

THE LOST HISTORY

— OF —

1914

**RECONSIDERING THE YEAR THE
GREAT WAR BEGAN**

JACK BEATTY

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To the honored memory of John J. Beatty (1893–1982) and his fellow countrymen and women who served in World War I.

Born in the last year of World War II, I was raised on tales of World War I. My father conveyed affecting memories of London under bombardment by German dirigibles, of a pub brawl between American sailors and English soldiers (“You’re four years late, Yank!”), of mustering the nerve to ask a posh Paris lady for a kiss, and of the thirty-six flag-draped coffins of his shipmates from the USS *Mount Vernon*, torpedoed by a German submarine in the Bay of Biscay on September 5, 1918, arrayed along a Brest dock and the captain weeping during the memorial service and the tears soaking his blouse.



After the torpedo. Sailors from the stricken U.S.S. *Mount Vernon*: The second kneeling sailor from the left is very likely John J. Beatty of South Boston. He banged his head when the torpedo hit, and for a time suffered nosebleeds. After the war he did not apply for disability compensation, for which the standard of injury was ridiculously low, because he could not cash in on an attack that killed so many of his shipmates. Sleeping in his car at WPA jobsites during the Great Depression, he cursed himself for a fool for passing up the money. His family venerated him for it.



INTRODUCTION

Very few things happen at the right time, and others do not happen at all.

—Herodotus

1914 might be remembered for a coup in Germany, a polar shift in foreign policy in Russia, a civil war in Britain, a leftist ministry in France pursuing détente with Germany. If any of these things had happened, 1914 would *not* be remembered as the year World War I as we know it began. If Franz Ferdinand, the heir apparent to the Austrian throne, had not been murdered at Sarajevo in June, the war might not have happened at all. Most books about 1914 map the path leading to war.* This one maps five paths that led away from it.

I intend the subtitle in two senses. “Lost” as in forgotten, buried under the avalanche of the war. And “lost” as in “did not win.” It is as if the events I relate were in a race with the war; and the war won. It is just.

My presentment of the war as contingent on Herodotus’s chancy clock may be unexpected to readers who last encountered World War I in textbooks that depicted it as overdetermined to redundancy. One survey of Underlying Causes advanced by historians lists four Deep Causes, six under System Level, five under Organization and Bureaucracy, five under Leaders, four under Ideas, two under Domestic Politics, and one under State Structure. The subheads range from the Industrial Revolution to Social Darwinism to the Cult of the Offensive to Poor German Leadership after Bismarck, Poor Austrian Crisis Management, Poor Russian Crisis Management, and Poor British Crisis Management. With all these deep psychological (“war as escape from super ego constraints”), economic, political, cultural, and intellectual causes, how could war have been avoided? No wonder historians of the war sometimes stray from the trenches of empiricism into the metaphysical no-man’s-land of historical inevitability. For example, here is F. H. Hinsley, a British scholar, voicing what has long been an unspoken assumption: “If the Sarajevo crisis had not precipitated a particular great war, some other crisis would have precipitated a great war at no distant date.” Not surprisingly, some of the men most responsible for the war took a similar line. According to the Austrian chief of staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, “the First World War came about inevitably and irresistibly as the result of the motive forces in the lives of states and peoples, like a thunderstorm which must by its nature discharge itself.” Chroniclers of “the path to war” need not so explicitly embrace inevitability to convey the impression of it. Highlighting the milestones along the path with one eye fixed on its termination, they wind up, in H. Tawney’s formulation, “dragging into prominence the forces which have triumphed and thrusting

into the background those which they have swallowed up.”

World War I historians of the Hinsley persuasion anchor their certainty in the fatalism, amounting to a “cult of inevitability,” of contemporary decision makers. Armageddon happened because men believed it would happen. A twenty-first-century generation of historians demurs, finding that “the European population as a whole shared a common belief in the improbability of a Great War” with the civilian and military elite. Regarding war as improbable, Holger Afflerbach hypothesizes, leaders took risks that made it possible. Armageddon happened because men believed it could *not* happen. Other things seemed so much more probable than war, and some seemed to rule it out. They are my subject.

Exploiting the recent scholarship on World War I, *The Lost History of 1914* tells an old story newly depicting Franz Ferdinand’s death, for example, not as the catalyst of a war that would have broken out over some other crisis “at no distant date” but rather as its all-but-unique precipitant.*

The German historian Annika Mombauer distinguishes three interpretive stances, or “topos,” on the war’s origins, “the topos of inevitable, avoidable, and improbable war.” She identifies the weakness of the latter two: “War was still avoidable, but only if everyone had actually wanted to avoid it. This was not the case.” To fit what she suggests a fourth category, “the topos of desirable war,” contending that “war broke out not because it was inevitable ... but because certain key individuals [in Vienna and Berlin] felt the time was right for having it.” The argument that the war was avoidable, therefore, if it rests on evidence of “the contingent ... mistakes and misperceptions of a very small number of decision makers” during the July Crisis after Sarajevo, cannot address Mombauer’s objection that had then, with war willed, even flawless crisis managing on all sides could not have stopped it. War would have had to be stopped earlier. And, when Germany relied on threats of war as an instrument of statecraft, Great Power diplomacy could not have stopped it. Only events *within* the powers could have. By exploring such events this book seeks to reconcile the “topos of improbable war” with the “topos of desirable war.”¹

The history I uncovered from beneath the war—the military overturning civil government in Germany, revolution stalking autocracy in Russia, political fanaticism threatening parliamentary democracy in England, incipient nationalism among its eleven peoples haunting the Austro-Hungarian Empire, imperialism in Morocco staining the honor of France and poisoning relations with Germany—challenges the received image of the Belle Époque as a “Golden Age of Security,” as the Viennese author and playwright Stefan Zweig remembered it. Only for a sliver of Europeans was that true, and then only on holidays. At work men like Zweig’s industrialist father worried about strikes (two thousand in Britain in 1912, four thousand in Russia in the first six months of 1914) shutting down their factories and Socialist parties winning power in Europe’s parliaments. “Socialists! The word had a peculiar taste of blood and terror in the Germany and Austria of those days,” Zweig recalled, “like ‘Jacobin’ before and ‘Bolshevik’ since.” Fearful of being swept away by those below, the ruling classes of Europe mistook democratization for revolution, and brooded on “escaping forward” into war to head it off.²

Mexico, the subject of the one new world chapter, was ablaze with revolution. The European powers wanted it snuffed out before the contagion of example, the transformation of brown-skinned people from being the objects of history to its subjects, could spread. Also, the powers had interests at risk in Mexico. The Royal Navy, for example, was switching from coal to oil, and depended on supply from

British-operated fields near Tampico. The Europeans expected the United States to back a military dictator in Mexico against the rebel peasant armies led by bandit generals like Francisco “Pancho” Villa.

The American president who took office in 1913, Woodrow Wilson, refused to recognize the dictatorship and armed the rebels. This was the only time in the twentieth century that the United States supported a poor people’s revolution in Latin America. No one remembers Wilson for that. In Mexico they remember him instead for an episode of “Yankee imperialism”: sending in the marines to occupy Veracruz in April. Imperialism was not the motive; stopping arms from reaching the dictator was. Forgotten, too, is the historic consequence of Wilson’s decision: It cracked ajar the door through which, most improbably, the United States would enter the European war.³

Set in the months before the war, the first six chapters focus on interpretively rich episodes in each belligerent country that light up national character. Kaiser Wilhelm judged Russians by the only one he knew, Tsar Nicholas II, a warning against representing wholes by their most atypical parts. Still, the challenges faced by leaders often implicate enduring strains in their nation’s histories; such, at any rate, is the perspective I brought to my portraits of the major figures of 1914. The familiar ones—Wilson, Nicholas, Rasputin, the kaiser, Franz Ferdinand, the young first lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, the aged emperor of Austria-Hungary Francis Joseph—share the stage with unexpected characters like Villa and John Reed, with once-famous politicians such as Joseph Caillaux, Herbert Asquith, and Sir Edward Carson, and with 1914’s hero for unambiguous good, Herbert Hoover.

Throughout, I treat personality—temperament, grandiosity, obsession, conviction—as event making, even history changing. That Kaiser Wilhelm believed a “racial struggle” between “Teutons” and “Slavs” was imminent was not without bearing on the war. That Nicholas II got it into his addled head to launch a temperance crusade in besotted Russia mattered; as it did that his consort, the Empress Alexandra, was under the spell of the notorious Rasputin, a lecherous peasant faith healer who swayed the royal couple to replace an able prime minister opposed to war with a doddering nonentity. It mattered that Conrad von Hötzendorf, the chief of staff of the Austro-Hungarian army, believed that to break up the marriage of Gina von Reininghaus he must possess the irresistible charisma of victory in war. It mattered that Woodrow Wilson was “ashamed as an American” of the Mexican War of 1846–48, “a predatory enterprise” the United States must never repeat. It immensely mattered that on the evening of March 16, 1914, the wife of France’s minister of finance shot dead the editor of *Le Figaro* for prosecuting a politically inspired vendetta against her husband, Joseph Caillaux. If Madame Caillaux had missed, her husband would have been premier in July 1914; his foreign minister would have been the Socialist Jean Jaurès, the titanic anti-war voice of the era. Their policy would have been détente with Germany. Because Madame Caillaux had defended her “woman’s honor” by murdering Europe’s greatest pacifist was not in power during Europe’s greatest crisis. Historical inevitability is a doctrine for history without people.

The last three chapters, set in November and December, depict the war’s transformation of war and of the societies seen earlier in peace. Extending the motif of lost history, they show how the beginnings of trench warfare in November, since regarded as the acme of mindless slaughter, represented a victory for life over death when placed in the forgotten context of the mass killing.

during the preceding months of fighting in the open. The “trenches,” the defining battlescape of World War I, were war paralyzed; and the General Staffs feared that the live-and-let-live ethic between enemies dramatized in the Christmas Truce of 1914, when soldiers from the opposing armies met in no-man’s-land to sing carols and exchange gifts, would end in war-suspended. Ahead of its hundredth anniversary, these chapters try to distill the essence of World War I—military, political, existential—on the western and home fronts. Toward that end, the text features work by famous artists like Otto Dix and Max Beckmann and now-obscure ones like C. R. W. Nevinson, the British war painter whose *Column on the March* from 1914 appears on the cover. The art may help readers feel the horror and sorrow of a war that George F. Kennan without fear of contradiction could call “*the great seminatural catastrophe*” of the twentieth century.⁴

The last three chapters, set in November and December, depict the war’s transformation of war and of the societies seen earlier in peace. Beginning with a reconsideration of the “cult of the offensive” that gripped the prewar military mind, chapter 7 breaks fresh ground, citing evidence that became available only after the fall of the Berlin Wall fatal to two shibboleths of World War I scholarship—the short-war illusion and the Schlieffen Plan.

When the kaiser promised the German people that the soldiers would be home before the leaves fell from the trees, he may have believed it but not his generals. For low bureaucratic-political reasons they gave “lip-service” to the short-war scenario when talking to Germany’s civilian leaders and politicians. Long thought to be fools, men like Helmuth von Moltke the younger, the army chief of staff, emerge from the new found history of 1914 as criminals.

Everybody knows that the German army followed the Schlieffen Plan in its August invasion of Belgium and France. Everybody read it in nearly every work of history published since the war. Everybody, it now appears, is wrong and every work. In August 1914 the document containing the alleged top-secret war plan was held by the elderly daughters of Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the general staff from 1891 to 1905. The Schlieffen Plan was “invented” by the postwar general staff to reclaim the reputation of Prussian martial genius from the ruin of defeat. If von Moltke had not deviated from his predecessor’s invincible strategy, the German army would have crushed the Allies in forty days and won the war. That was the legend. Everybody swallowed it. Chapter 7 will be the first place most readers encounter the real story as pieced together by a U.S. Army officer, who discovered it in the military archives of the former East Germany.

Extending the motif of lost history (and jostling another shibboleth), chapter 7 also shows how trench warfare that began in November, since regarded as the acme of mindless slaughter, when placed in the forgotten context of the previous months of maneuver warfare represented a victory for life over death. The “trenches,” the defining battlescape of World War I, were war-paralyzed; and the General Staffs feared that the live-and-let-live ethic between enemies dramatized in the “Christmas Truce” of 1914, when soldiers from the opposing armies met in No-Man’s Land to sing carols and exchange gifts, would end in war-suspended.

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1

GERMANY

SABER RULE

Sometimes “incidents” occur in politics when the nature of a certain order of things is revealed, as it were, suddenly, and with extraordinary power and clarity in connection with some relatively minor happening.

—V. I. Lenin, writing in *Pravda*, November 29, 1913

The Austrian cartoon from 1870 shown opposite annihilates libraries in communicating the essence of Imperial Germany. Conceived in war in 1871, it died in war in 1918. Field marshals were its founding fathers. Versailles, the conquered enemy’s palace, was its Independence Hall. Yet in the years after Germany’s victory in the Franco-Prussian War, the helmet did not smother political life—not quite. The identity of the new Germany was contested from the start. Its brief history saw a culture war between the “forces of order” symbolized by the helmet and the “forces of change” that came to a crucible in late 1913. For a moment the forces of change gained the upper hand. No one realized it at the time, but war hung in the balance. Everything depended on the forces of order overreacting to the threat of change from below. The spiked helmet had to be slammed down hard, plunging Germany into months of unrest. Militarists brooded on saber rule, but in the end this is the story of a polity that humanity’s lasting regret escaped its caricature.



An icon is born: This Austrian cartoon tells the story of Imperial Germany (1871–1918).

The cartoon captured what Allied statesmen and publics agreed was the cause of World War I: Prussian militarism. Its first victims, Woodrow Wilson argued, were the German people. The war was ultimately about their “liberation” from the “military clique” in Berlin. There were two Germany

Once the Allies defeated the bad one, the good one, liberal Germany—the Germany of the abortive revolutions of 1848—would squeeze out from under the spiked helmet.¹

The bad Germany of the Prussian militarists was an accident of history that history, acting through Allied arms, would correct. The accident was a work of war, specifically, the three short successful campaigns between 1864 and 1871 that forged Imperial Germany (1871–1918) from four kingdoms, six grand duchies, seven principalities, three free cities, and two imperial provinces. Only in Germany would the readers of an eminently respectable journal select, as the nineteenth century's greatest *thinker*, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, the strategist credited with these nation-making victories. Since the age of Frederick the Great (1712–1786) the army had ridden high in Prussia, but von Moltke's triumphs lent it unrivaled prestige across the new Germany and elevated the German officer into the social empyrean.²

“An incident experienced by my father as a student visiting Berlin in 1913 aptly illustrates the militarization of German society,” an Irish historian writes:

He had come to Berlin to meet and bring the greetings of Irish colleagues to Kuno Meyer, the renowned professor of Gaelic, at the Humboldt University. Walking together along the Kurfürstendamm, they were approached by a young officer with a crimson stripe on his trousers, denoting membership of the General Staff. Meyer stepped down onto the roadway as he passed; my father, protected by his ignorance of the language and the history of the country, walked on ... The young blood [was furious]. The professor had to explain ... that my father was a foreigner and knew no better.³

Americans snicker at this parody of “militarism.” Soldiers are respected, not worshipped, here. Yet on a comparative scale of militarization, defined as the degree of the state's organization for war, the United States—which “by some calculations, spends more on defense than all other nations in the world together” without a great rival power and with oceans between it and any future invader—today ranks as far more militarized than Imperial Germany, ringed by a hostile alliance rivers, not oceans away.⁴

In 1888, when a colonial enthusiast lobbied Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (from 1862 to 1890 “master of Germany in all but name,” in his own words) to enter the race for spoils in Africa, Bismarck replied with a lesson in strategic geography: “Your map of Africa is very nice. But there is France, and here is Russia, and we are in the middle, and that is my map of Africa.” On the eve of war, France and Russia invested 10 percent of net national income in defense and fielded armies of 2.5 million compared to 7 percent (of a larger economy) and 1.2 million for Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary. Yet the map of Europe reveals that France and Russia were not surrounded by Germany and Austria. With sound reason George F. Kennan, the American diplomat and historian, traced the fuse of the war behind Prussian militarism to its geostrategic justification—the Franco-Russian military alliance of the early 1890s.⁵

“Our enemies are arming more vigorously than we, because we are strapped for cash,” Helmuth von Moltke, the great thinker's nephew, and the army's chief of staff, complained in 1912. With its booming industrial economy based on applying science to production, Germany had the cash but spe

it on the wrong priorities. In a country that could repel an invasion, or mount one, without so much as a dinghy, millions of marks were diverted from the army to the navy, a fatal enthusiasm of the German emperor.⁶

Whereas his ancestors had expanded the German Empire by conquests on land, Wilhelm II would take Germany out to sea. It would be a world power like Britain. Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the navy's salesman, knew his kaiser, catering to his whims in ship design—*his* ships had to have extra smokestacks to make them look more powerful. Tirpitz would have done as well consulting Germany's tailors, Wilhelm was an admiral of the fleet of the Royal Navy, as well as an admiral in the Imperial Russian, the Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian navies, and an honorary admiral of the Royal Greek Navy; and he sought out even remotely nautical occasions, like visiting Berlin's Zoo-Aquarium or attending a performance of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, to dress up in their uniforms. So when Tirpitz told him, "Your Majesty can now be your own Admiral," that closed the sale on the Tirpitz Plan of 1897.⁷

The Tirpitz big-gun "battle fleet," the Social Democratic leader August Bebel predicted in 1900 would provoke a naval arms race with England, drive England to join France and Russia in an anti-German alliance, and drain resources from the army, which held Germany's life in its hands. Bebel was right about all of this, especially the last. In September 1914, after the army was forced to retreat from the River Marne east of Paris, General von Falkenhayn exploded at Tirpitz: "If we did not have the Navy, we would have had two more army corps and would not have lost the Marne battle!" He was undoubtedly right: Three battleships could have paid for five new army corps. In losing that battle, Falkenhayn told a Reichstag deputy, Germany had lost the war. Besides defeat, what did Germany get for the 855,890,000 marks it sunk into the navy? When the High Sea Fleet wasn't running from Britain's Grand Fleet (as it did even on May 31–June 1, 1916, at Jutland, the one fleet-against-fleet battle), it spent the war in port, rusting.⁸

The navy drained marks from the army, not men. Germany had the men, just not enough of the right sort. Fearing contamination of its rural recruits, the army was loathe to conscript urban workingmen, carriers of the socialist bacillus, leaving about half its eligible young men untouched by the draft.⁹

Politics, too, crimped the army's growth. While the kaiser answered only to a reliably teutonic God, Reichstag deputies faced a tax-averse electorate. Numerical superiority was vital to the army's victory over France in 1870. Yet the Reichstag rejected General Staff demands to grow the army to approximate the French and Russian numbers. In 1893, a coalition of parties rebelled against the one-hundred-million-mark price tag of the 115,000 more men sought. In 1913, in an atmosphere of international crisis, the army wanted 300,000; it got 117,000. "Under the inexorable restraints of the tightness of funds," the kaiser acknowledged, "justified demands of the 'Front' had to be left unfulfilled."¹⁰

Germans liked the image of a strong army. They were unwilling to pay for the reality. Prussian conservatives championed a bigger army but would not tax their East Elbian estates to pay for it. Under Germany's federal constitution, income taxes were the prerogative of the states, which balked at revenue sharing with the central government. Fear of "adding grist to the mill of the Social Democrats," a War Ministry official noted in 1913, inhibited raising taxes on the workingman's beer and tobacco. Considering its security dilemma, Germany's martial bluster was an unfunded bluff.¹¹

Bluster was the kaiser's department. The first "media monarch" specialized in frightening the world. In 1900, speaking in a moment of unguarded ferocity on a Bremerhaven dock, the kaiser adjured his soldiers headed to China to lift the Boxer siege of Peking to conduct themselves "like the Huns under their king Attila a thousand years ago." That is, to give no pardon, take no prisoners—"Whoever falls into your hands will fall to your sword"—and by these barbarous acts make "the name of Germany known to such effect that no Chinaman will ever again dare so much as look askance at a German."^{*}



This French cartoon from 1900 accurately conveys the kaiser's orders to his soldiers regarding the Chinese. From his Bremerhaven speech dates the use of "Hun" for German soldiers in two world wars.

If the kaiser was the voice of German militarism, the Prussian lieutenant, "the unbearable prig of the Wilhelmine era," was its symbol. To the novelist Theodor Fontane he was Imperial Germany's "Vitliptutzli"—"the warrior sun-god and idol of popular devotion." Even those bellicose professors classified by the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus as "a cross between a university chair and a submarine" resented his status. Socialists condemned his politics, cartoonists caricatured his monocle, writers satirized his fetish. In *The Sleepwalkers* (1932), Hermann Broch depicts a morally attractive nobleman transformed into a "military robot" by "his second and denser skin," his uniform, which he wears to bed on his wedding night: "She said softly, 'Joachim, we are not intimate enough yet ...' Through his position his military coat had become disordered, the lapels falling apart left his black trousers visible, and when Joachim noticed this he hastily set things right again and covered the place." At the spectacle of her sleeping lieutenant, "Elizabeth could not help smiling."¹³

The smile, harbinger of the mystique-killing laugh, was the nemesis of the Prussian officer. The bluff of German militarism depended on Germany's enemies taking his aptitude for war seriously. He was the totem of contemporary "bellicism," Michael Howard's term for that "frank and even gleeful acceptance of war as a supreme experience of life" that along with the "unquestioning acceptance of war as an instrument of international politics" makes the world of 1914 so alien to us.^{*} It weakened deterrence if foreigners found the Prussian officer funny.¹⁴

A 1906 incident illustrating the fetish of the uniform in Germany regaled newspaper readers the world over. To the socialist journalist Franz Mehring, the mockery brought down on the army by the "Captain from Köpenick" equaled a "second Jena," the 1806 battle in which Napoleon defeated Prussia. The captain led the first of our four conspiracies to rule Germans by the saber. At stake in the third, a late 1913 plot against the Reichstag, was peace in 1914.¹⁵

Friedrich Wilhelm Voigt was an itinerant cobbler down and out in Berlin after completing a fifteen-year sentence for armed robbery. Exercising the power “to exclude released prisoners from certain localities” granted them by an 1842 law, the Berlin police ordered him to leave the city. Prevented from earning a living, in a flight of criminal anthropology, Voigt planned a sting conceivable only in Germany. Assembling pieces from uniforms and equipment found in used-clothing stores, the ex-soldier dressed as a captain in the First Foot Guards, “the premier regiment of the Prussian Army.” In this character “in the name of the Emperor” he commandeered two armed detachments of enlisted men returning to barracks from guard duty, marched them to the nearby Putlizstrasse station, treated them to a beer, and boarded a train to Köpenick, a Berlin suburb.



Wilhelm Voigt leaving prison in 1908. This photograph documents the transformation required by the captain's overcoat to make Voigt into a plausible Prussian officer.

At the Köpenick town hall, the mayor, a reserve officer, stood at attention and saluted the captain. On “all-highest command,” the captain told him that he was under arrest. Dumbstruck, the mayor asked to see the captain's authorization. Voigt signaled two grenadiers, bayonets fixed, to step forward. “My authorization are these soldiers,” he said, a plausible Prussian officer. “Anything more that you may want to see will be shown at the New Guard House in Berlin to which you are now to be conveyed.” Locating the city treasurer, Voigt demanded that he hand over the contents of his safe and dispatched him under armed guard to the same place.

That afternoon the local *Landrath*, the agent of the Prussian central government, received an emergency telegram: “Town hall occupied by the military. We urgently desire information as to the reasons in order to reassure the excited citizenry.” But Voigt had already seen to that, directing the police to preserve order in the town while the army overthrew its civil government.

Traveling by himself, Voigt took a fast train back to Berlin. He had a curtain to make. Stopping first at a clothing store in Friedrichstrasse, where he spent one thousand marks on a new suit and hat, he made his way to a café across from the New Guard House. He was in time to watch the mayor being delivered to the gate, the dumb show when his guards could not name the captain who had ordered the mayor's arrest under what charge they were at a loss to say, the unexpected arrival of a disaster-scenting General von Moltke, and the advent of a second carriage carrying the treasurer and a second dumb show.

Voigt was not alone in enjoying the travesty he had stage-managed. The Metropol Theater put on

lampoon of the crime mere days after its commission. Postcards depicting Voigt as cobbler and captain sold briskly. The popular press embraced this “robber’s tale as adventurous and romantic as novel,” celebrating Voigt’s “hero’s deed” and his “unheard-of trickster’s exploit.” While in prison Voigt had talked over his sting with his accomplice in the armed robbery, who betrayed him to the police. Ten days after Voigt left the Köpenick town hall carrying two sacks of cash, he was arrested. Halfway through his four-year sentence, Voigt was pardoned by the kaiser, said to have been amused at his stunt. Voigt wrote an autobiography, toured Germany, Britain, Canada, and the United States retelling his story in nightclubs, restaurants, and state fairs. Madame Tussauds gallery in London celebrated him in wax. He bought a house in Luxembourg, where he stayed throughout the war. Ruined by the postwar inflation, he died broke in 1922, his saga having long since “established itself as one of the most beloved and enduring fables of modern Prussia.”

Democratic and autocratic Germany submitted clashing interpretations of the fable. “Immeasurable laughter convulses Berlin and is spreading beyond the confines of our city, beyond the frontiers of Germany, beyond the ocean,” commented the liberal *National-Zeitung*. “The boldest and most biting satirist could not make our vaulting militarism ... stand comparison with this comic opera transferred from the boards into real life.”

The conservative press found nothing to laugh at; rather, much to admire, spinning the credulity of the soldiers and officials as a sign of civic health. “[They] did not believe in the possibility of illegal action on the part of an officer,” the *Kreuzzeitung* editorialized, because “our officers are regarded as absolutely trustworthy ... If the Democratic Press and the enemies of Germany abroad interpret the success of the Köpenick hoax as an exposure of Prussian absolutism and militarism, they are making themselves ridiculous.”¹⁶

The two Germanys had been arguing like this over the army’s political and social displacement since Bismarck used victories against Denmark in 1864 and Austria in 1866 to silence agitation in the Prussian Diet for democratic control of the army. For liberals, arguing for change against this record of success proved an unequal struggle. Then, by conquering France in 1870–71, Bismarck overcame resistance among the South German states to unification in the German empire under the Prussian king. “The three wars were waged for internal political reasons,” Jacob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian of the Renaissance, observed in 1871.¹⁷

Bismarck’s cardinal goal was to solidify a feudal Hohenzollern dynasty shaken by the revolutionary surge of 1848. To that end, he sought to preserve the power and privileges of the “forces of order”—the Junkers (the great landed barons of Prussia), the industrialists, the higher bureaucracy, and the army—propping up the monarchy against the “forces of change” represented by liberalism and socialism. War was Bismarck’s answer to reform, his formula for state building, and his preventive for revolution. War worked, as did war scares. By playing up tensions with France or Russia, Bismarck won Reichstag majorities for regime-supporting parties. “Reactionary governments” always attempt “to divert the internal struggle to the foreign sphere,” reflected the éminence grise of the Foreign Office, Friedrich von Holstein.¹⁸

War worked. In a prophetic 1871 appeal to the king of Prussia a liberal publicist saw that as a ominous message for Europe. Bismarck’s victorious wars “had revived and magnified ... the danger of this part of the world and the entire epoch from a social and political order one had believed was dying

out. After five centuries of desiring, striving, and hoping to outgrow the military system of earlier times ... a power based on the permanent use of war has emerged with a frightening superiority which the military states of previous centuries, bent on conquest and expansion, could never remotely have conceived.”¹⁹

In the memory of the German governing elite, Bismarck planted the idea of war as an “escape forwards” from domestic crisis. Historians still debate how much that memory influenced Germany’s decision for war in July 1914. In the alarmed view of the American ambassador to Berlin, James V. Gerard, writing in 1917 at the height of the American propaganda campaign against Prussian militarism, the bad Germany provoked the war to escape from a political challenge to the status quo.

In February 1914, a British observer predicated that war would flow from the same crisis singled out by Gerard, a national political showdown between the Reichstag and the monarchy, sparked by a military incident in a provincial backwater: “Possibly the two great forces of German public opinion which have clashed at Zabern will clash again and again, and Germany may go through a period similar to that through which England went in the time of Charles the First,” J. Ellis Barker wrote in *The Nineteenth Century and After*. “It seems more likely that the powers of feudalism and absolutism which, under the cloak of parliamentarianism at present govern the country, will try to avoid domestic conflict by provoking a foreign one.” In April, the Duke of Ratibor, close to the kaiser, remarked to the French ambassador that just as Bismarck’s “wars of 64, 66, and 70 ... had strengthened the position of the military” and the forces of order, so now, in 1914, war “would be necessary to put things back on the right track.” In July, the German chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, oppressed by a “deep sense of malaise over the domestic situation in Germany,” “fatalistically decided to reverse [it] in one bold stroke” by handing Vienna a “blank check” to attack Serbia over its suspected role in the assassination of the Austrian archduke, Franz Ferdinand. An influential school of German historians cites evidence like this to highlight the long-overlooked domestic political causes of World War I. Strong enough to make the leaders of Germany want war, they were strong enough to deny them that deliverance.²¹

The crisis from which Ellis Barker feared Germany would escape in war was triggered by a real Köpenick with real soldiers mounting a real coup. It happened not in a Berlin suburb but in Zabern, a small town in Alsace, one of two French provinces Bismarck annexed in 1871 as the spoils of victory in the Franco-Prussian War, and because of its French connection the worst place in Germany for the army to run amok. In the “Zabern Affair” the two Germanys confronted each other over the basic “skirted decision” of the *Kaiserreich*—whether Germany was to be “a state with an army or an army with a state.” The good Germany strode out from under the spiked helmet and, for the first time since 1871, found its voice before, divided by appeals to remember Germany’s place on Bismarck’s map of Africa, losing its nerve.²²

To Léon Gambetta, the tribune of nineteenth-century French republicanism, the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine was “the death-germ of [Bismarck’s] work.” In a sensational book published early in 1911, Bernhard von Bülow, Germany’s chancellor from 1900 to 1909, warned his countrymen that “France is given up to its ideal of *revanche* ... We must take this into account, and consider that we ourselves should be the opponent against whom France would first turn if she thought she could carry out

victorious campaign against Germany.” In the 1920s, the diplomatic historian C. P. Gooch ranked France’s enmity toward Germany over Alsace-Lorraine the first of the “three antagonisms that produced the war of 1914,” the others being Germany’s challenge to Britain’s naval supremacy and Russia’s Balkan rivalry with Austria.²³

In fact, by 1914 everywhere but on the extreme right the French had renounced going to war to recover the “lost provinces.” Indicatively, “about half of all recruits, and quite a few junior officers were unaware that France had lost territory to Germany in 1870.” At the height of the Zabern affair the German embassy in Paris held a dinner in honor of President Raymond Poincaré, a Lorrainer, the first French president to accept such an invitation.²⁴

But assuming Gooch and Bülow were correct about French irredentism, Bismarck doubted that the French would have desired revanche any less if he had left the map of France intact. “What the French nation will never forgive us is their defeat as such,” he maintained with his accustomed realism. “Even if we were now to depart France without any territorial concessions, without any indemnities, with no other advantage than the glory of our arms, the same hatred and vengefulness would persist among the French people ... Any peace we may conclude, even without territory changing hands, will be but an armistice ... We shall demand Alsace-Lorraine ... merely to protect ourselves against the next attack.” The annexed provinces would form a “glacis” between that future French attack and southern Germany. Troops were garrisoned in Zabern, about thirty miles from the new French border, to implement Germany’s forward defense strategy.²⁵

Before its annexation by Louis XIV in 1679, Alsace had long been ruled by the House of Habsburg and remained German speaking under the French. The lingua franca didn’t concern Napoleon: “What matters that?—Though they speak in German, they saber in French!” In Alsace-Lorraine the French Revolution “had had a profound influence—the Marseillaise was composed in Strasburg—while the movement to unite Germany had passed them by untouched.” Bismarck spoke of binding Alsace-Lorraine to Germany with “Teutonic patience and affection,” but the latter—some would say oxymoron—proved weaker than the bonds of memory linking its people to France. Under a policy of “Germanization,” French language instruction was forbidden in most primary schools and French banned on street signs and on tombstones. Teutonic thoroughness turned “café” into “Kaffeehaus,” “concert” into “Konzert,” the city of “Nancy” into “Nansig,” and “Alsace-Lorraine” into “Elsass-Lothringen.”²⁶

The army also served as a school of Germanization; the draft swept deep among Alsace-Lorraine young men. The army’s treatment of its Alsatian conscripts may be guessed from the generic training methods documented by the left-wing socialists, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Beaten, bound to trees, and forced to eat their own excrement, recruits, the socialists charged, committed suicide at a rate fourteen times higher than the general population. That was how the army trained *Germans*. To Prussian officers and sergeants Alsace-Lorraine was still “the enemy’s country.”²⁷

Jacob Burckhardt foresaw dire trouble for Germany in the annexation. Even “outside of war,” he maintained, Alsace-Lorraine would “constantly provide at least the din of war,” and this would make for “a quiet state of siege in Germany itself,” putting at risk “constitutionalism and other such relics.” Vindicating Burckhardt’s prophecy, the Zabern Affair quickened rumblings of a right-wing putsch to declare a state of siege, suspend the constitution, and disband the parliament.²⁸

German papers considered Zabern, the home since 1888 of the Ninety-ninth Prussian Infantry regiment, the “most German town in Alsace-Lorraine.” The occasional brawl aside, soldiers and civilians got on tolerably well. But Zabern had never seen a soldier quite like Lieutenant Gunthard Freiherr von Forstner before.

Just turned twenty, Baron von Forstner was notorious for being a bully on the training ground and a loudmouth in the town. And that was *before* he insulted all six hundred thousand Alsatians. In late October 1913, a recruit with a police record started a scuffle on the rifle range. Forstner chastised the hothead, saying that if he wanted a fight he could easily find one in town, though, the lieutenant added, recruits ought to avoid fights. However, should “some *Wackes*” in town start something, the recruit should fight back, with bullets, if necessary. “And if that happens,” the official report quotes him speaking within earshot of the whole squad, “and you happen to waste one of them, OK. For every one of those dirty *Wackes* you bring me, you get 10 marks.” *Wackes*—vagabond, bum, coward—sounds anodyne to the American ear, yet “in normal circumstances even Alsatians used it with care, and non-Alsatians with their peril.” The regiment had banned its use in 1903. That knowledge would have dissuaded prudent mortals from using it, but Lieutenant Forstner was one of the “sun-Gods” of Wilhelmine Germany. In ordering at least one member of his squad to repeat, “I am a *Wackes*, I am a *Wackes*” how could he sense the danger to himself? The odds approach certainty that this *Wackes* was among those who leaked the story to the local newspapers.²⁹

Eight thousand people lived in Zabern; mobilized by the news, a thousand of them, a few shouting “Vive la France!,” gathered outside the army barracks to protest Lieutenant Forstner’s presence among them. Now began a campaign of harassment against Forstner. In restaurants and on the street, hecklers dogged him, small boys, picking up on the rumor that during a recent bender he had soiled his bed, yelling “*Bettschisser!*”

Passions had cooled somewhat when, on November 14, Forstner stepped in it again. Lecturing recruits against deserting to join the French Foreign Legion, as more than a thousand Alsatians and Lorrainers reportedly did in 1912, he remarked that for all he cared they could “shit on the French flag.” A cartoon soon appeared in the window of a Paris ladies’ shop showing him performing that act on himself. In the music halls, songs rang with his shame:

*Forstner said, “I’ll lower my pants
And go on the flag of France.”
But, my lad, to pull off that gag,
You must first get your hands on that flag.
And if I know where it’s at,
You’ll go in your pants before that.*



Making Zabern safe for Lieutenant von Forstner.

Not all the French were so lighthearted. Acting on an impulse shared by many of his countrymen, Paul de Cassagnac, a Bonapartist journalist, challenged Forstner to a duel.

The Staathalter, or governor, of Alsace, Count Karl von Wedel, appealed to the kaiser to have Forstner transferred. Wedel had weight with the Supreme Warlord. He could not have climbed so high in office, it was said, except for his ability to “terrorize” the kaiser over “certain profligate actions” in Vienna. In the early 1880s, as a lowly military adjutant, he had covered up a messy ménage à trois between the newly married Prince Wilhelm and two Viennese women. But the kaiser brooked no civilian interference with his army, which, on succeeding his father as kaiser in 1887, he addressed in rapturous terms: “And so we belong together, I and the Army.” He turned Wedel down. Forstner stayed, and Zabern was not spared the events that “made our town world famous,” in the words of a rueful resident.³⁰

For the next act in Zabern, Forstner passed the baton of calamity to Colonel von Reuter, his commanding officer. Reuter had lost his father in the fighting in Alsace in 1870 and treated Alsatians as if they were collectively responsible. Thus, for leaking the Forstner chronicles, Reuter arrested nine Alsatian privates along with an Alsatian sergeant major with relatives working in a nearby factory and transferred the remaining Alsatians in Forstner’s company to other regiments. For printing the Bettschisser rumor, he had the offices of the *Zaberner Anzeiger* raided, and threatened to ban soldiers from patronizing any restaurant “where customers were even seen reading it.” But he neglected to inform Zaberners that Forstner had been confined to his house for six days for Wackes. The apparent double standard—for all the locals knew, Forstner was free and clear—kept emotions on the boil.

So Zabern youngsters continued to heckle Forstner, again on the loose, and his bulldog-guarded companion, Lieutenant Kurt Schad. Reuter assigned an armed guard to escort the officers on their errands. When the raillery persisted, he issued an ultimatum to the local prefect: *Suppress disrespect for the army or I will.*

On the evening of November 30, he did. Sixty soldiers with fixed bayonets backed by two machine guns appeared at one end of the town square. Reuter sent half the force under Forstner to sweep one side, half under Schad the other. “The troops advanced; absurd scenes followed,” the *Frankfurter Zeitung* dryly commented.

Groups of blue-collar workers were leaving their night school classes, single men were en route to their favorite haunts, shoppers were walking home with the makings of their suppers. Suddenly the drums rolled, the soldiers’ hobnailed boots scraped the cobblestones, the civilians froze. Reuter expected them to cower before his bayonets. Instead they reacted like the audience at a light opera

which the goose-stepping soldiers were the extras. They laughed. One man was arrested for jeering another for whistling, a third for standing in the way of the advancing skirmish line. Forstner was about to collar a fellow carrying sausage home, but on recognizing him thought better of it. “I had had an affair with my wife’s sister,” he later testified, “who is only 14, and is currently in Paris.”

On his side of the square, Lieutenant Schad encountered unexpected resistance. A bank teller returning home from work objected to Schad’s accusation that he had laughed. Schad arrested him for his “smiling grimace.” “I had every man I suspected of laughing at us arrested,” Schad subsequently explained. “As they were too cowardly to laugh at our faces, we had to be guided by presumption.” Judges emerging from the courthouse, struck dumb by the spectacle, were slow to obey Schad’s command to keep moving—Reuter had ordered the arrest of “everybody who stood still even for a second”—so the lieutenant arrested them. They protested to Reuter. “This is where jurisprudence ends,” he told them. “Mars rules the hour.”

A district commissioner, representing the civil authority, pleaded with the colonel to withdraw his troops. He refused: “I am in command here now.” People were just “standing about,” the commissioner indicated to Reuter. What was wrong with that? “I intend to prevent this standing about at any cost,” the colonel came back. And he did not “intend to let people laugh in this way. If it continues, I shall order the troops to shoot.” Asked later if he would have shot people for laughing, he replied, “Certainly!” The “prestige and honor of the whole army” was at stake.

In a celebrated speech, Léon Gambetta had prophesied that “till [the Germans] have restored our ravished provinces ... the peace of the world will remain at the mercy of an incident.” A massacre in Zabern would have qualified.³¹

There was no massacre. Twenty-seven people were arrested, and jailed for the night in the barracks’ coal cellar. The next day, a Sunday, order returned to Zabern, though that evening a young molder was arrested for singing. “The official report regrettably neglects to say what.”³²

It was awkward for the army that responsibility for the coup reached up the chain of command. “I informed Col. Reuter personally that he was himself to arrest demonstrators,” General Berthold von Deimling, Reuter’s Strasburg-based superior, reported to Berlin, “and use armed force in case of resistance, should the jeering continue.” Reuter also based his action on a cabinet order issued by the king of Prussia in 1820 that “permitted and obliged” the army to suppress riots when the “civil authorities are excessively hesitant to request military aid.” No one had heard of this order; no officer before Reuter had invoked it. It was a military regulation, not a civil law, and even though the *New York Times* headline over its November 30 story read GERMAN BAYONETS STOP ALSATIANS FROM RIOT, the Zaberners had not rioted, only stood about. Some *had* laughed.

The editorial voices of liberal Germany were beginning to unlimber on the army—the *Hamburg Echo* denouncing Reuter’s action as “the dictatorship of the bayonet”—when the inexorable Lieutenant Forstner drew the only blood shed in the Zabern affair.³³

Forty-eight hours after Zabern passed under the rule of Mars, on a dawn march through an outlying village, his company encountered a group of factory-bound shoe workers. Taunts were shouted and Forstner ordered his men to pursue and arrest the quickly scattering taunters. One, Karl Blank, was not quick enough. Furiously protesting his innocence of the name-calling, Blank pronounced a curse on

Forstner, who slashed Blank's skull with his saber, opening a deep cut. Forstner later testified that Blank was about to strike him, but the jury at his court-martial doubted this as Blank was restrained by five men.

Fear of insult, not injury, goaded Forstner. As the *New York Times* noted, "Lieutenant von Forstner said he acted [according to] the prevailing German assumption that an officer was irretrievably dishonored if he permitted himself to receive a blow." Forstner was the victim of a "military code . . . ill-adapted to the conditions and requirements of the modern world." Under that code, a blow from Blank would have required Forstner's "resignation from the army."³⁴

It also would have required Forstner to strike at Blank, a person *unsatisfaktionsfähig*—so loosely socially as to be incapable of giving satisfaction in a duel—"with his entire energy and with the highest brutality of which he is capable," according to a manual of army etiquette. A cabinet order of the 1880s forbade the police from interfering in such moments of *Ehrennotwehr*—"the defense of honor in extreme emergencies through unusual measures."

Possibly as a result, the 1890s saw several notorious incidents. In 1892, on Berlin Postdammerstrasse, a civilian menaced by a dog asked the lieutenant-owner to restrain his pet, which the lieutenant drew his sword and inflicted "gruesome cuts" on the civilian's unoffending person. In 1895, jostled on a Hamburg street, an officer buried his sword in the jostler's scalp. In 1896, while the Reichstag was debating whether dueling among officers should be outlawed, a tipsy Baden plumber leaving a café brushed against a table occupied by Lieutenant Baron von Brusewitz, who followed the plumber out, demanded that he apologize, and, when he refused, stabbed him to death. Knowing the cut of a keen blade, the military court of appeals that reviewed Forstner's court-martial conviction primly noted that Forstner's sword "had not been specially ground; it was only the lieutenant's ordinary military sword." Blank should have counted his blessings.³⁵

The code called for officers to bear the legal consequences of *Ehrennotwehr*, sacrificing their freedom, if necessary, to defend caste honor. But in practice, even brutes like Lieutenant von Brusewitz could usually count on a pardon from the kaiser. Pardon was rarely necessary for the protagonists in an officer duel. Dueling was expected, encouraged, even required; an officer who refused a challenge from a fellow officer could be drummed out of his regiment.³⁶

The Social Democrats (SPD) advocated criminalizing dueling, collapsing it into the categories of assault and homicide. The duel's reactionary politics animated their campaign. "For us the duel is a purely political question," they announced ahead of the 1912 elections. "We perceive the duel not as a means of preserving Junker class honor but as a symbol of Junker class rule, and even more: a device for the maintenance of class rule." As dramatized in novels like Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1894), the German middle classes admired the aristocratic values epitomized by the duel. In social attitudes and political outlook they were a heavily "feudalized bourgeoisie," according to an influential interpretation first advanced by the Weimar historian Eckart Kehr. In the obeisance shown to the "cobbler-captain" by the citizens of Köpenick, the socialist Karl Liebknecht found "a compendium of that art of militaristic education and its results, the most sublime of which is the veritable canonization of the officer's coat by the whole of bourgeois society." Bought off by reserve officer commissions and hopes of ennoblement—by the lure of a "von"—the German bourgeoisie identified up, with the Junker-officer class, not down, with Germany's workers.* Unlike their French analogue

they refused history's assignment—to supplant the aristocrats and Junkers of the ancien régime as the ruling class. Marx drew the contrast memorably: “In France the bourgeoisie conquered so that it could humble the people; in Germany the bourgeoisie humbled itself so that the people should not conquer.” As the Social Democrats discovered in the next act of the Zabern affair, in a crisis the middle-class parties shrank from challenging their feudal masters.³⁷



“The Alsatian Bogeyman” (1913). Olaf Gulbransson’s cartoon from *Simplicissimus* is an emblem of the culture war between the “two Germanys.” Liberal Germany excoriated the army’s conduct at Zabern while conservative Germany defended the army for restoring order.

Reuter attacked Zabern on Saturday night; Forstner struck Blank on Monday; Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg answered for their conduct before an enraged Reichstag on Tuesday.

Crying “Militarism, military dictatorship, high treason!” a Social Democrat from Strasburg set the tone for what the *New York Times* called “one of the most tempestuous seatings in the history of the Reichstag.” Giving the Zabern affair its signature headline, a deputy from Alsace denounced “sabotage and dictatorship.” “Every thrust at the Army was applauded to the echo everywhere in the House save from the ultra-militarist back benches,” the *Times* reported.³⁸

In a sign of German militarism, Germany’s highest civilian official sat below the generals and admirals at royal banquets and appeared in the legislative assembly dressed like a soldier. Wearing the uniform of a major, Bethmann Hollweg, appointed chancellor in 1909, rose “to stand in the fiery rain” as he described the ordeal to a friend. Initially he had criticized the army for having “transgressed its authority.” However, cocooned by his military cabinet in a castle in distant Donaueschingen, the kaiser accepted the army’s side of the story. Blaming the controversy on “journalist pigs,” he refused to meet with Count Wedel to hear the civilian side. Privately, the Austrian ambassador reported to Vienna, “the Kaiser ... accuses [Bethmann] of too much partiality for the civilians against the military.” The kaiser expected his chancellor to defend his army. German citizens expected the government to defend their civil liberties. Alsatians required special attention. In 1911, Bethmann had persuaded the kaiser to grant a new constitution to the Reichsland (Alsace-Lorraine), providing for

greater local self-government. Saber rule in Zabern, Bethmann knew, had jeopardized its objective—to knit the conquered provinces into the fabric of Germany.³⁹

Bethmann Hollweg was cross-pressured, and it showed in his performance. Before he began speaking, his Social Democratic opponents lacked the votes to censure his government for failing to check militarism in Zabern. After he finished, the rout was on. Censure passed the next day by 5 to 1 with the Center, National Liberal, and Progressive parties merging with the Social Democratic tide.



Bethmann Hollweg. If Germany's chancellor, its highest civilian official, wore his saber in the Reichstag, that would complete the symbolism of "an army with a state."

Gesturing now to the army, now to public outrage at it, the chancellor, "his tall figure as melancholy as a leafless trunk," tried to straddle a widening gulf. It was proper for Lieutenant Forstner to instruct recruits to defend themselves if attacked, improper to put a bounty on Alsatians. Wackes was perhaps improper—hisses from the Alsatian deputies. Warning recruits against deserting to the Foreign Legion was proper, insulting the flag of a country "we met in honorable battle forty years ago" decidedly improper. Regarding Reuter's Saturday-night roundup, Bethmann observed, the military took one view and the civilian authorities in Zabern another. Which "was absolutely in the right" was "impossible" for him to say. At this, from all quarters of the House except the Right came cries of disapproval. "I ask the gentlemen not to forget," Bethmann declared into the din, "even in this serious and in many respects very sad case, that the military has the right to protect itself against direct attacks." The translation of the stenographic transcript continues:

(Shout from the Social Democrats: Children attacked!)

And it has not only the right; it also has the duty to do so.

(Commotion among the Social Democrats.)

Otherwise no army in the world can survive.

(Very true! from the Right.)

The uniform must be respected in all circumstances.

With that, amid the "angriest hisses ever heard in the Reichstag," the chancellor sat down.

The Prussian minister of war, General von Falkenhayn, his brindle-colored hair cut en brosse, spoke next. A stranger to ambiguity, he blamed "noisy agitators and newspaper campaigns" for the events in

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