Don't let's be beastly… about the First World War

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Don't let's be beastly to the Germans
When our victory is ultimately won.

Noel Coward was being humorous when he wrote this lyric during the Second World War; but nowadays there is a seriously held view that we should not blame the Germans alone for the First World War. Recently in *The Pity of War* (1998), in *Virtual History* (2011) and on television, Niall Ferguson has suggested (albeit 'playfully') that, if Britain had stood aside in 1914, Germany would have created 'something like the European Union', half a century before the Treaty of Rome. In *Germania* (Picador, 2010) Simon Winder argued (albeit 'tentatively'), that it would have been better if Germany had won a quick victory in the first year of the War, since 'a Europe dominated by the Germany of 1914 would have been infinitely preferable to a Europe dominated by the Germany of 1939'. In his review of Max Hastings's *Catastrophe*, published in *The Sunday Times* on Sunday 15 September 2013, Dominic Sandbrook took much the same line:

> Had we stayed out in August 1914, allowing the Central Powers to win a relatively quick victory, the world would surely have been spared the horrors of Nazism, the agony of the holocaust and the tyranny of Stalin. The Kaiser's Europe might not have been much fun at first, but it would probably have evolved into something more tolerable. In any case, could it really have been worse than what happened?

But these ideas lack are nothing more than anachronistic wishful thinking. They assume that modern Germany can be equated to the Imperial Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II, when the two entities have little in common other than the name.

Why are some of us so quick now to accept a kind of collective responsibility, for something which no British person would have acknowledged in 1914 or 1918? The change of heart is not confined to Britain. In March 2013 the Flanders Field Museum in Ypres had a series of exhibits where the focus was entirely on a descent into mutual madness, affecting all countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Europeans were shown to have been building empires, militarising their populations, and re-inventing medieval martial traditions. The

message seemed to be that war was inevitable one day. There was no mention of Sarajevo, or even of the violation of Belgian neutrality, though Ypres is where the last post can still be heard, every evening. Perhaps it makes sense to be nice to the young Germans who run modern Germany and the European Union of which we are members; and the modern Germany seems in many ways to be a model of liberal democracy and successful capitalism; but is it so wrong to blame Imperial Germany for the Great War?

Peace Initiatives

Rather than pore over the vast diplomatic archives relating to the events leading up to the outbreak of war, we should perhaps look at who actively worked to restore the peace, once hostilities had begun. The story is complicated, and not a little confusing; but the conclusion is clear. Only the Pope and the United States seriously tried; but the Pope was a non-combatant and the USA only entered the war in 1917. None of the powers which went to war in 1914 was ever seriously interested in a negotiated settlement; and this situation endured until the German war machine ran down, in the middle of 1918.

Pope Benedict XV was only elected on September 3rd 1914 but, as early as November that year, he was working for prisoner exchanges and a Christmas truce. He continued to urge exchanges and food aid throughout the war; but he was entirely unsuccessful in his efforts to achieve more. This was partly because each side suspected that he favoured the other -- though the Vatican remained neutral throughout the four years of conflict. When Italy entered the war on the Allied side in May 1915, the Allies agreed to ignore the Pope's peace-making efforts; and when Benedict pleaded his case again in August 1917, putting forward a seven point 'roadmap', none of the combatants took it seriously.

As for the Americans, President Wilson had made some attempts to bring about negotiations early in 1916, but dropped these when he ran for office again in November that year, while at the same time promising that the USA would not get involved in the European conflict. Upon re-election he wrote to all the combatants seeking a way to end the war. Britain replied to say in effect that she did not trust Germany and would fight on to victory. Russia likewise rejected the idea of negotiation, though she was close to collapse. France made a non-verbal reply by launching a new offensive near Verdun. Germany expressed some initial interest but, since she had just succeeded in overrunning most of Rumania, made it clear that she should continue to occupy Belgium and parts of N.E. France.

In January 1917 Germany commenced unrestricted submarine warfare and clandestinely tried to persuade Mexico to invade the United States. Prior to his initiative, Wilson had made speeches in which he had used the phrase 'peace without victory'. He now realised that the current combatants were determined on a fight to the finish, and that the German interest in peace was either insincere or

would come at too high a price. Soon afterwards, the USA entered the war on the side of the Allies. (Given this background, one can understand that the proposals made by the Pope in August 1917 must have seemed rather stale to Wilson. However, when he set out his famous 'Fourteen points' for post-war settlement in January 1918, these did overlap with some of the Pope's suggestions).

Austria became briefly involved in the search for peace. A new Emperor Charles (Karl I) of Austria succeeded Franz Joseph in November 1916. In March 1917 he initiated indirect negotiations with France; but, since he lacking German backing and Austria would have been unable to continue to fight without German support, these soon came to nothing.

In November 1916 Lord Lansdowne, Minister without Portfolio in the Coalition Government, had circulated a paper in Cabinet, arguing that prolongation of the war would destroy civilisation, and that peace should be negotiated on the basis of the *status quo ante bellum*. His proposal was rejected, but he went public with it in a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*. This provoked a storm of protest at the time, when it seemed like defeatism; and there seems to be general agreement among historians that by this date Germany would have made impossible demands in return for peace.

According to Douglas Haig's diary, the Germans did indicate a new interest in negotiations, at the end of 1917; and Haig was himself inclined to consider the possibility, so depressed was he by the disasters suffered by the British that year on the Western Front; but no-one in government shared his view, and it turned out later that at the time, the Germans were already planning to launch fresh offensives, in the Spring of 1918.

It was the Germans who brought the war to an end, by asking for an armistice, at the end of 1918. Before that date the Germans felt they were in a position to win, at least in the short term. Actions speak louder than words and Germany's attitude to negotiations was dictated by her military strength. In the West, the original plan to crush France quickly may have failed; but the objective was nearly achieved at Verdun in 1916. Germany's trenches remained much where she had chosen to dig them in late 1914 (or else where she had chosen to retreat to); and the German Army succeeded in throwing back successive Allied offensives in the West in 1915, 1916 and 1917. In 1915, her ally Turkey threw back the Allied forces at Gallipoli; in 1916 the Germans themselves overran most of Rumania. In the East, they defended the homeland, defeated successive Russian offensives and imposed a victor's peace on the new Bolshevik government in Moscow, in March 1918. This enabled them to launch their Spring offensives on the Western Front, which came within an ace of breaking the British Army.

Why should the Germans have been interested in a negotiated peace with the Allies, when they still thought they could win in the short run? Peace only came after the 'Black Day of the German army', 8 August 1918, when the German High Command realised that the German army could not break through to the West, and was faced with the arrival of a huge American army in 1919, and advised the Kaiser

accordingly. On 4 October the German government asked President Wilson for an armistice, which as everyone knows came into force at the eleventh hour on 11 November.

Fuelling the Fire

If peace was never given a chance before 1918, it is worth asking what kept the war going: German militarism? French revanchism, in relation to Alsace-Lorraine? Capitalism and imperialism? The lack of any equivalent to the League of Nations or United Nations? All these have been suggested as engines of war; but in the case of Britain, France and the USA there is really no mystery. They, or their civilians were either attacked; or else they felt obliged to come to the aid of an ally or country whose neutrality they had guaranteed. Their objective was to defend themselves and liberate occupied territory from German rule. Later on, the British claimed that they fought for abstract concepts like civilisation, freedom, justice and honour, while President Wilson, who had re-elected on a peace ticket in 1916, preached a war on terror, or at any rate for democracy. Many will now think that these slogans were hollow, but they represented sincerely held beliefs at the time.

In the last half century, our views about the First World War have been very much influenced by the continuing popularity in this country of the so-called War Poets (or at least, of those thought to have been against in some way anti-war); but was there any force in Siegfried Sassoon's argument in 1917 that the war had started as a war of defence and liberation, but had now become 'a war of aggression and conquest'? Or was this merely a war-weary protest, at the tactic of frontal assault and the strategy of attrition, adopted by Allied commanders?

Sassoon's was not a view which was widely shared, even in Britain. It was certainly not shared in France. In the best-selling novel *Le Feu* ('Under Fire'), published in 1916 and usually regarded as anti-war, Henri Barbusse wrote

> You only need to know one thing and that one thing is that the *Boche* are over here, that they're dug in, and that they mustn't get through and that one day they're even going to have to bugger off – the sooner the better.

The intense desire of the French to liberate the territories occupied by the German Army is also evident in Barbusse's novel. It was not for nothing that Joan of Arc was made a Saint in 1920. *La Patrie* was not negotiable.

There was a powerful isolationist lobby in the USA, before both World Wars; but in 1910 Andrew Carnegie had announced the establishment of an Endowment for International Peace, with a fund of $10 million. In his deed of gift Carnegie charged his trustees to use the fund to 'hasten the abolition of international war, the foulest blot upon our civilization' In 1917, the trustees unanimously declared that

the most effective means of promoting durable international peace is to prosecute the war against the Imperial Government of Germany to final victory for democracy.

International lawyers noted that the German invasion of Belgium was a violation of the Hague Convention of 1907, which states that hostilities must not commence without explicit warning. The use of poison gas, which the Germans used first, was a violation of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907.

In Russia, government was turned upside down by the Bolshevik Revolution. Historians can now speculate about Russian responsibility for the war in 1914; but what became more significant after 1917 was the Leninist critique, which blamed the war on imperialism, 'the last stage of capitalism'. This became the official dogma of the Soviet Union (and Communist parties around the world) from its foundation in 1922 to its dissolution in 1991. The force of the argument has been lost since then, but it lingers on in what card-carrying party members would have called 'vulgar Marxism', as well as in the bland statements of those who assume that war is always about money (or oil). Yet, if it did nothing else, Niall Ferguson's book *The Pity of War* did show that the First World War was not an inevitable result of imperialism: 'If there was a war which imperialism should have caused, it was [the war] between Great Britain and Russia which failed to break out in the 1870s and 1880s'.

Germany's Aims

The easiest way to rebut Sassoon's idea and the wider British anti-war critique is to examine Germany's attitude to the war. There is a wealth of evidence to show that many influential Germans - politicians, businessmen and intellectuals – wanted to see Germany take her rightful place on the world stage, if necessary by deploying her new military strength. We do not need to rely on statements made by the Kaiser, or on his momentous decision to build a High Seas Fleet to rival the Royal Navy. In a famous Inaugural Lecture at Freiburg University in 1895, Max Weber, pioneer of sociology, said

We must understand that the unification of Germany was a youthful folly, which the nation committed in its declining days and which would have been better dispensed with because of its expense, if it should be the conclusion and not the starting point for a German Weltmachtpolitik.

In 1899 Hans Delbrück, pioneer of military history wrote

We want to be a World Power and pursue colonial policy in the grand manner. That is certain. Here there can be no step backward. The entire future of our people among the great nations depends on it. We can pursue this policy with England or without England. With England means - in peace; against England means – through war.

Germany did not go to war reluctantly. In August 1914 the idea of war was popular amongst all classes and shades of political opinion. The Social Democrats, who had a majority in the *Reichstag*, voted in favour. Robert Graves had a German aunt who wrote to his mother regularly, pointing out 'the righteousness of the German cause and presenting Germany as the innocent party in a war engineered by France and Russia.' In September 1914 – only a month after the war had started - the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg spoke of his wish to achieve

the security of the German Empire in the West and in the East for the foreseeable future. France must be so weakened that she cannot rise again as a Great Power, Russia must be pushed as far as possible from the German frontier, and her rule over non-Russian peoples must be broken.

In October 1915 the same Chancellor accused Britain of making a colossal and 'tragic' error in entering the war which allegedly 'compelled us to aim for world power against our will.'

Pan-Germans began to advocate the annexation of the whole of north-eastern France and the division of the rest of that country into a republican north and a monarchical south. German success in south-east Europe led the liberal *Reichstag* deputy Friedrich Naumann to develop the idea of *Mitteleuropa*, in his book of that name published in 1915; but perhaps the most extraordinary statement of a position commonly taken in Germany was made by the Anglophile German Felix Liebermann. On 20 July 1916, as blood cascaded on the Somme, he wrote of his 'confident hope'

that the storm of hate and the sea of blood… will soon be understandable as essentially caused by the historical necessity of conflict between the heedless claims of a World-empire, familiar with power, to continue to dominate navigation and world trade, and the justified determination of a unified German people to contend peacefully and circumspectly but with freedom and strength for the goods of this earth, and to expand itself to the measure of its inborn life-force.

Of course, this was only one view; and there were Germans who adopted a very different attitude. Imperial Germany did have a parliament – the *Reichstag* – and in July 1917 the Catholic leader, Matthias Erzberger (1875-1921) persuaded a majority of the Catholics in it to join with the Progressives and Majority Socialists in sponsoring a public resolution in favour of a compromise peace, despite stern opposition from the Chancellor and the Army. This Peace Resolution declared that

Germany resorted to arms in order to protect its freedom and independence, to defend its territorial integrity. The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding, for durable reconciliation among the peoples of the world. Territorial acquisitions achieved by force and violations of political, economic, or financial integrity are incompatible with such a peace.

The vote was an embarrassment so far as the German government was concerned; but it made little difference because control of defence and foreign policy remained with the Kaiser, and by this stage in the war, that effectively meant, with Generals Hindenberg and Ludendorff. Imperial Germany was never a true parliamentary democracy in 1914, and by 1917 she had virtually become a military dictatorship. Even in the Reichstag, the Generals were able to foment opposition to the Social Democrats, for example by the Fatherland Party.

The Armistice of November 1918 led to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. By Article 231 of the Treaty Germany accepted

> the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

After the War German intellectuals and historians rejected this 'war-guilt' clause. Instead, Bethmann-Hollweg blamed 'a general disposition towards war in the world'. It was one of Adolf Hitler's missions in life to reverse the results of Versailles; and during the Third *Reich* it was official Nazi ideology that the German Army had never been defeated in the field, but had been 'stabbed in the back' in 1918. Hitler had little influence before 1933, but in his book *Out of My Life* (1920) the Chief of the German General Staff, Paul von Hindenburg presented Germany's actions as defensive. He concentrated on the East, where he had served between 1914 and 1916: it was Russia which had posed the main threat and indeed started the War, by re-building the armaments and military capacity destroyed during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, mobilising in support of Serbia in July 1914 and invading East Prussia. The Germans had been outnumbered and outgunned in every department.

> During the months of August and September [1914] Russia brought up not fewer than 800,000 men and 1,700 guns against East Prussia, for the defence of which we had only 210,000 German soldiers and 600 guns at our disposal.

Hindenberg also argued that the Germans had long been desperate to break out of the 'military, political and economic ring that had been forged' around them. He wrote of France as 'the enemy whose chauvinistic agitation against us had not left us in peace in times of peace'; and of England as ' that other enemy who every German was convinced was the motive force working for the destruction of Germany.'

Hindenberg's co-commander, Erich von Ludendorff, agreed that Germany had little choice in 1914. She occupied an 'unfavourable military and political position in the Centre of Europe, surrounded by enemies…. with greatly superior numbers.' In addition, Russia was bent on war, 'continually increased her army' and looked only for an opportunity to launch her vast army into the heart of Germany; France thought only of revenge for her defeat in 1870-1; and the Anglo-Saxons also

wanted an opportunity to secure her ancient supremacy at sea. It was 'the definite intention of the Entente to destroy us'. The Allies aimed to 'annihilate' Germany, by cutting her off from the world's resources. The Germans only ever wanted peace.

After the Second World War the historian Fritz Fischer upset the conventional wisdom in academic circles in the new West Germany. In *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (1961, translated as *Germany's Aims in the First World War*) he argued that that Imperial Germany had a deep-seated desire to establish herself as a world power and that she actively worked to provoke a war, in July and August 1914. It was not a case of Europe 'stumbling into war': there was a conscious decision, and one which was made in Germany.

It can be imagined that Fischer was not very popular in his homeland when he said this; and his views did not even appeal to all historians. Herbert Butterfield thought that he was in danger of confusing military plans and foreign policy, while Gerhard Ritter criticised his methodology. There were also Germans who were prepared to accept some blame, but not the sole blame, for the War; and others who stressed that the chief aim was the preservation of German security rather than expansion. They could point to the fact that not all Germans in 1914 had been Pan-Germans, and not all had believed in *Mitteleuropa*; but a great many had feared encirclement by France and Russia. There was a respectable position to be taken, both in 1914 and later, that Germany was not inherently a threat to other powers, but that another 'preventive' war (in the manner of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1) might not be a bad thing and, if it had to come, it were better to fight sooner rather than later.

The problem with German war aims was surely that it did not much matter whether they were inherently offensive or defensive. Because of her position at the heart of Europe and her vulnerability to invasion on two fronts, but also because of her great military strength and acumen, attack was the best – and arguably the only – means of defence. Under the German constitution as it then stood, the military and the Kaiser made the most important decisions. The First World War went viral, when they decided that the moment had arrived to strike.