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The war to end all war

“One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans.”– Otto von Bismarck (1888)

Patrick Smyth

The events that trigger change in the world, chaos and complexity theories suggest, are often the tiny things. A butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazonian jungle, and a storm ravages half of Europe.

The assassination 100 years ago in Sarajevo of the little-known heir to a declining empire, in many capitals a blip on a quiet news day, had the same relationship to the European storm that would become the first World War, a single domino falling that would bring down three empires and fan the flames of revolution and change the face of the modern world. The American historian Fritz Stern called the war it “the first calamity of the 20th Century, the calamity from which all other calamities sprang.”

In commemorating the events of that fateful decade of 1912-22 , during which history itself seemed to have accelerated at breakneck speed, The Irish Times has been marking with a series of supplements the great national moments in which our fellow countrymen and women reshaped and redefined Ireland. But we are also remembering those, and here the first World War, in which this country and its people were swept up involuntarily on the great tides of the world stage, bit players in a bigger drama, though one which we also shaped and which left its own indelible mark on us.

The fifth of our “Century” series is an attempt to describe/explain from the perspectives of the capitals of Europe what happened in the 37 days between the killings in Sarajevo on the 28th of June 1914 of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife by a Serb nationalist, and the declaration of war by Britain on Germany. It is a countdown to war that confounds the simplistic post-Versailles single-cause rationalisation – “German militarism” – that the war’s winners needed to proclaim it a “just war “. A lethal cocktail of Balkan nationalism and shifting borders, great-power rivalry, secret alliances, strategic miscalculations, and even jealousies in the single royal family of Europe, all contributed, with many more ingredients. Not least, the tussle for political power within Germany.

And we played our own significant part too in the descent into war. Ireland’s turmoil over home rule, and the preoccupation of the British with the possibility of civil war here, played a key part in Germany’s miscalculation and uncertainty about whether Britain would come to France’s aid, and in London’s dithering over the same issue.

That prevarication was decisively overcome by John Redmond’s pledge that nationalist Ireland would defend the country against German invasion, and his willingness to put the
home rule agitation on hold. Jerome aan de Wiel’s fascinating account in this supplement of that largely untold story of Ireland’s part in the road to war is an important perspective.

Thirty five thousand Irishmen would die in British uniform – for all too long forgotten and unhonoured here – in the war that saw the mobilisation of 65 million under arms and took 20 million civilian and military lives. HG Wells spoke of it as, and many hoped against hope it would be, “the war to end all war”. But, as Walter Lippman would write, “the delusion is that whatever war we are fighting is the war to end war”. The delusion was also that, as Kaiser William told German troops in 1914, “You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees.” Delusions about stability, and the old deference, about the rock-like permanence of the social order, about how to fight and win wars ... all casualties too of the calamity of mud and trenches of Flanders fields.
Shots echoed round Europe

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sofia in Sarajevo, how Austria would react to the killing of the heir to the throne of its empire was uppermost in European minds.

Suzanne Lynch

Along the banks of the river Miljacka which runs through the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, stands a simple stone bridge. The distinctive Ottoman-style arches and pale yellow stone bathe in the warm light of the Balkan sun, as small groups of tourists walk nearby, quietly taking pictures.

On the northern end of the bridge, a plaque commemorates the event that hurled this small corner of the Balkans into the maelstrom of European history: “From this place on 28 June 1914 Gavrilo Princip assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sofia.” The murder of Franz Ferdinand by a Serb nationalist was one of the main catalysts for the war that engulfed the continent between 1914 and 1918, dragging the late-Edwardian world violently into one of the biggest conflicts of the 20th century.

The events of that day in June have been seared into the common narrative of the first World War. Franz Ferdinand, next in line to the Austro-Hungarian throne, had accepted an invitation by General Oskar Potiorek to inspect the army in the recently annexed region of Bosnia-Herzegovina, a lush, mountainous region to the west of Serbia.

On the morning of Sunday June 28th, the Austro-Hungarian heir and his wife Sofia, having spent three days holidaying in Bosnia, arrived at the train station in Sarajevo. From there they travelled through the streets as part of a six-vehicle motorcade, waving to the assembled crowds. Tensions were high in the capital, but security was curiously relaxed.

Unbeknownst to them, seven terrorists had already convened in the Bosnian capital, as part of a planned attack and were stationed at different points along the main quay in the city. It fell to the last one, 19-year-old Gavrilo Princip, to deliver the two fatal shots killing the Austrian heir and his wife at around 11am.

Remarkably the archduke had earlier in the morning survived an assassination attempt, when one of the seven assassins threw a bomb at the car in which the royalty were travelling. It missed, hitting the car behind, but mildly injuring Sophie. The archduke proceeded with the events regardless, though appeared rattled when he interrupted the Mayor of Sarajevo during his speech at Sarajevo Town Hall, shouting: “I come here as your guest and you people greet me with bombs.”
As the motorcade made its way back through the city streets from the town hall, Princip attacked, shooting from point-blank range. Sophie died almost instantly, the archduke shortly afterwards in the nearby Konak palace. Princip was immediately caught, scooped up by the encircling crowd. Within hours he appeared in court. Photographs of the young men facing trial, alongside pictures of the archduke and his wife meeting well-wishers just hours before their assassination, are displayed just beside the murder site today, a striking reminder of the events of that fateful day one hundred years ago.

The rise of Serbian nationalism

The murder of Franz Ferdinand is often seen as a random, terrorist act, which might not necessarily have led to full-scale war but for the response of the larger European powers.

But in reality, the events that unfolded in Sarajevo had been in train for some time.

Stirrings of discontent were in evidence in the Balkans in the decades preceding the outbreak of the first World War. The Balkan peninsula, an area which stretched down to modern day Greece was sandwiched between the two major geopolitical powers of central and eastern Europe – the Austro-Hungarian empire to the north and west and the Ottoman empire to the east and south.

In 1878 Serbia, which had been a principality of the Ottoman empire for most of the 19th century was accorded independence by the Congress of Berlin, a major summit of European powers which dealt with the re-organisation of the Balkans.

Following independence, the Obrenovic dynasty, which had effectively ruled Serbia during the Ottoman reign, declared Serbia a kingdom. King Milan, and his son Alexandar, alternately held the throne, when the father abdicated in favour of the son. But antipathy towards the crown was growing within Serbia at the turn of the century, bolstered by the powerful army and fuelled by popular support for a rival dynastic line, the Karadjordjevics, who had been in exile for most of the 19th century.

In June 1903, the first major sign of serious instability occurred in Serbia. King Alexandar and Queen Draga were brutally murdered in their palace in the capital, Belgrade. The coup, abetted by the army, brought the Karadjordjevic dynasty to the throne. The deposal was enthusiastically welcomed by most of the Serbian public and the international community, which at first withdrew diplomatic representatives from Belgrade, ultimately recognised the new regime despite the bloody regicide that precipitated its accession.

In parallel to the dramatic regime change under way in Belgrade, at a more populist level Serbian nationalism was on the rise. The idea of an ethnic Serb identity resurfaced during the second half of the 19th century, bolstered by the region’s newly-achieved independence.
The 14th-century Battle of Kosovo, in which the ancient Serbian leader Tsar Dusan suffered a heroic defeat at the hands of the Turks took on mythic stature in the narrative of Serbian patriotism. The date of the battle – June, 28th, 1389 was significant. The decision of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to visit on the same date in 1914 was seen by many as an incendiary affront to Serb nationalists who resented the visit by the heir.

The idea of a Greater Serbia – an ominous precedent for a vision that would take hold again after the fall of Yugoslavia in the 1990s – gained momentum during the early years of the 20th century and was to be the force behind many of the complex developments that drove the geopolitics of the region. The unification of all ethnic Serbs – not only those who resided in the geographical entity of Serbia, but those who lived in neighbouring regions such as Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia – emerged as a central strain of Serbian politics.

The annexation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary in 1908 was the first major event to spark an outflow of Serbian patriotism. The region, which was populated by a mix of ethnic Serbs, Muslims and Catholic Croats, had already been occupied by Austria-Hungary for about 30 years, but the annexation provoked a furious reaction from Belgrade. New nationalist groups such as the Serbian National Defence Force, were formed, while other irredentist groups were radicalised.

These included the Black Hand group, of which the Sarajevo assassin Gavrilo Princip was a member. The underground group was formed in Belgrade in 1911, on a radical nationalist agenda, and was part of a nationalist sub-culture, with strong army links, that flourished in the capital at the time. The group also infiltrated other regions of the Balkan peninsula, including Bosnia, from where Princip and some of his accomplices themselves hailed.

In parallel to this rise of popular nationalism, politically Serbia was beginning to loosen ties with Austria-Hungary, with whom it had traditionally enjoyed relatively good relations. Under the leadership of the Karadjordjevics and Serbia’s long-standing prime minister, Nicola Pasic, Serbia extricated itself from economic dependency with Vienna, signing a number of trade agreements, including an arms deal, with France. Paris also provided a loan to Serbia, replacing Austria as Serbia’s main source of finance, in a sign of Serbia’s shifting alliances.

Serbian nationalism once more flared up during the two Balkans Wars of 1912 and 1913 which pushed Europe perilously close to war.

The actual trigger for the conflicts was Italy’s invasion of Libya in 1911. As the first major attack on the Ottoman empire, Italy’s action paved the way for attacks on other Ottoman-controlled areas, emboldening Serbian and Bulgarian nationalists to take on Constantinople.

The first Balkans War, which began in October 1912 saw Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece win victories throughout the Balkan peninsula, pushing back the Western borders of the Ottoman empire to modern day Turkey. Serbia succeeded in almost doubling its
territory, expanding mostly south into Macedonia, with Bulgaria acquiring southern Macedonia. The second Balkans War essentially saw Serbia and Bulgaria turn on each other, as they divided the spoils of the first war, with Bulgaria losing most of the territory it had gained the previous year.

Austria-Hungary was deeply unnerved by the events unfolding on its south Eastern borders. In a bid to create a buffer between the Adriatic Sea and Serbia it proposed the creation of an autonomous state of Albania, which was signed off by European powers at a conference in London, in the belief that it would stave off war. Serbia was furious. A tense stand-off which saw 100,000 Serbian troops occupy Albania was finally defused when Serbia was persuaded to withdraw in October 1913. But the damage was done.

When the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Franz Ferdinand, was murdered just eight months later, the eyes of Europe were on the reaction of Vienna.

The build-up of tensions between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and an increasingly nationalist Serbia to its east in the two decades before 1914 provides the context in which the assassination of Franz Ferdinand must be viewed.

The various instances of conflict that occurred in the previous decade – the annexation of Bosnia in 1908, the two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, the creation of the autonomous region of Albania – pushed Austria and Serbia closer and closer to the brink of war.

Arguably, without these precedents, the murder of Franz Ferdinand might not have been so momentous, though the fact that the victim was the heir to the throne may have in any event instigated a response from Vienna. But while the murder of the archduke was ultimately the trigger that sparked the Balkans war in 1914, it does not explain why the event spiralled into a global conflict.

The reason why war was not simply confined to the Balkan area but instead escalated into a broader conflict was the interconnectedness between the events in the Balkans and the wider European context of international relations. Their inextricable involvement of the European powers in the events unfolding in the Balkans due to the various diplomatic alliances that were in place, inevitably invited a response from the major European powers.

**Wider European context**

Europe had remained in a state of relative calm since the end of the Napoleonic wars, thanks in part to the Concert of Europe of 1815 which aimed to uphold the “balance of power” principle enshrined by the Congress of Vienna, ie a policy of national security based on the principle that no one power becomes more powerful than the other.
By the mid-19th century, and the emergence of new nation-states such as Germany and Italy, this policy was beginning to shift to a policy of alignment.

From the second half of the 19th century, a system of alliances was established between Europe’s largest powers which governed international relations in the run-up to the first World War.

Chief among these was the Austro-German alliance signed in 1879, and the Franco-Russian alliance signed between 1891 and 1894. This was followed by the signing of the “Entente Cordiale” between France and Britain in 1904 and the so-called Triple Alliance between Britain, France and Russia, agreed in 1907, prompted in part by Britain’s fear of the growing threat from Germany.

The Triple Entente, served as a geopolitical counter-weight to the Central Powers, particularly Germany. It also committed the three participants to defend each other in the event of the violation of one of the member’s sovereignty, though the interpretation of how far that commitment stretched differed sharply.

The extent to which the three “Triple Entente” powers – France, Britain and Russia – interacted with the events in the Balkans and the simmering Austro-Serbian tensions differed sharply.

Russia was a key player in the run-up to war. As Austria began to lose influence in the Balkan peninsula and Serbian nationalism grew, Russia increased its interest in the area. This went further than a commitment to protect the ideal of a pan-Slavic, Orthodox region. The geographical location of Serbia close to the strategically-vital Dardanelles was a key concern, while Russia was keen to preserve its interests in the increasingly unstable but strategically-important area.

During the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 Russia itself engaged in a military build-up along its border with the Austro-Hungarian empire in Galicia in present-day Poland, matched by Austro-Hungarian troops. In the event, both sides backed down, but the threat of all-out war was evidence of the underlying tensions that would flare up in 1914.

France had increased its engagement with Serbia in the late 19th century, through the various trade agreements and the provisions of loans to Serbia. Though it remained elusive on the question of whether its alliance with Russia extended to a conflict in the Balkans, by 1913 the new French president Poincare was moving closer to St Petersburg on the issue.

Though Britain was committed to France and Russia through the Triple Alliance, it remained relatively detached from the Balkan conflicts in the run-up to 1914, being preoccupied with the Home Rule crisis. Having built so much of its foreign policy on the principle of “Splendid Isolation” during the 19th century, it was not entirely comfortable with the new alliances,
and the commitments they entailed. Right up to the outbreak of war in 1914 Britain adopted a looser approached to the notion of common defence and commitments.

Despite their varying degrees of engagement with the Balkan crises in the run-up to 1914, the response of the Great Powers to the simmering events in the Balkans emerged forcefully with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on June 28th, 1914.

Despite the persistent tensions in the region over the previous decade, a full-blown continental war had not been on the cards. The events of June 28th changed that. Within five weeks, Britain had declared war on Germany on August 4th. So what occurred in the intervening 37 days to escalate a situation that had for so long been a localised conflict into a global war?

37 days: the road to war

The gunshots that killed Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28th echoed throughout the continent almost immediately, as the import of the assassination of the heir to the throne of one of the central powers in the continent was felt.

In the first instance, all eyes fell on Austria. How the empire was going to react to the murder of the heir to the throne, was the critical first move in the chess game unfolded across the continent throughout July 2014.

The reaction in Vienna was predictably one of shock and anger. But the main question of concern to Vienna was whether the Serbian state had been complicit in the attack. While Princip and his accomplices were members of the Black Hand group, rather than agents of the State, there were links between the underground groups and Serbian authorities.

The leader of Black Hand was Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, the head of the Serbian military intelligence. Known as “Apis”, he had been personally involved in the brutal regicide of 1903. Princip and his accomplices had sourced their guns and bombs in Belgrade, receiving training and instructions there, before travelling over the border to Bosnia Herzegovina to carry out the assassination.

Almost certainly, the Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pasic had some knowledge, however limited, of a plan to assassinate the archduke. Furthermore there is evidence to suggest that he informed officials in Vienna about the plot, but whether the details were too scant, or Vienna simply refused to accept the seriousness of the threat, remains unclear.

Despite the difficulty in proving Serbian involvement in the assassination, almost immediately Vienna committed itself to action against Serbia. One of the ironies of the Sarajevo incident was that Franz Ferdinand had been himself something of a pacifist. His removal allowed the chief of the General Staff, General Cordon, who had consistently
favoured action against Serbia in the preceding years, to drive the response to the murders in Sarajevo.

Within a week, Austro-Hungarian diplomat Alek Hoyos arrived in Berlin to meet with Kaiser Wilhelm II. It was here that Austria received assurances from Germany that they would back Austrian action against Serbia, a commitment that became known as the “blank cheque” by which Germany pledged unconditional support for Austrian action.

However, despite the consolidation of the German-Austrian position, Austria prevaricated throughout early and mid-July, neither issuing an ultimatum to Serbia nor invading.

On July 16th France’s President Raymond Poincare set sail for St Petersburg. The three-day summit in Russia would be another decisive point in the July crisis. On July 23rd France and Russia issued a joint communiqué to Vienna expressing the hope that Austria would not do anything to compromise the honour or independence of Serbia, underlining their “entire agreement” on the issue.

That same day Austria presented an ultimatum to Belgrade, giving Serbia 48 hours to respond under threat of war. The ultimatum, which accused Serbia of tolerating “a subversive movement” on its territory, demanded that Belgrade would allow Austria-Hungary to take part in an investigation into the crime, and was clearly phrased in the expectation that Serbia would not accept it. On July 28th Austria declared war on Serbia, backed and encouraged by Germany.

Russia at this stage had begun the partial mobilisation of troops. France, still somewhat reluctantly, backed Russia.

Britain, whose involvement was instrumental in turning the conflict into a truly European war, was the last Great Power seriously to engage with the conflict during the July crisis.

The government of Herbert Asquith had been preoccupied with the home rule crisis but with the declaration of war on Serbia by Austria on July 28th, focus switched to the continent. At issue was whether Britain would be prepared to back France in the event of a German invasion. The cabinet was against it, wary of being drawn into a war instigated by Serbia, but at the same time aware of its commitments under the Triple Entente. A similar conundrum faced its relationship with Belgium, to which it had pledged protection under an 1839 treaty.

Diplomacy between Berlin and London intensified in the last week of July, while Britain, at the request of Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, began precautionary naval mobilisation. On August 2nd, Berlin issued an ultimatum to Belgium, which it denounced. On the same day, the British cabinet, which had been reluctant right up to the last moment, finally decided that a “substantial violation” of Belgium had occurred,
justifying war. On August 4th, as German troops began moving into south-eastern Belgium, Britain declared war on Germany. The first World War had begun.

**The causes of war**

The debate still continues about what led Europe into the horrors of trench warfare, mass conscription and unprecedented killing that characterised the first World War. Simmering instability in the Balkans which exploded into the open with the assassination at Sarajevo was certainly the catalyst, but how the various “Great Powers” reacted to those events, as well as the build-up of military armaments in the decades preceding 1914, ensured it was a global war.

That Germany was ultimately to blame for the war has been the dominant narrative – not least because it was specifically elaborated in the post-War Treaty of Versailles. That argument is based on the existence of the Schiefflen Plan, Germany’s grand plan for a military attack on France that would be instigated in the event of Russian mobilisation, which dates back from 1905.

But there were other complex factors at play. The sense that the Austro-Hungarian empire, a multifarious composite encompassing almost a dozen ethnic groups, was a dying entity, which was not prepared to accept a move for independence from one of its regions, was an idea that held sway, even at the time. The question of whether Austria had exploited an isolated event to justify invasion of a smaller state that deserved the right to self-determination, became one of the central issues of the “July crisis” as the Great Powers gradually formulated their response to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

Whatever the causes of the war, the Balkans conflict played a central role in the outbreak of the first World War. Ironically, while most of the continent of Europe finally put its past conflicts behind it after second World War II, facilitated by the creation of the European Union, the Balkans remained one region of Europe that struggled to bury its past. The frightening parallels between the events that led to 1914 and the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, are testimony to the dangerously complex nature of the history of the Balkans peninsula. The events of the 1990s also acted as a reminder to the international community that an understanding of the history of countries of which we know little is essential if peace is to be guaranteed in the future.
Profile: Gavrilo Princip

His name may not be as instantly recognisable as Franz Ferdinand, but the 19 year-old assassin who killed the heir to the Austrian throne in Sarajevo in 1914 played a crucial role in the subsequent development of European history.

Gavrilo Princip, the young Bosnian-Serb who fired the fateful shots on the morning of June 28th, has become a symbol of the strain of radical Serbian nationalism that infiltrated the Balkan peninsula in the decades leading up to the first World War. Princip was in fact one of a core group of three assassins who were sent from Belgrade to carry out the assassination in June 1914.

Born in Sarajevo in 1894, Gavrilo Princip was born into a relatively poor household, and was a sickly child. He left school early and moved to Belgrade where, in the coffee houses of the Serbian capital, he became exposed to the underground nationalist movements that were gaining ground. He, and his two Bosnian-Serb friends, Trifko Grabez and Nedeljko Cabrinovic, were recruited into Black Hand, an irredentist group which counted among its members Dragutin Dimitrijevi, known as “Apis”, the chief of the Serbian military intelligence.

The plan to assassinate the archduke was hatched in Belgrade, with senior Black Hand operatives providing the guns and ammunitions that would be used to murder the archduke. In an ideology that would inform terrorist attacks a century later, the attackers intended to kill themselves after carrying out the deed. During his trial for the Sarajevo killing, Princip recounted how, in the days before the assassination, he had visited the grave of Bogdan Zerajic, a suicide assassin who had tried but failed to assassinate General Varesanin, the Austrian governor of Bosnia, in 1911.

The three friends entered Bosnia with the help of the Black Hand network in the days before the murder and were joined by four co-conspirators in Sarajevo.

The seven assassins lined Appel Quay on the morning of June 28th, under instructions to kill the archduke.

In the event, it fell to Princip to deliver the fatal shots, as the others effectively lost their nerve, while Nedeljko Cabrinovic’s attempt to bomb the car failed and the poison he ingested failed to kill him.

Princip was immediately seized following the attack, surrounded by a shocked and angry crowd which began attacking him, and he appeared before a judge within hours. Both he and Cabrinovic maintained that they had acted alone, but the decision of one of the seven assassins, Danilo Ilic, to confess, immediately widened the investigation to Belgrade, as the
authorities desperately tried to confirm a link between Serbian authorities and the actions of the young Bosnian Serbs.

Princip’s full trial took place in October 2014 in Sarajevo. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison, the maximum sentence that could be imposed as he had been aged under 20 at the time of the attack. The young Bosnian died of tuberculosis in the Theresienstadt Prison outside Vienna in April 1918 as the war he helped to ignite continued to rage.
Redmond pledge that nationalists and unionists would fight together in first World War

The response in the south at the outset of the first World War was one of support for the British war effort.

Elaine Callinan

As war erupted throughout Europe, Ireland was in the midst of her own major political crisis over home rule. The Third Home Rule (Government of Ireland) Bill was being fiercely resisted by unionists. In 1913 they had created and armed the Ulster Volunteer Force to resist the implementation of Home Rule or to exclude Ulster from the settlement.

Nationalists in southern Ireland responded by forming a rival militia, the Irish Volunteers. Conflict between these two armed forces seemed inevitable in the early months of 1914 but the outbreak of the first World War temporarily defused this crisis.

On August 3rd 1914, the eve of Britain’s declaration of war on Germany, John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, rose in the House of Commons and, in response to speeches by prime minister HH Asquith and foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, said: “I say to the government that they may tomorrow withdraw every one of their troops from Ireland.

“I say that the coast of Ireland will be defended from foreign invasion by her armed sons, and for this purpose armed nationalist Catholics in the south will be only too glad to join arms with the armed Protestant Ulstermen in the North.

“Is it too much to hope that out of this situation there may spring a result which will be good not merely for the Empire, but good for the future welfare and integrity of the Irish nation?”

Redmond had seized an opportunity to suggest a consolidation of the Ulster and Irish volunteer movements to demonstrate that patriotic feeling in nationalist Ireland was equal to the more recognised patriotism of Ulster unionists.

In taking this opportunity, Redmond expressed nationalist Ireland’s support early and before Edward Carson, leader of the Ulster unionists, had a chance to make an announcement in the Commons.

He gambled on the chance that his offer of support for Britain’s war effort would secure a positive response from all MPs, even from the most ardent unionists.
He was right. As he sat down most of the house, including many unionists, stood to applaud. Redmond had managed to address a broad audience to demonstrate that nationalist Ireland could collaborate with the Empire at times of dire need.

Nationalist attitudes to Redmond’s speech were reflected in many of the regional newspapers in August 1914. *The Nationalist and Leinster Times* said it was “received with feelings of delight in south Kildare” and it accepted that Ireland’s destiny was intertwined with the British Empire, commenting that the speech had done more for a “really united Ireland” than any of his predecessors in national leadership.

The *Drogheda Independent* saw Redmond’s offer as the practical manifestation of the “union of hearts” and the beginning of Young Irelander, Thomas Davis’s dream that the “union of Orange and Green” would portray to the world the “vision of a United Ireland”.

The *Clare Champion* hoped that Irish unionists and Irish nationalists would have it within their power to change not only Ireland, but win by “national unity a greater measure of Irish self-government”.

The *Cork Examiner* believed it would convince unionists that “when they rely on Ireland’s honour they can rest assured that she will keep her compact”.

It accepted that it would be unreasonable to suggest that unionists would become home rulers or that political differences would cease, but hoped that Irishmen working together to defend her shores might ultimately regenerate Ireland to work together for the greater good under an Irish parliament.

The *Limerick Leader* called the speech a “master stroke of tact, patriotism and statesmanship”, believing it would make home rule inevitable with north-south unity likely in the near future.

The *Freeman’s Journal* proclaimed a “chorus of approval from all parts of Ireland” and published several telegrams from political interests and private citizens telling Redmond that they “heartily approve of and congratulate you on your action . . . in the House of Commons. We are confident that you have the country behind you” and that “your patriotic action has the support of all responsible and sober-minded Irishmen”.

In unionist circles opinion was expressed in letters to the editor of *The Irish Times*. Bryan Cooper, an ex-unionist MP for South County Dublin stated, “I am this day joining the National [Irish] Volunteers and I urge every unionist who is physically fit to do the same”.

Lord Bessborough and Lord Monteagle, also in letters to the editor, both urged support for the volunteer movement.

The *Kilkenny Moderator* described Redmond’s attitude as “phenomenal”, stating, “there was in fact, but one mind and one heart in regard to England in her present conflict with
Germany . . . The Irishman is earnest, determined, enthusiastic . . . fanatically loyal to England in this gigantic struggle”. For many unionists in the south, Redmond’s speech certainly allayed fears and proved that the Irish party was sincere in its professions of loyalty to the Empire.

Support was by no means unanimous, however. Sinn Féin warned that a victorious England in the war would be more powerful and Ireland’s claim for home rule more easily dismissed. Further speeches by Redmond on Ireland’s involvement in the war effort would lead to a rift by some within the Irish Volunteer movement.

Historian JJ Lee highlights that Redmond’s objectives for participation in the war were: to secure the operation of home rule, unite nationalists and unionists in shared war-time comradeship, and secure better arms and training for the national volunteers. Ultimately Redmond’s agenda remained unchanged.

For him, the war did make England’s difficulty Ireland’s opportunity as the anticipated *sine qua non* of his support for Britain in the war effort was the realisation of home rule for Ireland.

On September 15th 1914, Redmond, in the House of Commons, said: “Catholic nationalist Irishmen and Protestant unionist Irishmen from the north of Ireland will be fighting side by side on the battlefields on the Continent, and shedding their blood side by side,” perhaps suggesting, at this stage, that he was considering the possibility of Irish volunteers enlisting in the British army to serve overseas.

Redmond’s long-time adversary, TM Healy (MP for North Louth) responded approvingly: “I wish to say that we shall heartily second his endeavours in regard to the war and I believe the Irish people, and certainly their representatives, will be behind this government to a man during the course of this war.”

William O’Brien told a volunteer meeting in Cork that “in fighting England’s battle in the particular circumstances of war . . . they were fighting the most effective battle for Ireland’s liberty”.

The possibility of Irish volunteers serving overseas had been alluded to by Redmond in his speech to 2,000 volunteers at Maryborough, now Portlaoise, in Queen’s County (Laois) on August 16th: “The sons of Ireland themselves, north and south, Catholic and Protestant, and whatever the origin of their race might have been – Williamite, Cromwellian or Old Celtic – standing shoulder to shoulder, would defend the good order and peace of Ireland, and defend her shores against foreign foe.”

Irish nationalists who enlisted for the first World War were volunteers who willingly went to the battlefields of Europe, and did so for a variety of reasons. While unemployment, economic reasons and lack of emigration opportunities may have encouraged some to
enlist, they also joined up to serve in the war because they believed in Redmond’s “moral obligation” argument, to fight in defence of the higher principles of religion and morality and right.

The historian David Fitzpatrick argues that family precedent also provided a strong impulse to sign up for service and we can see this in Redmond’s recruiting vocabulary when he refers to the volunteers sharing the dangers with their “kith and kin” on the “shores of France”.

Fitzpatrick also states that those belonging to militias, fraternities or sporting clubs were susceptible to collective pressure and to the maintenance of bonds of friendship formed in peace time which may have fostered group movements into the army. A desire for adventure may have been a further motivating factor.

Subsequent to the passing of the Home Rule Bill into law on September 17th 1914 (albeit with a suspensory bill and clause for Ulster) Redmond at Woodenbridge, Co Wicklow, stressed again that the primary duty of Ireland’s manhood was to defend the shores of Ireland.

But here he went a step further by encouraging the volunteers to “account yourselves as men not only in Ireland itself, but wherever the firing line extends”.

In broadening the mandate of the volunteers, Redmond verbalised his previous intimations in his Commons speech in the hope of creating a universal sentiment of “Irishness”, which would be forged through a common sacrifice on the battlefields of Europe.

He believed that in performing its moral duty in the war Ireland would benefit politically. He also believed that if Ireland “seized the opportunity to stab her [Britain] in the back, the Home Rule settlement would not be worth an hour’s purchase” as Ireland would be dishonoured before the world.

Redmond’s encouragement of volunteers to enlist and fight “wherever the firing line extends” would cause alarm among members of the original committee of the Irish Volunteers. They issued a manifesto declaring that Redmond had announced a policy that was “fundamentally at variance with their own published and accepted aims and objectives”. This caused a split in the Irish volunteer movement.

Before the split the numbers enrolled in the volunteers totalled about 160,000; of this, 12,000 adhered to the original Provisional Committee. (There are variations in these figures cited by different authorities, however the overall ratios are similar).

That 140,000 stood with Redmond and the National Volunteers suggests that the majority of Irish opinion backed Redmond. And, while the 12,000 who joined the ranks of Eoin MacNeill is not an inconsequential number, it is small by comparison to those who joined the ranks of Redmond’s National Volunteers.
According to figures provided by Keith Jeffery in Ireland and the Great War, the best estimate for recruitment in Ireland after mobilisation indicates that the army secured about 50,107 volunteers from August 4th 1914 to February 1915 (although the rate of enlistment declines after this, but in similar proportions to that seen in England, Scotland and Wales up to 1916. After this, comparison is difficult because conscription was introduced in Great Britain).

Ireland’s aggregate male contribution to the war forces in total, according to Prof David Fitzpatrick, was about 210,000, but this does not include natives of Ireland who joined units in Britain, the Empire or the US.

Reports of German atrocities would strengthen the nationalist commitment to the war effort. In a recruiting meeting in 1915 Willie Redmond (John Redmond’s brother and MP for East Clare) asked “who had destroyed Belgium, who had burned God’s house, who had slaughtered, in cold blood, the men and the women, who, as priests and nuns, wore the livery of God?”

The Freeman’s Journal reported on the Germans’ use of poison gas in April 1915 as a violation of the Hague Convention, calling it “another ‘little scrap of paper’ torn up”. And after the sinking of the Lusitania passenger ship off the south coast of Ireland, the newspaper stated that it was Germany’s “last great violation of the laws of humanity”.

In 1914 the Irish Parliamentary Party’s political supremacy was unchallenged in most parts of the country, the Catholic Church was supportive under the slogan of “Save Catholic Belgium”, and the majority of Irish opinion backed Redmond.

However, the heavy death toll on the Western Front, along with difficulties at home, would create a variety of problems for Redmond that would lead to decreased recruits in what would become a prolonged war.
What will the British do?

Very few writers have given the Irish home rule crisis sufficient attention as one of the factors that enabled the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914, and yet there can be little doubt about it.

Dr Jerome Aan De Wiel

‘The influence of the Irish crisis on German policy has generally been underestimated,’ Northern Ireland historian ATQ Stewart wrote in his thriller-like The Ulster Crisis in 1967.

More than 25,000 books and articles have seen the light on the origins of the first World War, but very few have paid attention to the Home Rule crisis as a factor that led to the outbreak of war in the fateful summer of 1914. And yet there can be no doubt that the Home Rule crisis played its part.

The turn of the century saw some major changes in the European alliance systems. The result was that the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, were encircled by the Triple Entente of France, Russia and the United Kingdom.

Strategically, the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians were at a distinct disadvantage as a war would require them to fight on two fronts although the German General Staff was confident it could beat both the French and the Russians. A quick knock-out blow of the French in the west would enable the Germans quickly to transfer the might of their army to deal with the advancing Russians in the east, who, until then, would have been kept busy by some of their divisions and the bulk of the Austro-Hungarian army. It was the Schlieffen Plan, which would badly backfire on the Marne in 1914 and lead to trench warfare.

But what would the British do? This was a preoccupying question for Berlin as they had a powerful navy, a vast empire and huge financial resources. And it was not at all clear if London would decide to intervene on the continent in case of a generalised war. The British army and navy’s strategic commitment to the French and Russians remained ill-defined.

But Berlin was well aware that the British government was experiencing increasing difficulties in Ireland where nationalists and unionists were at daggers drawn over Home Rule. Initially the Irish question remained confined to the constitutional arena. But, could the Irish crisis not prevent the British from entering a continental war, or at least delay them crucially?

In 1901 and 1904, the maverick politician Frank Hugh O’Donnell, nicknamed “Crank Hugh” within the Nationalist Party, contacted the Germans with an offer of an alliance to oppose British imperial policy. On a second attempt he so impressed Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow that the latter offered him 60,000 marks if successful. But the plan was quickly
abandoned as the Germans worried they would be compromised if it became publicly known.

The more radical fringe of Irish nationalists were looking for new allies as France, Ireland’s historical ally, had signed the Entente Cordiale with Britain in 1904. It was not a military alliance as such, but it was clear that the French and the British would co-operate.

Until that year, some in France had been seriously exploring the possibility of launching an attack on Britain, through Ireland, during the Boer War. The military archives in Vincennes contain boxes of reports written by French military intelligence which reveal that the French had identified four landing places in Cork: Ballycotton Bay, Courtmacsherry Bay, Kinsale Harbour and Oysterhaven. Topography, quality of the roads, coastal defences, morale of the local troops, had all been assessed and there had also been contacts with local nationalists. Unfortunately the reports are silent on both who their spies were and who they contacted.

Strikingly, once the Entente Cordiale was signed, French military intelligence lost interest in Ireland almost overnight as a sudden lack of Irish material in Vincennes makes clear. Its interest was revived again in about 1913 when the home rule crisis threatened the stability of France’s British ally.

In Berlin, Emperor Wilhelm II, aka the Kaiser, became more and more frustrated with Britain’s attitude to Germany and more and more aggressive in his comments on Ireland. He was regularly informed on the evolving Irish question by historian Dr Theodor Schiemann who secretly corresponded with George Freeman, a journalist specialised in foreign affairs and working for the *Gaelic American* in New York, the newspaper owned by Clan na Gael leader John Devoy. Their correspondence reveals information on Ireland, and occasional work of a cloak-and-dagger nature like trying to ascertain how many Irishmen were in the Royal Navy, and contacts with Middle-Eastern anti-British nationalists.

The German embassy in London also informed the Kaiser on the Home Rule crisis. In September 1912, the embassy wrote that “the worst cruelties” would happen in Ireland if the Conservatives managed to get rid of the Home Rule Bill. The Kaiser wrote in the margin: “No disaster” – his marginalia have attracted the attention of historians who have interpreted them differently, some seeing them were merely as the product of an excitable mind. But his comments on Ireland were perfectly consistent. He had grasped that the Irish crisis was a *Störkunktion*, a disruptive function, in the formulation of British foreign policy and lucidly commented on the failure to establish a solid Irish-American/German-American co-operation in order to prevent any alliance between Washington and London.

There was also some interaction between Berlin and Vienna about Ireland. In November 1908, Frank Hugh O’Donnell met the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in London again to propose a plan of alliance. Although he found Crank Hugh’s “views a little exaggerated and eccentric”, the ambassador was sufficiently impressed to send a full report to Vienna and
although marked “secret”, the latter passed it on the Germans, knowing that Berlin had an interest in Irish affairs. The matter was entrusted to Schiemann who contacted Freeman in New York. Freeman emphatically warned against having anything to do with O’Donnell, an “an impostor and a dangerous one”. A taste of the divisions among Irish nationalists.

On December 8th 1912, after receiving news from London that Britain would not tolerate the crushing of France by Germany, the Kaiser ordered his top generals and admirals, including Helmuth von Moltke and Alfred von Tirpitz, to a meeting which went down in history as the War Council. Moltke argued in favour of war, “the sooner the better” as Germany’s potential enemies were increasing in strength. Tirpitz countered by saying that “the navy would prefer to see the postponement of the great fight for one and a half years”.

The significance of the War Council has divided historians, some arguing that it was only one of the Kaiser’s theatrical swashbuckling decisions. But war did break out one and a half years later, a most striking coincidence, and the same people were still in power.

Three weeks after the War Council, the German military attaché in London wrote that British intervention on the continent would be dependent on Ireland and India being at peace.

In Ireland, the home rule crisis was no longer confined to the constitutional arena as the UVF and the Irish Volunteers were established in 1913 and home rule was due to become operational in 1914. It looked as if a civil war, with the British army squeezed between the two paramilitary forces, was a serious possibility.

In October, the German military attaché in Britain sent a report, now sadly missing, on the readiness of the UVF. It was transmitted to the Ministry of War in Berlin and then to the General Staff, the Military Cabinet and the Kaiser. In November, the German embassy in London wrote that “so long as Ireland is in the foreground of internal policy, England’s parties will be compelled to manage their foreign policy cautiously and with discretion”.

That was soon made very clear. When a German military mission arrived in Constantinople the following month, the Russians got worried as it had been their long-term ambition to control the Turkish Straits in order to enable their Black Sea Fleet in the Crimea to cross into the eastern Mediterranean. However, Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey explained to the Russian chargé d’affaires that the British would not intervene in this issue because of the difficult internal situation and the Irish crisis.

In March 1914, the so-called Curragh Incident occurred when British officers declared they would rather resign that fight against the UVF. Although the crisis was quickly settled, the French and the Russians had doubts about the reliability of the British army. In Vienna and Budapest, newspapers spoke of a crisis in British democracy and a future civil war in Ulster. The same month, the German consulate in Sydney reported that the Irish Home Rule crisis was dividing Australia.
In April, the Larne gun-running took place, when the UVF smuggled in 20,000 rifles from Austria-Hungary by way of Hamburg. Research in national and local archives could not establish whether Berlin and Vienna had a hand in it. King George V told the ambassadors of Austria-Hungary, Germany and France that he feared a civil war was on the cards in Ireland.

On June 28th, Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist. Events now gathered momentum. The so-called July Crisis developed when governments wondered who was going to do what. On July 15th, the German embassy reported that civil war in Ireland was a distinct possibility. The Kaiser wrote in the margin: “War of Thirty Years!” and his Under-Secretary of State, Arthur Zimmermann, declared that the British government did not want a full-scale war on the continent because of the Irish crisis.

On July 21st, George V opened the Buckingham Palace conference, a last ditch attempt to find an acceptable Home Rule solution for both nationalists and unionists. It ended in a miserable failure three days later. In Vienna, General Franz Conrad von Hützendorf, the Chief of Staff, noted in his diary that the conference had failed and that civil war was threatening.

On July 25th, Serbia rejected Austria-Hungary’s ultimatum, demanding humiliating terms after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. The next day, a British regiment killed four people and wounded 40 others in Dublin after a gun-running for the Irish Volunteers. So soon after the failure of the Buckingham Palace Conference, the Bachelors’ Walk massacre seemed to mark the beginning of the long-expected civil war in Ireland. The Austrian press spoke about “alarming news from Ulster” and “Belfast rebel divisions” taking up position in the city. In Luxembourg, the press announced the beginning of the civil war. This perception was wrong.

On July 26th, the Belgian minister in Berlin reported that the Germans could now wage war in “extremely favourable circumstances” and quoted the reasons: the Russian army was not yet fully reorganised, the French had problems with their artillery and “England (...) is paralysed by her internal dissensions and her Irish quarrels”.

On July 28th, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. Now, the alliance mechanism came into play and one great power after the other became involved. But what would the United Kingdom do?

In London, Herbert Asquith was passionately in love with a young woman about 40 years younger than him. In his detailed and politically indiscrete correspondence with her the Liberal Prime Minister makes clear his preoccupation with the Irish crisis and current financial problems.

His letter of the 30th of July has however not received sufficient attention in the analysis of the July Crisis. That day, he secretly met Conservative leader Andrew Bonar Law and
Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson. His political opponents persuaded him that it was now an urgent priority to focus on the events on the Balkans rather than on Home Rule. According to Asquith: “I agreed and read to them the latest telegrams from Berlin which, in my judgement, assume that the German Government are calculating upon internal weaknesses to affect our foreign policy”. Asquith was keenly aware of a correlation between the Irish and Serbian crises but he failed to act decisively. His problem was not only the Irish and financial problems but also his cabinet where a majority of ministers were opposed to an intervention on the continent. And how would Nationalist leader John Redmond react?

On August 1st, Grey told a dismayed Russian ambassador that the sending of a British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was presently not possible, “a force which the government could use for possible inner troubles in the kingdom”. In the evening, Germany declared war on Russia which had mobilised to assist Serbia against Austria-Hungary. Later, German units entered Luxembourg. They were on their way to Belgium.

On August 2nd, Grey told an equally dismayed French ambassador that the sending of the BEF was not possible right now. But later in the day, the British cabinet at last decided that if Germany violated Belgium, then the United Kingdom would declare war.

On August 3rd, Grey addressed a packed and tense House of Commons. He explained that the violation of Belgium’s neutrality and the crushing of France would not be tolerated. He then suddenly said: “One thing I would say: the one bright spot in the very dreadful situation is Ireland. The position in Ireland —and this I should like to be clearly understood abroad — is not a consideration among the things we have to take into account now.” This confirmed that the British government believed, or knew, that Berlin was relying on the paralysing Irish factor hobbling the United Kingdom’s foreign policy.

In Vienna, General Conrad wrote in his diary on the same day: “England’s attitude proves to be unfriendly and doubtful. To [our] Military Attaché [in London], it seems, however, that there is no desire for war for the time being, taking into account the Ulster crisis and the civil war.” To point out that there was no civil war in Ireland is to miss the point. What is important here is the interpretation. Surely, the British could not enter the war. It was a wrong assessment.

That there was no civil war was largely due to John Redmond’s speech, just after Grey’s. Before speaking, Redmond told his colleagues that he would suggest that the Irish Volunteers and the UVF should together defend the country against a foreign, ie German, invasion. One of his MPs agreed, another demurred, deeming that the Bachelors’ Walk massacre was too fresh in people’s minds. Moreover, only a few days beforehand Redmond had received a letter from the inspector-general of the Irish Volunteers who argued that Irish reservists ought to be instructed not to join the army unless Home Rule was immediately implemented.
Redmond chose to go ahead with his speech. The House was stunned and then erupted into a tremendous ovation. At 7pm, Germany declared war on France.

On August 4th at 8am, the German army invaded Belgium. At 11 pm, after an ultimatum had expired, a united United Kingdom declared war on Germany. On August 5th, the decision was taken to send the BEF to France. On August 12th, the British were at war with Austria-Hungary.

ATQ Stewart’s remark on German policy and the Irish crisis was vindicated. It is that crisis – and also the divisions inside Asquith’s cabinet – that explains why it took the British so long to commit themselves to support the French and the Russians. If Asquith had been at the head of a united United Kingdom from the start of the July Crisis, would he have been in a position to make a strong statement that might have impressed Berlin and Vienna and persuade them to adopt another policy? There will never be a definitive answer to this question of course.

In another counterfactual scenario, if Redmond had instead insisted on the immediate implementation of Home Rule for the whole of Ireland and fighting had been the result, would the miracle of the Marne, stopping the Germans near Paris, have happened?

General Alexander von Kluck claimed that his 1st army failed to take the French capital because of the stubborn resistance of the BEF. What if the BEF had been in Ireland, fighting against the Irish Volunteers and the UVF? After all General Sir Henry Wilson had threatened Asquith that this might well happen.

British historians have generally described Grey’s speech as brilliant. It might well have been brilliant, but the most momentous, and ultimately the most important speech was Redmond’s. How could Grey possibly speak of Ireland as a “one bright spot” after the Bachelors’ Walk Massacre? That no fighting erupted was nothing short of a miracle. Redmond’s selfless intervention had a soothing effect.

In the words of the famed British historian George Dangerfield: “Ireland’s leader, the successor of Parnell, had just rendered an enormous service to the British Empire and ruined his own career.” The nationalist leader had also rendered an enormous service to the Triple Entente.

The Irish crisis does not help in answering the question if the first World War was the product of a long process of deterioration, or if Germany was responsible for the war. Surviving archives do not reveal that German and Austro-Hungarian subversive actions took place in Ireland although it was clear that Berlin had reached the conclusion that the Irish factor was able to hamper British foreign policy. It may also have been a serious case of wishful-thinking in Berlin and Vienna.
And yet what can definitively be stated is that the Home Rule crisis played an important part in the chain of events that began in Sarajevo and led to the outbreak of war.
From brink of civil war

As the Third Home Rule Bill made its way through parliament in London, Ulster Protestants were spooked and formed the UVF to fight in the event of British MP’s electing to support the bill.

Fionala Meredith

One hundred years ago, in spring 1914, the idea of an imminent world war was far from the minds of Ulster people. The focus was much closer to home. Most of the northern province was effectively an armed camp on the verge of civil war by an insurrection against the British government; the aim, paradoxically enough, was to remain part of the United Kingdom.

Ulster’s widespread unionist and Protestant population, most densely found in Belfast and the neighbouring counties of Antrim and Down, was solemnly pledged and steadfastly organised to resist the government’s policy of home rule for Ireland. The fearful prospect united Protestant unionists across the social spectrum, from captains of industry and commerce to landowners and farmers, and from working class to upper class. Their strong sense of “Britishness” felt threatened by the rise of political and cultural nationalism, the power of the Catholic church in Ireland and the economic impact of home rule on manufacturing and trade.

Under the leadership of Sir James Craig – “the hatchet-faced heir to a distillery”, as historian Richard Killeen describes him, and “the very epitome of the new Ulster plutocrat” – and Sir Edward Carson, the ferocious Dublin lawyer, notorious for his role in the Oscar Wilde case, unionist opposition found dramatic expression in the mass signing of the Solemn League and Covenant in September 1912 (some men even used their own blood), and in the organisation of huge rallies and demonstrations. These were theatrical affairs, with speeches of impassioned resistance invoking deeply-embedded fears of plots and betrayal.

As Carson said, “Ulster sees in Irish nationalism a dark conspiracy, buttressed upon crime and incitement to outrage, maintained by ignorance and pandering to superstition.”

A highly effective propaganda campaign was also initiated. Large numbers of colourful picture postcards were produced, showing unionist resistance to home rule and an embattled determination to remain British: in one example, a stout-legged bulldog, occupying the entire province of Ulster, squares up to a distinctly mangy-looking cur, representing “home rule territory”, with the slogan “Shall we from the Union sever, by the God that made us NEVER”.

Characteristically defiant and pugnacious, the cards were designed as pictorial propaganda to mobilise unionist sentiment in Ulster and gain support in Britain for the unionist cause.
More to the point, a people’s militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was formed in January 1913, to resist home rule by force of arms if necessary. Ironically, the militaristic organisation and activities of the UVF in 1913 also inspired the formation of the nationalist Irish Volunteers and the socialist Irish Citizen Army, both inaugurated in Dublin in November 1913.

By early 1914, the dreams and political ambitions of generations of Irish nationalists were soon to be realised as the Third Home Rule Bill neared the end of its stormy passage through the House of Commons. This heavily contested parliamentary legislation had been introduced by the prime minister Herbert Asquith two years earlier, on April 11th, 1912, coincidentally the day after Titanic sailed from Belfast.

It had been delivered because the nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), led by John Redmond, held the balance of power in the Commons, and home rule was the price of Irish support for Asquith’s Liberal government against the Conservative and Unionist opposition. With the proposed future Irish Parliament invested with modest devolved powers – not unlike today’s Northern Ireland Assembly – Ireland would remain within the British Empire under the expected constitutional leadership of John Redmond as the Irish Prime Minister. In a major concession to Ulster unionists an exclusion opt-out for a period of six years was offered, but rejected by Carson who regarded it merely as “a stay of execution”.

Meanwhile other important figures were watching. The German Kaiser was known to be interested in the Ulster crisis, and the unionists had already sent out exploratory feelers in that direction, with Craig even floating the notion that Germany would be favoured over “the rule of John Redmond, Patrick Ford and the Molly Maguires”.

Historian ATQ Stewart notes that tongues were set wagging in August 1913 when Carson met the Kaiser at a lunch party in Homburg. Apparently the German emperor confided that he would have liked to go to Ireland, but his grandmother, Queen Victoria, had not let him. He added, with a smile: “perhaps she thought I wanted to take the little place”. “I think, sir, you are well out of it,” Carson replied, to laughter.

But when the Kaiser asked about Ulster, Carson changed the subject. Stewart adds that a month after the Kaiser’s meeting with Carson, the German strategist General von Bernhardt wrote an article for the Berlin Post entitled “Ireland, England and Germany” in which he declared that “it is not without interest to know that if it ever comes to war with England, Germany will have allies in the enemy’s camp, who in given circumstances are resolved to bargain, and at any rate will constitute a grave anxiety for England, and perhaps tie fast a portion of the English troops.”

According to Stewart, the strangest episode of all was the visit, on the very eve of the war, which the Counsellor at the German Embassy in London, Richard von Kühlmann, was alleged to have made to Belfast, on July 12th, 1914. It was rumoured that he had visited Ulster
incognito to see how things were for himself. After the war, Kühlmann denied ever having been in Ireland in his life.

The Ulster crisis intensified when the UVF was equipped with 25,000 German rifles after an unhindered gun-running operation to land weapons and ammunition at the Ulster ports of Larne, Bangor and Donaghadee on April 24th and 25th, 1914. “I am glad that the North has ‘begun’,” Patrick Pearse wrote. “I am glad that the Orangemen have armed, for it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands . . . I should like to see any and everybody of Irish citizens armed. We must accustom ourselves to the thoughts of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms.”

A month earlier, on March 20th, the “Curragh mutiny” had revealed the unwillingness of British army officers to move against Ulster. With the meeting of an Ulster Provisional Government in Belfast on July 10th, 1914, the armed defiance of a separatist Ulster was now the greatest political and constitutional crisis any British government had faced for more than 200 years. Ulster militarisation – with its drilling, public reviews and threats of violent resistance – was firmly in the driving seat of democratic politics, and it was seen to be working.

In desperation, a conference to address the whole Irish and Ulster problem was held at Buckingham Palace from July 21st to 24th, but failed to agree on the terms of Ulster’s exclusion from home rule.

By the very last days of July 1914, it seemed certain that war would break out in Ulster. Stewart says that the UVF was completely ready for the coup d’etat and waited only for Carson to telegraph “go ahead” or “hold back in the meantime”. On July 29th, Craig wrote to him: “you may take it that immediately you signify by the pre-arranged code that we are to go ahead, everything prepared will be carries out to the letter unless in the meantime you suggest any modification. All difficulties have been overcome and we are in a very strong position.”

Detailed arrangements had been made for women and children to be evacuated to England and Scotland before hostilities broke out, for anticipated casualties once the fighting did begin, and even for a new currency for the rebel government.

Yet unfolding events in Europe were at last eclipsing the internal domestic problems of Britain and Ireland. Foreign affairs and the threats posed by continental mobilisation took centre stage. Winston Churchill recalled that “the parishes of Fermanagh and Tyrone faded back into the mists and squalls of Ireland, and a strange light began immediately, but by perceptible gradations, to fall and grow upon the map of Europe.”

Following the assassination of the heir to the Hapsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie by pro-Serb nationalists in Sarajevo on June 28th, Austria-Hungary, with
the backing of Germany, declared war on Serbia on July 28th. With frightening speed, the final countdown to the first World War began.

On August 1st, Germany declared war on Russia which supported Serbia. On August 2nd, Germany invaded Luxembourg and the next day invaded Belgium in order to mount an attack on France, simultaneously declaring war on France. It was the invasion of Belgium that triggered Britain’s declaration of war on Germany, following a disregarded ultimatum, on August 4th, 1914.

“On that sunny August bank holiday weekend when the world fell to pieces,” writes Stewart, “Carson and other members of the Opposition were the guests of Sir Edward Goulding at Wargrave, overlooking the Thames. There Captain Spender came to seek him . . . on the urging of his friends in the Committee of Imperial Defence, to get a decision on the future of the UVF. Carson at once stated that ‘a large body of Ulster Volunteers will be willing and ready to give their services for Home Defence and many will be willing and ready to serve anywhere they are required’.”

The next day, Redmond declared that “if it is allowed to us, in comradeship with our brethren of the north, we will ourselves defend the coasts of our country”.

A few days later, Kitchener, the new war minister, sent for Carson and Craig, asking them “surely you are not going to hold out for Tyrone and Fermanagh?” A needled Carson responded, “you’re a damned clever fellow telling me what I ought to be doing”. Yet the two unionist leaders, following another meeting with Kitchener, offered him 35,000 volunteers. Stewart relates that, on leaving the War Office, Craig – now a chief recruiting officer for the Ulster area – took a taxi to Moss Brothers, a firm which had previously supplied UVF equipment, and ordered 10,000 complete uniforms. By the time Carson announced in Belfast that an Ulster Division would be formed from the UVF, many young men, impatient with waiting, had already enlisted.

During the second week of the war, on September 18th, 1914, the Third Home Rule Bill was finally enacted in Parliament. But it was also suspended for the duration of the war, with the intractable opposition of Ulster still unresolved.

“It is impossible for us to recreate the midsummer of 1914 as contemporaries saw it,” writes Richard Killeen. “We know that they stood at the volcano’s edge. The war . . . transformed everything.” It certainly brought an unexpected unity, of sorts, to Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists, who threw in their lot with the British forces in defence of Belgium and other small nations. Redmond and Carson pledged support to the war effort. Thousands of volunteers, unionist and nationalist, north and south, joined the colours and served on land and sea and in the air.

In Ireland there had been a long tradition of British army service and now additional battalions of Irish infantry were formed into divisions of Kitchener’s New Army. In the north,
UVF members formed the backbone of the 36th (Ulster) Division, while National Volunteers from across Ireland, including nationalists in Ulster, joined the 16th (Irish) Division. Both divisions were to serve with great distinction and sacrifice at the Somme and other Western Front battles, including Messines in 1917, where the 16th and 36th fought side by side with each other. By the war’s end, over 30,000 soldiers from Ireland had lost their lives.

Totally unforeseen in 1914, the Great War, of which the 1916 Rising was an integral part, led to political oblivion for John Redmond’s constitutional nationalist party and a revolutionary change in the whole course of Irish history. Ultimately, the first World War got Carson off a sharp political hook, and at the same time resulted in the skewering of Redmond’s home rule ambitions.
A duty to the French?

During the long month of July the British public enjoyed summer, listening occasionally to ever more strident tones from the Continent. For a while, however, they mostly did not choose to do so.

Mark Hennessey

Two days after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Asquith stood in the Commons, describing the killings as one of “those incredible crimes which almost make us despair of the progress of mankind”.

The Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph, who had ruled for 70 years, had “to the human eye” suffered “such an unmerited succession of dark and wounding experiences,” declared Asquith. “He and his people have always been our friends,” he said, “We respectfully tender to him and to the great family of nations of which he is the venerable and venerated head, our heartfelt and our most affectionate sympathy,” the prime minister went on.

The words filled the needs of diplomatic form, and, on the day, reflected public sympathy in Britain – such as it was – that it was an affront that an heir to a throne, any throne, should have been felled by an assassin’s bullet, even if it was not something that involved them.

Privately, however, Asquith was absorbed more by the home rule crisis in Ireland, but also by his new mistress, Venetia Stanley, to whom he was then writing passionate letters daily – ones that detailed his views on Ireland, his thoughts on her pet penguin and his longing to see her.

Asquith was as unconcerned as many others that events in the Balkans – the latest in a series of outbreaks there since the beginning of the century – might threaten Britain’s golden years. The assassinations were next mentioned in his diary on July 24th. In the sunshine-filled days of late June 1914 – days that would later be more filled with sunshine in the memories of those who lived through the horrors of the years to come, many others shared Asquith’s lack of interest.

In the Foreign Office, news of the killing of the archduke and his wife was delivered by a page-boy, a telegram on a silver salver, to the desk of its most senior official, Arthur Nicholson. The latter was also unconcerned. Writing a week later to Britain’s ambassador in Berlin he confidently declared that apart from Albania “we have no very urgent and pressing question to occupy us in the rest of Europe”.

So much of the story of the 37 days between peace and war centre on the Liberal Edward Grey, who had served as Foreign Secretary since 1905, a lonely widower, happiest when
standing on the banks of the Itchen in Hampshire with a fly-rod in his hand, or bird-watching. History today remembers the Northumbrian Grey for his sad comment, as he looked out St James’ Park as evening shadows fell one evening in early August: “The lights are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”

But he has been blamed for failing to prevent it, too. For nearly a decade, he had run the Foreign Office, believing that the balance of power in Europe had to be maintained at all costs – and that only Britain could do it. The policy had brought him ever closer to the French, long-time enemies. Indeed, by the Agadir crisis of 1911 in Morocco many of his fellow Liberals in the Cabinet began to be concerned about the depth of ties when it emerged that military staff talks had taken place.

The Balkans had done much to burnish Grey’s international reputation after he organised an international conference in 1913 after Bulgaria, unhappy with its share of the spoils from the First Balkan War, started a second.

During feverish weeks a year later, Grey tried to organise a second meeting of the Great Powers, but, this time, it was too late because this time Vienna – emboldened by Kaiser Wilhelm’s “blank cheque” guarantee of support – wanted to crush the Serbs, not negotiate.

During the long month of July, the British public enjoyed summer, listening occasionally, to ever more strident tones from the Continent. Mostly, however, they did not choose to do so.

Even senior figures misread the signals. Chancellor of the Exchequer Lloyd George later claimed that he had known immediately he had seen the telegram carrying news of Franz Ferdinand’s assassination that it “meant war”. But his words at the time contradicted his later claims to far-sightedness – that month the Welshman, keen to spend money on welfare changes rather than guns, told MPs that he hoped Britain’s naval budget could fall because of better relations with Berlin.

On July 26th, Grey left for his Hampshire cottage. He managed a few hours on the banks of the Itchen rod in hand. There, he made an entry in his diary – the last one before the outbreak of war, indeed, the last one of that year: “Caught three fish and put back six between 3/4lb and 1lb.” By Sunday afternoon, he was back in Whitehall, clear in his mind Britain could not, would not, go to war because Austria had attacked Serbia. Not even if the Austrians and the Russians met on the battlefield.

Defending France, however, was a different matter. Grey had placed himself in a quandary. He had refused to turn an entente into a formal treaty, yet had never fully brought his cabinet colleagues into how deep the bonds with Paris had already become.

In the following days, Sir Henry Newbolt, the poet best known for Vitaī Lampada which urged a generation of Edwardian youth to “Play up! play up! and play the game!”, travelled
to St Olave Grammar School in Bermondsey. The unveiling of a portrait of the great man was to have been the day’s centrepiece. But the portrait had been sent to Germany for prints to be made and the Berlin firm had won unexpected contracts, war work, as it turned out, and did not return it in time.

Handing out the prizes, Newbolt struck an odd tone in the minds of students and parents. All were looking forward to the summer holidays stretching ahead, rather than debating politics and war. Offering no congratulations, Newbolt said: “When you are engaged – as you may be in a few days – in a great world-shaking war, your prizes will appear very little things.” *

By 1919, 191 Olavians would have died in Flanders’ fields, and elsewhere.

Between July 21st and August 2nd British ministers debated, and disagreed about what to do. Asquith feared that half his ministers would quit – and his government fall – if they were faced with a demand for war on foot of a German attack on France.

If the situation had stayed as it then was, Britain would probably have still gone to war that August, but it would have been with Asquith, Winston Churchill and Grey joining with the Conservatives to take the decision for war. But Germany’s decision to attack France through Belgium changed everything. Public opinion was woken from its summer slumber to rise behind “little Belgium”. On August 3rd the Cabinet agreed an ultimatum requiring German withdrawal.

The Cabinet’s preoccupations with Ireland that month eased on July 30th, when the Ulster crisis was averting with both sides in the Irish debate proposing that the Home Rule Bill should be postponed until the European crisis was over. Ireland, said Grey, rather to his own surprise, had become “the one bright spot in this dark scene”, while Asquith believed that the Ulster deal mean that Britain “would now be able to speak and to act with the authority of an undivided nation”.

On August 3rd, Grey walked the short distance from the Foreign Office on Whitehall for his three o’clock speech feeling strangely calm, he recalled later. The minutes ahead would form the defining moment of his life, he knew, but he believed he had done everything possible to avoid bloodshed. The House of Commons dealt briskly with a number of items, including a 29-word mention of the County Officers and Courts (Ireland) Act, before it settled down to hear the Foreign Secretary.

It was not a great speech, but it was persuasive. Grey had decided not to read out the telegrams from German chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg believing that to read them “ought to stir indignation and the House ought to come to its decisions on grounds of weight, not passion,” he wrote later. He did not, he told MPs, want them to focus on “where the blame seems to us to lie, which Powers were most in favour of peace, which were most disposed to risk or endanger peace.”
Instead, he wanted them to decide based on “British interests, British honour, and British obligations, free from all passion as to why peace has not been preserved”.

Lord Hugh Cecil, who watched the sitting from the gallery above, dissected Grey’s speech minutely, noting “its admirable arrangement, its perfect taste and the extraordinary dexterity with which it deal with the weak spot in his argument” – the scale of London’s obligations to the French. Here, Cecil observed, “he changed to a note of appeal to the individual conscience, thereby disarming criticism in the one matter where he was weak, without any departure real or apparent from perfect sincerity”.

So little had been done to prepare the ground for war that Grey had to start almost from the beginning, detailing a decade-old web of diplomacy – one where the Germans demanded respect, the French revenge, while the British sought to protect the hegemony they enjoyed.

“I have assured the House – and the prime minister has assured the House more than once – that if any crisis such as this arose, we should come before the House of Commons and be able to say to the House that it was free to decide what the British attitude should be, that we would have no secret engagement which we should spring upon the House, and tell the House that, because we had entered into that engagement, there was an obligation of honour upon the country,” he declared.

A 1912 deal with the French – under which the latter moved its fleet into the Mediterranean, while the Royal Navy undertook to protect French ports from aggression – did not tie London’s hand, he insisted.

By then, however, the Germans had demanded that Belgium offered its troops unhindered passage into France – “whatever may have been offered to (Belgium) in return, her independence is gone if that holds. If her independence goes, the independence of Holland will follow,” he went on, echoing Gladstone’s warning against “the unmeasured aggrandisement of any Power” on the Continent.

“We are going to suffer, I am afraid, terribly in this war whether we are in it or whether we stand aside,” he said. Standing aside was not an option: “I do not believe for a moment, that at the end of this war, even if we stood aside and remained aside, we should be in a position, a material position, to use our force decisively to undo what had happened in the course of the war, to prevent the whole of the west of Europe opposite to us – if that had been the result of the war – falling under the domination of a single Power, and I am quite sure that our moral position would be such as to have lost us all respect.”

By its end, Asquith’s wife, Margot, wrote later, the House erupted into “a hurricane of applause”, while Asquith himself noted that Grey had spoken so well “so much so that our extreme peace-lovers were for the moment reduced to silence”.
Returning on foot to the Foreign Office, news of Grey’s triumph in the Commons had preceded him. There, officials rushed forward to congratulate him. He remained silent. Then, he slammed his fist down on the table and cried, “I hate war, I hate war.”

However, it was too late. In Felixstowe, Rifle Brigade sentries stood guard, still believing that they were on a practice mobilisation, not hours away from war. The sentry-duty had been mind-numbingly boring, broken only by the tale of a sentry who had shot a seal neatly through the head, but had been too embarrassed to own up to it.

By early morning, the sentries spotted a launch coming ashore from *HMS Amphion*, from which a naval officer hurried to the battalion commander. “Sir, I have the honour to report that as from 11 o’clock, a state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany,” he declared, following a crisp salute.
Ramsey McDonald met Keir Hardie on the terrace of the House of Commons, looking out on to the river Thames, shortly after he had come back from his South Wales constituency in August 1914. “He was a crushed man, and, sitting in the sun on the terrace, he seemed to be looking out on blank desolation. From that he never recovered,” remembered McDonald.

Hardie had believed workers across Europe would not heed the calls for war in the weeks before it, only to see his dreams dashed. He had been no more far-sighted than anyone else about the dangers posed by the Sarajevo assassinations, believing it to be a local affair.

Instead, in his columns in the local Merthyr Pioneer that summer, he concentrated, like nearly everyone else, on the crisis in Ireland and the threat of civil war there.

On August 6th, two days after Britain had declared war on Germany, Hardie had returned to Aberdare, the least friendly part of his constituency, for a public meeting. Even still, the hostility shocked him – he frequently struggled to be heard against “the tremendous roar of thousands of voices in the remainder of the hall”, noted the local paper.

“Surely we are nearer in thought and feeling to Germany than we are to Russia,” he said in near despair, before he was drowned out by repeated renditions of Rule Britannia. The Scottish-born trade unionist and politician was escorted back to the home of a supporter where he was staying by a disorderly crowd shouting “Turn the German out!”

In the House of Commons, Hardie was called a coward after he argued that foreign secretary Edward Grey should have discussed last-minute German peace proposals. He discounted the worst of the atrocity stories coming from Belgium – bodies being melted down for fat, or raped nuns being tied to the clappers of the bells in their convents.

In January 1915, he suffered a stroke. Writing to friends in Merthyr in March he said he felt better on a diet of raw cabbage and onions, adding jokingly: “If you never want to die start out on that.”

In a letter in July to the suffragette campaigner Sylvia Pankhurst, Hardie said he expected in “about a week to be gone from here with no more mind control than when I came”. Poignantly for a man who had written millions of words during his career, Hardie, his brain damaged by the stroke, had mis-spelt her Christian name as “Sylphia”.

He died in September 1915, his passing largely ignored in a country now coping with the full horrors of the war that he had campaigned against. No words of tribute were made in the
House of Commons, even though he had been an MP for 18 years, while *The Times* of London offered a brief obituary.

“The bitter passions which he aroused in his life were in great measure forgotten before his death,” it said, arguing that he had lost the ear of the moderate working class.

However, his friends remembered. In its obituary, as warm as the obituary in *The Times* was grudging, the *Merthyr Pioneer* said: “The Member for Humanity has resigned his seat.”
Profile: Sir Edward Grey

Mark Hennessey

In the years after the first World War, Sir Edward Grey, by now failing in sight, stayed awake at night in his cottage on the banks of Itchen chalk river in Hampshire, examining the actions he took in the years before July 2014.

Few men mattered more in the British government in the days, months and years before the first World War began than Grey, by then foreign secretary for nearly a decade. In the eyes of some, he is the one who could have stopped the headlong rush to war if he had made clear to Berlin the circumstances under which Britain would go to war.

For a decade, he had brought London ever closer to Paris. However, he wanted to bridle the French, still stung by the humiliation received at the hands of the Prussians 40 years earlier. The strategy in Grey’s mind was to work two ways. The French should always feel an element of doubt about London’s intentions in a bid to ensure that they did not become too bullish in their dealings with the Germans.

In turn, Berlin should not be made to feel that Britain’s ties to Paris were so intimate that they ruled out the possibility of an Anglo-German understanding – which had once been seen as an inevitability.

Berlin, of course, viewed life differently, particularly after Grey piloted an Anglo-Russian agreement through in 1907, one that was deeply unpopular in some quarters in Britain.

If Grey had boxed himself in by the time Sarajevo came, and he had, then it is equally true that the British cabinet was unclear about the messages it should send to Vienna and Berlin.

Three years before, during the Agadir Crisis, London had made it clear it would not remain indifferent to Berlin’s manoeuvres in Morocco, though Lloyd George, rather than Grey, put it into words.

Even if the policy worked, it alarmed many on the Liberal benches – leaving Grey facing more criticism than he had ever done before during his time in the Foreign Office.

Haunted by the carnage caused, Grey encouraged President Woodrow Wilson to make concessions in order to get US Senate backing for the League of Nations. Equally, he pressed for the publication of diplomatic papers from the days leading up to the outbreak of war. In the end, he published his own account his time in office, Twenty Five Years.

In 1922, he married for a second time, to Pamela Wyndham, the widow of Lord Glenconner – though the two had written frequent letters to each other since shortly after his wife had died 15 years earlier.
In 1927, Grey, who was once photographed with a robin perched on his hat, wrote a highly-regarded book on ornithology, *The Charm of Birds*. Into it, Grey poured his passion for nature in chapters titled as “January: Early Song”, though he modestly wrote in the preface that it would “have no scientific value”.

His wife died shortly afterwards. So, too, did his brother, the second of his line to die violently in Africa – killed by a buffalo. Through it all, Grey maintained, in the eyes of visitors, a certain dignity.
An appetite for war

A peaceful graveyard and Irish soldiers’ graves ... how Germany wrote a “blank cheque” to Austria-Hungary for its revenge on the Serbs and the corner of a German field that is forever Irish.

Derek Scally

A field of lush grass and a 3m-high Celtic high-cross in the German countryside are the last clues to a sad chapter of Irish history. A century ago this field outside Limburg, near Frankfurt, was the site of a camp for 10,000 prisoners of war, including 2,200 Irish officers in the British army.

The Irish men captured by German forces in the opening months of the first World War were collected here at the request of diplomat and revolutionary Roger Casement. He travelled to Berlin in October 1914 and found German officials were agreeable to assisting in his Irish liberation struggle in the hope of destabilising the British empire.

Key to Casement’s mission to Germany was establishing an “Irish Brigade”, drawing recruits from the Limburg camp. He travelled at least twice to the camp but sceptical Irish prisoners booed him out and Casement secured only 56 conscripts.

In the Limburg town archive, silvery images show how the empty field outside town was once a sprawling camp with half-timbered, single-storey barracks, a tidy hospital and even an ornate chapel.

Other propaganda images in a crumbling photo album show smiling men exercising or taking disinfection showers. A striking picture shows a coffin being carried to its grave with full military honours as a brass band plays.

That was the scene the day before Christmas eve in 1914 at the funeral of Fredrick Reilly. The 50-year-old Irish officer in the British army succumbed, records indicate, to a lung infection.

Before the war ended in 1918, at least 44 more Irish prisoners would die in the Limburg camp. All were buried with full military honours by their German captors. Today, a Fredrick Reilly Strasse overlooking the camp remembers its first Irish casualty. “It was a completely different attitude to war that’s hard for us to fathom today,” says local man Bernd Eufinger. “In the war a century ago, death ended the enmity.”

The respect shown to the Irish dead didn’t end there. On May 25th 1917, Irish prisoners in the Limburg camp were allowed to erect a Celtic cross in the graveyard to honour their fallen comrades. Financed by the prisoners and created by a German stonemason the
Nassauische Bote, a local paper, praised its “glorious” depiction of St Patrick. The cross was a worthy memorial both to the fallen soldiers and of British colonial oppression, the report said before concluding: “May the hour of liberation beckon soon for the Irish people.”

In a yellowing school chronicle, in a hardbacked ledger, a Limburg school teacher also records the unveiling of the cross. “The dog (on the cross) is the emblem of alertness and looks to the future,” he wrote in a fine copperplate script. “The Irish people want to remain alert for the suitable moment for their liberation from long suffering.”

For town archivist Christoph Waldecker, these reports about the camp and its Irish internees indicate the prominent role both played in the area. “Having the camp has kept the first World War alive for people here, more so than elsewhere in Germany,” he said.

The lead-up to war

For most Germans the first World War is many worlds away. Reaching pre-1914 Germany is a reverse obstacle of historical hurdles: German division and unification; the chill of the Cold War; the shadow of the Third Reich and the humiliating chaos of the Weimar Republic. Only then do you reach the moustached, bombastic figure of Kaiser Wilhelm II, the Prussian king and unpredictable German emperor.

His Germany was a young imperial power, a collection of kingdoms united under Prussian rule in 1871 following the victory over France, the despised Erbfeind, or “hereditary enemy”.

This German Reich was a place of rapid industrialisation, technical progress and grinding poverty – overseen and exploited by an apathetic industrial class and a self-serving military elite.

Late to the table of world powers, this Germany felt pressure to justify a club membership it feared could be easily revoked. Behind the propaganda image of Kaiser Bill, the strings were pulled by a clique of generals, paranoid about being trapped between the military allies of France and Russia.

This overriding concern prompted Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Germany’s military chief of staff, to devise, in 1905, his eponymous war strategy. Germany could best secure its status in Europe, he argued, first by defeating France on the western front before, if required, shifting German troops quickly to face down Russia in the east.

His deputy, Friedrich von Bernhardi, in the 1912 book Germany and the next war, portrayed war as a biological necessity and the basis for a healthy human development. In short, military conflict was an unavoidable obligation for the new German Reich. Such views coloured opinion among Germany’s national conservative elite and dominated the middle-class media.
In the lead-up to 1914, with fears of Russian militarisation driving Germany’s own arms build-up, the Schlieffen plan was adopted and modified by his successor as chief military strategist, Helmuth von Moltke.

He shared a common view that it would be better to take on Russia before it became too strong. Incoming foreign intelligence was framed accordingly for the Kaiser, such as news on April 1914, from German spies in London, that the British had signed a navy agreement with Russia. This, the generals argued, was proof that the wheels of war had been set in motion.

Two months later, Kaiser Wilhelm was shocked by the assassination of the Austrian heir apparent, who he had met just a fortnight previously. For his generals it was a welcome opportunity to test the waters with Russia.

Would the tsar step in to assist his traditional Serbian allies if Vienna moved on Belgrade? If so, would France and Britain assist Russia or decide Serbia was not worth the risk of a wider conflict?

Most German historians see imperial Berlin’s war-guilt here, egging on Vienna in July to see how Russia would react, like a child encouraging another to set the curtains alight to see if they burn.

For them, the spark was Kaiser Wilhelm’s “blank cheque” of July 5th, 1914, promising to “stand by Austria-Hungary, as is required by the obligations of his alliance and of his ancient friendship” – a reference to the alliance with the Danube monarchy dating back to 1879.

For the next month, Berlin’s pursued a mixture of half-hearted and even duplicitous diplomacy, confusing other European powers about Germany’s intentions. Records suggest even the kaiser was confused. In early July he noted in his diary that it was “now or never . . . the Serbs need to be sorted out”; weeks later, seized by doubt, advisers reported Wilhelm delivered “confused speeches that make clear he doesn’t want a war anymore”. He urged Vienna to go easy on Serbia but failed to withdraw his blank cheque offering support.

When Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 29th, Russia mobilised a day later. After a reportedly tearful Kaiser signed the declaration of war on August 1st, he had little to say on military strategy: von Moltke activated his war plan.

Germany’s declaration of war was portrayed at home as a defensive step against Russian aggression and helped unite Berlin’s political parties behind the leadership.

On August 4th the Social Democrats (SPD) vowed they would “not let down the fatherland in its hour of need” and backed crucial loans to fund the war effort – to the disgust of SPD voters who, a month earlier, had protested in their millions against “criminal warmongers” in Berlin.
The strategic shortcomings of von Moltke’s plan soon became apparent. He had not reckoned with Britain entering the war to support Belgium, nor had he anticipated strong Belgian resistance to the marching of his troops to France.

With hopes dashed of a quick victory over France and the Russians mobilising faster than Berlin anticipated, Germany now faced the very two-front war it had feared. The war deviated dangerously from his plan and, in September 1914, von Moltke suffered a nervous breakdown and was removed.

The nerve of the German populace was similarly unstable. Behind the cheering propaganda images of soldiers marching to war, diaries of ordinary people reveal anxiety and doubt from the outset.

Artist Käthe Kollwitz reproached herself in her diary for letting her under-age son go to war: “What will the fatherland and the kaiser do when you’re all dead?”

Germany’s cultural elite was starkly divided. Heinrich Mann watched as the serialisation of his novel Der Untertan (The Subject) was halted, so vicious was his satire of Prussian militarism. His brother Thomas, meanwhile, supported the Kaiser’s effort to destroy the “depraved police state” of Tsarist Russia.

The mood of Germany’s war supporters darkened within weeks as the scale of the war unleashed became clear. By September German newspapers apologised to readers for no longer being unable to reprint in full the endless lists naming fallen soldiers.

By October 1914 a depressed Kaiser Wilhelm suggested the only option was for Germans to “go down with dignity”. After Germany’s defeat four years later, he took his own advice – albeit with considerably less dignity – and abdicated. The prisoner of war camp in Limburg survived both conflicts until post-war shortages of building materials saw the barracks dismantled to house German refugees. The remains of the fallen Irish soldiers were reinterred near Kassel in the 1960s and only the sandstone cross has remained.

Uniquely in Europe, Limburg locals are rightly proud of the massive structure. A poppy wreath is laid every Remembrance Sunday and, seven years ago, they restored the crumbling stone and added a bronze plaque listing the names of all Irish men once buried here.

Experiencing first-hand the love, care and respect with which the graveyard is maintained by Limburg volunteers is deeply humbling. “Young people today have everything ahead of them but these men died so young and not even for their own country,” said local woman Annegret Moth, choking back tears. “Every one of these names is important.”

Those important people lay here during those decades when it was a taboo to speak the names of Irish soldiers who died serving the British crown. Here in Limburg they were always remembered: John Nolan, 21; William Keane, 22; Patrick Kearns, 25; and 42 others.
Almost a century on, the Celtic cross is a small but important piece of an appalling wartime puzzle in a peaceful graveyard of terrible beauty. Breaking the silence, a bird chirps overhead then flies away.
Profile: Kaiser Wilhelm II

Derek Scally

The visage of Kaiser Wilhelm II – a steely gaze between a pointed moustache and spiked, Pickelhaube helmet – is one of the most potent images of the first World War. Yet this image of the King of Prussia and German emperor steering the war effort with an absolute, iron will is at odds with the reality of 1914 Berlin.

After 26 years on the throne Kaiser Wilhelm was, on the eve of war, more tolerated than feared by the Berlin government and German generals. They kept up the pretence that the kaiser was in charge long after they had tired of his dilettante diplomacy and violent mood swings. The latter biographers attribute to an inferiority complex, fed by a withered left arm and a stormy relationship with his mother, eldest daughter of Queen Victoria.

As legendary as his outbursts was the kaiser’s poor political judgment. On ascending the throne in 1888 he dismissed his political mentor, iron chancellor Otto von Bismarck, and broke with his stability-oriented foreign policy. By 1914 the kaiser’s own “new course” foreign policy had, bar its alliance with an enfeebled Austria-Hungary, left the German Reich isolated in Europe. Six years earlier an infamous Daily Telegraph interview had triggered a state crisis, undermined his policy-making credibility and fed his neurotic inferiority complex towards the British. To prevent further outbursts – and ensure they got the desired decision – the German government fed the German monarch only carefully filtered information.

And so the isolated emperor learned of Vienna’s ultimatum to Serbia – not from his own government – but from a Norwegian newspaper while cruising aboard his imperial yacht.

Despite his limited political influence, Wilhelm succeeded in stoking up the July crisis. A week after the Sarajevo assassinations, an enraged Wilhelm – without consulting his government – assured the Austrian ambassador that Vienna could count on Berlin’s full support to deal with Serbia as it felt best. The delighted ambassador added in his dispatch: “His majesty . . . said he would regret if we didn’t take advantage of this fortuitous moment.”

It was a fateful move, without government consultation and against the old advice of Bismarck, that military intrigues in the Balkans were “not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier”. Just two years previously, Wilhelm himself had insisted that “no one of good conscience” would allow the German empire be caught up in Austria-Hungary’s struggle for survival. Tinkering with the unstable Balkan region would, he said in 1912, “put the existence of Germany up for grabs”.

After firing up the July crisis, sealing his reputation as a warmonger, Kaiser Wilhelm performed one final pirouette: telling a cheering crowd from his Berlin balcony on July 31st how Germany accepted hesitatingly the sword of war “pressed into its hand”.

“If our neighbours don’t grant us peace,” he added, “then let us hope and wish that our good German sword emerges victorious from the struggle.”

Wishful thinking: he fled Berlin in 1918, ending centuries of rule by the Hohenzollern dynasty, and died in exile in the Netherlands in 1941.
Profile: Helmuth von Moltke

Derek Scally

Helmuth von Moltke’s German army fought for four years. The commander of the armed forces, a key figure in Berlin’s decision to go to war, lasted six weeks.

On August 1st, 1914, the senior general predicted correctly that the war Germany had just entered “will expand to a world war. . . how it will end, no one knows”.

It ended for Moltke with a nervous breakdown on September 14th after neutral Belgium had the audacity to resist the invading German army, slowing its advance on France and throwing the general’s war plan into disarray.

Despite his sensitive disposition, von Moltke had been calling for a preventative war with Britain, France and Russia since at least 1912. He served as a lieutenant in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 and was nephew of Helmuth von Moltke the elder, a legendary field marshall, military strategist and, for three decades, chief-of-staff of the Prussian armed forces.

On his uncle’s death, von Moltke the younger became aide-de-camp to Wilhelm II, entering the young emperor’s inner circle. This relationship and his famous name, critics suggested, were behind the rise through the military ranks more than strategic talent. As army chief-of-staff from 1906, he tinkered with the so-called Schlieffen plan, named after his predecessor, which proposed a two-front war to reorder Europe along German lines: marching west to conquer France quickly before tackling Russia to the east.

With that in mind von Moltke co-authored a pamphlet in December 1912 demanding an increase in military spending and greater army recruitment. His wishes were granted and, 18 months later, he even got his war.

Shortly before the outbreak of hostilities the Kaiser was informed that Britain had offered to remain neutral if France was not attacked. The Kaiser demanded that western front forces be pulled back and concentrate on the eastern front against Russia, but von Moltke refused saying it would cause chaos. When the British embassy in Berlin denied the report, the Schlieffen plan went into effect despite von Moltke’s reported doubts about it.

His doubts of a swift victory over France were confirmed in the first battle of the Marne. Even before it ended in defeat for the Germans, halting their advance westward, von Moltke announced: “Majesty, we have lost the war!” Two days later he ordered a retreat and, on September 14th, he suffered a nervous collapse.
For decades military historians have debated his order to retreat: one camp believes the move cost Germany the war, another say it prevented the army being surrounded and annihilated.

With morbid fascination for war, von Moltke predicted in 1914 the conflict he had just helped trigger would cause the “mutual laceration” of European states and “destroy the culture of almost all of Europe for centuries to come”.

He didn’t live to see if his prediction would come true, dying a broken man in 1916.
Unlike Britain, there is no established tradition in Berlin of remembering the conflict, nor is it ever referred to as the “Great War”. However the centenary has seen the country make up for lost time with a flood of books, exhibitions and documentaries that challenge long-held assumptions about the conflict.

The greatest phenomenon so far has been the runaway success of Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers*. It remains a bestseller after weeks atop Germany’s non-fiction charts last autumn. His thesis, that all of Europe’s powers – not just Germany – carry blame for the war has triggered a heated historians’ dispute.

It is a reversal of the original first World War dispute of the 1960s when historian Fritz Fisher argued that there was an obvious continuity between the war goals in 1914 and 1939: German world dominance. He framed the first World War as a warm-up act for the second and put blame for both squarely at the door of Berlin. By doing so he shattered West Germany’s post-war complacency towards the Nazi era as a regrettable, unprecedented historical mishap.

Fischer’s arguments have been challenged by other German historians in the subsequent decades but *The Sleepwalkers* has lobbed a grenade into the debate and younger German historians have applauded Clark’s portrayal of a pan-European crisis with shared guilt.

“I find it very convincing,” said Sönke Neitzel, a leading military historian to *Der Spiegel*. “Everyone had the chance to prevent an escalation but no one did.”

Older historians are more wary, with the milder critics suggesting Prof Clark’s book plays down Germany’s role in the July crisis. Many mainstream German historians argue that neither Germany nor Austria wanted a big European war but, motivated by false assumptions, decided to risk it anyway.

“In that sense [Germany’s] Reich leadership carry clearly the main blame for the outbreak of the first World War,” writes Prof Oliver Janz of Berlin’s Free University in his book 14.

The older the historian, the harsher the attacks on Prof Clark. Some have gone so far as to accuse him of pandering to a nationalist minority in Germany, for whom a draw on war guilt is as good as a German acquittal. In a lively interview with *Der Spiegel* Clark conceded that, had it not been for Berlin’s encouragement of Vienna, the July crisis might have ended differently. But he insisted that the notion of sole German guilt for the first World War is as
misleading as 1920s claims of German innocence, common after the shock of the Versailles Treaty.

The historians’ dispute came to a head in Berlin recently. In the baroque German Historical Museum – a former arsenal and later museum to Germany’s military might – Clark found himself under fire from Prof Gerd Krumeich, a German specialist on the first World War.

Krumeich suggested the secret of Clark’s *Sleepwalker* success was its insinuation that German nationalism and imperialism before 1914 was in no way more aggressive than others. “Clearly we had a longing for a more ideal German history,” said Krumeich sarcastically, “and Christopher Clark has satisfied this longing with bravura.”

The event’s host, German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, noted diplomatically that Clark “hadn’t encountered just support” in Germany for his arguments. Skirting around his own opinion of *The Sleepwalkers* thesis, Mr Steinmeier praised the Australian historian for making a well-timed distinction between good and bad diplomacy.

With an eye on Ukraine, Mr Steinmeier said: “It does make a difference whether we make an effort at dialogue or break off contact, whether we allow ourselves to be driven by the desire for escalation in the hope short-term gain – or whether we take the arduous path of de-escalation.”

As Germany’s historians’ dispute rolls on it has made an important contribution to this centenary year by dragging the memory of the first World War out from under the shadow of the second.
France holds its fire in the blame game

For fear of reviving old hostilities, one French version of responsibility for it has the war ‘appearing as a sort of natural disaster that no one wanted – a catastrophe in which all are victims and none are responsible’.

Lara Marlowe

The minarets of a Sarajevo mosque loom in the background. Men watching from balconies and in the street are coiffed with the red Ottoman fez. Gavrilo Princip surges from the crowd, in black, firing a pistol. The duke and duchess, decked in finery with plumed hats, are thrown backwards by the onslaught of bullets. While Franz Ferdinand agonises, Sophie embraces her dying husband.

There were no photographs taken of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28th, 1914, so the image reproduced in French history manuals and seared in popular memory was a melodramatic, almost comical colour drawing published by “Le Petit Journal.”

Political assassination was not unusual. “In France, President Sadi Carnot was assassinated in 1894,” notes Frédéric Manfrin, head of history at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and commissioner of the BnF’s authoritative exhibition, Été 14; les derniers jours de l’ancien monde.

“Empress Elisabeth of Austria – ‘Sissi’ – was assassinated in 1897, the royal family of Serbia in 1903, the prime minister of Russia in 1911,” Manfrin continues. “June 28th was a clap of thunder in a cloudless sky. No one saw the war coming.”

For years, there had been wars and rumours of war. France and Britain nearly came to blows at Fashoda in 1898, then made a “gentlemen’s agreement” recognising each other’s colonial interests. Kaiser Wilhelm sought his “place in the sun” in the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911, raising tension with France and Britain. The Ottomans fought the Balkan League in 1912-1913, in what came to be considered a dress rehearsal for the first World War.

Yet it was a time of great prosperity, in France and in Europe. “The gross domestic product of Europe in 1914 would not be equalled again until 1973,” says Manfrin. After the war, the French would recall the turn of the century as “la Belle Époque,” much as Britain idealised the Edwardian era as a golden age.

France was one of only three republics in Europe, along with Portugal and Switzerland, while Britain, Germany and Russia were ruled by grandsons of Queen Victoria. They habitually sorted out their differences through correspondence, and on lavish visits. The French
believed the crisis provoked by the assassination in Sarajevo would be resolved diplomatically, like earlier crises.

France was Europe’s leading agricultural power. More than half the French population were still peasant farmers. A chief concern that summer was that children complete school in time to help with the early harvest, brought on by exceptionally hot weather.

France was also an industrial power, though less so than Britain and Germany. And she derived tremendous wealth from her empire, which provided both a market for French products and natural resources that created new industries, for example rubber from Indochina.

The French Compagnie des Messageries Maritimes extended French trade to the Americas and Australia. Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, rejoiced in the convenience of communications and transport, declaring that “with the railway and the steamboat, distance exists no longer!”

Life continued to improve under the French Third Republic, thanks to decades of peace. “Through work, through dignity and savings, the humble worker can attain great fortune,” said a school dictation text in 1894. “The sons of farmers or workers can aspire to the highest ranks in the army, to the most eminent responsibilities in the state. That is true equality.”

Europe in 1914 had attained a high degree of cultural, scientific and political cooperation, as shown by the number of world fairs, congresses and meetings of the Socialist International. Marie Curie, Albert Einstein and Max Planck were among the great scientists who met at the Solvay Congress in Belgium in 1911, for example, to discuss radiation and quantum theory.

“These meetings lasted for two or three weeks,” says Manfrin. “They ended with the war. Thereafter, French and Germans kept to themselves; there were no more exchanges.”

Although she was profoundly opposed to the war, Marie Curie, the Polish-French physicist and chemist and the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, advised the French army. In November 1914 she took charge of a fleet of radiology vans, known as petites Curies that criss-crossed the battlefields, helping the wounded.

The assassination of the archduke coincided with the first day of the 12th Tour de France bicycle race. Suffragettes demonstrated in Paris. There were street balls on July 14th. The crisis in the Balkans barely figured in French newspapers.

The French public were obsessed by the Cailloux affair. Le Figaro newspaper had decided to destroy the career of the finance minister and former prime minister Joseph Cailloux. Every day for 95 days, Le Figaro published letters and documents against him.
Cailloux had become the head of the pacifist radical party in October 1913. Though a pragmatist with strong business connections, he embodied peace for many French people, because he’d negotiated an agreement with Germany over Morocco, and because he campaigned against extending conscription to three years.

Cailloux’s wife Henriette was so enraged by *Le Figaro’s* campaign against her husband that she went to the newspaper office and shot dead its editor, Gaston Calmette. Her July 20-30th trial for murder overshadowed the diplomatic manoeuvring that preceeded mobilisation and declarations of war. Madame Cailloux’s acquittal, on the grounds she had committed a crime of passion, was deemed far more interesting than the sabre-rattling in European capitals. Belle époque France was a militarised society in which soldiers were idealised, except by the left, which objected to the repeated use of the army to put down strikes. The loss of Alsace and Lorraine continued to gnaw at the French body politic. “Let us think of them always, speak of them never,” the statesman Léon Gambetta had said in 1871.

Draft-dodgers were considered traitors. An illustration in “*Le Petit Journal*” in 1909 shows a gallant officer delivering an ill-kempt pacifist who’d shouted “Down with the army!” by the scruff of his neck to police at a military parade.

From 1889, *Tu seras soldat*, a patriotic military manual, was standard fare in French schools. Sentences such as “There is no more beautiful death than to die for one’s country” and “Germans are arrogant people who do everything they can to harm us” figured in school dictations.

Every Frenchman owed the army 25 years of his life; three on active duty, the rest in the reserves. Émile Driant, a deputy in the national assembly and a reserve colonel, wrote a series of best-selling books under the pseudonym Capitaine Danrit, titled *The War of Tomorrow*.

Driant foresaw trench warfare, the use of barbed wire, hand grenades, heavy artillery and poisonous gas. At the age of 59, he obtained the command of two battalions in August 1914. Driant was killed at Verdun 18 months later.

France and other belligerents were in many ways ill-prepared for the coming war. Though each country manufactured its own rifles, they all weighed an average 4.5 kilos and with bayonets too long to be handled in the trenches. The poppy red trousers of the French poilus – named affectionately for their moustaches – made them easy targets. French war plans rejected defence, investing an almost mystical belief in the psychological advantages of the all-out offensive.

Both France and Germany were so confident the war would be short that they ran out of ammunition by September. They also failed to realise how deadly machine guns would be. The weapons had a range of up to 1.5 km, so victims could not see who shot at them. A machine gun could mow down a regiment in two minutes. Casualties were horrendous:
27,000 French soldiers were killed on August 22nd, 1914, the most deadly day in the country’s history. On average, 900 Frenchmen and 1,300 Germans would be killed every day for the next four years.

The Triple Entente between France, Britain and Russia was so ill-defined that French politicians were gripped by anguish over whether Britain would fight. The French ambassador to London, Paul Cambon, virtually laid siege to the office of the British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey, seeking reassurance.

“We would like to know if the relations established between (military) headquarters are the consequence of a treaty or a verbal agreement... or if they are the result of a tacit understanding,” wrote Gen Joseph Joffre, the supreme commander of French forces. “Moreover, can we say that, in all probability, England will be at our side in a conflict with Germany?”

France had no certainty until, responding to the violation of Belgian neutrality Britain declared war on Germany on August 4th.

France so feared being portrayed as the aggressor – thus losing British support – that the government falsified a document in its “yellow book” chronicling the beginning of the war.

Maurice Paléologue, the French ambassador to St Petersburg, had sent a telegram to Paris on the morning of July 31st announcing the mobilisation of Russian forces. For reasons unknown, the cable took nearly 10 hours to reach Prime Minister René Viviani.

In the meantime, Austria-Hungary announced that it too was mobilising, in reaction to the Russian mobilisation. Until the evening of the 31st, when Paléologue’s telegram finally arrived, the French government genuinely believed that Austria, not Russia, had mobilised first, which is how French newspapers reported the chain of events.

Rather than allow their Russian allies to appear to have been the aggressors, Paris concocted a false diplomatic note, post-dated July 31st, saying that “because of the general mobilisation of Austria and measures taken secretly but continuously by Germany for the last six days, the general mobilisation of the Russian army has been ordered”.

When the government received a letter from the German ambassador to Paris on August 3rd declaring war on France, “there was among all the members of the Council (of ministers) a genuine relief,” President Raymond Poincaré wrote in his diary. “Never was a declaration of war greeted with such satisfaction, France having done all she could to maintain peace, and war having become nonetheless inevitable. It was a hundred times better that we not be forced... to declare it ourselves.”

French historical interpretations of la Grande Guerre have evolved over the past century. “From the autumn of 1914 until 1940, the fundamental question was that of responsibility,”
explains Manfrin of the BnF. “In France, the position was totally clear: It was Germany’s fault.”

After the second World War and in the run-up to commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the first World War in the 1960s, Manfrin continues, attention turned to the point of view and suffering of the poilus.

For some 15 years in the 1970s and early 1980s, in the wake of the May 1968 revolution and protests against the Vietnam war, France seemed to reject veterans of all wars. The eldest, in particular, were regarded as laughable whiners. But the poilus were rehabilitated in literature, cinema and popular culture in the late 1980s. Studies of the first World War focused on the brutalisation of society.

Today, the theme of pointless, inhuman suffering continues to dominate. The historian Antoine Prost condemns “today’s politically correct vision” in which “the war appears as a sort of natural disaster that no one wanted.” Contemporary historiography, Prost adds, is “careful not to revive old quarrels that poisoned the period between the two wars,” instead presenting the conflict as “a catastrophe in which all are victims and none are responsible”.

The Cambridge professor Christopher Clark’s book *Sleepwalkers; How Europe Went to War in 1914* attributes prime responsibility to Serbia. It has provoked great controversy among British and German historians, but not in France.

“French historians have been very careful,” says Manfrin. “I think it’s largely because France played such a passive role at the beginning of the conflict. France was a follower, dragged along by Russia and Germany. She played no determinat role in starting the conflict, so the French tended to look naïve. I think that’s why we’ve held back on the question of the causes of the war.”
Profile: Jean Jaurès

Lara Marlowe

For more than a decade, Jean Jaurès observed the rise of nationalism and territorial and military rivalry between great powers. No one was more lucid than the French parliamentarian, founder of the Socialist Party and newspaper editor regarding the probability of war and its terrible consequences. No one did more to try to stop it.

Before the Socialist International in Basel in November 1912, Jaurès warned of “the monster looming on the horizon.” Addressing tens of thousands of socialists, he quoted the 18th century German poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller: “I call on the living. . . I weep for the dead. . . I shall break the thunder of war that threatens from the clouds.”

In 1913, he failed to prevent the extension of conscription from two to three years. In the last week of his life — the last week of peace in Europe — Jaurès described a continent “teetering on the brink of the abyss”. Two days before his death, he brainstormed with other socialist leaders including Keir Hardie and Rosa Luxemburg in Brussels.

The socialists thought that an international workers’ strike would make it impossible for governments to go to war. But they set aside plans for a general strike in the hope that French and German socialists could persuade their governments to prevent their Russian and Austrian allies from mobilising.

Jaurès spent the last day of his life at the French foreign ministry and the National Assembly, lobbying for peace. He returned to the office of L’Humanité, the newspaper he’d founded in 1904, with the intention of writing a plea for reason which he envisioned as the equivalent of Zola’s J’accuse.

Before setting to work, Jaurès met colleagues for dinner in the Café du Croissant in the rue Montmartre. Raoul Villain, a student who belonged to a pro-war, nationalist movement, shot him twice through the open café window. Jaurès’s only son, Paul, would be killed in Normandy at the age of 18.

A brilliant orator, university professor, historian of the revolution and journalist between stints in parliament, Jaurès had denounced the French army’s lies during the Dreyfus affair. He co-founded the French Socialist Party in 1902, and helped draft the law on separation of church and state.

In 1914, the Socialist International counted three million members throughout the world, 12 million voters and 200 daily newspapers. “Jaurès’s death made the Socialist International the symbolic first victim of the first World War,” says the historian Frédéric Manfrin. “It would never be the same again.”
Generations of French people have asked, as Jacques Brel sang plaintively, *Pourquoi ont-ils tué Jaurès?* The French left moved his remains to the Pantheon in 1924. He remains their iconic martyr. The right, too, now praise him as a great Frenchman.

Jaurès said he would accept war only if it were necessary to defend the territorial integrity of France. His fellow socialists rallied to the “sacred union”. “They assassinated Jaurès. We won’t let them assassinate France,” declared a headline in a left-wing newspaper.
Real power in France in 1914 lay neither with the depressed and overwhelmed prime minister René Viviani, nor with the figurehead president Raymond Poincaré. The man who called the shots at the beginning of the war was Generalissimo Joseph Joffre, the supreme chief of all French armed forces, and later of British and Belgian forces as well.

In the run-up to war, Joffre reorganised the French army, extended conscription from two to three years, and adopted plan XVII (so-called because it was the 17th war plan devised since the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian war.) He also consolidated relations with Britain and Russia.

Like many in the military, Joffre was steeped in Napoleonic tradition and believed l’offensive à outrance – the all-out offensive – would deliver victory over Germany. He had little understanding of modern warfare and underestimated the importance of artillery. In 1914, France had 280 heavy artillery pieces, compared to Germany’s 848.

As the civilian government dithered, paralysed by the fear that France would be seen as an aggressor, Joffre began pushing in late July for military preparations. At his urging, general mobilisation of France’s 880,000-strong army – 3.6 million men including reservists – was announced on August 1st, two days before Germany declared war on France.

Joffre wanted to send French troops into neutral Belgium, but instead agreed to pull his forces 10km back from the border, at the insistence of the civilian government. The priority of plan XVII was to regain Alsace and Lorraine, provinces lost to Prussia in 1871. In August, Joffre attacked German forces in Alsace, Lorraine and the Ardennes in the “battle of the borders”, but was driven back by the German counter-offensive.

August 1914 was a disastrous month, with more than 100,000 French deaths and virtually the entire army in retreat. Joffre ordered the execution of deserters and of all officers who showed “weakness or cowardice before the enemy”. He would sack 162 generals in the first five months of the war.

Yet Joffre initially bounced back. He owed his immense popularity, and the nickname “Papa Joffre”, to the first battle of the Marne in September 1914 when French troops – some ferried to the front in taxis – routed the German advance towards Paris. He succeeded, too, in Flanders that autumn.

But hundreds of thousands of lives were squandered in Joffre’s futile offensives in the Artois, Champagne and the Somme. To his admirers he remained the victor of the Marne; to others, he became the butcher of ‘14. Heavily criticised, he was given a face-saving promotion to Marshal of France in late 1916 and replaced by Gen Robert Nivelle.
Joffre nonetheless continued to enjoy great prestige. He was sent to the US to enlist US support for the war, and was elected to the Académie Française. Joffre imposed his former deputy, Gen Ferdinand Foch, to prosecute the last months of the war. They rode side by side in the victory parade on Bastille Day 1919.
Ill-placed family trust

Tsar Nicholas II refused to believe his forceful German cousin would back the Austrians after the death of Franz Ferdinand and his wife.

Isabel Gorst

It was a nice day, slightly lifting his spirits. Nicholas II lunched with his two younger daughters before setting out by carriage for the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg where in the splendour of the Malachite Hall he signed a declaration of war.

Caught up in patriotic frenzy, the ladies of the court surged forward to kiss the hands of the tsar and tsarina leaving the royal couple feeling, as Nicholas later confided in his diary, “slightly battered.”

Given what lay ahead, the horrendous bloodshed, countless lost battles and the revolution that ended the Romanov dynasty’s three-century-long rule, the unceremonious scrum might have been seen with hindsight as an ill omen. But what impressed the tsar on that fateful day was the view from the Winter Palace balcony of the vast, jubilant crowd that kneeled to greet him, singing God Save the King.

But if Russia was at last united, the coming war had caused a deep rift between the royal houses of Russia, Germany and Great Britain.

Queen Victoria’s efforts to marry off as many of her progeny as possible into the ruling families of Europe had resulted in the descendants of the British monarch occupying the thrones of more than 10 nations.

Tsar Nicholas II, his wife Princess Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt and Wilhelm II, the German emperor, were all first cousins of Britain’s King George V and were on familiar enough terms to refer to each other by nicknames, Nicky, Alicky, Willy and Georgie.

Blood ties linking Nicholas and Wilhelm stretched further back to the 18th century. Both men were great great grandsons of the Russian Tsar Paul I.

Queen Victoria had hoped that her royal matchmaking efforts would help shore up peace in Europe and her country’s position as the greatest of all the great powers. Yet little over 13 years after attending the grandmama of Europe’s funeral, the royal cousins were heading off to a calamitous war.

Nicholas and Alix disliked court life and lived most of the time lived at the Tsarskoe Selo palace outside Saint Petersburg, taking care of their invalid son and four daughters. In early 1914 the royal family departed the capital for a three-month sojourn on the Black Sea shores of Crimea.
It was an odd time for the monarch to take time out. Russia was gripped in political turmoil. Nicholas who, like his wife, believed in his God-given right as an autocrat, was on bad terms with the parliament where deputies were pushing for sweeping reforms. More than one and a half million Russian factory workers were out on strike.

Tensions were also rising in Europe where a fresh conflict was brewing in the Balkans. Russia was alarmed by the rapid rise of a unified Germany that threatened the balance of power. Nicholas’ cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, who was said to fantasise about taking over the Turkish army, had installed a German commander to guard the garrison at the Ottoman Straits, the main waterway for Russia’s lucrative grain exports to the west.

The German menace was driving a surge in popular support for pan-Slavism, an historic movement that, aiming for the unity of all Slavic people, was increasingly eager for Russia to expand in the Balkans.

Wilhelm made efforts to remain on cordial terms with Nicholas, but was convinced that Russia had territorial designs on east Prussia and on the Balkan provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina that Germany’s ally, Austria-Hungary had annexed in 1908.

“As a military man I harbour not the slightest doubt that Russia is systematically preparing for war against us, and I direct my policy accordingly,” he wrote to Count Friedrich Pourtalès, the German ambassador to Saint Petersburg in March 1914.

For all his belief in Russia’s God-given great power status, experience had taught Nicholas to be wary of military adventures. Russia’s defeat in a war with Japan in 1905 had marked a disastrous setback for the tsar’s plans to expand the boundaries of empire further into Eurasia and dominate large swathes of China and the Far East.

Russian losses in the Japanese war had sparked a revolution on the streets of Saint Petersburg that was violently put down by tsarist forces. Political and social unrest had fanned out across the empire and for a time it had seemed that Russia was imploding.

If Nicholas was fretting about the future of his nation or of the Romanov dynasty, it did not stop him enjoying the long balmy days in the Crimea. Officials, including Sergei Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister, occasionally visited for talks. Most of the time, however, the tsar was out yachting, playing tennis with his family or overseeing naval parades in the Black Sea port of Sevastopol.

Back from Crimea, the Russian royals were out cruising in the Baltic when the news arrived that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the empire of Austria-Hungary, and his wife Sophie has been murdered by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo on June 28th, 1914.

The fraught weeks that followed were to expose how ill-fit Nicholas was to rule. It must have been obvious that Austria-Hungary would exact some kind of revenge for the
assassination of Ferdinand. But until the very last moment, the tsar refused to accept that his German cousin Wilhelm would back the Austrians and draw Russia into a disastrous war.

Most of his ministers thought otherwise. Sazonov was rightly convinced that Germany had encouraged Austria-Hungary to issue tough ultimatums to Serbia and was ready to go to battle with Russia if need be.

Russia had suffered heavy military losses in the Japanese war and was not ready to take on another conflict. Sazonov knew that, but believed that failure to go to the rescue of Serbia would signal unacceptable weakness that could fatally undermine Russia’s position in Europe and popular support for the government.

There was a risk of course that war would spark another revolution. But that was outweighed by the immediate danger that Russia’s pro-Slavic population would rise up against the authorities that abandoned the Serbs to their fate.

Nicholas thought Sazonov was exaggerating and suspected Wilhelm of sabre-rattling. “I can’t believe the emperor wants war. If you knew him as I do! If you knew how much theatricality there is in his posing,” he told the French ambassador in Saint Petersburg.

Wilhelm was indeed prepared to mediate with Austria-Hungary, not least because he did not want to risk being saddled with responsibility for letting Europe slide into a disastrous conflict. After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28th, the two cousins exchanged a flurry of telegrams, each appealing to the other to find a way out of the crisis.

Austria-Hungary had taken up arms in an “ignoble war to a weak country,” Nicholas wrote to Wilhelm in the early hours of July 29th.

“The indignation in Russia shared fully by me is enormous. I see that very soon I shall be overwhelmed by the pressure forced upon me and be forced to take extreme measures which will lead to war. To avoid such as calamity as a European war, I beg you in the name of our old friendship to do what you can to stop your allies from going too far.”

Wilhelm, 10 years older and a far more forceful character than Nicholas, thought he could bend his Russian cousin to his will. He had already whistled off a message that crossed with Nicholas’ telegram somewhere between Saint Petersburg and Berlin that ruled out the notion of an “ignoble war”.

Wilhelm agreed to mediate but reminded Nicholas, as a fellow monarch, that the murder of Ferdinand could not go unavenged. “The spirit that led the Serbians to murder their own king and his wife still dominates the country. You will doubtless agree with me that we both, you and me, have a common interest as well as all Sovereigns to insist that all the persons morally responsible for the dastardly murder should receive their deserved punishment.”
Pale and haggard, Nicholas was clutching at straws. In another late night message, he suggested to Wilhelm that the Serbian problem could be taken to the international court in the Hague.

Wilhelm was meanwhile penning another high-handed telegram telling Nicholas he had got the Serbian crisis all wrong and should at all costs refrain from military action. Austria-Hungary, according to the emperor, was not aiming to grab Serbian territory but merely applying pressure to force the Serbs to yield to its demands.

“I therefore suggest that it would be quite possible for Russia to remain a spectator of the conflict without involving Europe in the most horrible war she ever witnessed.”

While professing their desire for peace, the royal cousins were gearing up for war. Indecisive at the best of times, Nicholas was now fumbling hopelessly. Under intense pressure from his ministers, he issued an order to mobilise, withdrew it and then issued it again. Wilhelm was not one to dither. Germany’s army received the command to ready for combat on two fronts.

In mobilising, both sides were raising the stakes, but Germany, with its highly organised and well equipped army, could move much faster than Russia, which needed at least two weeks to get its troops to the front.

When Wilhelm discovered that the Russian army was heading not only for the border of Austria-Hungary but also towards eastern Germany, he was incensed and fired off a furious telegram accusing Nicholas of betrayal. “In my endeavours to maintain the peace of the world I have gone to the utmost limits possible. The responsibility for the disaster which is now threatening the whole civilised world will not be laid at my door. In this moment it lies in your power to avert it. Nobody is threatening the honour or power of Russia which can well afford to await the result of my mediation.”

Nicholas came as near as he could to being openly assertive and replied that it was “technically impossible” for Russia to halt the mobilisation. He gave his “solemn word” that his troops would take no provocative action as long as mediation talks continued.

Even when Wilhelm admitted that Germany was mobilising, Nicholas clung to the hope that war could be avoided. “Our long proved friendship must succeed with God’s help in avoiding bloodshed,” he wrote in what was the last telegram in the exchange. “Anxiously, full of confidence in your answer . . .”

Wilhelm drafted a reply saying further talks might be possible if Russia halted mobilisation, but it was too late. By the time the telegram arrived in Saint Petersburg the German ambassador there had handed Sazonov a declaration of war.
Years before Queen Victoria had warned Nicholas not to trust his German cousin. With Wilhelm’s final telegram the penny finally dropped. “He was never sincere, not for a moment,” Nicholas said. “I felt that all was over forever between me and William.”

It was.
On neutral territory

The occupation of Belgium became one of the main justifications for involvement by the Allies in the first World War.

Suzanne Lynch

On Tuesday August 4th 1914, the citizens of Belgium read the news that most had been dreading. “Germany violates the neutrality of Belgium . . . Belgium will defend itself by all means,” ran the headline in *Le Soir*, the country’s main French language daily.

The country of 7.5 million people played a pivotal role, not just as the main theatre of war during the battle for the Western Front, but as one of the main catalysts for the outbreak of the first World War.

In the weeks following the Sarajevo assassination, the issue of Belgian neutrality hung over events as the main European powers formulated their response to the unfolding crisis.

Britain had been committed to protecting Belgian neutrality since 1839. The Treaty of London recognised Belgium, which had declared its independence from the Dutch in 1830, as an “independent and neutral” state.

The treaty, and subsequent pacts, committed Britain to protecting Belgian neutrality if its sovereignty was violated.

Positioned between the English channel and Germany, Belgium was strategically important for Britain. But Germany’s intention to launch a Western offensive through Belgium as outlined in the so-called Schiefflenn plan, formulated by the German military chief general Schiefflenn in 1905, pushed the issue of Belgian neutrality directly onto the political agenda in the weeks following the assassination. If Germany was to declare war, Belgium was first in line.

The question of how far Britain was committed to Belgium – and indeed France – preoccupied Westminster in the run-up to war, with the Cabinet divided over what a “substantial violation” entailed.

In Belgium, as throughout Europe, newspapers were filled with news of the impending war, the government well aware of Belgium’s vulnerability. Throughout the 19th century, the constitutional monarchy had become a prosperous, industrial nation, helped in part by the burgeoning empire in the Congo established by King Leopold II. But while it was advanced economically with a sophisticated armaments industry, its military capacity was well below the relative levels of the other European powers, a reasonable reflection, perhaps, of its status as a neutral country.
Belgium passed legislation in 1913 designed to double its mobilised strength from 180,000 to 340,000, but conscription was limited to a 15-month term and the army was woefully unprepared in comparison to neighbouring powers, a reality of which countries on both sides of the war were well aware in the run-up to war.

On July 24th, the day after Austria-Hungary presented an ultimatum to Serbia, the Belgian government announced that, should war take place, it would maintain and uphold its neutrality. King Albert I, who was also commander in chief of the Belgian army, mobilised the Belgian forces.

On August 2nd 1914, Germany issued an ultimatum to Belgium. It requested Belgium to allow German troops to enter its territory, on the pretext that France was about to invade Belgium.

Within 12 hours Brussels had replied: “The attack upon [Belgium’s] independence with which the German Government threatens her constitutes a flagrant violation of international law. No strategic interest justifies such a violation of law. The Belgian Government, if they were to accept the proposals submitted to them, would sacrifice the honour of the nation and betray their duty towards Europe [. . .]The Belgian Government are firmly resolved to repel, by all the means in their power, every attack upon their rights.”

Albert immediately appealed to the three “Triple Entente” powers to honour their commitments to Belgian independence. On August 4th, as German troops moved across the border, Britain officially declared war on Germany.

The conquest and occupation of Belgium proceeded swiftly. The first key battle ground was the town of Liège, just 50km from the German border. The battle began on August 5th with the German army bombarding the heavily-fortressed town, using heavy artillery. The siege lasted until August 18th, much longer than the Germans had anticipated.

Namur, the next major town along the river Meuse in southern Belgium, was next to come under attack. The Belgian troops were ordered to withdraw to the heavily fortified port city of Antwerp, where the Belgian government and king had based themselves.

Brussels fell on August 20th as the Belgian troops moved westwards towards the so-called “national redoubt” at Antwerp, a reference to the ring of forts encircling the city. From there the Belgian troops launched various “sorties”, but by November most of the country had been occupied and German focus had switched to the Allied battles along the Western front.

In parallel to the military occupation of Belgium in the first weeks of the war, the widespread killing of civilians occurred, a development that had a hugely significant impact on the Allied response to the war in its early days. Almost immediately reports emanated from Belgium of random, gratuitous killings of civilians, causing outrage in Britain where it
helped to galvanise support for the war, and more significantly in the US where it provided an important moral justification for US intervention later in the war.

Posters and advertisements depicting heroic Belgium were used as powerful tools of enlistment and of propaganda. The so-called “Rape of Belgium” became a contentious subject after the war, with Germany denying claims of widespread killing. But Belgian civilians were undoubtedly subject to appalling suffering.

The burning of the town of Dinant and the gruesome murder of 674 civilians on August 23rd, allegedly in an act of reprisal, is still deeply ingrained in the Belgian collective memory, 100 years after the war.

Whatever the truth of those early weeks of the war, the occupation of Belgium became one of the main justifications for Allied involvement in the war, but tensions remained between the Belgian and allied forces. The country’s suspicion that France and Britain had delayed sending support to Belgium during the first month of the war persisted, though arguably the courageous defence of Liège by Albert’s troops delayed the German advance, and possibly prevented Paris from falling to the Germans.

But for most Belgians – millions of whom fled the country during the war – the abiding memory of their country’s involvement in the war would be the appalling bloodshed that took place in the fields and trenches of Flanders.
Did the fractious family squabbles of Europe’s royal cousins in 1914 matter?

Mu Keating

On May 24th, 1913, there was a big family party in Berlin. Victoria Louise, the youngest, favourite child and only daughter of the German emperor Kaiser William II, was marrying her cousin Ernst August, heir to the kingdom of Hanover (they were both descendants of George III of England). It may have been a love match or it may have been a reconciliation between the Hohenzollerns and the Hanovers, or perhaps it was both. In any event, it was a large wedding which the extended family attended.

The family who gathered included the groom’s parents, the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland, the Emperor Nicholas II of Russia and his wife Alexandra, and George V of England and his wife Mary.

Like many family occasions, it was probably not without its tensions.

William II had had a strange and difficult relationship with his English mother, he disliked her brother Edward VII and was disliked by him and his Danish wife Alexandra (perhaps because of the German annexation of Schleswig-Holstein) and their son George V. Tsar Nicholas of Russia also disliked his cousin William.

The following summer the family got together again for the christening of the happy couple’s first child who was born in March 1914. Among the godparents were Tsar Nicholas, George and Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria-Hungary. Before the end of the year Franz Joseph and William would be heads of states at war with Britain and Russia.

The family tree above outlines the relationships between the monarchs ruling European during 1914, many of them guests at the parties. They were all descended from Christian IX of Denmark or Queen Victoria or from uncles of her husband, Albert of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Descendants of the Saxe-Coburg-Gothas were also, through Albert’s uncle Ferdinand, the kings of Portugal and Bulgaria, and, through his uncle Leopold, the king of the Belgians.

Family trees are always fascinating. In the case of these intertwined royals, does the family tree matter? Do their fractious family squabbles matter? Had they enough power left in 1914 to drag their countries into war because they disliked cousin William?

Almost certainly not. The war of 1914 was, however, to divide the family further and for many of them, the family quarrels were never mended and the official attitude to the losers was not softened for reasons of family pietas.