VINTAGE

EUROPE' S LAST SUMMER

DAVID FROMKIN

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About the Book

The Great War not only destroyed the lives of over twenty million soldiers and civilians, it also ushered in a century of huge political and social upheaval, led directly to the Second World War and altered for ever the mechanisms of governments. And yet its causes, both long term and immediate, have continued to be shrouded in mystery.

In *Europe's Last Summer*, David Fromkin reveals a new pattern in the happenings of that fateful July and August, which leads in unexpected directions. Rather than one war, starting with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, he sees two conflicts, related but not inseparably linked, whose management drew Europe and the world into what *The Economist* described as early as 1914 as 'perhaps the greatest tragedy in human history'.

About the Author

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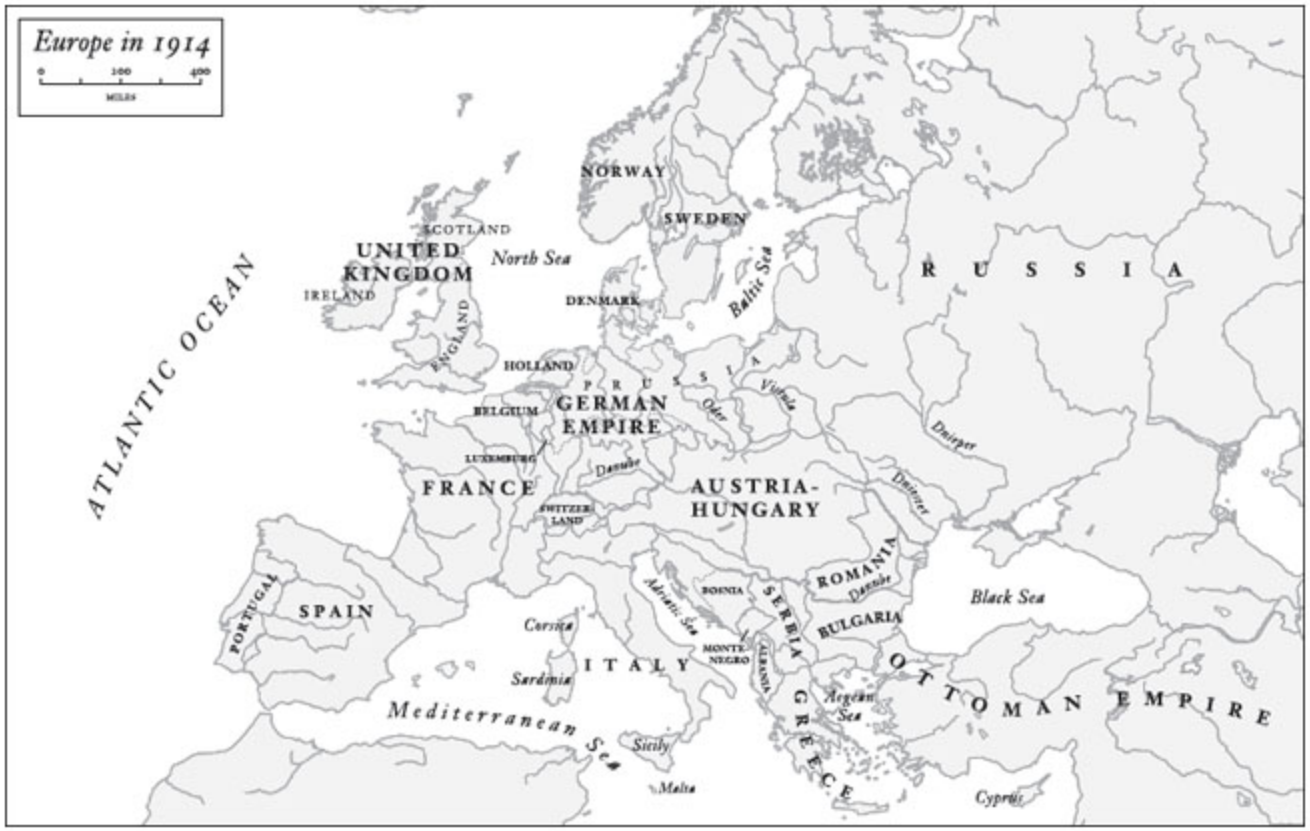
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For Alain Silvera—

Europe’s Last Summer

Why the World Went to War in 1914

David Fromkin

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

The peremptory transition from an apparently profound peace to violent general war in a few mid-summer weeks in 1914 continues to defy attempts at explanation.

—*JOHN KEEGAN,* *The First World War*

PROLOGUE

(i) *Out of the Blue*

SHORTLY AFTER ELEVEN o'clock at night on Sunday, December 29, 1997, United Airlines Flight 826, a Boeing 747 carrying 374 passengers and 19 crew, was two hours into its scheduled trip across the Pacific from Tokyo to Honolulu. It had reached its assigned cruising altitude of between 31,000 and 33,000 feet. Meal service was about to be completed. It had been an uneventful trip.

In a terrifying instant everything changed. The plane was struck, without warning, by a force that was invisible. The aircraft abruptly nosed up; then it nosed down into a freefall. Screaming bodies were flung about promiscuously, colliding with ceilings and with serving carts. A thirty-two-year-old Japanese woman was killed and 102 people were injured. Regaining control of the jumbo jet, the captain and cockpit crew guided Flight 826 back to the Japanese airport from which it had taken off hours before.

What was so frightening about this episode was its mysteriousness. Until the moment of impact, the flight had been a normal one. There had been no reason to expect that it would be anything else. There had been no warning: no flash of lightning across the sky. You could not see it coming, whatever "it" may have been. Passengers had no idea what had hit them and airline companies were in no position to assure the public that something similar would not happen again.

Experts quoted by the communications media were of the opinion that Flight 826 had fallen victim to what they called

“clear air turbulence.” They likened this to a horizontal tornado, but one that you could not see. Some of the experts who were interviewed expressed the hope that within a few years some sort of sensing technology would be developed to detect these invisible storms before they strike. Transparency, the public learned from this episode, signifies little; a pacific sky can rise up in wrath as suddenly as can a pacific ocean.

Something like such an attack of clear air turbulence is supposed by some to have happened to European civilization in 1914 during its passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The world of the 1890s and 1900s had been, not unlike our own age, a time of international congresses, disarmament conferences, globalization of the world economy, and schemes to establish some sort of league of nations to outlaw war. A long stretch of peace and prosperity was expected by the public to go on indefinitely.

Instead, the European world abruptly plunged out of control, crashing and exploding into decades of tyranny, world war, and mass murder. What tornado wrecked civilized Old Europe and the world it then ruled? In retrospect, it may be less of a mystery than some of those who lived through it imagined. The years 1913 and 1914 were ones of dangers and troubles. There were warning signs in the early decades of the twentieth century that catastrophe might well lie ahead; we can see that now, and military and political leaders could see it then.

The sky out of which Europe fell was not empty; on the contrary, it was alive with processes and powers. The forces that were to devastate it—nationalism, socialism, imperialism, and the like—had been in motion for a long time. The European world already was buffeted by high winds. It had been traversing dangerous skies for a long time. The captain and the crew had known it. But the

passengers, taken completely by surprise, insistently kept asking: why had they received no warning?

(ii) *The Importance of the Question*

In the summer of 1914 a war broke out in Europe that then spread to Africa, the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific, and the Americas. Known now, somewhat inaccurately, as the First World War, it ended by becoming in many ways the largest conflict that the planet had ever known. It deserved the name by which it was called at the time: the Great War.

To enter the lists, countries of the earth ranged themselves into one or another of two worldwide coalitions. One, led by Great Britain,[1] France, and Russia, was called the Triple Entente;[2] the other, led by Germany and Austria-Hungary, was known at first as the Triple Alliance.[3] Between them the two coalitions mobilized about 65 million troops. In Germany and France, nations that gambled their entire manhood on the outcome, 80 percent of all males between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine were called to the colors. In the ensuing clashes of arms they were slaughtered.

More than 20 million soldiers and civilians perished in the Great War, and an additional 21 million were wounded. Millions more fell victim to the diseases that the war unleashed: upwards of 20 million people died in the influenza pandemic of 1918–19 alone.

The figures, staggering though they are, fail to tell the whole story or to convey the full impact of the war on the world of 1914. The consequences of the changes wrought by the crisis of European civilization are too many to specify and, in their range and in their depth, made it the turning point in modern history. That would be true even if, as some maintain, the war merely accelerated some of the changes to which it led.

On August 8, 1914, only four days after Great Britain entered the war, the London *Economist* described it as

“perhaps the greatest tragedy of human history.” That may well remain true. In 1979 the distinguished American diplomat and historian George Kennan wrote that he had “come to see the First World War, as I think many reasonably thoughtful people have learned to see it, as *the* grand seminal catastrophe of this century.”

Fritz Stern, one of the foremost scholars of German affairs, writes of “the first calamity of the twentieth century, the Great War, from which all other calamities sprang.”

The military, political, economic, and social earthquakes brought about a redrawing of the map of the world. Empires and dynasties were swept away. New countries took their place. Disintegration of the political structure of the globe continued over the course of the twentieth century. Today the earth is divided into about four times as many independent states as existed when the Europeans went to war in 1914. Many of the new entities—Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia are examples that come to mind—are countries that never existed before.

The Great War gave birth to terrible forces that would plague the rest of the century. To drive Russia out of the war, the German government financed Lenin’s Bolshevik communists, and introduced Lenin himself into Russia in 1917—in Winston Churchill’s words, “in the same way that you might send a phial containing a culture of typhoid or of cholera to be poured into the water supply of a great city.” Bolshevism was only the first of such war-born furies, followed in years to come by fascism and Nazism.

Yet the war also set in motion two of the great liberation movements of the twentieth century. As Europe tore itself apart, its overlordship of the rest of the planet came undone, and over the course of the century, literally billions of people achieved their independence. Women, too, in parts of the world, broke free from some of the shackles of the past, arguably as a direct consequence of their

involvement in war work—jobs in factories and in the armed forces—beginning in 1914.

Another kind of liberation, a wide-ranging freedom from restraint, came out of the Great War and has expanded ever since in behavior, sex life, manners, dress, language, and the arts. Not everybody believes it to be a good thing that so many rules and restrictions have gone by the way. But whether for good or ill, the world has traveled a long way—from the Victorian age to the twenty-first century—along paths that were blasted out for it by the warriors of 1914.

In searching for the origins of any of the great issues that have faced the world during the twentieth century, or that confront it today, it is remarkable how often we come back to the Great War. As George Kennan observed: “all the lines of inquiry, it seems to me, lead back to it.” Afterwards the choices narrowed. The United States and even Great Britain had a choice, for example, of whether or not to enter the First World War—indeed disagreement has persisted ever since as to whether they were wise to do so—but, realistically, the two countries had little or no choice at all about whether or not to join battle in the Second.

There was nothing inevitable about the progression from the earlier conflict to the later one. The long fuse could have been cut at many points along the way from 1914 to 1939, but nobody did cut it. So the First World War did in fact lead to the Second, even though it need not have done so, and the Second, whether or not it needed to do so, led to the Cold War. In 1991 historians Steven E. Miller and Sean M. Lynn-Jones maintained: “Most observers describe the present period of international politics as the ‘post-Cold War’ era but in many ways our age is better defined as the ‘post-World War I’ era.”

From the start, the explosion of 1914 seemed to set off a series of chain reactions, and the serious consequences were soon apparent to contemporaries: In the Introduction to *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Thomas Mann wrote of “the

Great War, in the beginning of which so much began that has scarcely yet left off beginning."

Nor has it entirely left off today. On April 21, 2001, the *New York Times* reported from France the return to their homes of thousands of people who had been evacuated temporarily because of a threat from munitions left over from World War I and stored near them. These included shells and mustard gas. The evacuees had been allowed to return home after fifty tons of the more dangerous munitions had been removed. But a hundred tons of the lethal materials remained—and remain. So munitions from the 1914 war may yet explode in the twenty-first century.

Indeed, in a sense they already have. On September 11, 2001, the Muslim fundamentalist suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City destroyed the heart of lower Manhattan and took some three thousand lives. Osama bin Laden, the terrorist chieftain who seemingly conjured up this horror and who threatened more, in his first televised statement afterwards described it as vengeance for what had happened eighty years earlier. By this he presumably meant the intrusion of the Christian European empires into the hitherto Muslim-governed Middle East in the aftermath of—and as a consequence of—the First World War. Bin Laden's sympathizers who hijacked jumbo jets had smashed them into the twin towers in pursuance of a quarrel seemingly rooted in the conflicts of 1914.

Similarly, the Iraq crisis that escalated in 2002–03 drove journalists and broadcast news personalities to their telephones, asking history professors from leading American universities how Iraq had emerged as a state from the embers of the First World War. It was a relevant question, for had there been no world war in 1914, there might well have been no Iraq in 2002.

It was indeed the seminal event of modern times.

What was the First World War about? How did it happen? Who started it? Why did it break out where and when it did? “Millions of deaths, and words, later, historians still have not agreed why,” as the “Millennium Special Edition” of *The Economist* (January 1, 1000–December 31, 1999) remarked, adding that “none of it need have happened.” From the outset everybody said that the outbreak of war in 1914 was literally triggered by a Bosnian Serb schoolboy when he shot and killed the heir to the Austrian and Hungarian thrones. But practically everybody also agrees that the assassination provided not the cause, but merely the occasion, for first the Balkans, then Europe, and then the rest of the earth to take up arms.

The disproportion between the schoolboy’s crime and the conflagration in which the globe was consumed, beginning thirty-seven days later, was too absurd for observers to credit the one as the cause of the other. Tens of millions of people could not be losing their lives, they felt, because one man and his wife—two people of whom many of them had never heard—had lost theirs. It did not seem possible. It could not, everyone said, be true.

Because the Great War was so enormous an event and so fraught with consequences, and because we want to keep anything similar from happening in the future, the inquiry as to how it occurred has become not only the most challenging but also the biggest question in modern history. But it remains elusive; in the words of the historian Laurence Lafore, “the war was many things, not one, and the meanings of the word ‘cause’ are also many.”

In the 1940s and 1950s scholars tended to believe that they had learned all that there was to be known about the origins of the war, and that all that remained to be disputed was interpretation of the evidence. Beginning in the 1960s, however, sparked by the research of the great German historian Fritz Fischer—of whose views more will be said

later—new information has come to light, notably from German, Austrian, and Serbian sources, and hardly a year goes by now without the appearance of new monographs adding considerably to our knowledge. Fischer inspired scholars to comb the archives for what was hidden. What follows in this book is an attempt to look at the old questions in the light of the new knowledge, to summarize the data, and then to draw some conclusions from it.

When and where did the march toward the war of 1914 begin? Recently, in a Boston classroom, I asked university students to pinpoint the first steps—before 1908—along the way. From their responses, the following may illustrate how many roads can be imagined to have led to Sarajevo.

The fourth century *A.D.* The decision to divide the Roman Empire between the Latin-speaking West and the Greek-speaking East had lasting consequences. The cultural divide that ramified into two different branches of Christianity, two calendars, and two rival scripts (the Latin and the Cyrillic) persisted. The Roman Catholic Austrians and the Greek Orthodox Serbs, whose quarrel provided the occasion for the 1914 war, were, in that sense, fated to be enemies.

The seventh century. The Slavs, who were to become Europe's largest ethnic group, moved into the Balkans, where the Teutons already had arrived. The conflict between Slavic and Germanic peoples became a recurring theme of European history, and in the twentieth century pitted Teuton Germans and Austrians against Slavic Russians and Serbs.

The eleventh century. The formal split between Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christianity generated a conflict of religious faith along the same fault line as those of ethnic group, alphabet, and culture—Roman versus Greek—a fault line that threatened the southeast of Europe and was followed by the political earthquake that struck in 1914.

The fifteenth century. The conquest of Christian eastern and central Europe by the Muslim Ottoman (or Turkish) Empire deprived the peoples of the Balkans of centuries of experience in self-government. That perhaps contributed to the violence and fractiousness of that area in the years that led up to the 1914 war—and perhaps contributed to bringing it about.

The sixteenth century. The Protestant Reformation split Western Christendom. It divided the German peoples politically, and led to the curious relationship between Germany and Austria that lay at the heart of the crisis of July 1914.

The seventeenth century. The beginning of the centuries-long Ottoman retreat from Europe meant that the Turks were abandoning valuable lands that the Christian Great Powers coveted. Desire to seize those lands fed the rivalry between Austria and Russia that set off war in 1914.

1870–71. The creation of the German Empire and its annexation of French territory in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War made another European war likely as soon as France recovered sufficiently to try to take back what it had lost.

1890. The German emperor dismissed his Chancellor—his prime minister—Prince Otto von Bismarck. The new Chancellor reversed Bismarck's policy of allying with both Austria and Russia to keep the peace between them. Instead, Germany sided with Austria against Russia in the struggle to control the Balkans, which encouraged Austria to follow a dangerously bellicose policy that seemed likely to provoke an eventual Russian response.

1890s. Rebuffed by Germany, and seeing no other alternative, reactionary, monarchical Russia was drawn into an alliance with republican France. This convinced Germany's leaders that war was inevitable sooner or later, and that Germany stood a better chance of winning if it were waged sooner rather than later.

1900s. Germany's attempt to rival Britain as a naval power was seen in London as a vital threat.

1903. In a bloody coup d'etat in Serbia, army officers belonging to a secret society butchered their pro-Austrian king and queen and replaced them with a rival dynasty that was pro-Russian. Austrian leaders reacted by planning to punish Serbia—a plan that if carried out threatened to lead to a dangerously wider conflict.

1905. The First Moroccan Crisis was a complicated affair. It will be described in Chapter 12. In it Germany's aggressive diplomacy had the unintended effect of unifying the other countries against it. Britain moved from mere friendship with France—the Entente Cordiale—to something closer to informal alliance, including conversations between the two governments and military staff talks, and later to agreement and conversation with France's ally Russia. There was a hardening of European alignments into rival and potentially enemy blocs: France, Britain, and Russia on one side, and an isolated Germany—with only halfhearted support from Austria-Hungary and Italy—on the other.

To some extent all of these were right answers. Other dates —among them 1908, which is discussed in the pages that follow—also served as the starting points of fuse lines that led to the explosions of 1914. All of them can be said to have contributed something to the coming of war.

Yet, in a sense all of them are wrong answers, too, to the question of why the conflict came. Thirty-seven days before the Great War the European world was comfortably at peace. Europe's leaders were starting their summer vacations and none of them expected to be disturbed while away. What went wrong?

All of the fuse lines identified by my students had been as dangerous to the peace of Europe in 1910 and 1912 as they were in 1914. Since they had not led to war in 1910 or 1912, why did they in 1914? The question is not only why war came, but why war came in the European summer of 1914; not why war? but—why *this* war?

Why did things happen as they did and not otherwise is a question that historians have been asking ever since Herodotus and Thucydides, Greeks of the fifth century B.C., started to do so more than twenty-five hundred years ago. Whether such questions can be answered with any accuracy remains debatable; often so many tributaries flow into the stream that it is difficult to say which is its real source.

In its magnitude and many dimensions, the First World War is perhaps a supreme example of the complexity that challenges and baffles historians. Arthur Balfour, a prewar British Prime Minister, longtime Conservative statesman, philosopher, and named sponsor of the Jewish state in Palestine, is quoted somewhere as having said the war was too big to be comprehended.

Not merely, therefore, is the explanation of the war the biggest question in modern history; it is an exemplary question, compelling us to reexamine what we mean by such words as "cause." There were causes—many of them—for Europe's Great Powers to be disposed to go to war with one another. There were other causes—immediate ones, with which this book is concerned—for them to have gone to war when and where and how they did.

(iii) *A Summer to Remember*

To the man or woman in the streets of the Western world—someone who was alive in the vibrant early years of the twentieth century—nothing would have seemed further away than war. In those years men who dreamed of battlefield adventure had been hard pressed to find a war in which they could participate. In the year 1901, and in the thirteen years that followed, the peoples of western Europe and the English-speaking Americas were becoming consumers rather than warriors. They looked forward to more: more progress, more prosperity, more peace. The United States at that time (commented an English observer) "sailed upon a summer sea," but so did Great Britain, France, and others. There had been no war among the Great Powers for nearly half a century, and the globalization of the world economy suggested that war had become a thing of the past. The culmination of those years in the hot, sun-drenched, gorgeous summer of 1914, the most beautiful within living memory, was remembered by many Europeans as a kind of Eden. Stefan Zweig spoke for many when he wrote that he had rarely experienced a summer "more luxuriant, more beautiful, and, I am tempted to say, more summery."

Middle- and upper-class Britons in particular saw themselves as living in an idyllic world in which economic realities would keep Europe's Great Powers from waging war on one another. For those with a comfortable income, the world in their time was more free than it is today. According to the historian A. J. P. Taylor, "until August 1914 a sensible, law-abiding Englishman could pass through life and hardly notice the existence of the state." You could live anywhere you liked and as you liked. You could go to practically anywhere in the world without anyone's permission. For the most part, you needed no passports, and many had none.

The French geographer André Siegfried traveled all around the world with no identification other than his visiting card: not even a business card, but a personal one.

John Maynard Keynes remembered it, with wonder, as an era without exchange controls or customs barriers. You could bring anything you liked into Britain or send anything out. You could take any amount of currency with you when you traveled, or send (or bring back) any amount of currency; your bank did not report it to the government, as it does today. And if you decided to invest any amount of money in almost any country abroad, there was nobody whose permission had to be asked, nor was permission needed to withdraw that investment and any profits it may have earned when you wanted to do so.

Even more than today, it was a time of free capital flows and free movements of people and goods. An outstanding current study of the world as of 2000 tells us that there was more globalization before the 1914 war than there is now: “much of the final quarter of the twentieth century was spent merely recovering ground lost in the previous seventy-five years.”

Economic and financial intermingling and interdependence were among the powerful trends that made it seem that warfare among the major European powers had become impractical—and, indeed, obsolete.

One could easily feel safe in that world. Americans felt it at least as much if not more than Europeans. The historian and diplomat George Kennan remembers that before the 1914 war Americans felt a sense of security “such as I suppose no people had ever had since the days of the Roman Empire.” They felt little need for government. Until 1913, when an appropriate amendment to the Constitution was ratified, the Congress was deemed to lack even the power to enact taxes on income.

Stefan Zweig, the Austrian-Jewish author, remembering those antebellum years decades later, remarked that “When

I attempt to find a simple formula for the period in which I grew up, prior to the First World War, I hope that I convey its fullness by calling it the Golden Age of Security. Everything in our almost thousand-year-old Austrian monarchy seemed based on permanency."

In the Western world, it was by and large true that ordinary people felt no apprehension. As will be seen, there were leaders who worried, but in the winter and spring of 1914 not even they expected war to break out in the summer.

France, it is true, would have liked to recover territories taken away by Germany decades before, but those well placed to judge were certain that France would not start a war to get them back. Russia, as France's ally, was well informed on French official thinking; and the Russian Prime Minister reported to the Czar on December 13, 1913, that "All French statesmen want quiet and peace. They are willing to work with Germany." These feelings seemed to be reciprocated by the Germans. John Keiger, a leading scholar of the politics of those years, has argued: "There is no doubt that at the end of 1913 Franco-German relations were on a better footing than for years." Germany feared an eventual war with Russia, but in 1913, Berlin recognized that Russia was in no condition to wage a war, and would not be able to do so for years to come. It was axiomatic that Britain wanted peace. So, as Professor Keiger writes, "the spring and summer of 1914 were marked in Europe by a period of exceptional calm." None of the European Great Powers believed that any one of the others was about to launch a war of aggression against it—at least not in the immediate future.

Like airline passengers on United Airlines Flight 826, Europeans and Americans in the glorious last days of June 1914 cruised ahead above a summer sea and beneath a cloudless sky—until they were hit by a bolt that they wrongly believed came from out of the blue.

[1] Beginning in 1801, the official title of Great Britain was the “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland”; for short, the United Kingdom.
[2] Called “the Allies” during the war.
[3]With Italy as the third member in peacetime. Called “the Central Powers” during the war.

PART ONE

EUROPE’S TENSIONS

CHAPTER 1: **EMPIRES CLASH**

AT THE START of the twentieth century Europe was at the peak of human accomplishment. In industry, technology, and science it had advanced beyond all previous societies. In wealth, knowledge, and power it exceeded any civilization that ever had existed.

Europe is almost the smallest of the continents: 3 or 4 million square miles in extent, depending on how you define its eastern frontiers. By contrast, the largest continent, Asia, has 17 million square miles. Indeed, some geographers viewed Europe as a mere peninsula of Asia.

Yet, by the beginning of the 1900s, the Great Powers of Europe—a mere handful of countries—had come to rule most of the earth. Between them, Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, and Russia dominated Europe, Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and even substantial parts of the Western Hemisphere. Of what little remained, much belonged to less powerful European states: Belgium, Holland, Portugal, and Spain. When all of its empires were added together, Europe spanned the globe.

But the European empires were of greatly unequal size and strength, an imbalance that led to instability; and as they were rivals, their leaders were continuously matching them against one another in their minds, trying to guess who would defeat whom in case of war and with whom, therefore, it would be best to ally. Military prowess was seen as a supreme value in an age that mistakenly believed Charles Darwin’s survival of the fittest to refer to the most murderous rather than (as we now understand it) to the best adapted.

The British Empire was the wealthiest, most powerful, and largest of the Great Powers. It controlled over a quarter of the land surface and a quarter of the population of the globe, and its navy dominated the world ocean that occupies more than 70 percent of the planet. Germany, a newly created confederation led by militarist Prussia, commanded the most powerful land army. Russia, the world's largest country, a backward giant that sprawled across two continents, remained an enigma; enfeebled by a war it lost to Japan in 1904–05, and by the revolution of 1905, it turned itself around by industrializing and arming with financial backing from France. France, despite exploiting a large empire, no longer was a match for Germany and therefore backed Russia as a counterweight to Teutonic power. The Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary ruled a variety of nationalities who were restless and often in conflict. Italy, a new state, as a latecomer aspiring to take its place among the powers, hungered to be treated as an equal.

It was commonly believed at the time that the road to wealth and greatness for European powers was through the acquisition of more colonies. The problem was that the Great Powers already controlled so much of the world that there was little left for others to take. Repeatedly, in going forward, the European powers ran up against one another. Time and again, war threatened, and only skilled diplomacy and self-restraint enabled them to pull back from the brink. The decades before 1914 were punctuated by crises, almost any one of which might have led to war.

It was no accident that some of the more conspicuous of these crises resulted from moves by Germany. It was because Germany's emperor—the Kaiser, or Caesar—in changing his Chancellor in 1890 also changed his government's policy. Otto von Bismarck, the iron-willed leader who had created Germany in 1870–71, was skeptical of imperialism.[1] Far from believing that overseas colonies