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THE PRE-1914 PERIOD: IMAGINED WARS, FUTURE WARS

Conference organized by the International Research Center of the Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, and the German Historical Institute Paris, 9th–10th November 2011

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Introduction

A golden age; a lost generation; a belle époque: our idea of the pre-1914 era has long been dominated by such clichés, enduring testimony to the way that the outbreak of the First World War shattered the sense of continuity with the past for contemporaries, proving such a cataclysmic historical caesura that it rendered all that came before it halcyon and nostalgic.

The stereotypical interpretations of the pre-war era have deep roots: it was the initial shock of war in 1914 itself, when countless bourgeois and aristocratic summer holidays were dramatically interrupted by the unprecedented carnage of August and September 1914, that created these first stereotypes about the pre-war period, stereotypes that have gone on to influence historians ever since. The Western European image of the pre-war world, as orderly, peaceful and prosperous, fitted with theological schemas of a lost Eden before the fall of man, matching easily the widespread sense after 1914 that the war had brought a loss of innocence and catastrophic fall from grace for Western civilisation – which through the conflict had revealed its primitive inner barbarism. That last pre-war summer of 1914 became a metonym for the emotional bereavement that followed; by lamenting its passing, the war generation could articulate the grief and shock the conflict caused. Emphasising the pre-war era as a golden age became a means of highlighting and accentuating the war's horrors by way of descriptive juxtaposition.

Yet this narrative was always an unstable one: this idea of the pre-war period as idyll coexisted with the search for long-term causes of the war within it, as historians, politicians, journalists and diplomats set out in their writings hypotheses that firmly located the origins of the war in the decade that preceded it, in the disruption of the European balance of power, the weakening of the concert of Europe, the arms and naval races and the rise of German militarism[1]. This was a debate that would rage well into the interwar years, as people sought in the pre-war period great causes that would match the scale of the great catastrophe that had unfolded in 1914. The idea that the catastrophe might not have major causes was too difficult to accept; by finding explanations for the war contemporaries gave it meaning and, crucially, allowed for the attribution of responsibility for its outbreak. The war thus became part of a coherent historical narrative, the consequence of a series of pre-war »causes«, which made it easier to come to terms with than just random disaster. In sum, people needed to believe they could understand what had caused the 1914–1918 conflagration and thus ensure that such causal developments never recurred and led to war again; situating those origins in the distant past rendered them safe and containable on the basis that causes that could be identified could be dealt with or treated; all of this was a deeply comforting notion in the interwar years[2]. This establishment of a cause-and-effect narrative around the pre-war period, which turned the years from 1890 to 1914 into a canon of diplomatic and structural crises, each a signpost on the road to war, rendered the war's outbreak more comprehensible.

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[1] Ernest R. May, Samuel R. Williamson Jr., An Identity of Opinion: Historians and July 1914, in: Journal of Modern History 79/2 (2007), p. 335–387.

This interpretative strand of historiography of the First World War is far from having run its course, as evidenced by the large number of new publications on the causes of the war[3]. 2011 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the start of the Fischer debate which illustrated the ongoing importance of these parameters in defining the interpretation of the pre-war era. Following on from the debates of the interwar period, the Fischer debate also depicted the pre-war years, in terms of a »moral universe«, a place of decisions and responsibility, the site of war guilt and blame. While many interwar commentators had preferred to emphasise structural crises within the international system as the explanation for why war broke out, however, Fischer very effectively revived the older thesis of German war guilt, attributing responsibility for the war's outbreak to Germany. As in the interwar period, this 1960s search for the causes of the war was a way of providing an explanatory framework for why the conflict happened. Yet this debate continued to frame the pre-war in terms of what Marc Bloch has termed the historians' obsession with the search for origins[4]. Thus the pre-war period was portrayed as both idyll and incubator, a paradox that was never resolved in the interwar years. Indeed, this paradoxical narrative of the pre-war continues to dominate our understanding of it to this day.

It was in an attempt to move beyond this paradox that, in November 2011, the German Historical Institute, Paris and the International Research Centre of the Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, jointly hosted an international conference to interrogate our traditional understanding of the pre-war period. The aim of the conference was to question how we categorise the years leading up to the Great War and to suggest that it is time to unpick the stereotypical myths about this era, to investigate it on its own terms, using the methodologies of cultural history, methodologies that remain surprisingly under-utilised as a means of investigating and understanding the pre-war decades. A key related objective of this conference »Future Wars, Imagined Wars: Towards a Cultural History of the Pre-1914 Period« was to re-examine how contemporaries anticipated the future – and to take seriously their expectations and perspectives of what they thought the future held[5]. As Christopher Clark has argued it is »easy to imagine the disaster of Europe's ›last summer‹ as costume drama«, with »the effete rituals and gaudy uniforms, the ›ornamentalism‹ of a world still largely organised around hereditary monarchy« having a distancing effect on public perceptions of the period[6]. The conference sought to escape this danger by revisiting the pre-1914 era within its own context. The aim was to avoid historical anachronism as much as possible, by trying to dismantle the idea of the early twentieth century as always defined by the prism of hindsight, as a series of events that all flowed inexorably towards their endpoint and culmination in the First World War. In other words, what was attempted was to write a »history of the future in the past« (John Horne). This would allow for a better understanding of the behaviour of contemporaries, and, in particular, elite decision-makers and social groups, as it would reveal their expectations of what they believed the future would bring and how these expectations correlated to their concrete plans, as well as how they restricted or framed what they perceived to be their room for manoeuvre.

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[2] See, for example, the account by Vera Brittain, Testament of Youth. An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925, London 1978, p. 86-93.

[3] See among the recent publications: Holger Afflerbach, David Stevenson (ed)., An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914, New York, Oxford 2007; Richard F. Hamilton, Holger H. Herwig (ed.), War Planning 1914, Cambridge 2010; Annika Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War, Cambridge 2001; Michael Neiberg, Dance of the Furies. Europe and the Outbreak of World War I, Cambridge, MA 2011; William Mulligan, The Origins of the First World War, Cambridge 2010; Chistopher Clark, The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914, London 2012.

[4] Marc Bloch, The Historian's Craft, Manchester 1954, p. 29–31.

[5] We would like to thank all those who participated in the conference, who chaired sessions and presented papers and who contributed to the success of the event as well as to the intellectual quality of the discussions. Only a selection of the conference papers have been revised for publication in this special edition for reasons of space. On behalf of the German Historical Institute Paris and the International Research Center of the Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, we would also like to thank our partners without whose support the organization of the conference would not have been possible: Conseil général de la Somme; Gerda-Henkel-Stiftung; Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne; université de Picardie Jules-Verne; université Blaise-Pascal, Clermont Ferrand, Institut universitaire de France; université de Paris-Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense, Institut universitaire de France; University of Birmingham; ministère de la Défense, DMPA.

Of particular interest was how contemporaries imagined any future war, its outbreak, evolution and outcome. This is the subject of the articles that follow, which apply cultural investigative paradigms to concrete case studies to examine how people imagined war and sought to prepare for it before 1914, as well as what lessons they drew from pre-1914 conflicts in Europe and in the colonial sphere. Yet here it is important to emphasise that the idea of a future war was, for contemporaries, to draw a grammatical analogy, more often than not expressed in the conditional rather than the future tense[7], as the following articles illustrate, a possibility rather than an inevitability.

This approach highlights that it is time for us to revisit and to re-assess the period leading up to 1914 in its own terms. For the reality is that the »pre-war« that those living before 1914 experienced was not, and could not be, that which we portray it as today, with the benefit of our historical hindsight. First, this is true in its most basic sense: the populations of Europe living in the three decades that preceded the First World War were not aware of the fact that this period would later be classified as »pre-war«, defined in terms of its relationship to the world war that would break out in 1914. They had their own obsessions, interests, diversions and they understood them in other ways than those that we necessarily project back upon them. Moreover, with the passage of time, and our distance from the war, we no longer need to cling to the prewar in terms of an explanatory framework for why the war happened but can also investigate it in other ways. The image of the pre-war as a linear trajectory – a place of cause and effect – can be examined alongside other interpretations of this era, as we do not face the same urgent pressures in investigating it as previous generations did. The generation of the interwar period, fearing a second conflagration, badly needed to understand how the horror of the 1914–1918 total war had been unleashed, while the generation of the 1960s, saw the origins of the First World War as key to both explaining the outbreak of the Second World War and as a possible model for how war might break out in the future. They still lived with the 1914 rupture as something which might imminently recur, fearing the outbreak of nuclear war at the height of Cold War tensions. The fact that John F. Kennedy read Barbara Tuchman's history of the outbreak of the First World War, »The Guns of August«, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, illustrates the point well; Tuchman herself had witnessed the arrival of the Goeben and the Breslau battleships to Constantinople as a very young child when visiting her grandfather, the American Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau[8]. It has only been relatively recently, with the passing of the generation that had this living memory of the war and its aftermath, as well as the end of the Cold War, that such fears have subsided: the current generation does not fear the causes of the First World War repeating themselves to the same extent, as, with the greater historical distance, some, for example Prussian militarism, have become historically obsolete. What emerges from this liberation of historical distance are new ways of reading the pre-war period and investigating it in broader terms.

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[6] Clark, The Sleepwalkers (as in n. 3), p. XXVII.

[7] See John Horne, Guerres prémonitoires. Visions croisées des conflits balkaniques (1912–1913). France et Grande-Bretagne, in: Francia 40 (2013), p. 464.

[8] Barbara Tuchman, Practising History. Selected Essays, London 1989, p. 209; Henry Morgenthau, Ambassador Morgenthau's Story, New York 1918, p. 44–52.

Second, it is time to acknowledge the extent to which the pre-war period is an artificial historical chronological construction: it was not hermetically sealed off from what went before or came after. What defines when the »pre-war period« began – 1870 ? 1890 ? 1911 ? To what extent is it determined by monarchical identity – the start of the Wilhelmine or Edwardian eras for example ? Arguably, the pre-war was as much a seamless *fin de siècle* phase, linking the nineteenth century to the twentieth, as it was a place of rupture, the breakage point of either a long nineteenth century as argued by David Blackbourn or short twentieth century as contended by Eric Hobsbawm[9]. Indeed, it is possible in some modernisation trends, such as urbanisation, literacy, growth of the mass media, decline of the peasantry, or the advent of modernist art, to see the pre-war as part of a long *fin de siècle* period marked by the rise of classical modernity that spans from 1890 through to 1939. Thus the pre-1914 period was a place of fluidity and contingency and one in which, this special edition will argue, we see pan-European trends across cultures which framed what James Joll described as the »unspoken assumptions« of 1914[10]. The themes of the articles that follow here reveal these complex pre-1914 transnational trends, which form continuities, as well as breaks between the pre-war and what preceded and came after it. Joll, of course, alluded to these assumptions as part of the quest for the causes of the war in the pre-war period but it is perhaps better to understand these assumptions in terms of pan-European contexts and in terms also of a European »shared political culture«[11] that enveloped 1914 societies both before and after the outbreak of war. Transnational historical approaches allow us to do this.

What are these unspoken assumptions that emerge ? One common theme in many of the articles in this special edition is what might be described as a »geography of unease.« A sense of unease, a latent dissatisfaction or concern with the state of international relations or social change was evident as a pan-European trend, although it affected certain areas more than others and it fluctuated at different times. This impacted on war plans and decision-making as it affected the extent to which contemporaries felt that the peaceful societies in which they lived merited defending from the impact of war or could be rejuvenated by it. Moreover, this unease had significant corollaries that affected the extent to which populations felt they could or should stop the outbreak of any future war. Corollaries of this geography of unease included fatalism, which was related to many aspects of life in pre-war European societies where many had little choice over their fates, particularly the poor. Fatalism co-existed with the idea of predestined events and hierarchies as well as of divine protection and mission, and apocalyptic visions of the future which affected how war was envisaged by some pre-war artists and writers[12]. It also affected how war was envisaged by some key military decision makers, a fact which was, until recently, overlooked[13]. Take for instance Franz Conrad von Hötzendorff, the Austro-Hungarian chief of staff and one of the foremost advocates of preventive action against the enemies of the dual monarchy who at the height of the July Crisis expressed a feeling of doom, writing in a personal letter: »It will be a hopeless battle; however it must be waged in a way that ensures that an old monarchy and such a glorious army do not go under without fame. I see approaching a blighted future and a blighted end to my life[14].« Tellingly, a sense of male honour and military virtue made him embrace the catastrophe rather than do everything to avert it. The geography of unease was also affected by the rapidly shifting relationship between pre-war societies and speed: cars, trains, bicycles, subways, electric trams, steamships, the advent of the aeroplane, as Nathaniel Wood has shown, all radically altered how fast people could travel and enlarged the geographical distances their daily lives could encompass. The growth of the city, with its ever faster transportation networks disorientated those who could not adapt to a more rapid pace of life. As Wood has brilliantly argued, the disparity in the spread of these new technologies which were more advanced in some parts of Europe, particularly the west, than in others, also led to a cultural economy of speed developing, with those societies where access to these new rapid forms of mobility was limited, such as in southern and eastern Europe , feeling excluded from those changes that they knew from the press were happening elsewhere. This awareness of their own backwardness, of their exclusion from this new commodity of speed, created a growing fear of being left behind in many European populations[15].

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[9] David BLACKBOURN, History of Germany, 1780–1918. The Long Nineteenth Century, Oxford 2003; Eric HOBSBAWM, The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991, London 1994.

[10] James JOLL, 1914. The Unspoken Assumptions, London 1968.

[11] CLARK, The Sleepwalkers (as in n. 3), p. 561.

[12] Jay WINTER, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History, Cambridge 1995, p. 145–158.

[13] William MULLIGAN, The Origins of the First World War (as in n. 3), p. 111–112.

However, above all, a sense of »unease« was a response to the growing awareness of the social injustices, and grinding poverty, of many parts of pre-war societies and the increasing politicisation of the poor and disenfranchised by the socialist movement, which spread across Europe in diverse ways and at differing speeds – some of whose members looked to war violence to trigger the long-awaited revolution. In fact, the stereotypical view of the pre-1914 period as optimistic, that it universally embraced the idea of inevitable progress in history, of going forward, of human development as constantly on an upward curve, was the concomitant of this geography of unease. The two phenomena were closely interrelated – contemporaries were beset by fears that social improvements might not come quickly enough to stave off revolution or that war might interrupt them. Pre-war optimism and unease were thus corollaries of each other, exemplified in widespread fears that any future war might slow progress and the gains made – a particularly influential idea in the Social Democratic Party in Germany. All of this impacted expectations of future wars. The opening of the Carnegie Peace Palace in The Hague in 1913 exemplifies this ambiguity of belief in progress co-existing with fears of the horrors of war.

A second pan-European assumption was a sentimentalized understanding of the military. This included not only a widespread romantic depiction of soldiering and of battle but also an ideal of the gentleman warrior that enraptured many European societies, permeating leisure activities and often functioning to provide a form of escapist fantasy in novels, naval spectacles,[16] military manoeuvres and royal events. Even for the poorest classes, militarist sentiment offered popular forms of escapism[17]. This coincided with the transition to the ever-increasing scientific professionalization of armies during this period, evident for example in the foundation of officer training schools. However, it also clearly coincided with the challenges to male dominance in the public sphere by women – it is plausible to suggest that the increasing sentimental depiction of the masculine sphere of the military was related to this trend. How this sentimental image of the soldier rendered armies more appealing to women, who were among the consumers of this new military leisure culture, in the audience for military reviews and fleet launches or purchasers of the romanticised postcards of soldiers doing their military service remains to be investigated; clearly this sentimentalization of Europe's widespread varieties of pre-war militarism, however, affected how future war was imagined.

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[14] »Es wird ein aussichtsloser Kampf werden, dennoch muss er geführt werden, da so eine alte Monarchie und so eine glorreiche Armee nicht ruhmlos untergehen können. So sehe ich einer trüben Zukunft und einem trüben Ausklingen meines Lebens entgegen.« Cited in: Günther Kronenbitter, »Krieg im Frieden«. Die Führung der k.u.k.-Armee und die Großmachtpolitik Österreich-Ungarns 1906–1914, Munich 2003, p. 462.

[15] Nathaniel Wood, Kings of the Air. Aviation, Backwardness, and Modernity in the Polish Lands, in: IREX STG Research Brief, October 2010: http://www.irex.org/resource/kings-air-aviation-backwardness-and-modernity-polish-lands-early-20th-century-research-brie. See also: Nathaniel Wood, Becoming Metropolitan. Urban Selfhood and the Making of Modern Cracow, DeKalb, IL 2010, esp. p. 129–160.

[16] Jan Rüger, The Great Naval Game. Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire, Cambridge 2007.

The third pan-European theme visible in multiple societies in the pre-war period was the rise of the public media spectacle – whereby the public engaged with the state and often a national narrative as well, conveyed through the presentation of history and nation through spectacular collective events that gathered mass crowds, which included military displays, royal weddings or funerals or historical pageants. These events were, in turn, conveyed to an even wider audience through the media. These »spectacles« by definition sought to emphasise the spectacular – the battle, the military struggle – never the mundane aspects of daily national life. And they transcended class identities and divisions due to the new mass literacy and mass citizenship – as did many of these pan-European trends. Increased leisure time and longevity were part of this new relationship between the state and the public spectacle – the pre-war idea of war was affected too as historical wars became part of public identity.

The fourth pan-European trend was that of Social Darwinism, which drew upon perceptions of Empire and race that provoked fears of racial decline and of competition; this was one of a series of contemporary apocalyptic visions of the future which also included scenarios of socialist revolution, millenarian collapse and demographic decline, provoking concomitant war and civil unrest[18]. Again, this influenced how future wars were anticipated and attributed to them a biological – and scientific – *raison d'être* that had not been part of how the public viewed war before. This was closely linked to a widespread fear of invasion visible in the pre-1914 European imagination of future wars, which was linked to the military cult of the offensive that dominated military thinking before 1914 (and indeed after the outbreak of the Great War as well). It was also clearly a corollary of fears of what impact new technologies might have on war – the spread of the railways which allowed for more rapid movement of troops made invasion seem more likely and faster. Another factor leading to invasion fears was the advent of airpower – this introduced the third dimension to war which could now be waged in the air as well as on land or at sea. It made invasion from the air possible – as H.G. Wells highlighted in his pre-war novel »The War in the Air« (1908). However, it is also evident that invasion fears were linked to the fact that many of the Great Powers had spent the late nineteenth century in practising invasion warfare in the colonies. What is clear from this fear of invasion is the extent to which technological »progress« raised a sense of alienation – the speed of change, the rapidity with which territory could be amalgamated, swallowed up, taken over, was a source of fear, as well as of potential and awe. For all of these reasons, future war was envisaged as an »invasive«, offensive experience.

All of these pan-European trends affected how a future war was envisaged; they interacted to create the framework for understanding military conflict before 1914. What pre-war populations *at the time* imagined a future war would be like; what their anticipations and expectations of war were, deserves examination. After all, in July/August 1914, decision-makers and soldiers on all sides subjectively entered the war they expected and not the war we now know, with the benefit of hindsight, actually took place. We still know far too little about what they meant when they referred to »war.« In many aspects, their imagined war differed greatly to that of 1914–1918, and, although the evidence presented here suggests that contemporaries, and especially the military, were not as naïve or ignorant as historians have for a long time suggested, this contrast between the unimaginable nature of the war that came and the war that had been anticipated was absolutely central to the disorientation that contemporaries who lived through the Great War experienced. Moreover, their imagined future more generally – the future that did not happen because of the nature of the conflict that broke out in 1914 which radically interrupted peacetime expectations of what was to come – merits historical study as it is only through this kind of examination that we can begin to understand how their expectations shaped their decision-making and their understanding of events.

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[17] Jakob Vogel, Nationen im Gleichschritt. Der Kult der »Nation in Waffen« in Deutschland und Frankreich 1871–1914, Göttingen 1997.

[18] Emilio Gentile, L'Apocalypse de la modernité. La Grande Guerre et l'homme nouveau, Paris 2011.

It is this question of how war was imagined before 1914 that is the focus here of this special edition. The articles largely cover three major themes, which are not strictly separate, but rather overlapping and complementary: imagining war; pre-war military planning; and pre-war military practices. Part I, imagining war, focuses mainly on the image of war and the projections of future warfare among the military. In their examination of professional military discourses in Britain and France, Andreas Rose and Benoist Couliou clearly show that the relatively realistic understandings of what modern war was likely to resemble that were held by mainly (although not only) younger military professionals, drawing upon their largely accurate analysis of the trends visible in pre-1914 conflicts, did not influence concrete military planning, because their warnings collided with key social values and perceived norms that were integral to both the self-image of soldierly masculinity and the status of the military in society. Their views were not judged unsound on military technical grounds but rather because they clashed with cultural understandings of how the military saw itself. There are clear similarities here between these findings by Rose and Couliou for the British and French cases and contemporary German military views concerning the likely nature of future warfare: the German General Staff realised from the experience of the Franco-Prussian war that the advances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that it was highly probable that in future war might be long and exhausting, leading to total resource mobilisation, and to a shortage of economic and manpower resources[19]. This was, in fact, the reason why they opted for a highly risky »short war« strategy, exemplified in the Schlieffen Plan[20]. Faced with similar challenges, the British and French military planners also tried to respond in what they saw as the appropriate manner, within the framework of the central belief tenets of nineteenth century military doctrine. This resulted in a partially lucid recognition of the realities to be expected on the battlefields of any future conflict on the one hand and a lack of practical preparedness on the other. They recognised that new weaponry and technology would mean that victory would cost more lives than had previously been the case; however, they believed that an active troop leader would still be able, through skilled, focused training, to successfully establish an advantageous, strong position, which would allow for a breakthrough of the enemy lines. In many respects, the articles by Couliou and Rose highlight the extent to which some military theorists and, in particular, young officers, were closer to the pessimistic and realistic war prognoses of the likes of Jean de Bloch or Norman Angell, whose predictions on future warfare are discussed in the article by Peter Farrugia, than was previously thought. They had much in common in terms of what they expected a future war to be like; where they dramatically differed was in the conclusions they drew regarding how to respond to this new reality.

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[19] On this see: MULLIGAN, The Origins of the First World War (as in n. 3), p. 110–111.

[20] Stig FÖRSTER, Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871–1914. Metakritik eines Mythos, in: Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen 54 (1995), p. 61–95.

While De Bloch's »The Future of War« and Angell's »The Great Illusion« are considered the leading literary classics of pre-1914 apocalyptic understanding of war, Friedrich von Bernhardi's 1912 work »Deutschland und der nächste Krieg«, later published in English translation as »Germany and the Next War«, epitomizes the promotional writing of the German national right that sought to affirm and endorse war. As Gerd Krumeich's article here shows, Bernhardi's case in many ways highlights the extent to which the First World War has distorted our interpretation of the pre-1914 world. The reality was that Bernhardi's publisher Klett-Cotta claimed at the end of 1912 that the book was practically unsellable; it was only when it was used by the Entente as part of its wartime propaganda against Germany, and publicised by Britain, in particular, as a book that revealed Germany's aggressive nature, that »Germany and the Next War« came to be considered as representative of public opinion in Germany. Its notoriety is thus less evidence of a widespread German pre-war war-mongering mentality than of the power of wartime propaganda. However, examining the extent of the influence of militarist publications upon the political decision-makers before 1914, Krumeich also emphasises that the scale of influence was not inevitably reflected in high sales figures and that one should therefore not dismiss Bernhardi's impact on German elites on the basis of his pre-war sales figures in Germany.

The question of what motivated decision-making elites remains a controversial one. Indeed, the most recent historiographical research on the causes of the war remains divided in its conclusions. However, what is clear is that none of the Great Powers sought the actual kind of total war which emerged from the escalation of the Austro-Hungarian-Serbian conflict into a European and subsequently a world war, even if everywhere, and particularly on the side of the Central Powers, there was a fatal readiness to accept the risk of a general war breaking out. This famous pre-war »politics of calculated risk« was, in part, based upon the idea that a general war would be widely viewed as an extremely negative outcome and precisely because of this one could use extensive war preparations to play politics and gain leverage. Yet this view of a general war was, in reality, not shared by all European actors. Depending on one's outlook and geo-political situation, a general war could appear as the only way to achieve important goals. This was particularly true for nations which did not have a state, such as in the case of Poland, as Pascal Trees convincingly shows. Parts of the Polish elite believed that the European alliance system meant that a fundamental revision of the status quo in Eastern and Central Europe could only be brought about through a major war; this was the cost that would have to be paid to re-establish a Polish state. This was a viewpoint that was only ever held by a fraction of the Polish population; however, it was one that objectively proved well-founded and which raises the question to what extent the First World War must also be understood as an »aggregation of regional conflicts«[21].

Of course, the kinds of expectations that surrounded the idea of future war (whether it was seen in the conditional or future tense) cannot be solely ascertained from military theory debates. As important are the concrete military preparations that were made for the possible eventuality of war. Here we see the military's abstract ideal image of future warfare, their imagined expectations, take concrete form. These pre-war military preparations are the focus of the second part of this special edition, examined through a set of particular case studies. The emphasis here is less upon the »major« strategic war plans, for example the Schlieffen Plan on the German side or the French Plan XVII, which have long been the focus of classical historical studies of the pre-war period, as well as of recent new research[22]. Rather the articles that follow examine less well-known examples of war planning and preparations which are highly revealing of the military planners' conceptualisation of war and understanding of contemporary developments. These military preparations did not operate in a vacuum but were greatly influenced by the advent of the mass media, with its concomitant sentimentalization of the military, as well as by modern commercial capitalism, and greater leisure time, as the article by Stéphane Tison on pre-1914 military manoeuvres in France shows. Tison convincingly asserts that the major French annual military manoeuvres, which rehearsed army battle plans each year, had less to do with military expediency and far more to do with the logic of performance – these were staged as outdoor theatrical events intended to display the strength of the French armed forces to the general public, as well as the unity of the nation and the army. These events thus had a key domestic performative function, in terms of integrating the military into the Third Republic, which – and broad sections of the officer corps were aware of this – in no way related to preparing the French army for war. It was widely recognised that these manoeuvres contributed little to readying the French soldier for modern conflict. This conclusion can also be extended to similar war preparations by other armed forces as well. Clearly the military was subject to domestic and media pressures that it could not escape.

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[21] Hew Strachan, The First World War as a Global War, in: First World War Studies 1/1 (2010), p. 3–14.

Domestic political pressures of a different kind are the focus of Justin Dolan Stover's contribution on Ireland's position within Britain's defence policy before the Great War. The United Kingdom's policies regarding Ireland's position in the overall defence scheme for the British Isles were deeply influenced by a British fear of invasion, coupled with a deep mistrust of the Irish population, who were seen as potential supporters of any invading enemy force. As a result, Ireland took on considerable importance in the overall defence scheme for the British Isles. The suspicion of the Irish population and the way this impacted upon war planners offers a clear illustration of the »geography of unease« which was a constant aspect of European security policy before the Great War.

The contributions from Franziska Heimburger and Gabriela A. Frei examine pre-war plans with regard to specific types of warfare: coalition warfare and maritime blockade. Heimburger's article focuses upon the pre-1914 plans for the provision and use of translators as part of the Anglo-French preparations after the Entente Cordiale for the eventuality of coalition warfare. Frei investigates the pre-1914 British conception of future maritime war. Both these articles, which address technical and tactical topics, reveal a range of important insights relating to broader themes. Heimburger shows that the first attempts to create a shared Anglo-French policy regarding the use of interpreters in the event of a joint war effort dates to 1905, and that from 1911, these efforts became more intensive, with the recruitment and preparation of a pool of qualified English-French translators becoming a key military language policy. Frei highlights the extent to which pre-1914 international law, and the complex questions it raised with regard to the contested right of seizure of contraband and the status of neutral trade at sea during wartime, mattered to British pre-war naval planning, as well as showing the degree of uncertainty in Great Britain as to its position in a future war at sea.

The final section of this special edition covers perhaps the most prescient aspects of the pre-1914 era. No investigation of the conceptualisation or imagination of war in the early twentieth century can ignore the pre-1914 conflicts that effectively acted as a laboratory for war violence, turning it into a multi-faceted phenomenon, and which also both anticipated and left their mark on the Great War itself. These pre-1914 conflicts were crucial in framing how contemporaries understood war[23]. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 is the focus of the articles by

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[22] See HAMILTON, HERWIG (ed.), War Planning 1914 (as in n. 3).

[23] As a particularly good example of the value of this approach see also Olivier COSSON, L'ennemi viendra: 1899–1914. L'armée, la Mandchourie et la Grande Guerre, Paris 2013.

Alexandre Sumpf and Naoko Shimazu. While Sumpf emphasises the fact that, for the Russians, the lessons drawn from the war only had a limited impact, Shimazu's article highlights the war experience of Japanese soldiers, and how, after the end of the conflict, Manchuria developed into a Japanese *lieu de mémoire*, at the centre of a Japanese cult of the war dead. She argues that there are strong structural similarities between the war experiences and socio-psychological coping strategies that developed in the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War.

Matteo Caponi's article focuses upon the case of the Italian conquest of Libya in 1911–1912, looking at the ways in which religion was used to make sense of the conflict and to place it within a meaningful belief system framework. He convincingly shows to what extent the Roman Catholic church in Italy, which at this time had a very tense relationship with the Italian state that dated back to the circumstances in which the state was founded, was caught up in the patriotic popular mobilisation for war: the church had only very limited room to distance itself from the conflict and therefore accepted the situation. The war thus instigated a new relationship between nationalism and the church in Italy, in which the rhetoric of a holy war was used to legitimate state decisions regarding the Italo-Libyan conflict. This fact ultimately served to bolster the war's popular appeal. By revealing this development, Caponi highlights the extent of the progress made in integrating the Roman Catholic Church within European nation states on the eve of the First World War, as well as the ways in which the Italian conflict in Libya served as an important precursor for the role that the Catholic Church would play throughout Europe in the mobilisation for war three years later.

Of all the conflicts immediately preceding the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 were undoubtedly of particularly important influence. They were not only the last major clash before the 1914–1918 conflagration, they also took place within Europe, in contrast to the war in Libya or the Russo-Japanese War, even if, by the standards of the day, the Balkans were also considered as a peripheral region. Most importantly, the Balkan Wars revealed the limits of the possibility of European Great Power diplomacy in managing conflict and thus marked, as the most recent research has correctly highlighted, an important step on the road to the First World War[24]. In the context of this special edition, the effects of the Balkan Wars upon the European powers' foreign and security policies matter less than the ways in which these wars were interpreted and how this impacted upon the European public imagination and the popular understanding of war. The article by John Horne is of particular value in this regard: first, he shows very clearly the extent to which the Balkan Wars were widely represented in the media, with readers of the mainstream European press at the time able to construct a very accurate picture of the realities of modern war, such as trench warfare, from newspaper war reports. He also shows the extent to which this press coverage, which depicted the scale of war violence against the civilian populations, gave readers a sense of the inherent radicalisation tendencies in modern conflict. Second, John Horne's article reveals the extent to which contemporary observers, particularly professional ones, had a tendency to see the Balkan Wars in selective terms, interpreting events in ways that served to support beliefs they already held. For example, a successful attack would be interpreted as evidence of the principle of the superiority of the offensive over the defensive; similarly, the continual failure of attackers to take well-defended positions was attributed to a lack of »offensive spirit«.

In a certain sense, this is the leitmotiv which runs throughout all the articles in this special edition: the co-existence before 1914 of relatively realistic, partially developed conceptions of how modern war was evolving, with an evident inability among contemporaries to respond to its challenges, particularly its technical advances. Yet before we accuse pre-1914 populations of inadequacy, it is important to point out that our own understanding of what would have constituted the »correct« response is one that originates in the post-military cultural landscape of

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[24] See Mulligan, The Origins of the First World War (as in n. 3), p. 74–91.

Western European society which itself has its roots in the major catastrophes of the twentieth century – the two world wars. For pre-1914 societies, in contrast, and, in particular, for their militaries, the cultural hegemony of an ideal of heroic masculinity was a powerful social norm. Indeed, pre-war militaries depended upon this for their status; its widespread permeation of the culture, in turn, helps to explain both the stability and the stasis evident in how the military imagined war. Operative and tactical thinking remained set in unchanging nineteenth century frameworks. In this regard, pre-1914 conflicts set an important and ominous precedent for 1914: the reasons why militaries were unprepared for them, and the difficulties that they displayed in adapting to the nature of modern warfare during these conflicts, would be repeated with the outbreak of the First World War. Indeed, they would continue throughout the 1914–1918 conflict, compounded by the way in which the Great War rapidly evolved: the war of 1914 was not that of 1916 or 1918 and each new phase brought the need for new adaptations that challenged older mindsets.

Perhaps the most important point, however, is to emphasise that to those living before 1914, the future remained an open book. They saw a major European war not in the future tense but rather in the conditional, as a possibility, one among many, which in the context of Europe's long period of peace that dated back to 1871, did not appear a particularly probable one. Individuals saw war as something distant and not pertinent to their own immediate lives. In this regard, historians should be wary of considering themselves wiser through hindsight than the historical subjects about whom they are writing.