

The Lessons of World War I: The 100th Anniversary of the Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

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June 28, 2014 is the 100th anniversary of the famous political assassination in Sarajevo, Serbia, that was the spark that started World War I, the war that was widely called “the war to end all wars”, because of the unendurable mutual mass slaughter of an entire generation of young European men (on all sides of the war).

On June 28, 1914, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, one of the wealthiest men in Austria, was murdered in Sarajevo.

The Victim

Besides his excess luxury wealth and his over-privileged position in life, there were lots of traits to despise. As an over-privileged Hapsburg family member, he joined the military at an early age and, what was typical for his elevated status in life, he was frequently and rapidly promoted in rank. He was given the rank of lieutenant at age fourteen (!), captain at twenty-two, colonel at twenty-seven and major general at age thirty-one.



The Archduke had no significant experience as a commanding officer in wartime. Europe had been in a prosperous peacetime economy for generations. A year before his assassination, Franz Ferdinand had been appointed Inspector General of the empire's armed forces, and he was in Sarajevo discharging his duties while the empire's occupying army was on maneuvers.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand with his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg and their three children (from

left), Prince Ernst von Hohenberg, Princess Sophie, and Maximilian, Duke of Hohenburg in 1910 (left, source Wikipedia)

The Archduke was also a compulsive trophy hunter. Today many would call him a “slob” hunter. In his own diaries, he documented over 300,000 game kills over his lifetime, 5000 of which were deer (100,000 of his hunting trophies were on exhibit at one of his castles).

For every oppressed Serb, the autocratic Archduke and his empire were just the latest cruel colonial powers that were occupying Serbia, oppressing and taxing the Slavic people and denying freedom for those unfortunate indigenous folks who had been living, toiling and suffering there for centuries.

The Assassin

Gavrilo Princip was the young Serbian who pulled the trigger on the Archduke and his wife Sophie (in the second assassination attempt of the day) killing them both with one shot each from his 9 mm pistol. The assassin was an impoverished, unemployed, tuberculosis-infected 19 year-old Serbian who grew up on a tiny farm in a rural part of the Balkan Peninsula that had been colonized and oppressed for centuries by the Turkish Ottoman Empire. Many of the Slavic people converted to Islam from their traditional Orthodox Christianity under the Ottomans, but the Princip had remained Christian.

Six of Princip’s siblings had died in infancy or early childhood, which certainly negatively impacted the family psychologically and very likely angered the young boy, who never had an opportunity to attend school until he was 13 years of age. His law and order father needed him to help work the tiny 4 acre subsistence farm.

Early in his teen years, Princip moved away from his family to better himself by enrolling in a school in Sarajevo – his first formal educational experience. He proved to be an apt student and, in his studies, learned about Serbia’s brutal colonial history under the Ottomans and then under the jackboot of the Austria-Hungarian empire. Likely angered by what he learned about the unjust suffering of his people, he joined a secret pan-Slavic liberation movement (the Black Hand) that led him to that fateful day, June 28, 1914.

Interestingly, before Princip was born (in 1894), his impoverished, downtrodden and exploited father had once been a member of a militia group that tried to overthrow the Ottomans, whose overlords 1 Percenters at the time routinely took the first fruits of every farmer’s harvest – thus ensuring the relative starvation, continued poverty and ill health of his family.

By the time 1914 rolled around, the Ottoman Empire was gone, taken over by the Austro-Hungarian Empire that was ruled by a dual monarchy, which was dominated by the elderly Austrian Emperor Franz Josef, who had designated his nephew Franz Ferdinand to succeed him.

What Motivates Oppressed Minorities to Protest (or even kill)

So now there was a new and deeply hated colonizing oppressor-overlord that was also an enemy of ethnic Slavs and Serbians. Seeing no willingness on the part of the oppressors to grant their freedom through negotiations, Princip joined up with the Serbian nationalist movement that had been demanding liberation and self-rule.

And, as usual, when ruling class oppressors keep denying the legitimate international human rights to achieve liberty, equality and brotherhood (or death) (“Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite ou la Mort” of the French Revolution), they often are forced to increase the decibel level.

I am reminded of the non-violent actions of peace and justice activists like Duluth’s Catholic Workers who, after repeatedly being denied a place at the table and/or never having their serious and valid theological/political messages taken seriously by the churches or local leaders, finally feel obliged to throw blood on the doors of the Federal Building.

Or, like Duluth’s own Greg Boertge-Obed of the Transform Now Plowshares movement, getting arrested and then imprisoned for 35 years because of a nonviolent protest at the high security nuclear weapons factory — the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn (see John LaForge’s fine Duluth Reader article at: http://duluthreader.com/articles/2013/02/16/1455_35_years_for_embarrassing_the_state_greg_boertje).

Or like Catholic Workers and other peace groups at various points across the nation getting arrested (with media blackout preventing the actions from being publicized) for exercising their First Amendment rights by protesting at the CIA and Pentagon Killer Drone installations.

A Few of the Root Causes of the World War I

Figuring out the roots of the “Great War” is an enormously complex issue. Hundreds of books and thousands of scholarly papers have been written on the subject. Some of them have been written by militarists to obscure the issues, but one of the usual conclusions that all authors draw is the fact that many of the European Great Powers at the time had, over the decades, made alliances between one another that pledged that one would come to the defense of the other if either one was attacked. So Russia had pledged to militarily defend Serbia if Serbia was attacked. Likewise Germany would come to the aid of Austria if Austria was attacked by another nation. Both France and England had promised to come to the aid of Russia and Belgium if either nation was attacked. And so it went, in domino fashion

And so when a Serbian group assassinated the heir to the throne, Austria, to not appear to its critics to be “soft on crime” and to “save face”, felt that it had to do something to punish Serbia, even if the nation had nothing to do with the assassination.

After an investigation into the details of the assassination did not prove Serbian national guilt, Austria still decided to issue a 48 hour ultimatum (to be enforced by invasion if not accepted), that was actually designed to be rejected. Serbia actually accepted all of the terms of the ultimatum (save for one clause) and Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. And the dominoes fell. And the rest is history.

There are, of course, a lot of research that has documented the blunders, the laziness, the outright idiocy, and the hubris of the ruling class aristocrats, captains of industry, kings, diplomats, generals and the ever-present uber-patriotic newspapers in every city looking to sell papers. Each of them had a role to play in the continued butchery that gutted an entire generation of young men who came home crazy, haunted and demented – as well as mentally, spiritually and/or physically disabled – because of the miscalculations of each nation’s incompetent and mis-guided leaders who couldn’t get themselves to use the words

“retreat” or “we were wrong” or “mea culpa” or “please forgive me”.

Of course, the lessons from each and every international or civil war has been consistently unheeded by subsequent generations of our so-called national leaders in the military, industry or politics. They consistently ignore the will of the people who are the ones who have to sacrifice their young to the vicious Gods of War and Mammon.

This 2014 centennial year of the beginning of the “War to End All Wars” will offer many opportunities to explore the blunders of the national leaders that allowed the mutual slaughter to continue (including the Christmas Truce of 1914 where the generals on all sides chose to squelch the efforts of disillusioned soldiers on all sides of No-Man’s Land to end the war then and there. Heeding the wisdom of the millions of soldiers in the trenches would have saved the bodies, minds and souls of tens of millions of combatants.

The Wisdom of Clemenceau

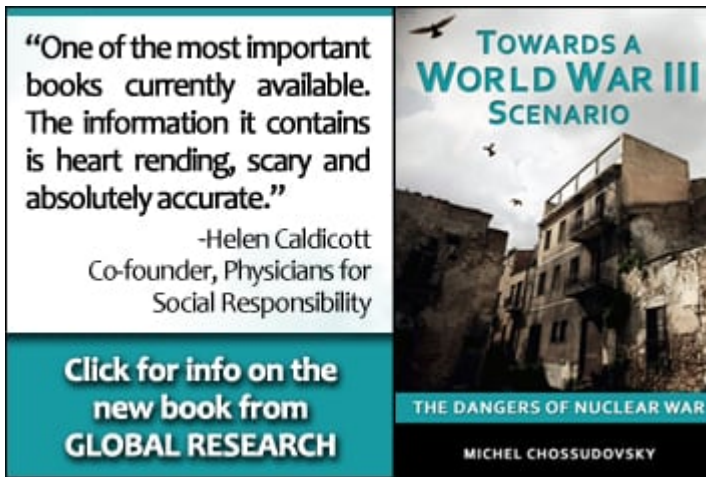
After World War I, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau (serving in that position twice: from 1906 to 1909 and from 1917 to 1920) was quoted thusly: “War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men”. (The clever-with-words Clemenceau also famously said: “America is the only nation in history which miraculously has gone directly from barbarism to decadence without the usual interval of civilization”, “Military justice is to justice what military music is to music”, “War is a series of catastrophes that (sometimes) results in a victory”, and “It is easier to make war than make peace.”)

By prolonging the war beyond Christmas 1914, the generals on all sides of WWI continued to blunder badly, thinking – from the safety of their bunkers that were well out of reach of the enemy’s artillery shells – that they could still single-handedly and gloriously win the stalemated and unendurable (at least for the front line soldiers) trench war, perhaps dreaming about writing their memoirs after “victory” was achieved; saving face through self-deception, thus avoiding the cognitive dissonance they would otherwise have experienced; advancing in rank (and pay grade); and being awarded more of the cheap trinkets and ribbons that would be pinned on the breasts of their nicely laundered and perfectly pressed officer uniforms. No unforgettable stench of death came close to their nostrils.

And the military commander’s illusions would be reinforced by the co-opted war correspondents, most of whom weren’t actually seeing or smelling the carnage at the front. Most approved journalists dutifully covered up the blunders and the carnage, just as they do in today’s wars, although TV networks today hire retired generals to do the bidding of the Pentagon by prostituting themselves by endlessly reciting the military’s and White House’s talking points, all the while overlooking, covering up, or lying about the unwelcome real truths of war (which are always the “first casualties of war”).

***Dr Kohls** is a retired physician who has painfully witnessed in his practice the soul- and psychic-devastation of war, domestic violence, punitive parenting, malnutrition, homelessness, poverty and the serious dangers of the chronic use of psychotropic drugs. In his essays he tries to warn his readers about some of the physical, neurological, psychological and spiritual consequences of all those forms of violence.*

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