Margaret MacMillan

THE WAR THAT ENDED PEACE

How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War

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Introduction: War or Peace?

There have been as many plagues as wars in history;
yet always wars and plagues take people equally by surprise.

—Albert Camus, *The Plague*

Nothing that ever happened, nothing that was
ever even willed, planned or envisaged, could seem
irrelevant. War is not an accident: it is an outcome.
One cannot look back too far to ask, of what?

—Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court*

Louvain was a dull place, said a guidebook in 1910, but when the time came it made a spectacular fire. None of its inhabitants could have expected such a fate for their beautiful and civilised little town. Prosperous and peaceful over many centuries, it was known for its collection of wonderful churches, ancient houses, a superb Gothic town hall and a famous university which had been founded in 1425. The university library, in the distinguished old Cloth Hall, held some 200,000 books including many great works of theology and classics as well as a rich collection of manuscripts which ranged from a little collection of songs written down by a monk in the ninth century to illuminated manuscripts over which the monks had toiled for years. In late August 1914, however, as the smell of smoke filled the air, the flames that destroyed Louvain could be seen from miles away. Much of the town, including its great library, went while its desperate inhabitants, in scenes that would become all too familiar to the

twentieth-century world, struggled out into the countryside carrying what belongings they could.

Like much of Belgium, Louvain had the misfortune to be on the route of the German invasion of France in the Great War that broke out in the summer of 1914 and which was to last until 11 November 1918. The German war plans called for a two-front war with a holding action against Russia, the enemy in the east, and a rapid invasion and defeat of France in the west. Belgium, a neutral country, was meant to acquiesce quietly as German troops marched through on their way southwards. As with so much of what later happened in the Great War, those assumptions turned out to be very wrong. The Belgian government decided to resist, which immediately threw the German plans out, and the British, after some hesitation, entered the war against Germany. By the time the German troops arrived in Louvain on 19 August they were already resentful at what they saw as an unreasonable Belgian resistance and they were nervous about being attacked by Belgian and British troops as well as by ordinary civilians who might decide to take up arms.

For the first few days all went well: the Germans behaved correctly and the citizens of Louvain were too afraid to show any hostility to the invaders. On 25 August new German troops arrived, retreating from a Belgian counter-attack, and rumours spread that the British were coming. Shots were fired, most likely by the nervous and perhaps drunken German soldiers. Panic mounted among the Germans, who were convinced that they were under attack, and the first of the reprisals started. That night and in the next days civilians were dragged out of their houses and a number, including the mayor, the head of the university, and several police officers, were shot out of hand. By the end some 250 out of a population of around 10,000 were dead and many more had been beaten up and insulted. Fifteen hundred inhabitants of Louvain, from babies to grandparents, were put on a train and sent to Germany where the crowds greeted them with taunts and insults.

The German soldiers – and their officers frequently joined in – sacked the town, looting and pillaging and deliberately setting buildings on fire. Eleven hundred of Louvain's 9,000 houses were destroyed. A fifteenth-century church went up in flames and its roof caved in. Around midnight on 25 August, German soldiers went into the library

and poured petrol about. By morning the building was a ruin and its collection no longer existed, although the fires smouldered on for several days afterwards. A local scholar and priest talked to the American ambassador to Belgium a few days later; the Belgian was calm as he described the destruction in the city, the friends shot, the pathetic refugees, but when he got to the library he put his head on his arms and wept.[1] 'The centre of the city is a smoking heap of ruins,' reported a professor who returned. 'An oppressive silence everywhere. Everybody has fled; at the windows of cellars I see frightened faces.'[2]

This was only the start as Europe laid waste to itself in the Great War. The 700-year-old Rheims Cathedral, the most beautiful and important of the French cathedrals and where most French kings had been crowned, was pulverised by German guns shortly after the sack of Louvain. The head of one of its magnificent sculptured angels was found lying on the ground, its beatific smile still intact. Ypres, with its own superb Cloth Hall, was reduced to rubble and the heart of Treviso in the north of Italy destroyed by bombs. Much although by no means all of the destruction came at the hands of Germans, something which had a profound impact on American opinion and which helped to propel the United States towards entering the war in 1917. As a German professor said ruefully at the war's end: 'Today we may say that the three names Louvain, Rheims, *Lusitania*, in almost equal measure have wiped out sympathy with Germany in America.'[3]

Louvain's losses were small indeed by what was to come – the more than 9 million soldiers dead and another 15 million wounded or the devastation of much of the rest of Belgium, the north of France, Serbia or parts of the Russian and Austrian-Hungarian Empires. Yet Louvain came to be a symbol of the senseless destruction, the damage inflicted by Europeans themselves on what had been the most prosperous and powerful part of the world, and the irrational and uncontrollable hatreds between peoples who had so much in common.

The Great War started on the other side of Europe from Louvain, in Sarajevo in the Balkans with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. Like the fires that raced through Louvain, that act set in motion a conflict which grew to encompass most of Europe, and many parts of the world beyond. The greatest battles, and the greatest losses, were on the Western and

Eastern Fronts but there was fighting too in the Balkans, in the north of Italy, throughout the Middle East and in the Caucasus, as well as in the Far East, the Pacific and Africa. Soldiers from around the world also poured into Europe, whether from India, Canada, New Zealand or Australia in the British Empire or from Algeria or sub-Saharan Africa in the French. China sent coolies to transport supplies and dig trenches for the Allies while Japan, also an ally, helped to patrol the world's waterways. In 1917, the United States, stung beyond endurance by German provocations, entered. It lost some 114,000 soldiers and came to feel that it had been tricked into joining a conflict in which it had no stake.

Peace, of a sort, came in 1918, but to a very different Europe and world. Four great empires had fallen to pieces: Russia, which had ruled over many subject peoples from Poles in the west to Georgians in the east; Germany with its Polish and overseas territories; Austria-Hungary, the great multinational empire at Europe's centre; and the Ottoman Empire, which still included pieces of Europe as well as today's Turkey and most of the Arab Middle East. The Bolsheviks had seized power in Russia with dreams of creating a new communist world and that revolution had set in motion a train of others, in Hungary, Germany, or later in China. The old international order had gone for ever. Weakened and poorer, Europe was no longer the undisputed master of the world. In its colonies nationalist movements were stirring and new powers were rising on its periphery, to the east Japan and to Europe's west the United States. The Great War was not the catalyst for the rise of the Western superpower – that was already happening – but it sped up the coming of America's century.

Europe paid a terrible price in many ways for its Great War: in the veterans who never recovered psychologically or physically, the widows and orphans, the young women who would never find a husband because so many men had died. In the first years of the peace, fresh afflictions fell on European society: the influenza epidemic (perhaps as a result of churning up the rich microbe-laden soil in the north of France and Belgium) which carried off some 20 million people around the world; starvation because there were no longer the men to farm or the transportation networks to get food to the markets; or political turmoil as extremists on the right and the left used force to gain their

ends. In Vienna, once one of the richest cities in Europe, Red Cross workers saw typhoid, cholera, rickets and scurvy, all scourges they thought had disappeared from Europe. And, as it turned out, the 1920s and 1930s were only a pause in what some now call Europe's latest Thirty Years War. In 1939, the Great War got a new name as a second world war broke out.

The Great War still casts its shadow both physically and in our imaginations. Tons of ordnance are still buried in the battlefields and every so often someone – an unlucky farmer ploughing in Belgium, perhaps – is added to the casualty lists. Every spring after the ground has unfrozen, units of the Belgian and French armies have to gather up the unexploded shells that have been heaved up. In our memories too the Great War, thanks in part to an extraordinary outpouring of memoirs and novels and paintings, but also because so many of us have family connections to it, remains that dark and dreadful chapter in our history. Both my grandfathers fought in the war; one in the Middle East with the Indian Army, the other a Canadian doctor in a field hospital on the Western Front. My family still has the medals won then, a sword given by a grateful patient in Baghdad, and a hand grenade which we played with as children in Canada until someone realised that it had probably not been disarmed.

We also remember the Great War because it is such a puzzle. How could Europe have done this to itself and to the world? There are many possible explanations; indeed, so many that it is difficult to choose among them. For a start the arms race, rigid military plans, economic rivalry, trade wars, imperialism with its scramble for colonies, or the alliance systems dividing Europe into unfriendly camps. Ideas and emotions often crossed national boundaries: nationalism with its unsavoury riders of hatred and contempt for others; fears, of loss or revolution, of terrorists and anarchists; hopes, for change or a better world; the demands of honour and manliness which meant not backing down or appearing weak; or Social Darwinism which ranked human societies as if they were species and which promoted a faith not merely in evolution and progress but in the inevitability of struggle. And what about the role of individual nations and their motivations: the ambitions of the rising ones such as Germany or Japan; the fears of declining ones such as Great Britain; revenge for France and Russia; or the

struggle for survival for Austria-Hungary? Within each nation too there were the domestic pressures: a rising labour movement, for example, or openly revolutionary forces; demands for votes for women or for independence for subject nations; or conflict between the classes, between the believers and the anti-clericals, or between the military and civilians. How did these all play their part in keeping Europe's long peace or moving it towards war?

Forces, ideas, prejudices, institutions, conflicts, all are surely important. Yet that still leaves the individuals, not in the end that many of them, who had to say yes, go ahead and unleash war, or no, stop. Some were hereditary monarchs with great power – the Kaiser of Germany, the tsar of Russia or the emperor of Austria-Hungary; others – the President of France, the Prime Ministers of Britain and Italy – were embedded in constitutional regimes. It was Europe's and the world's tragedy in retrospect that none of the key players in 1914 were great and imaginative leaders who had the courage to stand out against the pressures building up for war. Somehow any explanation of how the Great War came must balance the great currents of the past with the human beings who bobbed along in them but who sometimes changed the direction of the flow.

It is easy to throw up one's hands and say the Great War was inevitable but that is dangerous thinking, especially in a time like our own which in some ways, not all, resembles that vanished world of the years before 1914. Our world is facing similar challenges, some revolutionary and ideological such as the rise of militant religions or social protest movements, others coming from the stress between rising and declining nations such as China and the United States. We need to think carefully about how wars can happen and about how we can maintain the peace. Nations confront each other, as they did before 1914, in what their leaders imagined was a controlled game of bluff and counter-bluff. Yet how easily and how suddenly Europe went from peace to war in those five weeks after the assassination of the archduke. During previous crises, some as bad as the one of 1914, Europe had not gone over the edge. Its leaders – and large parts of their people had supported them – had chosen to work matters out and to preserve the peace. What made 1914 different?