Hi-story lessons.

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01.08.1914

By marching into Luxemburg, the German Empire begins the First World War

In August 1914, the dual monarchy of Austro-Hungary is a fragile state structure characterised by strong internal tensions. Over a number of centuries, the Austro-Hungarian Empire has successfully brought together a wide variety of different peoples, religions and languages into a heterogeneous Empire. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the state that had previously been given the description felix Austria (happy and/or lucky Austria) was now being torn apart by the nationalism of individual countries within the empire, by aggressive Pan-Slavism that was being promoted by Russia, and by the Austrian and Hungarian power elites' policies that many perceived as oppressive. Add to this reality, Emperor Franz Josef I, a ruler who has been on the throne for 66 years, but who refuses even to consider important reforms.

The presumptive heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Este, sees a centralised solution for the internal conflicts in the creation of a strong federal structure within the empire. These plans, however, run contrary to the Kingdom of Serbia's power-political ambitions. Serbia, with the support of Russia, hopes to profit from the tensions between various nationalities, in order to create a 'Greater Serbia'.

On 28 April 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand's visit to the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which had been annexed into the Austro-Hungarian Empire, ends in catastrophe. Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Bosnian-Serbian terrorist, shoots the heir to the throne and his wife as they were being driven through the city in an open car. The secret Serbian nationalist society Black Hand and the Serbian Secret Service are the master-minds behind the assassination. It cannot be definitively stated whether or not the Serbian government is privy to the plans. The assassination is deemed to be the beginning of the Urkatastrophe des 20. Jahrhunderts (original catastrophe of the twentieth century), the beginning of the First World War. That the assassination would culminate in the Great War is, nonetheless, by no means a foregone conclusion on 28 April. In reality, a series of misjudgements, fears of potential threats, coldly scheming cynicism and excessive nationalism were equally significant in the lead up to the war. The European major powers are trapped in a system of military alliances, whose mutual obligations now contribute directly to the impending disaster.

Austro-Hungary opportunistically views the assassination as a chance to punish Serbia militarily, a country that it has considered a troublemaker for a long time. On 5-6 July, the German Empire

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effectively offers its military ally a Blankoscheck (blank cheque) when it assures Austro-Hungary that Germans will offer absolute support in the case of war. This blank cheque is not without a high level of risk, and there is a lot of evidence to suggest that the leaders in the German Empire are well aware of the dangers they are facing. The German military leaders are working on the assumption that a war is going to come to Europe in any case. Not entirely without cause, German military leaders feel threatened by France to the West, a country that is still mourning its verlorenen Provinzen (lost provinces) of Alsace and Lorraine that had been ceded in 1871, and to the East by Russia. Both powers are united in military alliances against Germany, and both powers are aggressively building up armaments. In August 1914, the German military believes that a war on two fronts is still winnable; however, this will no longer be the case by 1916. For this reason, the German military and Austro-Hungary, which is strongly influenced by this German blank cheque policy, push into a conflict with the minor neighbour, which they know will rely on support from Russia. When Austro-Hungary subsequently issues an ultimatum to Serbia containing tough, largely unacceptable demands, Germany's Chancellor, Theodor von Bethmann-Hollweg, offers his country's partner its express support. This ultimately leads to a chain reaction. Although the Serbian government unexpectedly accepts most of the points in the ultimatum on 25 July, Austro-Hungary nevertheless declares war on Serbia on 28 July with the support of Germany. In response to this, Russia declares general mobilisation on 30 July, which Germany answers with unsuccessful ultimatums to Russia and France. On 1 August, France mobilises and, in response, Germany declares war on Russia. A declaration of war with France follows on 3 August.

The German military's plan, which had been developed at length and in great detail in case of emergency, as to how a war was to be waged and won on two fronts, was extremely risky. The Schlieffen Plan, named after a former chief of the German general staff, proposed that the Army would first march through the neutral countries of Luxembourg and Belgium, in order to reach Paris as quickly as possible, and then take the capital city and, thus, bring the war in the West to a victorious end. Then the entire Army could be mobilised in the East to defeat Russia. The problem with this plan, however, is that Germany, together with Great Britain, is a guarantor power for Belgian neutrality. The concept that Belgium might refuse permission for the German Army to march through its territory was either not contemplated in the plan, or the consequence of such a Belgian refusal was underestimated. On 2 August, German troops occupy Luxembourg, and on 3 August, they invade neutral Belgium, which had previously rejected the German request to march through the country. The German invasion of Belgium led Great Britain to enter the war, a country that was also allied with France through the Entente Cordiale military agreement. German Emperor Wilhelm II made a number of desperate attempts to salvage peace by seeking personal contact with his close relative, Tsar Nicholas II, but all efforts were in vain. The World War had begun. By its end, approximately 9.5 million soldiers and almost 8 million civilians will have lost their lives.

The whole so-called Julikrise (July crisis) is a textbook example of extreme political failure, and the ultimate occurrence of the First World War represents a declaration of moral bankruptcy of an entire generation of the ruling elite. The twentieth century to follow will be characterised by the collapse of civilisation in uninhibited industrialised war, the brutalisation of individuals through the simultaneous totalitarian moulding of anonymous masses as Menschenmaterial (human material) or human resources, the annihilation of all morals, the rejection of centuries-old cultural norms and values, the destruction of developed social and economic structures, and the smashing and re-formation of complete states. From the German perspective, this development is especially tragic.

As the second strongest world industrial power, with a highly educated population when compared to

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other international powers, countless internationally recognised scientists and artists, with social legislation that was considered modern for the times, and the hopeful beginnings of a functioning democracy, the outlook was promising for the German Empire to achieve a Deutsches Jahrhundert (German Century) in spite of all the prevailing class antagonisms and differences. Instead, Germany will fall into the barbarism of the Nazi Regime; it will be defeated a second time, be ostracised and despised and, ultimately, it will be divided.

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