

World War I: Lessons from 1914 for 2014

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As we mark the 100th anniversary of World War I, Belfer Center experts suggest important lessons today's leaders should draw from the outbreak of the "war to end all wars."



"Just because war would be folly and self-defeating does not mean that it cannot happen. None of the leaders of Europe in 1914 would have chosen the war they caused—and in the end all lost. By 1918, the Kaiser had been dismissed, the Austro-Hungarian Empire dissolved, the czar overthrown by the Bolsheviks, France bled for a generation, and England shorn of the flower of its youth and treasure. Given a chance for a do-over, none of the leaders would have made the choices he did. Combinations of assertiveness and ignorance, risk-taking, overconfidence, and conceit produced an outcome so devastating that it required historians to create a new category: world war."

—Graham Allison

"History is typically assumed to be the result of great forces, strategic trends, well-thought-out plans, but is often a function of unimportant and unintended events, a "shot heard around the world." This is certainly the case in the Mideast where a car accident ignited the first Intifada, the humiliation of a Tunisian fruit seller began the upheaval which is changing the face of the region, and Israel today fears a small border incident becoming a major conflagration."

—Chuck Freilich

"A salient lesson of World War I for decision-makers should be humility about predicting consequences in a transitional epoch. **The leaders of the era were wrong about almost everything** – the effectiveness of ultimatums, the value of the alliance system, the duration of the conflict, the tactics and strategy required in a new industrialized war, the social and cultural impact of mass death and the stability of empire. These mistakes, driven by hubris, had catastrophic impacts during the Great War itself, led to the horrific 30 years war in Europe and have echoed down the century across the globe (USSR...Middle East...)."

–[*Ben Heineman*](#)

"Historical analogies, though sometimes useful for precautionary purposes, become dangerous when they convey a sense of historical inevitability. WWI was not inevitable. It was made more probable by Germany's rising power and the fear that this created in Great Britain. But it was also made more probable by Germany's fearful response to Russia's power, as well as myriad other factors, including human errors. But the gap in overall power between the US and China today is greater than that between Germany and Britain in 1914. Among the lessons to be learned from the events of 1914 is to be wary of analysts wielding historical analogies, particularly if they have a whiff of inevitability. **War is never inevitable, though the belief that it is can become one of its causes.**"

–[*Joseph S. Nye*](#)

"The single most important conclusion that one can draw from the WWI experience (as it might apply to us today) is the ambiguity that allies present. Confronting China in the future, the United States will need all the strong allies it can get, yet supporting those allies (like Japan for instance, which has major territorial disputes with China) can get us involved in conflict just as Russia's support of Serbia or Germany's of Austria did in 1914. **We have to find new ways of supporting a key ally without at the same time undertaking to defend it come what may.**"

–[*Richard Rosecrance*](#)

"**The main lesson to draw from the onset of the Great War is that serious miscalculation leading to war is possible even in a modern world that is well connected and deeply integrated.** The suggestion made often today that commercial interdependencies will preclude war was proven wrong exactly a hundred years ago. Europe in 1914 was in many ways like the world today – integrated in commerce and politics; with many shared goals and interests that should have made war unthinkable. Yet, somehow the leaders of 1914, with all the pertinent information at their fingertips, and with a capability to talk to one another instantly, miscalculated; setting Europe ablaze and putting the world on a path to even greater conflict two decades later."

–[*Kevin Ryan*](#)

"You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees,' Kaiser Wilhelm told his troops in August 1914. Yet, before autumn had ended, a million combatants lay dead. Fifteen million more—soldiers and civilians—would perish before the armistice. Empires shattered. Borders dissolved. Europe's statesmen failed to imagine the immensity of the tragedy they were to cause. In Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and elsewhere, such unquenchable fires may again be aflame."

-William Tobey

http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/24431/world_war_i.html

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