

Lutz Unterseher

The First World War

Trauma of the Twentieth Century



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“That I was allowed to experience this”.
Emperor Franz Joseph on his deathbed at Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna on
21 November 1916

Instead of an Introduction: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothin'.
Edwin Starr

Lucid Foresight

Ivan (Jean) Bloch (1836–1902) was a Radom-born banker of Jewish origin who made critical military journalism his hobby. In the work on the “War of the Future” he painted a gloomy picture of what the people of Europe might have to expect (*La Guerre*, Paris 1899).

In this work, he processed the technological-social developments of his time and related them to the possibility of a military clash. He saw very clearly the enormous increase in firepower since about the middle of the nineteenth century:

Multiplication of the explosive power of projectiles; increase in the precision, range and rate of fire of rifles and guns through the introduction of rifled barrels and the breech-loading principle; and the appearance of the first rapid-fire weapons in armies: from the French *mitrailleuse* to the machine gun designed by *Hiram Maxim* (1840–1916).

Likewise, Bloch noted the mobilization of the masses – particularly for industry, but also for the armed forces, and the enormous increase in productivity in the most important states of Europe. States that showed conflicting interests without having established tried and tested means of effective arbitration.

He imagined a future war more or less as the First World War actually unfolded: as a power-driven clash of huge masses of soldiers, transported and supplied via efficient railway networks. In addition, both sides had superior defences, mainly due to overwhelming firepower, which drowned every offensive movement in floods of blood. The result was a gruelling war of positions and the general demoralization of the soldiers, with the consequence of mutinies and epidemically spreading war fatigue.

Bloch predicted that European societies would be shaken to their foundations by such a clash, such a “blood pump”, to use the expression of a German military leader, that political unrest, revolutions and civil wars would have to be expected in the wake of the disaster. And this too was true. Just think of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia at the end of the First World War!

To the Polish banker, the perspective he presented seemed so terrifying that he considered it “impossible” in its consequences:

The war that can no longer be waged because of the development of the productive forces. Industrial development as a bringer of peace.

This is reminiscent of the thought of the Saint-Simonists, a kind of industrial worshippers in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. (This sect gathered Parisian intellectuals who saw themselves as the spiritual heirs and executors of an important French social philosopher: *Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Count of Saint-Simon*, 1760–1825).

Bloch wanted to believe that the prospect of an all-destroying catastrophe could have a deterrent effect. But, at the same time, he also feared that the “impossible” would nevertheless happen due to the dynamics of political development.

So he went tirelessly through Europe, to the limits of his physical abilities: from capital city to capital city, giving speeches in more or less filled festival halls to warn the people. In doing so, he painfully felt that the patriotism (or rather: chauvinism) developing in his time made it almost impossible to reach a really large audience, and finally also noticed that his message was highly inconvenient for the “interested” circles in politics and the military.

Ivan Bloch was nominated for the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, but came away empty-handed. At that time, the prize was shared by a now scarcely known pioneer of the French peace movement and *Henri Dunant* (1828–1910), the spiritual father of the Geneva Convention. Hardly anyone will remember the far-sighted Ivan Bloch, who pointed to ominous trends. Many, however, are probably fascinated by the First World War in an almost morbid way: thinking of the “primordial catastrophe of the twentieth century”, the great turning point of time, as a – god-given – inevitable event. There is reason for concern that – if at all – the discourse

focuses on the “catastrophe as such”, a speculation about the “underlying causes” and – once again – on the “question of guilt”. The phenomenon of this war, however, demands a broader and more nuanced analysis. This collection of essays aims to make a small contribution to this.

Focus

It is true that this analysis is about differentiation, about a certain breadth of approach. Thus, whenever it seems sensible and possible, we deliberately look beyond the end of our noses: transcending a narrow German perspective.

However, in the spirit of compactness of this collection of essays, a concentration on certain key issues has at the same time proved useful:

The focus is on the foreign policy preconditions, contexts and consequences of the events, and above all on the war itself, its dynamics, its appearance (“the face of battle”) and the emotional cum mental effect on those directly involved. Domestic politics are reserved for other reappraisals.

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Before the War: Powers and Machinations

1

The focus is on the eve of the First World War: it is about the relevant history as well as the events and calculations that were immediately significant before the beginning of the great collision. Constellations and relations are examined: the relationships of the state actors to each other, whose interests and entanglements drove them into disaster.

For this purpose, first a review of the relevant states is to be provided, which are presented with their form of government, their potentials, internal problems and aspirations. The presentation aims at clarity through a streamlined presentation.

In this context, the obligations that the states had entered into among themselves are then discussed. The focus is on both their genesis and the situation at the outbreak of the war.

In a further consideration, two things stand in the foreground: On the one hand, the offensive thinking that essentially drove and shaped the planning of the armies before the First World War. Its origins are to be grasped. In doing so, reference is made to a specifically Prussian-German tradition.

On the other hand, the mechanism of mobilization, which appeared to be extremely important for the participating states – without the timely handling of which the political and military leaderships saw themselves at a disadvantage from the outset in the face of acutely perceived threats:

The speedy replenishment and launching of one's own forces was a condition and half-guarantee of victory.

Finally, the third contribution shows how the arms competition between two great powers with diverging aspirations proceeded. The focus is on the maritime race between Great Britain and the German Empire, which was driven by imperial claims. This competition is exemplary for others.