

The Vexing Question of Prussia

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Introduction

Reading **Adam Tooze**'s powerpoints for his *War in Germany, 1618-1648* <<https://adamtooze.com/2018/01/18/war-germany-1618-2018/>> course, and thinking about the Vexing Question of Prussia in World History...

For a bit over the first half of the 1870-2016 Long 20th Century, global history was profoundly shaped by the peculiarity of *Prussia*. The standard account of this peculiarity—this *sonderweg*, sundered way, separate Prussian path—has traditionally seen it as having four aspects. Prussia—and the “small German” national state of which it was the nucleus—managed to simultaneously, over 1865-1945:

1. wage individual military campaigns with extraordinary success: in campaigns it should have won it conquered quickly and overwhelmingly; in campaigns it should have narrowly lost it won

decisively; in campaigns it should have lost it turned them into long destructive abattoirs.

2. wage wars no sane statesman would have entered and—unless its first quick victories were immediately sealed by a political agreement—lose them catastrophically, via total neglect of grand-strategical and strategical considerations, a failure to take anything other than the shortest-term view of logistics, and a stubborn eagerness to turn the country into an abattoir out of a refusal to recognize that war is a continuation of politics.
3. via the role, authority and interests of the military-service nobility societal caste, divert the currents of political development from the expected Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, French, Belgian, Dutch, Swiss, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish path of growing political and social democracy into a separate channel, the *sonderweg*, of authoritarian rule at home in the short-run material interest of a business-landlord-service nobility class and caste, and of desired conquest and demographic expansion in the European "near abroad".
4. engage in continent-spanning systematic patterns and campaigns of terror, destruction, murder, and genocide that went far beyond anything other European powers engaged in within Europe, and even went far beyond the brutalities of colonial conquest and rule that European powers engaged in outside the continent.

Did Prussia—and the “small German” national state of which it became the core—in fact follow a separate and unusual path, with respect to economic, political, cultural, social development, relative to other western European national states in the arc from France to Sweden? Do these four aspects as components rightly summarize the *sonderweg*? What is their origin, and what is the relation between them?

This is the vexed question of Prussia...

A Persistent “Prussian Way of War”? Sometime “Aggressive Excellence”

The first thing to note is that Prussian operational excellence—winning campaigns it ought to have lost, and winning decisively and overwhelmingly campaigns it ought to have narrowly won—did not exist for a century before 1866 and the Prussian victory at Königgrätz in the Austro-Prussian war. In 1864 the Prussian army did not cover itself with glory in the short Austro-Prussian war against Denmark. In 1815 the Prussian army had the distinction of losing the last two battles anybody ever lost to Napoleon: the battles of Ligny and Wavre. Also in 1815, staff confusion in arranging the order of march and the consequent delayed arrival of Prussian forces at Waterloo turned the Duke of Wellington’s victory from a walk in the park into a damned near run thing and a bloody mess. In the rest of the Napoleonic and French Revolutionary wars, the performance of the Prussian army was: competent but undistinguished in 1813-4, the most disastrous in history in 1806, less than competent from 1792-5.

You have to go back to 1762 and the wars of Friedrich II Hohenzollern (the Great) to see any evidence of operational excellence, or, indeed, more than bare competence. Looking backward we can see Friedrich II as the culmination of a line of military-political development through Friedrich Willem and Friedrich I back to Friedrich Willem (“the Great Elector”). Thus there appears to be a century-long near-hiatus in anything that could be called a distinctive Prussian military-political-sociological pattern in the society and polity as a whole, outside of the military, the bureaucracy, and their service nobility, which continued their Friedrichian traditions, to some extent at least

Building “Aggressive Excellence”

Trapped on the Northern European Plain

In 1618 Georg Willem Hohenzollern became Electoral Margrave of Brandenburg under the Holy Roman Emperor (from his father John Sigismund) and Duke of East Prussia under the King of Poland (from his mother Anna). He married Elisabeth Charlotte Wittelsbach, brother of Palatine Electoral Count and King of Bohemia Friedrich Wittelsbach. Georg Willem and Anna’s only son Friedrich Willem Hohenzollern was born in 1620. He grew up watching his father’s and his uncle’s principalities become devastated and depopulated ruins. His elders failed to avoid the fate of puppets in the Thirty Years War. Austrian, Spanish, French, Swedish, and other armies marched where they would; stealing, raping, and killing as they wished.

With neither defensible national borders nor cultural and linguistic differences vis-a-vis its neighbors to serve as anchors, Friedrich Willem’s Brandenburg-Prussia was an obvious candidate to disappear into annexation by some larger and more powerful neighbor building an early-modern nation-state. Yet under his 1640-1688 reign, he and his counselors built up the economy, with canals and other commercially-oriented internal improvements, with subsidies for industrial development, and with very strong encouragement of immigration, especially skilled Huguenot craftsmen expelled from France by the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. From a low point of about 600,000 in 1648, population of his old realm doubled and land won in wars brought the total population up to 1.5 million by his death. He and his counselors built up central authority, convincing the *Juncker* nobility to dissolve their representative assembly in return for permanent exemption from taxation, the entrenchment of serfdom, and the granting of jurisdiction on their estates.

The Professional Army

Most important, perhaps, for the future of Prussia and later Germany, he raised a professional army that amounted to 40,000 men. That was one in every nine adult men. Maintaining such an army was a very heavy burden on the early modern state—even with substantial subventions paid to Prussia by its Britain and other sometime allies in return for Prussian contributions to their campaigns. Yet even so Prussian forces remained much smaller than those of its neighbors and near-neighbors Sweden, of Russia, of Austria, of France, Hanover (after the accession of its Electoral Duke to the throne of Great Britain), and even of Poland.

The Prussian army thus needed to fight in a different way.

The Aggressive Army: Fehrbellin & *Sequellae*

As Robert Citino tells the story, the paradigm became to always emulate the campaign of Fehrbellin. There a surprise two-week march starting May 26, 1775 at rapid speed brought the Prussian army into surprise close contact with the invading Swedes. Bribery persuaded local officials to hold a drunken banquet for the occupying Swedish high command the night of the attack. The Prussian vanguard gained entrance to the fortress of Rathenau by pretending to be a Swedish patrol fleeing the Prussians at their heels. The regrouping Swedish army moving backward to reorganize through marshy country without good maps found itself trapped against the Rhin River at Fehrbellin while its engineers frantically tried to rebuild a bridge. The Swedes with 11000 soldiers and 28 cannon had nearly twice the numbers, nearly three times the artillery, and had more experience. But they were thinking not about what they could do to the Prussians but what the Prussians were about to do to them. Disorganized and badly arrayed, they lost 1000—twice Prussian losses—on the day of Fehrbellin, June 18, 1775. And after a two-week pursuit the entire Swedish invading army had

been driven out of the country, with only 3000 out of 14000 still with the colors.

Speed. Surprise. Attack—preferably flank attacks from unexpected directions made possible by speed and thus attaining surprise, but attack in any case. To fail to attack at every reasonable—and some unreasonable—opportunities would be to doom the army to a war of attrition, and then defeat. And officers needed to be able to grasp when the moment to attack came, and then to move fast when the moment opened. This meant that authority had to move downward: rather than waiting for the high command to tell them what to do, lower-level commanders had to understand the grand plan, keep themselves aware of the situation, and strike while the iron was hot—relying on their adjacent peers and on the high command itself to observe and adjust in reaction to opportunities. How could this hold together? It could hold together only if officers at all levels thought sufficiently alike that they could reliably predict what their subordinates, their peers, and their superiors were about to do given the situation. And that meant a common training that placed a high value on: speed, surprise, and attack.

Flank marches, night marches, clever misdirections, move fast, use surprise, the “indirect approach”, great captains seeing and grasping an opportunity and demonstrating their excellence by winning stunning victories at low cost as they get and remain inside their opponents’ OODA—observation-orientation-decision-action—loops.¹ That makes for extremely readable battlecentric military history: lots of plot, lots of surprise, lots of reversals, lots of *hubris* and *nemesis*, lots of human excellence deployed for us to admire, lots of less-clever and less-agile losers to scorn. And, indeed, from 1600 to 1871 Prussia grew by war after war.

¹ **John R. Boyd** (1995): *The Essence of Winning and Losing* <<https://www.danford.net/boyd/essence.htm>>

It is hard to imagine any other pattern for warfare that could have allowed Brandenburg-Prussia to survive and grow as a state from 1740 to 1870. Neighboring states with different patterns did not: Prussia swallowed them up. From 1645 to 1945—with the embarrassing hiatus—the Prussian way of war led the Prussian and then the “small German” nation-state’s armies, at the operational level, to punch well above for the weight. For, as Adam Tooze puts it, quoting boxer Mike Tyson: “Everybody has a plan—until they get punched in the face...” There was a 150-year tradition there before 1765.

The Growth of Prussia

The state started with the Margravate of Brandenburg as a vassal of the Holy Roman Emperor and the Duchy of (East) Prussia as a vassal of the King of Poland. It had gained the (small) Dutchies of Cleves and Mark and the (very small) County of Ravensberg in 1614 as the settlement of the War of the Jülich Succession. In 1653 it gained Eastern Pomerania. In 1657 it gained sovereignty over East Prussia, which became independent of the Kingdom of Poland... In 1680 it gained the Prince-bishopric of Magdeburg. In 1701 it gained acknowledgement of the ruler’s status as King-in-Prussia. In 1715 it gained the east-of-Oder part of Swedish Pomerania. In 1742 it gained Silesia—which was to become one of Germany’s two industrial centers.

Then under Friedrich II Hohenzollern “The Great” Prussia fought not short-and-lively but extended-and-costly wars. But it won—it held on to its territory, most importantly Silesia.

Then the first era of aggressive operational excellence comes to an end. Prussia is not so much victorious on the battlefield as just very very lucky.

The whole edifice could have come crashing down after a sufficiently large disaster. It almost did after the defeat at Jena-Auerstadt in 1806. It is

true that in many ways Prussia was the lucky gambler with a system, attributing to its system what is mostly the result of luck: Friedrich II Hohenzollern (“the Great”) was even more so “the Lucky”: in most parallel-universe want-of-a-nail counterfactuals we can imagine, he winds up either dead on a battlefield or a penniless exile, and is judged as much a historical failure as Charles I de Valois (“le Téméraire) of Burgundy.

Yet Prussia, via its alliances and diplomacy, grew—ultimately, that is. Over 1772-95 it gained West Prussia and Posen as its spoils from the Partition of Poland. Then Napoleon cuts it down to size after the catastrophic tactical and operational defeat of Jena-Auerstadt, and the subsequent pursuits. And in 1815 Prussia gained, with the collapse of Napoleon, North Saxony, pieces of Westphalia, and the Rhineland—where included the Ruhr Valley, which was to become Germany’s second great industrial region. The victorious allies wanted to punish Napoleon’s willing ally Saxony. And Austrian Chancellor Metternich wanted Prussia to lose massively from any French aggressive expansion in the Rhineland, to ensure that in the future Prussia would stand with Austria in the first line of those containing France.

A less successful diplomatic decision than that of giving Prussia a great industrial region at the start of the 19th century in order to contain France can hardly be imagined.

Yet the 1763-1815 territorial gains were not due to operational excellence. That had been lost. Indeed, Prussia would have been unlikely to have been offered its 1815 territorial gains had Metternich and the Austrians seen it as still punching as much above its weight as it had in the years up to 1764.

And yet operational excellence was, somehow, revived after 1865.

The Prussian way of war did and does exercise a somewhat sinister fascination.

Why “somewhat sinister”? Because we have to recognize Friedrich II’s was not, in the end, a terribly good or effective way of making war. 500,000 Prussians died in war in battle, of disease, as civilians murdered by passing soldiers, or as civilians starved in the aftermath of one of the many scorched-earth campaigns. And his victory and the preservation of the state was, in the end, more a matter of luck than of skillful strategy. Prussia drew to an inside straight from 1740-1763 in the reign of Friedrich II Hohenzollern. And the lesson the inherited military-political culture drew from that was: always draw to inside straights.

Other Prussian Military Traditions

This reinforces other military traditions passed down from history that Robert Citino sees as also key to the Prusso-German army of the 20th Century. Perhaps most prominent is the idea of the “death ride”: the *Totenrit*. If the operational doctrine of attempting to emulate Fehrbellin did not work, try it again: “what it costs, it will cost.” With enough elan and a willingness to take high enough casualties, victory ought to be achievable. This made defeating Prussia-Germany so damned costly.

The Prusso-German way of war was always unwilling to recognize that war is a continuation of politics by other means, and the game may well not be worth the candle. Hence there was an enormous unwillingness to cut losses. Instead, the default was to roll the iron dice of war for another campaign one more time—no matter how low the chances of success or how costly the effort—in the belief that this time, perhaps, will and *élan* would carry the day, and speed, surprise, and aggression would derange the enemy and at least win one more campaign.

Thus the second of the features of the Prusso-German way of war is:

wage wars no sane statesman would have entered and—unless its first quick victories were immediately sealed by a political agreement—lose them catastrophically, via total neglect of grand-strategical and strategical considerations, a failure to take anything other than the shortest-term view of logistics, and a stubborn eagerness to turn the country into an abattoir out of a refusal to recognize that war is a continuation of politics...

Rolling the Iron Dice of War Until You Lose

After 1850 the inherited pattern was to cause Prussia and Prussia-Germany to role the iron dice of war five more times: first—at favorable odds—against Denmark in 1864; second—at unfavorable odds—against Austria in 1866; third—at unfavorable odds—against France in 1866; fourth—at very unfavorable odds—against great powers France, Russia, Britain, and America in 1914-8; and fifth and last—at ludicrously unfavorable odds—against France, Russia, Britain, and hyperpower America in 1939-45. Make a lot of high-stakes bets at unfavorable odds, and gambler's ruin is the result. By 1945 following the Prusso-German way of war had lost far more than it could ever have reasonably hoped to gain.

The Knot of War, 1914-1920

Nikita Sergeyevitch Khrushchev to John F. Kennedy (1962):

We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose...

The Narrow Military-Affairs View

We shifted our focus from economics to political economy: we needed to look not just at technology, production, organization, and exchange, but also at how people governing themselves and others tried to regulate the economy to preserve or produce a good society, or a society good for them. Then we shifted our focus to the politics of empire: we needed to look not just at how peoples and their elites governed themselves, but how they governed others.

Each of these two shifts brought us away from processes and factors that seem almost inevitable—in which the actions of individuals mostly cancel out, and if an opportunity was not seized by one person at one date it would have been seized by another soon after. Each of these two moved us closer to that part of history where individual actions matter: where individuals and their luck can divert history for good, either because of their place in the society or because of the waves of belief and

expectations that they set in motion. And so the history became less a flowering of long-planted seeds and more choice and chance.

Now we take a further step in that direction: into politico-military affairs, where choice and chance is dominant. This fits awkwardly into an economic history. But it is necessary. For we cannot understand what the world was like in 1918 without looking at World War I. The world in 1914 had been a growing, substantially peaceful, prosperous—with problems, but prosperous—world, in which it was not irrational to be optimistic about human civilization. The world, especially Europe, in the ashes after World War I was different.

Roots of War

The Economic Illogic of War

Perhaps the saddest book on my bookshelf is Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion*. If, Angell argued:

conquest and extension of territory is the main road of moral and material progress... then... the Austrian should be better off than the Switzer... If a nation's wealth is really subject to military confiscation... the wealth of those small states should be insecure indeed—and Belgian national stocks stand 20 points higher than the German... It is such quite simple questions as these, and the quite plain facts which underlie them which will lead to sounder conceptions in this matter on the part of the peoples...

It was, Angell rightly pointed out, much cheaper to make and trade for what you want than to build war material and then spend the blood of your people to extract it. War and empire to become rich was, Angell rightly pointed out, profoundly stupid in the age of destructive industrial war. War and empire to provide a greater domain for the king to rule or duchies for younger sons was, Angell thought, no longer a motive for anyone. And

war and empire to make people worship God the right way was, Angell thought, another habit that humanity had outgrown. It was not.

Prologue to World War I: The Boer War

Starting in 1899 Britain waged a War of Choice in South Africa: the Boer War.

From the 1860s the expansion of European empires was coupled with a willingness to hand over power over local affairs to locals—to white locals—Canada in 1867, Australia in 1901, New Zealand in 1907, and South Africa in 1910, even though the majority of the white population of the newly-established Union had been at war with the British Empire only a decade before, when Britain had sent 250,000 soldiers to South Africa to convince 200,000 Boers that they did not want to govern themselves but rather to be ruled from London.

The British navy occupied the Cape of Good Hope at the start of the 1800s. The Dutch-Afrikaans speaking Boers of earlier Dutch colonization responded by moving north. And there, in the Boer republic of the Transvaal in 1886, they found gold. Miners and speculators carried Johannesburg in a few years to a population of 100,000. The Boer farmers watched nervously as the numbers of the *uitlanders* grew. They denied immigrants the vote. They taxed the gold industry. They gave a monopoly over dynamite sales to Alfred Nobel's company. Their President Paul Krueger sought a railway line to the sea independent of British control.

British Cape Colony boss Cecil Rhodes sought to overthrow the Boer government by coup d'état—the 1895 Jameson Raid. After the raid's failure the Boer republics began buying and stockpiling rifles. Britain reinforced its troops in the Cape Colony and Natal. Colonial Secretary

Joseph Chamberlain—father of 1930s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain—preached the annexation of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. And in 1899 Joe Chamberlin he sent an ultimatum: equal rights for British citizens in the Transvaal, or war.

What, after all, did the mightiest empire the world had ever seen have to fear from the two small Transvaal and Orange Free State republics of unindustrialized farmers? More than you would think.

The Boer army attacked, besieging British garrisons in towns named Mafeking, Ladysmith, and Kimberley, and defeating British relief columns in battles at places named Spion Kop, Vaal Kranz, Magersfontein, Stormberg, and the Tugela River. 600 of Sir William Gatacre's 3,000 troops were captured at Stormberg, as British troops fled after being sent up a near-cliff against entrenched Boers with rifles. 1400 of Lord Methuen's 14,000 were killed or wounded at Magersfontein, as they assaulted the Boer trench line. Buller's 21,000 suffered 1200 killed and wounded to the Boer's 50 in a failed attempt to cross the Tugela River. Short and victorious Joseph Chamberlain's war was not.

Any calculation of costs and benefits would have told the British cabinet to talk peace: It was time to stand down, in return for promises from the Boers to treat British miners and prospectors as white people should be treated.

Instead, a quarter of a million British soldiers were sent to South Africa starting in February 1900: the same proportional manpower commitment as two million would be for the U.S today. This gave the British overwhelming numbers: a five to one edge even over the entire Boer people-in-arms. And the British sent a competent general—Field Marshal Lord Roberts. Orange Free State capital Bloemfontein fell on March 13, 1900, Johannesburg fell on May 31, and Transvaal capital Pretoria fell on June 5.

But the war was not over. Defeated in open battle, the Boers turned to guerrilla warfare. The dispersed Boers waged a guerrilla insurgency against the British for a year and a half, and at one point they captured the British second-in-command, Lord Methuen.

What does an invading military superpower do when its troops are faced with a guerrilla insurgency in a land where they do not speak the language? The British invented the concentration camp. Are guerrillas active in an area? Round up everyone—everyone—and stick them behind barbed wire, don't feed them too well, and don't spend too much time worrying about sanitation. Build small forts and construct wire fences to reduce the guerrillas' mobility. Roughly 30,000 Boers, most of them children under 16, died in the concentration camps. Nearly 100,000 people died in the Boer War: in addition to the 30,000 Boer civilians, perhaps 8,000 British battle deaths, 14,000 British soldiers dead of disease, and 10,000 Boer soldiers. And perhaps 30,000 indigenous Africans—nobody counted them.

Britain mobilized 2.5% of its adult male population for the war, and about one in ten of those died.

The 1900 British general election was a huge political victory for the warmongering Conservatives led by Lord Salisbury: a “Khaki Election”. A peace treaty ending the war was signed in 1902, annexing the two Boer republics to the British Empire. But by 1910 South Africa was a white self-governing dominion with equality for Afrikaans and English as official languages, and with a voting population about as well-disposed toward Westminster as, well, the population of Ireland was in 1910.

Would it not have been better if all this could have been avoided?

Nationalism

The people on the ground did not think it would have been better. They were nationalists. What is a nationalist? Well, consider German social scientist, German liberal, for his day, social scientist Max Weber, who wrote in his “The National State and Economic Policy” that:

The German character of the East... should be protected.... The German peasants and day-labourers of the East are not being pushed off the land in an open conflict by politically-superior opponents... [but] are getting the worst of it in the silent and dreary struggle of everyday economic existence... abandoning their homeland to a race which stands on a lower level... moving towards a dark future in which they will sink without trace.... The economic policy of a German state, and that standard of value adopted by a German economic theorist, can therefore be nothing other than a German policy and a German standard.... Our successors will... hold us responsible... for the amount of elbow-room we conquer for them in the world...

Weber was a dark-haired square-headed low-melanin Caucasian male who spoke German. He greatly feared dark-haired square-headed low-melanin Caucasian males—who spoke Polish. He looked identical to a Pole. Indeed, the post-World War II West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was supposed to have said, of the “Prussians” of eastern Germany, that they were simply Poles who had forgotten their grandfathers.

Forty-eight years after Weber's speech, the largest single military command of German-speakers ever—Adolf Hitler's *Heeresgruppe Sud*—would be fighting an even larger army in the Ukraine in a war seeking to win “elbow-room” for the German *volk*. Its commander would be a man named at birth Fritz Erich Georg Eduard von Lewinski. That last—Lewinski—is not a name that springs from the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language tree, is it? The “von” signifies that the name is a German noble name. The “-ski” signifies that the name is a Polish noble name. What is left is “Levy”.

The young Fritz Erich Georg Eduard von Levinsky was the youngest of his parents' four sons. His mother H elene's younger sister Hedwig was childless. And so his parents gave him up to be adopted and raised by Hedwig and her husband, Georg von Manstein. Manstein-formerly-Levy traced his straight-line paternal ancestry so-and-so Levinsky—a Polish noble—and of, back earlier, so-and-so Levy—i.e., someone claiming descent from Jacob and Leah's third son, whose tribe became the priestly tribe of Israel. Erich von Manstein bore, at least symbolically, Abraham the Patriarch's Y-chromosome.

Weber was talking about what we rootless cosmopolites saw as a natural win-win process. Technology advanced in German cities like Hamburg and Essen: industrialists and merchants were desperate for workers, and pulled workers out of agricultural employment in Pomerania and Prussia, promising them higher wages and a better life if they would move to the seaports and to the Rhineland. Rather than matching the wage offers made by the ironlords of the Rhine, the landlords of the German East pulled Polish workers in from the Vistula valley further east. The Polish-speaking population remaining in the Vistula valley was happy: they had larger farms. The Polish-speaking population who moved to Germany were happy: they had higher wages and a better life.

The German-speaking landlords were happy: they could sell their grain at a higher price to the booming German West without having to match the wages of the German West. The German-speaking workers who moved west were happy: they were higher wages and a better life. The German-speaking ironlord industrialist and merchants were happy: they had an expanded labor force. The aristocrats who ran the German national state were happy: they had a stronger economy, more tax revenue, less poverty, and thus a lower level of democratic-egalitarian-socialist agitation.

Who was left to be unhappy? Max Weber, that is who. Also unhappy were all the others who saw the "German character of the German East" as

endangered. And note that Weber was, in pre-WWI Germany, solidly in the center-left: not a socialist, but otherwise a friend to political democracy, to mass education, to economic prosperity, and a foe to parasitic aristocracies and rigid social orders.

The scary thing is that German nationalism was not exceptional in pre-WWI Europe. War was viewed not as a catastrophe but as an opportunity for national assertion and mobilization.

The “Logic” of Armaments & Alliances

For example, the politicians and journalists of the French Third Republic were spoiling for a war.

The newly-formed German Empire had ripped the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from France as part of the treaty that ended the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. (The justification was that these provinces had been previously ripped away from Germany by French aggression-but their incorporation into France had taken place more than two centuries before, Alsace in the first half and Lorraine in the second half of the seventeenth century.) And for more than forty years the French army and French politicians had been getting ready for a rematch. From the perspective of France's politicians and generals, a war with Germany was to be welcomed-as long as France's allies were securely on board as well. A war would restore French predominance in Europe and dominance over Germany, and repay their enemies across the Rhine for the insult of 1870.

But why would France have any allies against Germany? Why wasn't Germany Britain's potential ally against France in 1914? Britain had been at war with France for more than half of the millennium before 1914, after all.

British geopoliticians feared Germany because Germany had built a modern navy strong enough to challenge and—possibly, if they were lucky—beat the British navy. Such a naval defeat would leave food-importing Britain helpless, with no choice but to surrender. France had not built such a navy.

Why had the Germans built such a navy?

Because the admirals convinced the German Emperor—the “Kaiser,” i.e. “Caesar”—Wilhelm II that the British would never respect Germany unless it did have a fleet strong enough to challenge the British navy. His British cousins, they told him, only respect those who are strong. If we are strong enough to harm them they will respect you and us. If we are not, they will not.

It is not clear that the British respected pre-World War I Germany; it is clear that they feared it, and armed against it. As Winston Churchill said, when the magnitude of the German naval construction program became clear:

the politicians proposed [to build] four [new battleships every year], the admirals demanded six, and we compromised on eight...

And for the politicians of the British Empire in London, risks of war were worth running for reasons of “face”—to show that the British Empire could not be pushed around. Britain had said that foreign armies should not march through Belgium, foreign armies should not march through Belgium no matter how much they apologized or how hard they begged for British neutrality and Belgian approval for passage or how much in indemnities they initially offered for their violation of Belgian neutrality.

The Start of World War I

The Damned Foolish Thing in the Balkans

It is worth stepping back, and noting that all of these politicians and military officers were at best badly mistaken, and at worst criminally insane. Nearly ten million people would die in World War I. All of the continental European emperors whose ministers made war would lose their thrones as a direct result of the war, the British monarch alone surviving (the kings of Italy and Belgium also survived: their countries joined the winning Anglo-French side).

The rulers of Austria-Hungary had for a long time been worried about Serbian nationalism, or rather the extension of Serbian nationalism northward as ideologues argued that Serbs, Bosnians, Croats, Slovenes, and others were really one nation—“Yugoslavs”—and that only alien rule by Turks from Istanbul and Germans from Vienna had prevented the previous emergence of a glorious south-slav nation.

From today’s perspective it is easy to be very, very cynical: less than 80 years separate the time when Serbs and Croats were blood-brothers (so much so that the Serbs would risk bloody war with Europe’s great powers to rescue the Croats from oppressive foreign despotism) and our time, when Serbs and Croats cannot live in the same village or province without the political leaders of at least one side calling for (and getting) the extermination and exile of the other. To fight one set of wars at the start of the twentieth century to unify Serbs and Croats and to fight another set of wars at the end to dissolve the union and “ethnically cleanse” the region seems among the sickest of the jokes that History plays on human populations.

From our perspective a semi-democratic, constitutional monarchy like that of the Habsburg-ruled Austro-Hungarian Empire, ruling over various nationalities, a monarchy that respected (most) local customs, kept the

peace, and allowed freedom of commerce, belief, and speech (within limits), seems much more than halfway up the list of desirable regimes. Would one prefer Marshall Tito? Or Milosevic? Or Karadic? Certainly not.

In the summer of 1914, a Bosnian terrorist seeking Bosnian independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and union with Serbia assassinated the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. The terrorists had received some assistance from the secret police of the Kingdom of Serbia—although almost surely not with the active knowledge of the King of Serbia. What ruler, monarchical or otherwise, has an interest in the declaration of an open hunting season against heads of state and their near relatives? The political objective of the assassination was to break off from Austria-Hungary her south-slav provinces so they could be combined into a Greater Serbia or a Yugoslavia. The assassins' motives are consistent with the movement that later became known as Young Bosnia.

For the old emperor Franz Josef in Vienna and his advisors, the outrageous murder of his nephew—with help from at least some within the Serbian government—seemed to call for action to chase and punish the guilty, humble and shame Serbia, and make it plain that Austria was the great power in the Balkans. Thereafter Serbian foreign policy had better trim its sails to the Austrian wind.

To establish this seemed worth a small risk of a large war. After all, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, the Prusso-Danish War of 1864, the Franco-Austrian War of 1859, and the Balkan Wars of the early twentieth century had all been very short. Few looked at the slaughter of the American Civil War of 1861-65, or at the bloody trench warfare of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, or even at the Boer War, and thought about what they might mean.

The not-so-old Czar Nicholas II in St. Petersburg and his ministers thought that it was important to demonstrate that did not demonstrate that Czarist Russia was the great power in the Balkans, and that slavic-speaking small nations could count on it to protect them from Viennese hegemony.

But World War I did not show anybody that Czarist Russia was the great power in the Balkans, and that slavic-speaking small nations could count on it to protect them from Viennese hegemony. Instead he lost his throne, his life, and his country. Russia lost a generation of young men dead or mutilated, and lost its chance to have a less-than-totally-unhappy twentieth century.

The not-so-old German Emperor Wilhelm II in Berlin and his ministers thought that a short, sharp victorious war—first defeat France, then occupy Paris, then accept the French surrender, then move the army east to Russia and force Russia to make peace as well—would secure for Germany a dominant “place in the sun” among the great powers of Europe. Hence a decision to back Austria to the hilt in whatever action it chose to take in response to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand-up to and including war-was nearly automatic. They looked back at a nineteenth century in which the standing and power of the core of the turn of the century German Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, had been radically enhanced by short victorious wars provoked and managed by the so-called Iron Chancellor, Prince Otto von Bismarck, a German politician whose best-remembered sentence is that: “It is not by speeches and debates that the great issues of the day will be decided, but by Blood and Iron.”

Bismarck’s shoes were hard to fill. His legend was hard to live up to. But attempting to live up to it seemed to involve an eagerness to court and welcome the risks of war. No one remembered that Bismarck had sought war against isolated powers without allies—Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866, and France in 1870—and only when he had stacked the deck to make rapid victory all but certain.

And no one remembered that Bismarck had never had any desire to escalate political conflict in the Balkans. Perhaps his second-best-remembered sentence is that: “There is nothing at stake [in the Balkans] that is worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.”

World War I did not secure for Germany a dominant “place in the sun” among the great powers of Europe. Wilhelm lost his throne. His country lost its political and military autonomy, a generation of young men, and took the first steps along the road to Hitler's Third Reich, a regime that will blacken the name of Germany for millennia.

The old Emperor Franz Josef in Vienna would die while World War I was still going on; but his Habsburg dynasty would lose its throne, and his empire would be chopped up and handed out to no fewer than seven nation-states (today between thirteen and fifteen, depending on whether you count Bosnia-Herzegovina as one or three).

The French would lose a generation of young men dead or mutilated. And it would take more than thirty more years before French politicians would realize that trying to contain Germany by using your army simply did not work, and that perhaps a better way to try to contain German power would be to integrate it economically into a wider Europe.

The British would lose a generation of young men. And the post-World War I British Empire would be much weaker, and eventually find itself in a worse strategic position, than even a pre-World War I Britain facing a German-dominated Europe would have possessed.

Germany Attacks Belgium

The Archduke had been killed. Serbia had rejected Austria's ultimatum. Austria had declared war on Serbia. Germany sought to convince Austria that it should attack to demonstrate that it was serious, but then "halt in Belgrad" and negotiate. Russia began to mobilize...

At that point Germany attacked Belgium.

It was that stupid.

Why did Germany attack Belgium?

The explanation was that Germany had only one war plan. France and Russia were allied—a war with one was a war with another. Germany was going to war with Russia. It would have to fight France too. Its war plan was to fight France first while Russia was still mobilizing. And its war plan was to begin the war not by attacking the French fortification line on the Franco-German border but by outflanking the French army by marching—hopefully unopposed—through neutral Belgium, apologizing while doing so.

Hence the first shots in what was a dispute between Austria and Serbia were fired on the German-Belgian border.

The laughter of the guns began, as Germany's heavy artillery began destroying Belgian forts and killing Belgian soldiers and civilians.

That attacking Belgium might well push Britain into the war against Germany, immediately cut Germany off from all outside resources, and add an extra great power to its enemies was not thought to be important. Britain could only bring its power to bear if the war was long. And one way or another it would be a short war.

And so the trigger was pulled. The war would be fought by the mass-conscripted 18-21 year old boys of Europe, augmented by reserves who had received their military training in the previous decades. The mass armies marched off to war enthusiastically, singing, taking the causes of the emperors and the generals for their own, on all sides expecting a short victorious war.

But it was not a short war.

The Course of World War I **It Ought to Have Been a Short War**

World War I really ought to have been a short war.

The German decision to turn an Austro-Serbian or an Austro-Russian dispute into a world war was amazingly stupid—propelled by the belief that it would solve domestic problems by busying giddy minds with foreign quarrels, that it would improve the breed and demonstrate the fitness of the German race, that it was what the Junker warrior aristocrats were born to do, and that if Germany did not strike eventually the Franco-Russian alliance would—and if allowed to strike first the weight of three times as many French and Russians as Germans with twice the Gross National Income would tell. But even with all those they ought not have launched a war.

And even with all those the war they launched should have been a short war. Germany ought to have lost quickly.

Indeed, for the German army, a long war was unthinkable. Germany's entire war strategy was based on the belief that they needed to win quickly or not at all. And thus when they failed to win quickly, sane national and

military leaders would have sought peace terms rather than face the destruction of a long, grinding war of attrition that they would lose—that they did lose.

Three other factors turned the diplomatic crisis of the summer of 1914 into a war, and the war into a civilization scarring catastrophe. Those three were: the professional attitudinal habits of the Prussian army, the genius of German scientists and administrators, and the adopted eastern civilizing mission of the German nation.

The Prussian Way of War Again

Since Fehrbellin, the odds are indeed that first a Prussian and then a German army would be a fearsome and terrifying foe, outpunching its weight on the tactical and operational level—but, as far as logistics, industrial mobilization, strategy, and grand strategy are concerned, a group that could be out-thought and out-fought by a committee of six-year-old children. And so it turned out: fearsome and terrifying in the onset in the first August 1914 month of world War I. But rapid victory eluded its grasp. The Imperial German Army's plan to surround and crush the French before the Russians could fully mobilize misfired. Out of supply and exhausted, the German armies on the western front retreated and consolidated, digging trenches, and soldiers were transferred east to fight the Russians.

But did the army then pressure the government to seek peace? No.

Here Citino's second cornerstone of the mental map of German army officers came into play: *Totenritt*—a death ride—carrying out senseless orders to the best of one's ability, as faith is substituted for logic and calculation. Instead of telling the government that the strategic situation was very bad, and that it was time to negotiate, the German army dug trenches and hunkered down. Its generals began to attrit the French and

the Russians in a kind of war-as-chemotherapy: hoping that the poison will kill your adversary before it kills your self.

German Science and Management

Here the army was rescued, for a time, by German science and management. The hunkering down would have been to no avail, however, without the genius of German scientists and administrators.

The scientists were men like Fritz Haber, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1918 for his creation of the power to extract useful nitrogen compounds literally out of thin air. This was an enormous boon to those who needed fertilizers to grow crops. This was also essential to Germany's fighting anything other than a very short war: without nitrogen pulled from the air by the Habor-Bosch process, Germany runs out of explosives and ammunition within six months of the start of the war. The administrators were people like Walther Rathenau, who established the industrial-materials priority command-and-control system that Germany used to keep its value chains functioning, at least for the production of war materiel, after the British naval blockade had cut itself off from international trade. "I am a German of Jewish origin. My people are the German people, my home is Germany, my faith is German faith, which stands above all denominations", wrote Rathenau. He was assassinated by right-wing anti-semitic German terrorists in 1922.

"Against Czarism!"

The third thing that kept Germany going during World War I was a strong current of thought believing that Germany was fighting on the side of civilization. The real struggle, it was claimed, was not over what language should be spoken by the mayor of Strasbourg (or Strassburg) on the Franco-German border or whether Belgian neutrality should be respected

or even what Balkan lands should be ruled by German-speakers in Vienna, but one of German civilization versus Russian barbarism.

Consider the German Socialist Party, the SPD. Founded in 1875, and promptly outlawed by Bismarck, by 1914 it had a million dues-paying members. It was the largest political party of the world. It held 34% of the seats in the German Reichstag. It had been founded to bring about the overthrow of capitalism and a just socialist society—whether that would be created by revolution, evolve naturally as the contradictions of capitalism manifested themselves, or evolve and then have to be defended in the streets against a reactionary coup was left ambiguous. It had been founded to advance the international brotherhood of workers. It had been founded to oppose militarism in all of its forms.

So what was the SPD supposed to do when the Emperor Wilhelm II's ministers asked for money to fight World War I?

The SPD's caucus met on August 3, 1914. SPD Co-Chair Hugo Hasse led the pacifist faction, and was appalled by what happened: "You want to approve war credits for the Germany of the Hohenzollern [Emperor] and the Prussian [landlord-aristocrat-officer-bureaucrat] Junkers?" he asked. "No," said his fellow Co-Chair Friedrich Ebert. Ebert went on:

Not for that Germany, but for the Germany of productive labor, the Germany of the social and cultural ascent of the masses. It is a matter of saving that Germany! We cannot abandon the fatherland in its moment of need. It is a matter of protecting women and children...

Only 13 other of the 110 SPD Reichstag deputies joined Hasse's position in the internal caucus vote.

What were they protecting women and children from? They were protecting them from the Czarist tyranny that would follow a Russian

victory and conquest in the war that Germany had started by attacking Belgium.

Younger-generation Reichstag member Karl Liebknecht had voted with his party to fund the war on August 4, 1914. But by December 2 he had moved into opposition to:

this war which nobody desired... an Imperialist war... a preventative war by the German and Austrian war parties working in the shadows of semi-absolutism and secret diplomacy... a Bonapartist attempt to demoralize and destroy the growing Labor movement...

By December the Germans were no longer fighting to protect German homes and families from imminent Czarist tyranny. The German army had already won its first great victories over the Russians at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. Instead, government was calling for Germany to fight to liberate the peoples of the Russian Empire from the Czar. Liebknecht replied:

Germany... does not possess any of the qualities necessary to play the role of a liberator [from Czarism]... We must demand a peace which will humiliate no one as soon as possible... Simultaneous and continuous demands for peace in all belligerent countries can stop the bloody massacre before complete exhaustion...

But only a trivial minority wished to hear him.

And so the war continued.

But Why Did the Allied Powers Fight?

But even after Germany had attacked Belgium, why did the allied powers—France Russia, Britain, eventually Italy and the United States—fight? Why did not they recognize that modern industrial war is, in the words of

the computer in the movie War Games, “a very interesting game: the only way to win is not to play”?

First of all, there was deterrence. One has allies in order to constrain what potential adversaries may do. And if one does not keep one’s promises, one soon has no allies. Only if the cost of keeping one’s promises looks very high might one shrink from doing so. And everyone expected a short, victorious war. Or, at least, a short war. Thus Russia and Britain kept their promises.

It is true that some did fear. It was Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary who committed the British Empire to the war, who is reputed to have looked out his window one evening at dusk in the last days and said: “The lights are going out all over Europe. I do not think we shall see them lit again in our lifetime...” Which raises the question of why—if that was truly his judgment—he did not do more to stop the machine then in motion.

Second, once the initial German lunge had ended, the strategic situation was very favorable for the allies: they were going to win a long war of attrition. Why then should they settle for anything less than, at a minimum, a return to the status quo ante bellum?

The problem was that the German government kept telling its people that they were winning. And, indeed, they had won a great many battles. They had conquered Belgium and Poland, and eventually Roumania. Their armies were holding deep positions inside Russia and France. Could they turn around and tell the voters that “we are sorry, but we are actually losing this war and we ought to make peace” and still survive as a government? They did not think so.

And so the attrition war that Germany could not win and that the allies should not have fought continued.

It Was a Long War

World War I would have been bad but not a disaster—check that: World War I would have been a disaster but not an utterly intolerable civilization-cracking catastrophic disaster—if it had been a short war. But it was not a short war. It was a long one.

British assistance to France kept it from being overrun in the fall of 1914. German assistance on the eastern front kept Austria from being overrun in the fall of 1914. And then they all dug trenches. It became a total war, a resource mobilization-based war of attrition that dragged on for more than four years.

Trench Warfare and Attrition

At first it had seemed as though victory would be quick, and would go to Germany and its allies, the so-called central powers. The first-mobilized vanguard of the Russian army was decimated in the forests of eastern Germany. The first battles between the French and the Germans saw the French take much heavier casualties, and retreat almost to Paris before the Germans outran their supply lines.

Thereafter the war settled into stalemate. The front line settled down into a fixed line of trenches in which soldiers hid from flying death. Offensives degenerated into episodes of artillery death from the skies killing anyone in the open followed by episodes of machine-gun target practice, in which the attackers always took far heavier casualties, and invariably gained little ground of no strategic value.

Nevertheless, they persisted.

Generals called for greater and greater commitments of resources to the front: if battles could not be won by strategy, perhaps they could be won by the sheer weight of men, metal, and explosives committed to the front. In Britain—which attained the highest degree of mobilization—the government was sucking up more than one-third of national product (plus the time of conscripted soldiers) for the war effort by 1916.

Mobilization

Mobilizing economic resources for total war was not something anybody had planned for. Military plans had all been based on the assumption of a short war: one in which decisive victory would be won or lost in a matter of months, in a single battle or two. When that turned out to be false, governments and armies turned to frantic expedients to try to manage resupply and the ramp-up of war production. Desired production became much more that dictated by the representatives of industry's largest customer, the military, than by market forces. Yet the army could not simply pay through the nose what the industrialists wanted to charge. And so the market needed to be substantially replaced by rationing and command-and-control.

Was that possible? Yes. In all cases, those that ran the industrial materials-allocation directorates succeeded. Such success turned out to be surprisingly easy, even though to do so efficiently would have been surprisingly difficult, and the changing character of the war meant that total mobilization was necessary.

The Weight of Men and Metal

Russia's Collapse

Under the pressure of military defeat and domestic poverty accentuated by the diversion of resources to the war, the Czar's government collapsed in

late winter 1917 and a Russian Republic was proclaimed. That republic was there overthrown in a coup by Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks in their October Revolution seven months later. They then dismissed the Constituent Assembly that was to write a constitution and then run elections. They took the burden of government upon themselves. Russia withdrew from the war.

The example of the German war economy made some, like Vladimir Lenin, believe that a “command economy” was possible: that you could run a socialist economy not through the market but by using the government as a command-and-control bureaucracy not just during national emergency, but as a matter of course.

German Defeat

Russia withdrew, but a stronger America took its place.

Here, once again, the Prussian way of war was decisive—in a negative way. Imperial Germany had started World War I with a surprise attack through Belgium to outflank and disrupt the French army, believing that even if that attack did push Britain into the war against Germany that would not matter because Britain could only bring its power to bear if the war was long. In 1917, they did it again. This time they attacked not a neutral power on land but a neutral zone in the sea: began unrestricted submarine warfare against all ships headed for Britain. They believed, once again, that even if that attack did push the U.S. into the war against Germany that would not matter because the U.S. could only bring its power to bear if the war was long. Longer.

So in the end, the weight of men and metal arranged against Germany and its allies did tell. France, Belgium, Russia, the United Kingdom, Italy (from 1915), Romania, and the United States (from 1917) against the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman Empires and Bulgaria. At the

end of 1918 the Austro-Hungarian Empire's army collapsed. The generals announced that the German army in France had been attrited and was facing defeat. The German population at home was over the edge of starvation because of the blockade. And Germany sought an armistice.

If you want to read more about battles and leaders and campaigns and casualties, read somebody else to learn what happened during the war. I don't have the heart to write it down. There were 10 million dead; 10 million maimed; 10 million lightly injured—out of major belligerent populations of some 100 million adult men, with the overwhelming proportion of war casualties were soldiers, not civilians. The amount of economic production that had been devoted to blowing things up and killing people rather than making useful commodities for human flourishing amounted to the belligerent powers' production in a full year. The imperial-authoritarian political orders in the Russian, Turkish, Austrian, and German empires had collapsed. The political order in Italy was at the point of class. Confidence that the world was run by far-sighted statesmen in a way that supported progress was gone.

And the great powers of the North Atlantic and others had to figure out how to try to pick up the pieces and put a world order back together again, so that the globe could return to the path of unprecedented and rapidly increasing global prosperity that it had been on from 1870-1913.

Populist Nationalism & Social Darwinism **Max Weber as German Chauvinist Again**

The coming of social and political equality—or at least pressures toward that end—in the North Atlantic had a consequence. People were no longer primarily identifying themselves as (western) Christians or Calvinists or nobles or farmers but as Englishmen, Frenchmen, Dutchmen, or Germans.

This meant that they were definitely not Poles or Italians or Catalans (well, maybe they were still identifying themselves as Catalans), or even Auvergnais. The drawing tight of the bonds of national identity meant the exclusion of those not identified with the ethno-nation from the *ekumene*—or worse: the rise of German nationality meant that Polish-speaking citizens of the traditional Hohenzollern lands, people whose ancestors had paid taxes and built roads for and died in the armies of the ruling dynasty of Prussia since the days of the Great Elector in the 1600s were now viewed as an alien excrescence in the body politic, human pus to be somehow treated to make the ethno-nation healthy.

We have noted German academic Max Weber, a German liberal. He was a believer in one-man, one-vote rather than gerrymandered electorates and noble estates, a believer in responsible government by ministers responsible to elected legislatures rather than the whim of hereditary princes, a believer in progress and peace. Yet he was terrified of the threat to the German nation somehow posed by barefoot hungry Poles who wanted to immigrate.

When you think that this is a pre-WWI establishment German liberal, it makes you want to cry. When you think that this is supposed to be the smartest and most learned pre-WWI German social scientist, it really makes you want to cry.

Start with the questions of morality, which in most people's minds is the command to: "be excellent to one another!" Max Weber disagrees: for him, the moral thing to do is to be un-excellent to as many people as possible in order to gain as much elbow-room—as much *lebensraum*—as possible for future generations of Germans. To march hundreds of miles to kill people you have never met so that the children of other people you have never met but who speak your language can have more elbow-room—this is raising up the great and noble characteristics of human nature.

And this is not just during times of declared war, for what the naïve call “peace” is simply the continuation of war by other means.

Nationalist Social Darwinism as Idiocy

This social Darwinist orientation is not only immoral but profoundly stupid.

It is simply insane as a matter of fact to claim substantial differences of any sort between human sub-populations. *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* appears to have emerged in a speciation event between 50 and 200 thousand years ago involving somewhere between 2,000 and 20,000 individuals, who thereafter interbred overwhelmingly with each other. We are all, in a selfish-gene sense, the equivalent of what third cousins would be among baboons, or any other two-sex animal with a healthy gene pool. A competent geneticist who happened to be a eugenicist would look at every single other person in the world and think: a valuable potential addition of variability to a human gene pool that has too little such.

And to claim differences in valuable genes between the German-speakers and the Polish-speakers living between the Elbe and the Vistula? Over the past two-thousand years, in the lands between the Elbe and the Vistula, the descendents of German-speakers began speaking Polish; Slavic-speakers moved in and their language evolved into Polish; Slavic-speakers moved in and their descendents began speaking German; German-speakers from further west moved in and their descendents kept speaking German; German-speakers from further west moved in and their descendents began speaking Polish; and everybody intermarried. “A Prussian?” said Konrad Adenauer, post-World War II West German Chancellor and a Rhinelander with a certain contempt for those of his fellow-countrymen from west of the Elbe, “that’s a Pole who has forgotten who his grandfather was.” The Poles and Germans whom Max Weber sees as engaged in a race war for

domination on the Polish-German plain are, in all respects save the language that they are speaking at the moment, the same people.

We don't even have the excuse of the Star Trek episode: "But I am white on the left and black on the right, and he is white on the right and black on the left!"

World War I did not change Weber's mind:

We have to be a world power, and in order to have a say in the future of the world we had to risk the war.... [It was our] responsibility before the bar of history...

It was during the war that he said:

Future generations, our own descendants above all, will not hold the Danes, Swiss, Dutch, and Norwegians responsible if world power—and that means ultimately control over the nature of culture in the future—is divided without a battle between the regulations of Russian officials on the one hand and the conventions of Anglo-Saxon "society" on the other, with perhaps a dash of Latin "reason"... Future generations will hold us responsible... and rightly so, for we are a nation of seventy and not seven millions...

Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century

One of the things that has characterized the entire twentieth century, on all six inhabited continents, has been nationalist ethnic cleansing.

Turkish governments decide that people identifying themselves as Armenians, Kurds, or Greeks need to be Turks, be gone, or be dead. Indonesian generals decide that people identifying themselves as Timorese need to stop doing so--or be gone. When you think of the benefits flowing from increased social equality and the rise of the ethno-nation state,

remember to think of the costs as well as these imagined communities have provided many excuses to kill and destroy.

It may be that nationalist wars fought by citizens are inherently more difficult to stop and turn into peace than other kinds of wars. Mercenaries fight for pay. Plunderers fight for loot. Political and military leaders who see the war effort going pear-shaped can make peace, tell their mercenaries and plunderers that continuing the war would get them no more pay and no more loot but that they can keep what they have got. Gentlemen can look back on their service in a war—even an unsuccessful war—as an episode in which they won honor. Believers can think that they served their god.

But what can a citizen who is fought in an unsuccessful war look back on? They have sacrificed at the behest of their political and military leaders: what have they gained? Thus once the nationalist wars of the twentieth century were started, the leaders who had started them did not dare stop, as long as there was any chance of avoiding defeat at all.

Could These Demons Have Been Kept Leashed?

Suppose that the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Habsburg Monarchy that ruled what by 1914 was called the Austro-Hungarian Empire and that incorporated all or part of what is now the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ruthenia, Romania, Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Austria—suppose that Franz Ferdinand had not been assassinated, but had lived to ascend the throne as Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary in 1916—then World War I as we know it would not have happened. Would we then have seen the demons that were unleashed in 1914 and after controlled? Would the

(relatively) peaceful world of 1870-1913 with growing and shared prosperity have kept politics softer?

Before World War I, Orthodox Easter Sunday in 1903 saw a pogrom in Kishinev: 50 Jews killed, about the same number of Jewish women raped, 1500 houses destroyed or damaged. It was seen as a big deal in the world journalism of the time.

After World War I, the Greco-Turkish War wound up with 50000 dead and 2 million people driven from their homes. It had about the same footprint in the world journalism of the time. It was a different, bloodier, world. Would this have been avoided.

After World War I, Acting-Brigadier General Reginald Dyer ordered his troops to massacre 1000 at Amritsar. There were no British soldier casualties. In spite of former British Prime Minister Asquith calling it “one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history” and Secretary of State for War Winston Churchill calling it “monstrous... absolutely foreign to the British way of doing things”. And he called it terrorism:

governments who have seized upon power by violence and by usurpation have often resorted to terrorism... but the august and venerable structure of the British Empire... does not need such aid...

And yet the House of Lords voted to support Dyer. And in the House of Commons Churchill and company were condemned as:

sitting in Oriental aloofness in Whitehall, a year after, and 6,000 miles away... pleased to measure the less or more of the severity applied by that gallant soldier.... If a gallant officer in the exercise of his discretion use a little more or less severity... he is broken on the wheel —no trial, no possibility of defending himself...

It was a different world after World War I.

Political historians (and assassins) tend to answer that this shift would have been avoided, that things would have kept going as they were going, that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and what followed switched world history onto different tracks. They tend to think that how events happen can be very important, and that determining and understanding the causal chains running from event to event are the purposes of history.

In their view human history is near-chaotic, at least at key times and places, and small changes can have very large long-run effects, just as the presence or absence of a hurricane can be determined by the flap of a butterfly's wings a year before and three thousand miles away.

Economic and social historians have a very different presumption: if Franz Ferdinand had not been assassinated in the summer of 1914, he might have been assassinated somewhere else; if he had not been assassinated, the Austrian government would have found some other excuse for an attempt to chastise the Serbian government through what it had hoped would be a small, limited war. Key individuals, luck, and chaos may determine exactly how things happen, but for the most part what happens is the result of stronger, deeper currents of ideas and interests that cannot be diverted or transformed even by key events.

I follow my discipline. I see the demons as likely to have been unleashed, somehow, somewhere, in some form, and spread over the globe...

Stephen Fritz (2008): *Review of Citino, "Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942"* <<https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/reviews/45387/fritz-citino-death-wehrmacht-german-campaigns-1942>>:

Continuing his examination of the German way of war, Robert Citino has produced a cogently argued, clearly written book in which he asserts that the German defeat in World War II was as much conceptual as it was material.

Given its geographical position and limited resource base, according to Citino, first Prussian, then German leaders learned that in order to survive a world of hostile enemies, wars had to be short, sharp, and decisive. Consequently, German military doctrine placed great emphasis on operational factors, to the detriment of prosaic material and logistical considerations. German planners thus concentrated their efforts on designing elegant operational schemes to achieve victory, while their opposite numbers in the enemy states tediously mobilized economic resources.

As a result, Germany found itself dangerously dependent on maneuver for success, since it consistently lacked the firepower and material resources necessary for decisive victory. When it worked, as in 1870-71, the triumph was glittering and spectacular; when it failed, as in 1941-42, the defeat was total and ruinous. It seemed for Germany that war was always all or nothing; its dependence on operational doctrine left it little room for any alternative outcome.

After a short introduction in which he deftly summarizes Prussian/German military doctrine, Citino makes it clear that, based on its history, the operational situation facing German leaders after 1941 was neither unique nor particularly worrisome. The fact that Germany found itself surrounded by enemies that substantially outnumbered it and had access to vastly greater economic resources was nothing new in German military history. Indeed, graduates of the *Kriegsakademie* knew what to do, since precisely this scenario formed the basis of their operational studies. The lesson of German history screamed one thing: attack and land a crushing blow against a single opponent to shatter the enemy coalition.

Citino asserts that the weakness of this approach had already manifested itself by the end of 1941. Given their emphasis on operational concerns, German military planners were in a sort of conceptual prison, one in which they thought very little about strategic concerns, but focused almost exclusively on operational victories. The

weakness of this approach lay in the lack of any exit strategy. If maneuver and a war of movement failed to yield a quick strategic victory, the only option left to German leaders seemed to be more of the same: keep winning operational triumphs in the hope that they would eventually lead to overall success. Therefore, as Citino notes wryly, by 1941, "the Wehrmacht... had conquered itself into a strategic impasse" (pp. 33-34).

Just as significantly, these dazzling successes of 1939-41, whether in Poland, Scandinavia, France, or the Balkans, while not achieving any decisive results, had left the Wehrmacht dangerously overextended. Much to German dismay, the pattern established in the first two years of the war held fast in the second half of 1941. Once again, the Germans won brilliant battles of maneuver and encirclement but to no avail; the Soviets stubbornly refused to give up.

More ominously, although they lent themselves to spectacular headlines and brilliant weekly newsreels, these encirclement battles proved to be grinding, grueling, costly affairs that began the process of gutting the Wehrmacht. As Citino points out, "[t]he Wehrmacht's losses in men and material, even in victory, were far heavier than they had been in previous campaigns" (p. 42). Indeed, one might note that the German army actually suffered more combat deaths in July 1941 than in the crisis months of December 1941 or January-February 1942. For a military organization not keen on logistics or economic mobilization under the best of circumstances, these losses proved beyond capacity for replacement. From the summer of 1941, the German army consistently ran short on crucial supplies necessary to sustain an all-out war effort.

Although the grim, dogged Soviet resistance was primarily responsible for preventing the Germans from converting operational triumphs into decisive victory, another problem had emerged that would plague the Germans in 1942: a lack of clear focus on the major strategic goals of the Barbarossa campaign. For a country that lacked sufficient resources in the first place, the failure to prioritize key aims on the Eastern Front risked a serious dispersal of effort that could only undermine the larger goal of a quick victory. In a further bitter twist, the conflict between Adolf Hitler and his military leaders put another cherished German military tradition into question: the independence of army commanders in the field. Although the Germans survived the Soviet counterattack before Moscow and the savage winter of 1941-42, the experience both reinforced and undermined key German ideas on how to make war.

As German leaders pondered the military situation in the early spring of 1942, Citino raises one of the most puzzling questions of World War II: given the fact that their armies occupied much of Europe, why did the Germans fail to mobilize resources on a scale similar to their enemies? Unfortunately, although he poses the question, Citino doesn't provide any answers. This omission does not so much point to a failure on his part as illustrate a limitation inherent in operational military history: the focus must remain on the battlefield. And here, Citino once again proves adept in his analysis of operational factors. Although the German gaze remained squarely on the Soviet Union, at this point Citino shifts the strategic focus of his book to the desert war in North Africa. Admittedly a side show in terms of sheer numbers, the North African campaign nonetheless confronted the Germans with the troubling reminder that although they barely had strength enough to fight in one theater at a time, they now faced the reality of having to conduct operations simultaneously in a number of far-flung areas. This dispersal of energies, in turn, presented problems of both a command and logistical nature.

In North Africa, of course, Erwin Rommel invoked the traditional independence of the field commander to violate orders on a consistent basis. Even as he was embarrassing his opponents with his operational and tactical brilliance, however, he lacked sufficient logistical support to achieve anything like a decisive strategic victory. In a reprise of the Russian campaign of 1941, every German victory in North Africa simply led to a strategic impasse that the Germans could not resolve.

In similar fashion, when faced with the dilemma of what to do in Russia after the blitzkrieg had failed, German planners came to the only conclusion possible given their history, training, and assumptions: launch another blitzkrieg campaign. In arriving at this decision, army leaders reinforced their tradition. As Citino also notes, though, in terms of the operational plan for 1942 they departed significantly from tradition and past practices: it was to be an exceedingly complex operation based on a series of sequential actions directed from the top with little decision-making freedom accorded field commanders. Success was assured only if the enemy cooperated once again in his destruction.

The plan, Operation Blue, began to fall apart almost immediately, a consequence of both German and Soviet actions. Here, the experience of 1941 proved significant. Determined to avoid the operational chaos of the latter stages of the 1941 campaign and faced with insufficient economic and military resources (shortages in the Luftwaffe proved especially limiting), German planners now aimed not to pull off deep

battles of encirclement, but instead to rely on Soviet forces staying in place and conduct a rolling series of shallow encirclements. In the event, whether from sheer panic or because of a Soviet decision to withdraw into the vast expanse of southern Russia, the initial German thrusts in the summer of 1942, while conquering much territory, netted few prisoners. The Wehrmacht found itself punching air. Rather than striking in depth to the east and trapping large Soviet formations against the natural line of the Volga, the Germans found themselves sliding ineffectually to the south in an operation that stretched their supply lines to the breaking point. Almost from the beginning, the Soviet retreat threatened to render the operational plan for 1942 pointless.

This operational problem concealed a larger dilemma. Hitler's goal for the war against the Soviet Union had always been the annexation of *Lebensraum*, but how was it to be achieved? The Germans barely had the resources to conquer European Russia, let alone the entire Soviet Union. Now that the Red Army had learned not to let itself be trapped in encirclement battles, destruction of the enemy forces proved beyond German capabilities. As the situation in North Africa demonstrated, the USSR's western allies were steadily amassing economic and military resources for use against Germany. For their part, the Germans found themselves increasingly dependent on their allies, Italy, Rumania, and Hungary, nations that could marshal far few resources than those of the western allies.

Hitler further compounded this increasingly unfavorable situation with his impatience and impetuosity: splitting the already over-stretched German forces, demanding that they conduct operations simultaneously that had been planned sequentially, and ignoring the threatening situation on the exposed German flanks. Once again, the Germans confronted their basic dilemma, how to do more with less. As Citino stresses repeatedly, the Germans had enough strength to win on the operational level, but failed to translate these gains this into strategic victory. This quandary simply grew with increasing German success on the battlefield, as scarce resources had to be dispensed over a wider area. To Citino, this conundrum reflects the basic German way of war itself, a conceptual framework based on historical experience that, limited in its focus to operational details, by definition could not devise an alternative approach if operational success failed to bring a swift strategic victory.

Viewed from the present perspective, in light of our awareness of the chronic German deficiencies of men and material, the outcome seems almost inevitable: the turning points at Stalingrad and El Alamein, then

the grinding down of German resistance over the next three years. Citino resists that temptation, instead soberly reminding us that "the most shocking aspect of 1942... is how absurdly close the Wehrmacht came to taking not one but all of its objectives for 1942" (p. 306). Citino is correct in this judgment, and he both affirms and raises some questions about his thesis.

As Richard Overy has demonstrated, the outcome of World War II hinged on the cumulative effect of narrow victories in a few key areas that eventually produced an overwhelming allied triumph. One of these key areas was economic mobilization, where the Germans failed to convert the resources of occupied Europe into sufficient military strength. Did this failure occur because, as Citino would argue, the German leadership simply did not concern itself with non-military factors, being focused exclusively on operational matters and thus blind to the obvious flaws in their method? Or, as others might argue, was it the result of the chronic institutional Darwinism and inefficiency of the Nazi bureaucracy, the racist and exploitative nature of the German occupation, the burdens produced by trying simultaneously to fight a military war and a war against the Jews, or simply the ultimately limitless aims of Hitler?

As with all good interpretative histories, Citino forces the reader to think about his assertions. Was the German failure in Russia in 1941 the result of an exclusive emphasis on operational thinking, or a consequence of a poor operational plan, one with no clearly defined focus upon which the Germans could concentrate resources? How great a role did key operational decisions play in the German defeats of 1941 and 1942? Did the Germans over-extend themselves before Moscow in 1941 because of blind operational thinking or because of recent historical memories (the Marne in September 1914) of a strategic victory thrown away because of a failure of effort at the last minute?

As Citino notes of German actions in Russia in 1942, "the operational plans for the summer offensive were in many ways a departure from past military practice" (p. 157). Indeed, in terms of preparation and assembly of forces, Operation Blue marked, according to Citino, "a remarkable break with the past" (p. 158). Does this information suggest, then, that the Germans might have been successful if they had maintained their operational traditions? Or, was the departure from customary practice itself the result of the failure of operational thinking? German commanders' loss of decision-making autonomy in the field also constituted a key sub-theme of 1942, and again represented a significant departure from German war-making custom.

With less interference from above and more freedom on the ground, could the defeat of 1942 been turned into an operational victory?

Robert Citino has produced an outstanding work of operational military history, a book that combines exhaustive research with a clear, well-argued thesis. Indeed, many of the endnotes read like mini-historiographical essays; here Citino discusses interpretative controversies surrounding many key assertions in the book. His assessment of the 1942 German campaign in the Soviet Union is especially noteworthy, not simply in its discussion of the operational details, but the manner in which he demonstrates that a unique way of fighting, the German way of war, died in the steppes of southern Russia. With better decision-making and operational plans, could the Germans have fared better in Russia in 1942? The answer is almost certainly yes. Would such victories have changed the outcome of the war? Given the enormous economic potential of the United States and its development of the atomic bomb, the answer is almost certainly no...

Robert Citino (2005): *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas: 0700614109):

Consider, if you will, this practically forgotten scene from the pages of German military history:

They came up out of the dark forests, mounted and mobile, driving deep into the flank and rear of their enemy. The shock and surprise of their sudden assault carried all before them. So rapid was the advance that it overtook every attempt by their defenders to form a cohesive position. The attackers were not simply faster than their opponents. Moving in a compact, mobile column, they were also more agile, more flexible, and far more responsive to the commands of their officers.

This great mobile column chopped the bewildered enemy force in front of it into uncoordinated segments, each with little more on its mind than flight. It was a near-perfect marriage between the best available technology, a flexible system of command and control, and officers who understood the possibilities of both. It was war in a new, faster tempo.

And now, a quiz: from whence comes this scene?... the Tannenberg campaign of 1914?... the invasion of France in 1940?... Operation Barbarossa?...

Any of the three would certainly be a good guess, but each would be wrong.... Friedrich Wilhelm I, the "Great Elector" of Brandenburg... winter campaign of 1678-9.... The routed enemy was Swedish, and the mounted force launching the devastating mobile assault and pursuit was actually riding sleighs...

[...]

There is indeed a German way of war and... it had its origins within the Kingdom of Prussia.... Prussian, and later German commanders, sought to maneuver their operational units... in a rapid and daring fashion. The Germans called it *Bewegungskrieg*... the war of movement on the operational level.... Such a vigorous operational posture [required]... an army with an extremely high level of battlefield aggression, an officer corps that tended to launch attacks no matter what the odds, and a flexible system of command that left a great deal of initiative, sometimes too much, in the hands of lower ranking commanders.

Thus the Germans evolved a certain pattern of war making.... Other nations... evolved different patterns. Need to land a large amphibious force on foreign shores? Call the Americans. Interested in deep strikes and consecutive operations on a vast scale of men and materiel? Study the Red Army in its prime. War as a means of colonial aggrandizement? Look to the British. Levels of firepower large enough to turn the enemy homeland into a parking lot? It's back to the Americans...