

The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914

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The First World War followed a period of sustained peace in Europe during which people talked with confidence of prosperity, progress, and hope. But in 1914, Europe walked into a catastrophic conflict that killed millions, bled its economies dry, shook empires and societies to pieces, and fatally undermined Europe's dominance of the world. It was a war that could have been avoided up to the last moment—so why did it happen? Beginning in the early nineteenth century and ending with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, award-winning historian Margaret MacMillan uncovers the huge political and technological changes, national decisions, and just as important, the small moments of human muddle and weakness that led Europe from peace to disaster. This masterful exploration of how Europe chose its path toward war will change and enrich how we see this defining moment in our history.

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Europe in 1900

On April 14, 1900, Emile Loubet, the President of France, talked approvingly about justice and human kindness as he opened the Paris Universal Exposition. There was little kindness to be found in the press comments at the time. The exhibitions were not ready; the site was a dusty mess of building works; and almost everyone hated the giant statue over the entrance of a woman modeled on the actress Sarah Bernhardt and dressed in a fashionable evening dress. Yet the Exposition went on to be a triumph, with over 50 million visitors.

In style and content the Exposition partly celebrated the glories of the past and each nation displayed its national treasures—whether paintings, sculptures, rare books or scrolls—and its national activities. So where the Canadian pavilion had piles of furs, the Finnish showed lots of wood, and the Portuguese decorated their pavilion with ornamental fish. Many of the European pavilions mimicked great Gothic or Renaissance buildings, although little Switzerland built a chalet. The Chinese copied a part of the Forbidden City in Beijing and Siam (today Thailand) put up a pagoda. The Ottoman Empire, that dwindling but still great state which stretched from the Balkans in southern Europe through Turkey to the Arab Middle East, chose a pavilion which was a jumble of styles, much like its own peoples who included Christians, Muslims and Jews and many different ethnicities. With colored tiles and bricks, arches, towers, Gothic windows, elements of mosques, of the Grand Bazaar from Constantinople (now Istanbul), it was fitting that the overall result still somehow resembled the Hagia Sophia, once a great Christian church that became a mosque after the Ottoman conquest.

Germany's pavilion was surmounted by a statue of a herald blowing a trumpet, suitable,

perhaps, for the newest of the great European powers. Inside was an exact reproduction of Frederick the Great's library; tactfully the Germans did not focus on his military victories, many of them over France. The western facade hinted, though, at a new rivalry, the one which was developing between Germany and the world's greatest naval power, Great Britain: a panel showed a stormy sea with sirens calling and had a motto rumored to be written by Germany's ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II, himself: "Fortune's star invites the courageous man to pull up the anchor and throw himself into the conquest of the waves." Elsewhere at the Exposition were reminders of the rapidly burgeoning power of a country that had only come into existence in 1871: the Palace of Electricity contained a giant crane from Germany which could lift 25,000 kilos.

Austria-Hungary, Germany's closest friend in Europe, had two separate pavilions, one for each half of what had come to be known as the Dual Monarchy. The Austrian one was a triumph of Art Nouveau, the new style which had been catching on in Europe. Marble cherubs and dolphins played around its fountains, giant statues held up its staircases and every inch of its walls appeared to be covered by gold leaf, precious stones, happy or sad masks, or garlands. A grand reception room was set aside for members of the Habsburg family which had presided for centuries over the great empire stretching from the center of Europe down to the Alps and Adriatic, and the exhibits showed off the work of Poles, Czechs, and South Slavs from the Dalmatian coast, only some of the Dual Monarchy's many peoples. Next to the Austrian pavilion and separating it from that of Hungary stood a smaller one, representing the little province of Bosnia, still technically part of the Ottoman Empire but administered since 1878 from Vienna. The Bosnian pavilion, with its lovely decorations by craftsmen from its capital of Sarajevo, looked, said the guide published by Hachette, like a young girl being brought out into the world for the first time by her parents.¹ (And they were not particularly happy ones at that.)

The mood of the Hungarian pavilion was strongly nationalistic. (Austrian critics said sourly that the folk art on display was vulgar and its colors too bright.) The exhibits also included a reconstruction of the great citadel of Comorn (Komorn) in the north which stood in the way of the Ottomans in the sixteenth century as they stretched northwards into Europe. Much more recently, in 1848, it had been held by Hungarian nationalists in the revolt against the Habsburgs but had fallen to Austrian forces in 1849. Another room was dedicated to the Hussars, famous for their bravery in the wars against the Ottomans. The exhibits paid less attention though to the millions of non-Hungarian peoples, Croatians or Rumanians, for example, who lived within Hungary's borders.

Italy, like Germany a new country and a great power more by courtesy than in reality, had built what looked like a vast, richly decorated cathedral. On its golden dome stood a giant eagle, its wings outstretched in triumph. Inside it was filled with art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but the glories of the past could weigh heavily on a poor young country. Britain, by contrast, chose to be low key even though it still dominated much of the world's trade and manufacturing and had the world's biggest navy and largest empire. Its exhibit was housed in a cozy country house designed by rising young architect Edwin Lutyens in the half-timbered Tudor style and consisted mainly of English paintings from the eighteenth century. Some private British owners had refused to lend their works because

Britain's relations with France, traditionally difficult, were particularly strained in 1900.²

Russia had pride of place at the Exposition as France's favored ally. The Russian exhibits were huge and scattered in several different locations, ranging from a massive palace in the style of the Kremlin dedicated to Siberia to a richly decorated pavilion named in honor of the Tsar's mother, Empress Marie. Visitors could admire, among much else, a map of France made in precious stones which the Tsar, Nicholas II, had sent as a present to the French and marvel at the sheer extent of the Romanovs' possessions. The French themselves did not have their own pavilion; the whole Exposition was after all designed to be a monument to French civilization, French power, French industry and agriculture, and French colonies, and room after room in the different special exhibits was devoted to French achievements. The French section of the Palais des Beaux-Arts was, said the guide, naturally a model of good taste and luxury. The Exposition marked the reassertion by France that it was still a great power, even though only thirty years previously it had been utterly defeated as it had tried to prevent Germany coming into existence.

The Universal Exposition was nevertheless, the French declared, a "symbol of harmony and peace" for all of humanity. Although the more than forty countries exhibiting in Paris were mainly European, the United States, China, and several Latin American countries also had pavilions. As a reminder though of where power still lay, a large part of the Exposition was given over to colonies where the European powers showed off their possessions. The crowds could marvel at exotic plants and beasts, walk by replicas of African villages, watch craftsmen from French Indochina at their work, or shop in North African souks. "Supple dancing girls," said an American observer severely, "perform the worst forms of bodily contortions known to the followers of Terpsichore."³ Visitors came away with a comfortable assurance that their civilization was superior and that its benefits were being spread around the globe.

The Exposition seemed a suitable way to mark the end of a century which had started with revolutions and wars but which now stood for progress, peace and prosperity. Europe had not been entirely free of wars in the nineteenth century but they had been nothing to compare with the long struggles of the eighteenth century or the wars of the French Revolution and later those of Napoleon which had drawn in almost every European power. The wars of the nineteenth century had generally been short-like the one between Prussia and the Austrian Empire which had lasted for seven weeks-or colonial wars fought far from European soil. (The Europeans should have paid more attention to the American Civil War which not only lasted for four years but which gave an early warning that modern technology and the humble barbed wire and spades were shifting the advantage in war to the defense.) While the Crimean War in the middle of the century had involved four European powers, it was the exception. In the Austro-Prussian War, the Franco-Prussian, or the Russo-Turkish the other powers had wisely stayed out of the conflict and had done what they could to build peace again.

In certain circumstances war was still seen as a reasonable choice for nations if they could see no other way to obtain their goals. Prussia was not prepared to share control of the German states with Austria and Austria was determined not to concede. The war that

followed settled the issue in Prussia's favor. Resorting to war was costly but not excessively so. Wars were limited both in time and in their scope. Professional armies fought each other and damage to civilians and to property was minimal, certainly in light of what was to come. It was still possible to attack and win decisive victories. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, though, like the American Civil War, hinted that armed conflict was changing: with conscription, armies were bigger, and better and more accurate weapons and increased firepower meant that the forces of the Prussians and their German allies suffered large casualties in the opening attacks on the French. And the surrender of the French army at Sedan did not end the fighting. Instead the French people, or large sections of it, chose to fight on in a people's war. Yet even that had finally ended. France and the new Germany had made peace and their relations had gradually mended. In 1900 the Berlin business community sent a message for the opening of the Exposition to the Paris Chamber of Commerce, wishing success to "this great undertaking, which is destined to bring the civilized nations of the world nearer to one another in the labours common to them all."⁴ The large numbers of German visitors who were expected to go to Paris would, so many in Germany hoped, help to build better relations between the peoples of their two countries.

All the peoples of the earth have worked on the Exposition, said the special Hachette guide: "they have accumulated their marvels and their treasures for us to reveal unknown arts, overlooked discoveries and to compete with us in a peaceful way where Progress will not slacken in her conquests." The themes of progress and the future ran throughout the Exposition, from the new moving pavements to the cinema in the round. At one of the pavilions, the Ch^{te}teau d'Eau, with its cascading waterfalls, shooting fountains, and colored lights playing on the waters, the centerpiece in a giant basin was an allegorical group which represented Humanity led by Progress advancing towards the Future and overthrowing the rather odd couple of Routine and Hatred.

The Exposition was a showcase for individual countries but it was also a monument to the most recent extraordinary achievements of Western civilization, in industry, commerce, science, technology, and the arts. You could see the new X-ray machines or be overwhelmed, as Henry James was, by the Hall of Dynamos, but the most exciting discovery of all was electricity. The Italian Futurist artist Giacomo Balla later called his daughters Luce and Elettricit^e in memory of what he saw at the Paris Exposition. (A third daughter was Elica-Propellor-after the modern machinery he also admired.) Camille Saint-Sa^{ns} wrote a special cantata in praise of electricity for the Exposition: *Le Feu c^{ele}ste* with orchestra, soloists and choir was performed at a free concert. The Palace of Electricity was ablaze with 5,000 light bulbs and high on the summit of its roof stood the Fairy of Electricity in her chariot drawn by a horse and dragon. And there were dozens more palaces and pavilions devoted to the important activities of modern society, among them machinery, mining and metallurgy, chemical industries, public transportation, hygiene, and agriculture.

There was still more, much more. The second modern Olympic Games took place nearby in the Bois de Boulogne as part of the Exposition. Sports included fencing (where the French did very well), tennis (a British triumph), athletics (American dominated), cycling and croquet. At the Exposition Annexe in Vincennes you could examine the new motorcars and

watch balloon races. Raoul Grimoin-Sanson, one of the earliest film directors, went up in his own balloon to film the Exposition from above. As the Hachette guide said, the Exposition was "the magnificent result, the extraordinary culmination of the whole century—the most fertile in discoveries, the most prodigious in sciences, which has revolutionized the economic order of the Universe."

In light of what was to come in the twentieth century such boasting and such complacency seem pitiful to us, but in 1900 Europeans had good reason to feel pleased with the recent past and confident about the future. The thirty years since 1870 had brought an explosion in production and wealth and a transformation in society and the way people lived. Thanks to better and cheaper food, improvements in hygiene, and dramatic advances in medicine, Europeans were living longer and healthier lives. Although Europe's population went up by perhaps as much as 100 million to a total of 400 million, it was able to absorb the growth thanks to increased output in its own industry and agriculture and imports from around the world. (And emigration acted as a safety valve to avoid an even more dramatic increase—some 25 million Europeans left in the last two decades of the century for new opportunities in the United States alone and millions more went to Australia or Canada or Argentina.)

Europe's cities and towns grew as people moved from the countryside in increasing numbers in search of better opportunities in factories, shops and offices. On the eve of the French Revolution in 1789, Paris had some 600,000 inhabitants; by the time of the Exposition, 4 million. Budapest, the capital of Hungary, showed the most dramatic increase: in 1867 it had 280,000 inhabitants and by the time of the Great War, 933,000. As the numbers of Europeans making a living from agriculture went down, the industrial working classes and the middle classes grew. Workers organized themselves into unions, which were legal in most countries by the end of the century; in France the number of workers in unions went up fivefold in the fifteen years before 1900 and was to reach 1 million just before the Great War. In recognition of the increasing importance of the class, the Exposition had exhibits of model houses for workers and organizations for their moral and intellectual development.

Other Books

1917. How did two men move the world away from wars for land and treasure to wars over ideas and ideologies—a change that would go on to kill millions? In April 1917, Woodrow Wilson—champion of American democracy but also of segregation, advocate for free trade and a new world order based on freedom and justice—thrust the United States into the First World War in order to make the "world safe for democracy"—only to see his dreams for a liberal international system dissolve into chaos, bloodshed, and betrayal. That October, Vladimir Lenin—communist revolutionary and advocate for class war and "dictatorship of the proletariat"—would overthrow Russia's earlier democratic revolution that had toppled the powerful czar, all in the name of liberating humanity—and instead would set up the most repressive totalitarian regime in history, the Soviet Union. In this incisive, fast-paced history, the New York Times bestselling author Arthur Herman brilliantly reveals how Lenin and Wilson rewrote the rules of modern geopolitics. Prior to and through the end of World War I, countries marched into war only to advance or protect their national interests. After World War I, countries began going to war over ideas. Together Lenin and Wilson unleashed the disruptive ideologies that would sweep the world, from nationalism and

globalism to Communism and terrorism, and that continue to shape our world today. Our new world disorder is the legacy left by Wilson and Lenin, and their visions of the perfectibility of man. One hundred years later, we still sit on the powder keg they first set the detonator to, through war and revolution.

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