Jan Bloch's Impossible War

hivewired.wordpress.com/2020/02/17/jan-blochs-impossible-war/

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Epistemic Status: Endorsed
Content Warning: Neuropsychological Infohazard, Evocation Infohazard, World War I
Recommended Prior Reading: Blueprint for Armageddon Part I
Part of the Series: Truth

> "History doesn't repeat itself but it often rhymes"

In any real look into the past, you realize pretty quickly that things don't have neat beginnings or simple origins in the vast majority of cases. Historical events are the result of billiard ball interactions among a chaotic conflux of actors and forces, themselves all built out of past impacts and collisions stretching back into the mists of antiquity.

Thus when trying to tell the origin story of the modern rationality community, it can be very tempting to just keep extrapolating backwards. How far back should we look? Do we need to rehash *Plato's Cave* and *Cogito Ergo Sum*? Francis Bacon is credited as the grandfather of science, so maybe we should start with him?

For the moment at least I'm writing blog posts not thousand page textbooks, and my goal here isn't to rehash the entire history of scientific and philosophical thought (I'd *like* to keep this blog post under three thousand words). If you want the entire history of scientific thought, *Cosmos* is a great place to start and has some pretty spiffy graphics.

But unlike history, every story and every blog post have to start somewhere, and I think the best place to start for our purposes is with polish banker and railway financier Jan Gotlib Bloch.

Bloch was born a Polish Jew in Tsarist Russia in the 1800s, and would later convert to Calvinism to protect himself from antisemitism within the Tsarist government. Bloch worked as a banker and would go on to finance the building of rail lines in Russia, as well as penning a lengthy treatise on the management and operation of said rail lines in 1875, for which he:

> was awarded a medal of the first class at the geographical exhibition of Paris, and was heartily endorsed by the Imperial Russian Geographical Society.

But it was Bloch's later work that would be remembered for. In 1870, The Northern German Confederation would go to war with the Second French Empire. Fueled by fears of the growing power of a rapidly unifying and industrializing Germany, France declared war and invaded in August of 1870.

The war was only six months long. By September, Napoleon III was captured and the French Imperial Army had been decisively defeated. A new French government was declared and kept fighting, but by January of 1871 Paris was besieged and the war was brought to an end. The balance of power in Europe had fundamentally shifted, and while all the great powers reeled from the event, some saw it merely as a portent for things to come.

The Franco-Prussian war was the first prototype of a modern war, one featuring the use of railroads, artillery, and all the new technology of creation and destruction that had come into existence since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. Jan Bloch was fascinated by the war of 1870 and would go on to devote much of his personal time to studying the phenomenon that was modern military conflict.

No one really knew how any of this stuff would interact with real combat, but everything seemed to point to the idea that the next major war would be unlike anything the world had seen before. Bloch looked at the state of the technology, where things seemed to be going, and penned his most famous six-volume work, originally in Russian and translated into numerous languages, popularized in English under the title *Is War Now Impossible?* This work would prove to be exactly as horrifying in its prescience as it was in its theories as to the nature of future conflicts.

In Europe during the renaissance and age of royalty and exploration, war was almost something of a gentleman's sport. The royals of all the major nations knew each other, everyone was someone's cousin or uncle or grandmother, the armies would fight out in lines and day battles and then after one side defeated the other the leaders would sit down for tea and enter negotiations and this was for a long time considered a normal and acceptable way to conduct diplomacy between powers. The civilians of these nations would likely not even notice that they were at war a lot of the time.

However, with the french revolution, we see the beginnings of a change in this behavior. The french revolution is the first war to feature mass mobilization, a trend of throwing the entire nation into a conflict instead of merely a small mercenary army. When the European royal powers united against the upstart French republic, they were met not by a small, professional French army but by as much of the french people as could be mobilized. This enormously changed the way wars were fought and forced the rest of Europe to follow suit or be swamped by the sheer size of the French military. Napoleon is famously quoted as saying:

> "You cannot stop me; I spend 30,000 lives a month."

And this was a major change for the European powers who didn't really want to arm their peasants, that's how you end up with uprisings. But here were the french conquering Europe with a peasant army and the rest of the great powers were forced into a game of catch up. This is a rather textbook example of a multipolar trap at work.

No one can coordinate to stop the escalation of the conflict, and anyone who doesn't escalate will be defeated by those who do, thus wars become total and we witness the pivot to the start of the modern arms race.

Moloch! Whose Fingers are ten armies!

Bloch looked at the state of technology, the state of war, and the state of European powers, and concluded that the era of quick and relatively bloodless conflicts as a method of diplomacy was over. War wasn't a fun pastime of royalty anymore, war was now serious. Wars of the future would be total. They would not be quick and decisive affairs but brutal slugging matches fought until one nation collapsed socially and economically. He saw that the development of rifling, artillery, and machine guns had made cavalry and bayonet charges suicidal and obsolete. He claimed that a future war would be one of entrenchment, stalemates, massive firepower, and massive losses of life.

Bloch's book is considered to be partly responsible for the Hague Conference of 1899, which sought to impose limits on warfare and prevent the increasingly bloody looking conflict from playing out as Jan Bloch feared it would. Bloch was even a special guest of Tsar Nicholas at the conference.

There was a belief, or maybe it was a hope, that because war had become so terrible and destructive, that the only choice nations would have would be to resort to peaceful negotiations. Bloch himself seemed to be something of a proponent to this theory, although he at least seemed to think that peace would still require conscious input and the wisdom of men. He didn't believe that war was truly impossible, just that continuing to treat war as it had been treated in the past (sportingly) was an impossibility. It was a lesson that would, unfortunately, be mostly ignored by the leaders and military of the time.

A decade after the publishing of *Is War Now Impossible,* British journalist Normal Angell published another work along similar lines, titled *The Great Illusion*. Angell was an early globalist, who looked at the same situation Bloch had and answered Bloch's question with "Yeah, war is impossible now."

Angell's thesis was that any gains made by war would be so dwarfed by the costs of waging a modern war that there would be no reason to ever fight one. A modern war would destroy the world's economy, and maybe even end civilization itself, and peace was just so profitable. So war was just not going to happen. You would have to be stupid to fight Bloch's Impossible War, no one would benefit, so no one would do it.

Well, as history would come to show, while Angell was correct that a modern war would destroy whole nations and leave economies in ruins, he was wrong about that actually stopping the war from happening.

Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

So in grade school, we're taught that World War I happened because all the European powers had entered these complex networks of alliances that drew each other into the growing conflict like dominos falling and no one saw it coming or could stop it.

Jan Bloch saw it coming, and he tried to stop it. It was a really solid attempt even, but we don't live in the timeline where he succeeded, we live in the timeline where he didn't. As the first decade of the twentieth century drew to a close, tensions continued to ramp up across Europe and Jan Bloch's warning started looking more and more like a dire inevitability.

One of the readers of Jan Bloch's book was Polish scholar Alfred Korzybski, who asked the very reasonable question: If this was all so inevitable, if everyone knew it was going to happen, then why couldn't it be stopped?

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