

smashed into the right flank of the Austro–Hungarian advance. The Austrian Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, originally intended to operate only against Serbia. When Moltke virtually ordered him at the last minute to move against Russia, he tried to mount two attacks in opposite directions. When the Russians took Lemberg, the Austro–Hungarian withdrawal became a rout. With 350,000 men lost, the Austro–Hungarian Army never recovered from its opening fiasco. The Serbs then completed Conrad’s misery by holding off his invasion of Serbia in September.

CHAPTER THREE

TAKING STOCK

THE SOLDIERS

The military leaders might not have expected the defensive stalemate that emerged, but when it did, they, or more often the new men who replaced them, analyzed the unexpected dilemma with a good deal more acuity than the post-war legend about bone-headed generals would suggest. As Trevor Wilson points out (Wilson, 1986), they realized that there were essentially two ways to bring back open and mobile warfare. One was to attack faster than the defence could entrench itself. Speed to achieve this came through the railway systems. For example, in the race to the sea in 1914, the battles between the Marne and Ypres took place where east–west spur lines delivered men who had been moved north on the main lines. Speed was constant for both sides because both were using the same railway network. Space was the other variable. The 475 miles of front might seem to present opportunities for open attack somewhere, but much of the territory was unsuitable for attacking, especially between Verdun and the Swiss frontier. In the flatter areas where manoeuvre was possible, the increase in firepower and manpower of the previous half-century ensured that both sides could pack in more than enough to stand their ground. Even before 1914, modern trenches had evolved far beyond being holes in the ground. Reinforced with barbed wire (one of the underrated basics of trench war), sandbags, deep dugouts, modern rifles, quick-firing field artillery and machine guns (one of the overrated basics of trench war), entrenched defences would yield only to infantry well supported by artillery. So artful manoeuvre and power drives were both impractical, at least for the moment. Moreover, by the end of 1914, everyone had run out of shells. Starting virtually from scratch, both sides converted to war economies to feed the guns. Yet the same artillery backstopped the defences. The more things changed, the more they were likely to stay the same, if only because the two sides had the same technological capacities, and whatever device one side lacked, it soon was able to copy.

THE POLITICIANS

The warring powers objectively still had a range of choices; all chose at this early point to limit the war. The shortage of shells gave them no other choice. Subjectively, however, each power faced a different situation. The French had the least freedom of choice. As Foch is alleged to have said after the war, 'when I last looked, France had not invaded Germany'. Other than surrender, the only option open to the French was to expel the invader. The Germans had a choice of fronts and therefore some strategic leeway. Looking ahead to the coming campaign season, they chose to defend in the west and attack Russia in the east. Hindenburg and Ludendorff wanted to commit everything to an eastern victory, but Falkenhayn doubted that he had the resources to force a Russian capitulation. Russia could always trade space for time, withdrawing into her vast interior to fight another day, the way she had when faced with Napoleon. Falkenhayn preferred to combine military pressure with diplomatic moves to detach Russia from her Western allies. As it happened, the German victories in the east in 1915 were too humiliating in their scope and their diplomatic concessions too minor to alter the will of the Tsar to fight on. Austria–Hungary still faced the threat the South Slavs seemed to pose to the survival of the multinational Empire, but it was now magnified by the struggle against the Slavs of Russia and the fissures that war brought. That the Habsburg Empire fought on despite its sorry start in 1914 is still hard to understand. Patriotism of the sort that France or Germany could muster was insignificant in a state whose ruler at most wanted, in his words, 'a patriot for me'. Yet there was perhaps an underlying affection for Franz Josef, who had been on the throne since 1848. Even for disgruntled nationalists he had become rather like unsightly wallpaper that is too familiar and inconvenient to replace. The Dual Monarchy kept going by sheer inertia.

Britain seemed to have the most freedom of choice by the end of 1914. Her new army was still embryonic, so that the Royal Navy remained her main strength. As early as the winter of 1914–15, members of the War Cabinet understood that the impasse on the Western Front might not be temporary. Winston Churchill wrote to Prime Minister Asquith to insist that the new army not be forced to 'chew barbed wire in France' (Wilson, 1986: 104). David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, had gone from being a critic of militarism to a staunch believer in the war. Not, however, any kind of war nor war at any price. He too did not want the main British effort on land to be on the Western Front. There Britain would always be a junior partner to France and might well be drawn into the French manner of war which seemed to him to involve enormous and wasteful attacks to wear down the Germans. Lloyd George looked instead to the Balkans. The growing conviction of the politicians that Britain should fight anywhere but the Western Front testifies to their compassion, but also to their evasion of the central reality Britain

faced in the war. Between 1914 and 1918, most of the German army was on the Western Front, making it the main front. To fight elsewhere ignored the reason Britain was at war in the first place, the need to defeat Germany. Whatever freedom of choice Britain had in theory, or in the imaginations of Churchill and Lloyd George, in fact she had as little as the others. She could see it through on the Western Front, tiptoe off to an unimportant sideshow, or drop out altogether. The generals accepted this point and its implications. The politicians had to deal with the political and social implications and understandably turned waffling into high policy.

CIVILIANS AND THE SUSPENSION OF PARTISAN POLITICS

Side-stepping the point was not an art form exclusive to the British. Politicians in all the warring countries had to tread carefully. As war approached, civilian leaders worried that an outraged public would regard war as a calamity and hold them responsible. When instead crowds everywhere welcomed the war rapturously, and even militant socialists supported the war on behalf of the working classes, the leaders issued a collective sigh of relief. Had the war not been so popular, at least in the larger cities, it might indeed have been over by Christmas. What turned another war into the Great War was its extraordinary popularity [Doc. 16].

In Germany, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg had been Chancellor (head of the central government) since 1909. A civil servant by training who in office was responsible only to the Kaiser and not to the elected parliament of the Empire, the *Reichstag*, Bethmann had hoped to concentrate on domestic matters. Foreign policy, in which he was relatively untrained, came instead to dominate his attention. After his wife died in 1912 he seems to have become fatalistic, and by 1914 to have convinced himself that war was inevitable. All he could do was ensure that Germany was prepared for it when it came. That meant hoping for British neutrality and keeping a watchful eye on the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which in 1912 had won a third of the seats in the *Reichstag*. In its official programme, the SPD was committed to oppose any war the capitalist classes foisted on the workers. In practice, the SPD gradually became less radical and more patriotic. Bread and butter issues and parliamentary politics displaced revolutionary ideology. When Bethmann delayed acting until Russia mobilized first, the SPD joined the rest of the nation in believing that Germany was the victim of Tsarist aggression. It was thus not just war with all its romantic associations that Germans embraced in August. They were also celebrating their new-found unity. When the Kaiser declared on 4 August that he no longer recognized parties but only Germans, he gave voice to a deeply felt yearning and for once spoke to and for his people. The government declared a *Burgfrieden** or 'truce of the castle', to signal the suspension of normal partisan politics.



Plate 1 Postcard. Inscription on the back reads: 'Born to Command. With the shortage of qualified officers during the war, Emma's natural leadership abilities were finally recognised' (© Wildwood Design Group 1987 All Rights Reserved Box 3140 McLean VA 22103).


Like the influenza pandemic that struck the world at the end of the war, the 'spirit of August' was not confined to one country or class, although contrary to legend it did not carry away everyone. People less engaged in the modern world were less susceptible, so that the 'spirit' was less evident in the countryside in Europe or in the longer-settled areas of the Imperial Dominions such as Nova Scotia or Quebec in Canada. France matched the German *Burgfrieden* with a *Union sacrée*. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was too fractious even to pretend to be united. Russia had little in the way of civic politics to suspend, but she too had a sudden abundance of patriotism. The Liberal government in Britain did not bother to proclaim a truce, yet the end result was much the same. The women suffragettes, Irish nationalists and trade unionists who had been so militant in the years before 1914 either suspended their agitation or backed the government enthusiastically. The legal side of consensus was secured by the Defence of the Realm Act [Doc. 9]. Under Andrew Bonar Law, the Unionists (Conservatives) moderated their bad temper and kept a close watch over the Liberals.

Although an interest in war had been growing before 1914, so had pacifism. Its most popular expression was *The Great Illusion* by Norman Angell. He argued that modern states were too integrated economically to make war a rational option. Following this vintage liberal argument, businessmen assured themselves that a long war was out of the question because it would ruin trade. When war came, the main economic worries concerned trade and finance. Only when the war did not end after a few months did government and business think about problems that would occur in the longer run: shortages of raw materials, the disruption of the workforce with so many men in uniform, and paying for the war, which was proving to be expensive beyond all expectations. When Winston Churchill used the phrase 'business as usual', he hoped to dispel the fear that the situation was heading into unknown dangers. The trouble with this breezy complacency was that the need for victory was making old ways of managing obsolete. War tests everything. Whatever obstructs victory is dumped overboard; whatever works passes the test; and measures, manners or mores that once were unthinkable are adopted 'for the duration' if they bear the promise of victory.

WAR AIMS

Victory was pretty much the only war aim the powers formally declared. Of course they also tried to explain why they were fighting. Germany was fighting to avoid encirclement and to secure a free hand to grow to be a world power. France was fighting to expel the invader. Britain was fighting to rid the world of bullies, or at least bullies who wore pointed helmets. Canada, Australia, South Africa and India were fighting because the Empire (read Britain) was fighting. Austria-Hungary was fighting against the threat of disintegration.

Russia was fighting for the rights of the Slavic peoples. All the states claimed to be defending themselves against the aggression of others. All left the public expression of what they were fighting for, of the details of war aims and peace settlements until the fortunes of war decided the outcome.

This omission of clear and explicit war aims was more than an oversight. What a state wants to achieve through war affects the sort of war it . When the aims are unlimited, the war tends to be as well, as with the Second World War. The curious thing about the First World War is that, even though the avowed aims of all of the powers were either unexpressed or, when finally articulated, limited and defensive, the means by which the war was fought became increasingly open-ended and unlimited. The belligerents defined victory simply as the collapse of the enemy and dedicated all their resources to that end. So it was that after the first deaths, war was the cause of more war and seemed to take on a life of its own. In effect, the civilian leaders asked the soldiers to fight until the other side gave up. The civilians would then revise the maps and sort out the details. The soldiers in turn asked the civilians not to be back-seat drivers and to keep quiet until victory came.

In private, people high and low had war aims that were anything but defensive and limited. The best example of such a private agenda is the September Memorandum of Bethmann [Doc. 1]. When Professor Fritz Fischer discovered the document in the archives, he thought it proved that the government of Germany, and not just Pan German* extremists, was committed to annexations and European supremacy (Fischer, 1967). Bethmann's private aims were indeed indistinguishable from Pan German aims. They were, however, private. He drafted the memorandum before the Battle of the Marne negated the hope of a quick victory. When the god of battle left the enemy able to fight on, Bethmann refused to endorse or deny annexations. Not only would any declaration of aims play into the hands of the enemy, but it would offend either the Social Democrats, who wanted the peace to reflect the situation before the war, or the growing movement for annexations. To uphold the *Burgfrieden*, he asked the parties and interest groups to say nothing about war aims. They would trust him, he would trust the army, and the result of this stoic solidarity would be a peace that would reward Germans for their sacrifices. The British were similarly vague about their avowed aims, but they had the advantage of publicists like H.G. Wells, who provided phrases that were a substitute for policy. 'War to end war' and 'war to make the world safe for democracy' went over well at home and in America.