorious by concentrating on the idea of a particularly brutal and swift hammer blow. Moltke’s successors were Alfred von Schlieffen, whose attitudes toward annihilation we have cited above in connection with the war in South-West Africa, and the old field marshal’s nephew of the same name. In two ways they drove German strategic thinking to the extreme. To begin with, Schlieffen, who after the French and Russians had concluded their alliance in 1893 reckoned with a war on two fronts, first conceived of an operations plan that his successor,

Helmuth von Moltke, then implemented in July 1914: under violation of Belgian neutrality and thereby circumventing the northern fortifications on France's eastern border, he proposed to defeat France in a lightning war. After this, he wanted to move his troops quickly to the east to annihilate the Russians in a second strike who, due to the slowness and inefficiency of the tsarist war machine, would not pose a serious immediate danger to Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary.

Second, Schlieffen, and Moltke even more so, became obsessed with the idea that the element of surprise was crucial, even if the projected mass mobilization of soldiers could not be kept secret for long. This required the meticulous preparation of the train timetables with the help of which tens of thousands of soldiers would be transported to the Belgian border in a very short time, but this also almost inevitably forced Moltke to prepare for a preventive war in which even the most elementary rules of existing international law would be pushed aside. To justify these violations he had to invoke the higher interest of the nation, whose survival was allegedly lethally threatened by the French and Russians. Accordingly, he accepted the invasion of small neutral countries, Belgium and Luxembourg, without long-winded declarations of war and the swiftest advance westward through Belgium. It was a strategy that tried to evade the consequences of a "people's war" in the age of the "people's war" by proceeding with devastating force and speed.

However, to understand the "primordial catastrophe" of the twentieth century that was unleashed in Europe in August 1914, one must realize that this kind of thinking also spread among the general staffs of the other great powers. The French spoke of the *attaque brusque*, and General Ferdinand Foch thought that the machine-gun was an excellent offensive weapon—until he had to recognize that in the age of industrialized warfare it was in fact a terrible weapon in the hands of the defense. Although Moltke assumed the Russian army was a lumbering juggernaut, tsarist officers, too, planned a war of annihilation. This was also true of Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of the General Staff of the Habsburg forces.

How widespread these assumptions had become by the turn of the century can also be seen when we look at the evolution of naval strategy. As late as the mid-1890s the "cruiser school" still dominated naval thinking in Europe. In the age of imperialism, naval warfare would not occur in home waters but as raids against the coasts of faraway enemy colonies. This required the construction of fast cruisers. But once the concept of annihilation had swept the board in the armies of Europe, its radiating influence proved so powerful that it was slowly also adopted among the navies of the great powers. The cruiser, with its range and speed, was replaced by battleships with larger guns and heavier armor. They would meet in the home waters for a decisive do-or-die battle in which the war at sea would be decided virtually in one afternoon through the annihilation of the enemy fleet.⁵¹

This change in strategic thinking triggered naval arms races—above all the one between the British Royal Navy and the German Imperial Navy—in which one side tried to outbuild the other in the number of battleships. The Anglo-German race continued from the turn of the century until about 1911–12, when it became clear that London had in effect won the naval arms competition with Berlin. The fleet that Tirpitz had constructed was too weak to face the Royal Navy in that much vaunted decisive battle in the North Sea, as became clear in 1916 during the Battle of Jutland. However, the end of the Anglo-German naval arms race did not mean that the specter of a future war between the great powers receded into the background. Rather the competition was transferred to the European continent and turned into an arms competition on land. It strengthened the hand of the army general staffs and increased their propensity to contemplate a violent way out of the growing international impasse before 1914. They even contemplated a preventive campaign of annihilation before the other side had become too strong to make a lightning war victory unlikely. It might be said, therefore, that Moltke's and de Bloch's warnings were taken seriously, but in a somewhat paradoxical way: the "people's war" of attrition that everyone thought could no longer be won was to be avoided with the help of a swift all-or-nothing blow.

Ordinary citizens and the military thus had vastly different concepts about what a future European war might entail. The army and navy staffs had integrated into their plans not only the latest weapons developments and improved transport capacities but also the experience of the "people's war," and the lessons learned from the various colonial wars. The preparation for war was now focused on the application of overwhelming force, which would result in a short, ruthless, and total war.

However, what would happen if the strategy of annihilation proved too risky and if the danger of a war of attrition was greater than was militarily and politically acceptable? In that case would it not have been wiser to return to the elder Moltke's position of trying, at all costs, to secure and preserve peace? Against the background of this question we shall first have to investigate the situation just before the outbreak of war in 1914 before turning to the forms of violence that subsequently became the hallmark of World War I and to the escalation of which Europe saw no end until 1945.