10

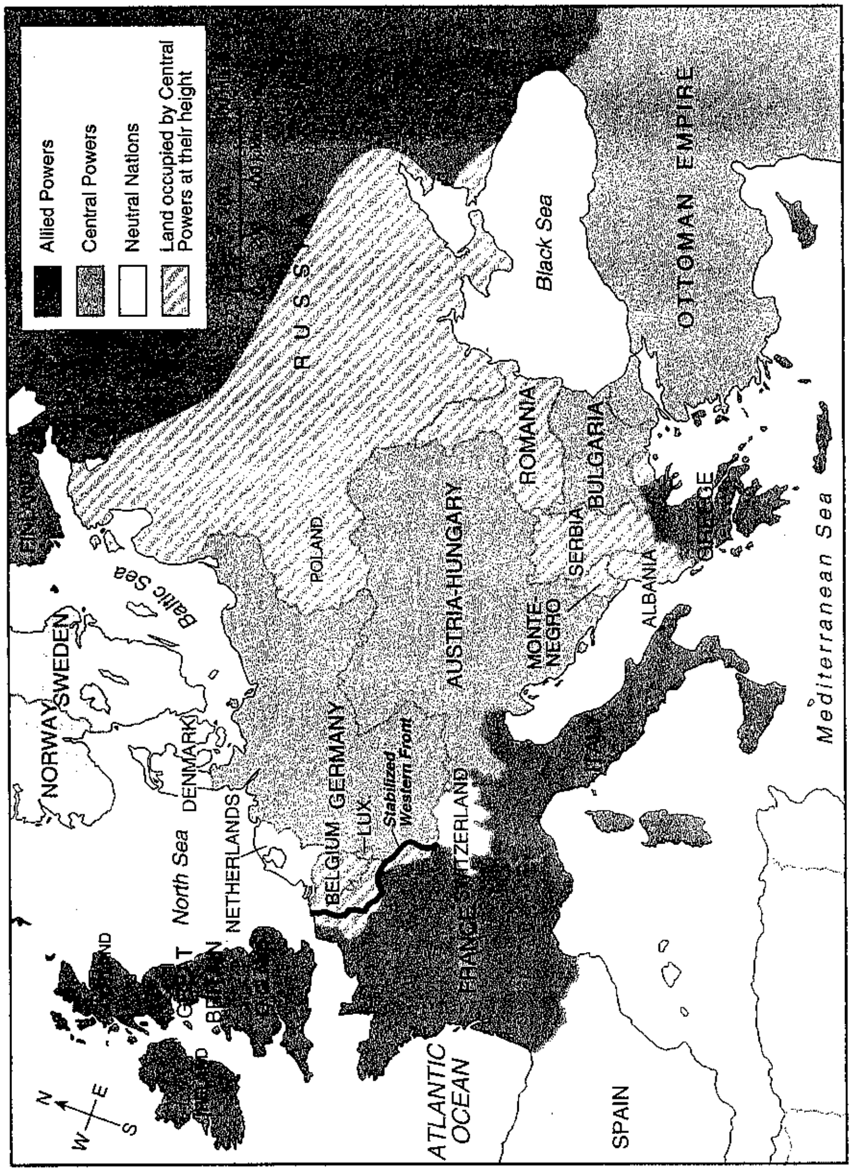
World War I and Its Consequences

Europe and the Soviet Union, 1914–1920

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Europe that so many non-European intellectuals sought to imitate or reject between 1880 and 1920 came very close to self-destructing between 1914 and 1918, and bringing many of the world's peoples from Asia, Africa, and the Americas down with it. The orgy of bloodletting, then known as the "Great War," put seventy million men in uniform, of whom ten million were killed and twenty million were wounded. Most of the soldiers were Western European, though Russia contributed more soldiers than France or Germany, while Japan enlisted as many as the Austro-Hungarian empire that began the war. Enlisted men also came from the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the colonies: India, French West Africa, German East Africa, among others. The majority of soldiers were killed in Europe, especially along the German Western front — four hundred miles of trenches that spanned from Switzerland to the English Channel, across northeastern France. But battles were also fought along the borders of German, French, and English colonies in Africa, and there were high Australian casualties on the coast of Gallipoli in Ottoman Turkey.

The readings in this chapter focus on the lives and deaths of the soldiers, as well as the efforts of some of their political leaders to redefine the world around them. We examine the experiences of soldiers and how the war changed the lives of those who survived its devastating toll. We compare the accounts of those who fought on both sides of the great divide. Germany and the Austro-Hungarian empire, joined by the Ottoman Empire, formed an alliance called the Central Powers (see Map 10.1). In opposition, England, France, and Russia, the Allied Powers, were later joined by Italy, Greece, Japan, and the United


Allied Powers
Central Powers
Neutral Nations
Land occupied by Central Powers at their height
RUSSIA
Black Sea
OTTOMAN EMPIRE
ROMANIA
BULGARIA
SERBIA
MONTE-NEGRO
ALBANIA
GREECE
ITALY
AUSTRIA-HUNGARY
POLAND
Baltic Sea
NORWAY
SWEDEN
DENMARK
North Sea
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
GERMANY
LUX
Stabilized Western Front
SWITZERLAND
FRANCE
GREAT BRITAIN
IRELAND
ATLANTIC OCEAN
SPAIN
Mediterranean Sea
FINLAND
N
E
S
W

Map 10.1 Allied Powers and Central Powers in World War I

States. We compare views across the generational divide as well as from the trenches and government offices.

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Understanding Causes and Consequences

From 1914 to 1920, the greatest divide was the war itself. It marked the end of one era and the beginning of another. Few events have left the participants with such a profound sense of fundamental change. And so our study of the war is an appropriate place to ask two of the universal questions of major historical change: What caused it? What were the consequences?

The *causes* are those events or forces that came before; the *consequences* are the results, what the war itself prompted to occur. Thus, causes and consequences are part of the same continuum. Still, we must remember that not everything that happened before the war was a cause of the war. Similarly, not everything that happened afterward was a result of the war.

In this chapter we explore specific ideas about cause and consequence. Our goal is not to compile a definitive list of either but, rather, to explore some of the ways that historians and thoughtful readers can make sense of the past.

SALLY MARKS

The Coming of the First World War

Sally Marks, a modern scholar, begins the following selection by declaring that, after much debate, historians have recently come to agree that Germany was the country primarily responsible for causing the First World War. Other countries were not blameless, however, and waging war in the twentieth century required willing recruits and popular support on all sides. Further, as Marks notes, there were secondary or background causes that precipitated the outbreak of war. What were these secondary causes? How important were they?

Thinking Historically

In studying the causes of major historical events, historians distinguish between structural or long-term causes, direct or immediate causes, and contingent events or accidents. Which events and circumstances leading up to the First World War would you place in each of these categories? Marks writes mainly of political decisions made by governments, which are often the most immediate causes of war. She also writes of long-term historic developments, however, such as competition for colonies, the difference between "young" and "old" states, the balance of power in international politics, the development of nationalism, as well as more personal factors such as leaders' fears and miscalculations. Were any of these long-term developments "causes" of war? How important does Marks think they were? Why does she think German political decisions were more important?

There is little that historians debate more endlessly than causation, and certainly much ink has been expended in arguing the origins of World War I. In recent years, however, a degree of consensus has emerged, even among German scholars, that primary responsibility should be assigned to the Second Reich, though debate continues about German motives and intentions. It now seems clear that Germany's

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Sally Marks, *The Ebbing of European Ascendancy: An International History of the World, 1914–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19–22, 25, 26, 31–36.

power, policies, actions, and diplomatic style provided a continual factor between its creation in 1870–1871 and the great collision of 1914.

Germany's unification, coupled with its industrial and demographic growth, brought a young but very strong power to the center of the European stage, hitherto a comparatively weak area. The power balance was at once implicitly altered. But Prince Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of the new Germany until 1890, chose not to make this explicit in Europe or elsewhere. Preferring to build the Reich's institutions and industry, he restored the Concert of Europe, used it to settle quarrels threatening the peace and his new empire, and eschewed colonies. Between 1894 and 1914, however, a series of political, economic, and diplomatic events contributed to a gradual coalescing of the great power alliances — Russia, France, Great Britain (and later Italy) on the one side, and Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey on the other — that would confront each other in World War I. Other key developments in this period and leading up to 1914 included Germany's growing policy of expansion, hunger for colonies, and military buildup, this last evolving into a fast-escalating naval race with Great Britain.

Although the old Concert was not quite moribund, all European powers of consequence were thus aligned in the two blocs, the Triple Alliance down the center of Europe, and the Triple Entente on the edges. Germany saw the Entente policy of containment as encirclement, and its fears in this respect only increased "the amalgam of insecurity and self-assertion in her make-up. . .". Thus its diplomacy became more bullying, which had the effect of driving Britain and France together, causing the Triple Entente to solidify. Both Germany's insistent claims and Russia's return from East Asia to compete with Austria in the Balkans contributed to growing conflict and tension between the two alignments.

Most of the conflicts concerned imperial matters although a European power struggle underlay them all. Part of the trouble was that the days when there were plenty of colonies available for everybody had passed, and as the powers bumped into each other, the latecomers were dissatisfied. Timing proved crucial to the imperial race; those who did not seize the moment encountered difficulties in doing later what other powers had done earlier. The latecomers were Germany, Japan, and Italy, impatient youngsters who remained dissatisfied, always seeking more until they went down to decisive defeat in World War II. But in the decade before the First World War, the collisions were not only in Africa and Asia, but also in the Balkans, as Russia turned to Austria's sole remaining sphere. Wherever confrontations occurred they brought with them the risk of a major conflagration, not merely a local conflict between two states, but a global struggle between two alignments of powers.

War among the major powers was avoided for a decade despite a series of crises, but only at the price of exhausting options and reducing flexibility, thus rendering resolution more difficult for the future. powers, especially the more precarious ones, could not repeatedly accept defeat and humiliation and still remain great powers. Another option which several states exhausted was that of not supporting an ally. With Europe divided into two camps, both of which were arming briskly, retaining one's allies was vital. However, one can desert an ally only so often and still keep it as an ally. Equally, the need for allies meant that both crises and atonements for desertion tended to solidify the two rival alignments, further reducing flexibility.

During the decade before 1914 the Anglo-German naval competition continued, despite British efforts to come to terms, and crises, often entailing lack of support from allies or diplomatic defeat, were too numerous to recount briefly. Though all depleted the reservoirs of good will and elasticity, only a few were so serious that they brought the risk of a pan-European war. Nonetheless, the fact that Europe came to the brink of a great war five or six times in ten short years is indicative of the instability and tension which were mounting.

Part of the problem was that Europe's power system was increasingly out of balance. The Habsburg Empire was no longer really a great power, while France was fading in comparative terms. Russia's vast size did not fully compensate for technological and organizational weakness, especially after the regime was shaken by defeat and revolution in 1905, while at the other end of the continent, Britain's economic lead was less commanding than before. In the middle of Europe Germany was becoming comparatively something of a superpower, already dominant economically, especially in relation to its neighbours, and aspiring to a comparable political and world position. And this young, thrustingly ambitious Reich pursued a high-risk policy of confrontation which created or aggravated crises, contributing to ten years of international tension. . . .

In the chanceries of Europe, a major war was anticipated before long. Some leaders thought that sooner rather than later would be more advantageous for their countries. All assumed that a pan-European war would be short — for economic and technological reasons. But despite the decade of crises and mounting tension, the situation seemed more serene in 1914. In particular, Anglo-German relations appeared improved. The two countries had worked together at the conference of ambassadors in London in 1913 to prevent an Austro-Serbian war, though the German calculations and hope was that if war came, Russia would be blamed and Britain would remain neutral. But that was not public knowledge. However, the citizenry did know that there had not been a major European war for a hundred years; collisions between the great powers had been short and snappy, especially since mid-century, and the last one had occurred nearly 45 years before. A widespread assumption had developed that wars were something which occurred only overseas or in the backward Balkans among quarrelsome infant states. Even Anglo-German naval relations were now less tense, and in July of 1914 the two countries reached an agreement about the Berlin to Baghdad railway. For these and other reasons, the prospects for peace looked better than in the recent past as the spectacularly beautiful summer of 1914 opened.

The sunny calm was shattered on 28 June 1914 by the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, by young Bosnian nationalists backed by Unification or Death,[1] a secret Serbian society in which key Serbian army officers were dominant. Their complicity is clear; members of the Serbian cabinet may have had partial foreknowledge as well. The chanceries of Europe anticipated an Austrian reaction directed against Serbia, whose involvement was widely assumed, but not a major war. However, the assassination led to the July crisis of 1914, culminating in World War I. . . .

Austria's actions played a substantial contributory role, and the Habsburg monarchy is usually assigned secondary responsibility for causing World War I, but only secondary, because Austria's actions were obviously contingent. It is beyond serious doubt that it would not have acted against Serbia or risked war with Russia without solid German support. Berlin not only gave that support and repeatedly urged Austria on but also decided upon war now and declared it against Russia and France without any direct provocation from either. A leading German scholar of the July crisis has concluded that "the German Government opened Pandora's box in an act of sheer political and ideological despair."

One must ask what brought the European continent's strongest power to such despair and created a situation where it almost desperately opted to set off a continental war with the risk of world war. Some of the answers lie within German domestic politics and the psychological frame of reference of its leaders. Additional answers lie, as do the contributory errors from other powers, in broader aspects of the European scene in 1914.

For example, there were both men and nations which could ill afford to back down. Too often in the past, the Russian foreign minister, his Austrian counterpart, and the German Kaiser had all displayed timidity, hesitation, and reluctance to commit themselves to firm action. Kaiser Wilhelm in particular was determined to prove that he was not a coward, and, like the Russian foreign minister, he was rather unstable. Similarly, it was doubtful whether the Austrian and Russian regimes could survive major diplomatic defeats. Austria was internally so precarious and Russia had sustained so many recent humiliations that disintegration of the one and revolution in the other were real possibilities. This factor loomed large in the calculations of leaders in Vienna, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. Paris concentrated more on retaining its Russian ally. Moreover, the intensity of public opinion in most countries made backing down almost impossible for weak regimes and politicians who wished to retain office. Under the circumstances, it was easy to hope that a strong stand would deter others and solve the problem.

The stronger great powers feared that their allies would cease to be great powers and, to varying degrees, felt a need to bolster them. There was also a widespread fear of losing an ally altogether. Both Britain and France had worried in past crises about losing Russia: France because she compensated for her own deficiencies with the Russian tie, Britain from fear of adding Russia to its enemies. Austria and Germany feared losing each other: Austria because its need was great, Germany from a sense of isolation. Both France and Germany worried that Russia and Austria would fight only if their own interests were involved. Each concluded that it was better for war to come on an issue where the ally's concerns were directly engaged.

Most states feared losing prestige and great power status. This was of intense concern to Austria and Russia, and in both instances was focused primarily on the Balkans, which impacted on domestic concerns and where the situation had changed so rapidly with the removal of Turkey. Yet dread of the results of backing down was widespread and extended even to Britain, master of the seas and of the world's greatest empire. On 31 July 1914, a senior British official argued for action by saying, "The theory that England cannot engage in a big war means her abdication as an independent state. . . . A balance of power cannot be maintained by a State that is incapable of fighting and consequently carries no weight."

Threats to prestige, authority, and vital interests were almost universally perceived. Britain had long recognized a German challenge on and beyond the seas; the invasion of Belgium seemed to be striking at the British heartland. France, aside from other considerations, could hardly hand over her border forts without becoming a defenceless laughing stock. Russia felt its future in the Balkans and among the Slavs was at stake. Austria saw Serbia as a danger to its very existence, whereas Germany perceived a Russian threat and perhaps was as obsessed by Russia as Britain had been in the mid-nineteenth century and the United States would be in the mid-twentieth century. Clearly, some threats were more real and immediate than others, but leaders acted upon their perceptions, even if erroneous.

Nationalism, whether unifying or divisive, and imperialism contributed to the crises and tensions of the pre-war years, if they did not themselves directly cause the war. And certainly Austria-Hungary's ageing, archaic multinational empire, trying to maintain itself against mounting nationalist pressures, was a major contributing factor, as was the Austro-Russian rivalry among the infant national states of the Balkans. The pre-war arms race contributed to the international tension of the era but of itself was not a direct causal factor, despite the beliefs of a later generation, particularly of Americans.

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[1] Popularly known as the Black Hand.

More important, probably, was a widespread pseudo-Darwinian view of international politics, an assumption that it was a question of dog eat dog with the strongest and speediest dog surviving. Furthermore, crises had become the norm, so much so that some leaders expected war before long. Especially in Germany, there was a belief that war and Darwinian struggle were unavoidable, which perhaps explains the preoccupation with an assumed Russian threat and a fatalistic view that a Russo-German war was inevitable soon. Nowhere was there any awareness of what a war would be like; as a result there was scant caution about the dangers war would bring. The short war illusion was widespread and had contributed to the arms race on the assumption that the war would be fought with what equipment one had at the outset. The businessmen would see to it that the war was brief (if they did not prevent it altogether, as some believed, but not those determining national policies). Few in power had much appreciation of what the industrialization, nationalization, and democratization of war signified. Indeed, it was widely held that war was good and glorious and cleansing.

In some countries, military men and military plans played a considerable role. The military plans were rigid, too few in number, and had tight timetables; the military men were wedded to them. The generals tended to be more eager for war than the civilian leaders; even where they were not, there was a fear that any delay in mobilization would be catastrophic. Initially there was often lack of co-ordination between civilian and military leaders, thanks to administrative inadequacy at the top, especially in Germany and Russia, and then tugs-of-war ensued, particularly to sway the autocrat. At a more fundamental level, appreciations in various countries of the military balance of power, then and as it would be in the future, clearly contributed to the pressures toward war.

The alliance system did not of itself cause any war, local, continental, or world. But it constituted a substantial reason why a local crisis became a world war, and partially explains why a murder in Bosnia caused Germany to invade Belgium and why that event in turn led to a world war, with Japan occupying Germany's Asian colonies. This is particularly true in view of the suddenness and speed of the crisis. Peace movements collapsed, and little time was left for diplomacy. Furthermore, previous crises had made the alliances more rigid. Europe had managed to edge past the abyss repeatedly in recent years, but only at the price of expending options and losing flexibility. Now governments felt they had few choices left. . . .

In the end, the debate always comes back to Germany. Clearly, Austria intended to start nothing without Germany at its side, and none of the Entente powers actively wanted a war in 1914. There was no Entente equivalent to Wilhelm's "Now or never." Thus, one must ask whether Germany wanted war in 1914, if so why, and what its reasons and motives were. Why did it encourage local war, accept continental war, and risk world war? The answers are contradictory, thanks to illogic, conflicts, and differing perceptions within Berlin's upper echelons, where policy-making was disorganized. . . .

War came when it did primarily because Germany opted for a war, if not necessarily for the war which eventuated. There has been a good deal of debate about why Germany did so and to what end. Was it largely a matter of miscalculation? Had there been a systematic two-year German plan for world conquest? Was Germany running a calculated risk, hoping to get its way without intent of war? Was the goal a preventive war, to deter future Russian aggression, or was Germany itself engaging in an opportunistic war of aggression?

The answers to these questions are a matter of opinion and the object of heated historical debate. Certainly there was miscalculation aplenty, and repeated gambles constituted calculated or miscalculated risks. It is perhaps begging the question to say that little German policy formulation was systematic, but, despite conferences debating war in December 1912 and thereafter, evidence for a conscious systematic two-year drive toward a world war depends heavily on interpretation and is hotly disputed. Clearly, Germany seized the opportunity for a war of aggression, but the question is why it thought it should.

Perhaps it is best to let German leaders speak for themselves. In February 1918 Bethmann Hollweg, who had been Chancellor in 1914, explained privately, "Yes, my god, in a certain sense it was a preventive war. But when war was hanging above us, when it had to come in two years even more dangerously and more inescapably, and when the generals said, now it is still possible, without defeat, but not in two years time." And in August 1916, Bethmann's close aide and confidante, who himself propounded the theory of the calculated risk, explained that the purpose of the war was "defence against present-day France, preventive war against the Russia of the future, struggle with Britain for world domination."

~~For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this program does remove. We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this program that impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise such as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or to block in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade if she is willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing. We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world, — the new world in which we now live — instead of a place of mastery.~~

~~. . . An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation no part of the structure of international justice can stand. The people of the United States could act upon no other principle; and to the vindication of this principle they are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess. The moral climax of this the culminating and final war for human liberty has come, and they are ready to put their own strength, their own highest purpose, their own integrity and devotion to the test.~~

REFLECTIONS

By studying causes and consequences of world events, we learn how things change but more important we learn how to avoid repeating past mistakes. History is full of lessons that breed humility as well as confidence. In *The Origins of the First World War*,[1] historian James Joll points out how unprepared people were for the war as late as the summer of 1914. Even after the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia was issued on July 23 (almost a month after the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28), diplomats across Europe left for their summer holidays. By August, all of Europe was at war, though as Sally Marks noted, the expectation was that it would be over in a month.

We could make a good case for diplomatic blundering as an important cause of the First World War. It is safe to say that few statesmen had any inkling of the consequences of their actions in 1914. And yet, if we concentrate on the daily decisions of diplomats that summer, we may pay attention only to the tossing of lit matches by people sitting on powder kegs rather than on the origins of the powder kegs themselves.

President Wilson blamed secret diplomacy, the international system of alliances, and imperialism as the chief causes of the war. On the importance of imperialism, Wilson's conclusion was the same as that of Lenin and Luxemburg, though he certainly did not share their conviction that capitalism was the root cause of imperialism and, in 1919, neither alliances nor imperialism were regarded as un-American or likely to end any time soon. Still, Wilson's radical moral aversion to reviving Old World empires might have prevented a new stage of imperialism in the League of Nations mandate system. One of the consequences of a Wilsonian peace might have been the creation of independent states in the Middle East and Africa a generation earlier.

The principle of the "self-determination of nations" that Wilson espoused, however, was a double-edged sword. The fact that the war had been "caused" by a Bosnian Serb nationalist assassin in 1914 might have been a warning that national self-determination could become an infinite regress in which smaller and smaller units sought to separate themselves from "foreign" domination. On the issue of nationalism versus internationalism, Wilson might have benefited from listening to Rosa Luxemburg. When asked about anti-Semitism, Luxemburg, a Jew from Russian Poland, answered:

> What do you want with this particular suffering of the Jews? The poor victims of the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Negroes of Africa with whose bodies the Europeans play a game of catch are just as near to me. . . . I have no special corner of my heart reserved for the ghetto: I am at home wherever in the world there are clouds, birds, and human tears.[2]

Woodrow Wilson was a historian and president of Princeton University before he became president of the United States. Rosa Luxemburg was a professional revolutionary — perhaps the leading socialist theorist in Europe. Both were trained to think historically. Which of the two better understood the causes and consequences of the First World War? Which of the two had a better appreciation of the problems of nationalism that were to continue to haunt the twentieth century?

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[1] James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War* (London: Longman, 1992), 200.

[2] Jay Winter and Blaine Baggett, *The Great War* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 248, quoting Rosa Luxemburg.

The rise of nationalist movements and international organizations were only two consequences of the First World War. Historians have attributed many other aspects of the twentieth century to the war. In an engaging account of his own search for the evidence of war along the Western Front, Stephen O'Shea writes:

> It is generally accepted that the Great War and its fifty-two months of senseless slaughter encouraged, or amplified, among other things: the loss of a belief in progress, a mistrust of technology, the loss of religious faith, the loss of a belief in Western cultural superiority, the rejection of class distinctions, the rejection of traditional sexual roles, the birth of the Modern [in art], the rejection of the past, the elevation of irony to a standard mode of apprehending the world, the unbuttoning of moral codes, and the conscious embrace of the irrational.[3]

What evidence can you find of any of these consequences in the accounts of this chapter?

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[3] Stephen O'Shea, *Back to the Front: An Accidental Historian Walks the Trenches of World War I* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 9.