

THE ORIGIN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR ON THE SWEDISH MAGAZINES

TEXT 1:

World War I – an inevitable disaster?

The continent and the world stumbled into a devastating conflict that few foresaw and even fewer actually requested. And that meant the end of old Europe, and a beginning of the short and terrible 20th century. But was it really inevitable? Had it been able to go another way?

Today, in hindsight, it is possible to identify a number of critical points in the development, points where the outcome was by no means given, and in which an alternate history hides itself. The first is of course the one who set the avalanche in motion: the killings in Sarajevo.

Without the murders the chain of events that led up to the outbreak of war in August would never have started. The tension within Austria-Hungary and between Austria and Serbia-Hungary would have persisted.

Well then. Let us assume that the attack still went the way it did. This brings us, however, not automatically to world war. The killings on June 28 triggered what is known as the July-crisis, which certainly reached its consummation with the outbreak of the war in early August. The fact that Austria-Hungary would react in some way was inevitable – the country had just had its successor assassinated.

Initially, however, surprisingly little happened. In Austria-Hungary where Franz Ferdinand was not very popular the news of this attack actually caused no major waves of outrage. In Europe murdering heads of state was not unusual and the Balkans was a “geographical abstraction”. In a praiseworthy effort to equip themselves with the facts, as well as an attempt to defuse the situation, the Austrian Government leaders let some time to go before July 23 posing a number of bitwise far-reaching requirements to the Serbian Government. (Document held no open threat of war.) By that time, the rulers of Vienna had picked up strength in the form of a promise of support from Berlin. Here we reach the second critical point.

In Belgrade, one believed to be isolated and was therefore inclined to agree with virtually everything that the Austrians demanded. On the same day that the response would be filed, on July 25, they understood, however, that Russia intended to give them more than just a vague moral support: the Russian army had begun a partial mobilization, directed only against Austria-Hungary.

Strengthened by this the Serbs found courage to formulate a new, more dismissive response. Then, when Vienna declared that this response was insufficient, Austria-Hungary began mobilizing its own army. And on July 29 Belgrade was bombarded by Austrian artillery. The war between Serbia and Austria-Hungary was a fact. The next day, commenced the general mobilization of the Russian army. And when the mobilization, despite German demands, was not aborted Germany declared war on Russia. The local conflict had escalated into a major European war.

The murders would most probably have led to a war between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Had the Government in Vienna immediately after the attacks started some kind of attack against Serbia, as an angry revenge, and thereby put the world and in particular Russia with a fait accompli. Then it would probably have stopped at that.

And this war between Serbia and Austria in 1914 had probably been as limited and quickly forgotten as the two Balkan wars of 1912-13. Here we arrive at the third critical point.

As we all know, the conflict grew undeniably. When Russia did not stop its mobilization, Germany declared, as mentioned, war in August 1. Wholly in accordance with plan and expectation it should be followed by a German attack on France. On

August 2 the first German units moved into Luxembourg, while Belgium got its own ultimatum, which told Belgium to allow the German armies to pass on their march towards France.

The next day the Belgians rejected this ultimatum, and on 4 August Germany declared war on them. This made the United Kingdom on the same day join side with the German enemies.

Either way: with Britain's entry into the conflict World War was a fact. Was it, however, given that the United Kingdom would be dragged into the war? No, not at all.

In addition, there was among British politicians' great doubts whether they should engage in this war. A majority of the Government was at first clearly against this. Some would tolerate a limited German violation of Belgian neutrality, others were even willing, in an emergency, let the British forces themselves break it – a position later spoken very quietly about. However, quite a few got something that the British historian Niall Ferguson calls a “Napoleon-neurosis”. Behind Germany's maneuvers they suspected a sinister attempt to gain world domination, something the Government in Berlin neither sought nor had the opportunity to achieve.

Suppose, however, that William II actually have had the power that many of his contemporaries thought he possessed, and he had managed to halt the German attack in the West: without the blatant violation of Belgian neutrality. United Kingdom would then probably not have declared war on Germany.

Or suppose that the war skeptic politicians in London had gained the upper hand. Then the United Kingdom would have remained neutral. Without Great Britain it would not have been a world war. And without Great Britain both France and Russia, would in all likelihood, have lost the showdown with Germany. Such a war would have been fairly short, and the devastation and losses would have been far less than they actually were.

Englund, Peter, “World War I – an inevitable disaster?”, in *Populär Historia [Popular History]*, 2008, No. 10, 24-30.