

## OLLI Lecture

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### “The Lights go Out in Europe”

Queen Victoria died on January 24, 1901. Her funeral was a solemn occasion as compared to the celebrations of her “Diamond Jubilee” four years earlier. The Royal Navy then had staged a mighty demonstration at Portsmouth and in London her carriage was escorted through the streets escorted by cavalry units from throughout her vast overseas empire. Rudyard Kipling composed a special poem for the occasion that was published in *The Times*. It read:

*God of our Fathers, known of old/ Lord of our far-flung battle line/*

*Under whose awful hand we hold/ Dominion over Palm and Pine/*

*Lord God of hosts, be with us yet/ Lest we forget, lest we forget.*

In a sense, the Victorian Era ended that day for what followed was a tumultuous period that ended in the tragedy of the First World War. Barbara Tuchman sums it up as follows in her Proud Tower.

*Queen Victoria...and the Nineteenth Century were gone. A year before she died, the Queen, returning on her yacht from a visit to Ireland, was disturbed by rough seas. After a particularly strong wave buffeted the ship, she summoned her doctor, who was in attendance, and said, in an unconscious echo of a distant predecessor [Canute], 'Go up at once, Sir James, and give the Admiral my compliments and tell him the thing must not occur again.' But the waves would not stand still.*

And so they didn't. Her conservative prime minister, Lord Salisbury, resigned his post the following year before the Boer War finally dragged to an end in 1904. The difficulty the British Army had in crushing the rebellion of a handful of Dutch settlers in South Africa revealed not only the poor condition of Her Majesty's land forces but also Britain's diplomatic isolation in the global community. Not a single

major power on earth endorsed the Empire's actions against the Boers and several, especially Kaizer Wilhelm, were openly critical. The first indication of the new government's concern was a mutual defense treaty negotiated between Great Britain and Japan in 1902.

Britain's new monarch, Edward VII (reigned 1841-1910), was anything but Victorian. A hefty, avuncular man, he was well-known in London social circles for his fondness for gambling, horse racing, and the ladies. His mistress, a Mrs. Keppel, escorted him publicly and was often his partner in bridge. As you might guess, Edward's relationship to his royal mother was a troubled one and it soon became apparent that their differences were far greater than her misgivings about his private life. Inheriting the throne at the age of 60, he wasted little time in influencing British foreign policy, especially regarding the long-standing rivalry with the French Republic so recently manifested in the Fashoda crisis of 1894. Edward conducted a state visit to Paris in 1903 and when an aide cautioned, "The French don't like us," he responded "Why should they?"

Less than a year later a *rapprochement* was concluded with the French government that settled all existing Anglo-French disputes and launched a series of military discussions between the two former rivals. Thus was begun the *Entente Cordiale* that Bismarck had feared and Kaizer Wilhelm thought impossible. These loose understandings only heightened the Kaizer's fear of encirclement so that German military planners began devising measures to counteract it. The result was the Schlieffen Plan, named for Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1906. Confronted by the possibility of a two-front war, the Plan:

- Concluded that France was by far the greater threat to Germany than Russia and thus should be attacked immediately and with great force at the beginning of hostilities.
- That the best way to defeat the French quickly was to invade the Republic through Belgium with overwhelming force on the German right.

- That Russia would take months to organize its forces so that only a screening force would be needed in the East until the French had been defeated. Then the whole army would concentrate against the Russians.

In the end, this Schlieffen Plan anticipated having 8 corps or 320,000 men protecting Alsace and Lorraine; 11 corps or 400,000 men invading Luxembourg and the Ardennes in the center; and 16 corps or 700,000 men attacking Belgium's 6 divisions (with the odds in Germany's favor at 20 to 1). Schlieffen was convinced that the Belgians would probably not resist such an overwhelming force but thought that the little kingdom's "chocolate soldiers" could quickly be overcome.

The problem, of course, was that Prussia was one of six signatories of an 1839 treaty that recognized Belgian independence and guaranteed its neutrality. Britain was another. When asked later what would happen if Britain (defending its ancient policy of keeping any enemy out of the Low Countries) should come to Belgium's defense, Kaiser Wilhelm allegedly replied that he would have Britain's "contemptible little army arrested." When the BEF marched in 1914, its units described themselves as "the Old Contemptibles."

We don't have time to describe how the competing powers now sought to entice other European states into this balance-of-power game. The Germans worked especially hard to secure firm alliances with the Italians and the Turks, for example, but had to be satisfied in these instances with complex "if this, then that agreements" that were anything but binding. Even the Anglo-French *Entente* was of such a nature since there was no firm commitment on Britain's part to come to the aid of France in case of German attack. But over the course of years, joint military discussions between the two powers arrived at a secret agreement that the French fleet should concentrate in the Mediterranean while Britain's Home Fleet would protect France's Channel and the Atlantic ports against the German navy.

Some of this Anglo-French collaboration had been stimulated by the Germans who twice in the first decade of the new century (1905 and 1907) caused diplomatic crises by challenging increasing French control over Morocco in North

Africa. In fact, British concerns about German threats even caused them to enter into conversations with the Russians (their long-standing rivals over the Ottoman Empire and Afghanistan) which the French naturally encouraged. In 1907 it was announced that the British and Russians had come to an *entente* over their outstanding imperial disputes and thus there emerged the Triple Entente that loosely bound Russia, France, and Great Britain into an alliance that rivaled Germany's Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria, and Italy).

Had you been living in Britain at the time, these overseas developments would probably not captured your attention as much as the news at home. The Tory government that had ruled the Empire for since 1895 stepped down in 1905 bringing the Liberals to power for the rest of the pre-war era. They had major problems to deal with, such as:

- The rising discontent of the working classes who were abandoning the Liberal Party for the newly-organized Labour Party in droves.
- The discontent of British women who resented being excluded from voting privileges even after most British males had garnered the vote in 1888. They began expressing their resentment by demonstrations of passive resistance led by the Pankhursts—mother Emmeline and her daughters, Sylvia and Christabel.
- The attempts of the House of Lords to penalize organized labor for strikes (the Taff Vale Decision of 1901) and their opposition to the Lloyd George budget of 1909 when Prime Minister Herbert Asquith threatened to pack that House with new members sympathetic to Liberal efforts to raise taxes on the wealthy.
- Then there was Ireland. The late Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809-1898) had tried in his four different terms as Prime Minister to reach a settlement with the Irish which would satisfy their demands for “home rule” just short of independence. He came close in his final ministry in 1892 but failed to gain majority approval by a few votes in the House of Commons. Asquith tried again in 1912-13 to gain approval for Home Rule but his initiative was bitterly opposed by the Ulster Protestants. When he

considered using force to impose parliament's wishes, elements of the British Army refused to obey orders. This "Mutiny at the Curragh" was still unresolved when World War One broke out.

The waves that had so disturbed Queen Victoria continued to stir as the new century unfolded. In distant Persia (renamed Iran in 1935) a popular rebellion against the reigning Shah broke out in 1905 when it was learned that he had borrowed 22 million rubles from the Czar of Russia to finance a European tour. He was obliged to grant a constitution (modeled on Belgium's) and convene a *majles* which promptly attempted to revise foreign contracts on Persian resources, especially oil. In 1907, Britain and Russia came to an agreement to divide Persia into "spheres of influence" in an attempt to retain their exploratory rights (part of the Triple Entente agreement).

Another revolution broke out in the Ottoman Empire in the following year, 1908. It was then that Turkish army officers (having been trained by the Germans) staged a rebellion that forced the reigning Sultan, Abdul Hamid to grant a constitution and an elected parliament. This episode hinted that the Ottoman Empire, long "the sick man of Europe," might be reviving, forestalling the expansionist ambitions of both Russia and Austria in the Balkans. In response, the Russian foreign minister Alexander Isvolsky and the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, Count Aloys Aehrenthal, met privately at Buchlau and reached a secret agreement: Austria could annex Bosnia while it supported Russian demands for control of Constantinople. Austria would thus strike an unmistakable blow at Slavic nationalism while the Russians would finally gain their long-sought goal of finding ice-free access to the world's seas even though they were betraying their Slavic brethren in the Balkans.

...Great idea. It didn't work. Austria moved promptly to declare its sovereignty over Bosnia and then sat on its hands. Russia was humiliated once again after its defeat at the hands of the Japanese only three years earlier. The Czar and his ministers fumed.

I haven't had much time to speak about Austria after the creation of the Dual Monarchy in 1867. Let me summarize by saying that in the late nineteenth

century it was to all appearances a glamorous place, booming in industry, constructing a railroad system that encompassed nearly the entire Danube basin, and experiencing a cultural revival that rivaled the vitality of Paris. We are all familiar with the works of the Empire's great musicians of the period: Gustav Mahler, Anton Dvorák, and the Strauss family. Vienna also enjoyed the great poetic talents of Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Stefan Zweig, as well as the pioneer musings of Sigmund Freud who practiced in the city.

Still, there was an underlying note of misgiving. Franz Josef still ruled (and did so until his death in 1916), but the future of the dynasty was uncertain. On January 30, 1889 the heir apparent, Crown Prince Rudolf, died along with his mistress in still uncertain circumstances at a hunting lodge at Mayerling. The scandal rocked the Empire and thus Rudolf's cousin, Archduke Franz Ferdinand became the likely next ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Or would he? Franz Ferdinand was widely known as being sympathetic to Slavic claims that the Dual Monarchy be extended into at least a Triple Monarchy (including the Czechs) or even a multi-national federation that would grant autonomy to all of the Slavic peoples. It was that inclination that prompted him to attend military maneuvers in Bosnia in June, 1914, and to visit with his wife a hospital in the region's capital, Sarajevo, on June 28. His driver that day made a wrong turn and while he was backing up to correct his mistake a Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, stepped out of the crowd and fired two shots into the Archduke's limosine. Both Franz Ferdinand and his wife died instantly. Princip was apprehended and under interrogation revealed that he and fellow conspirators had contact with Serbian government agents. War fever followed in Vienna, but no action against Serbia was taken until the Austrians had assurances from their German ally of that nation's full support. It was forthcoming on July 5 when the Kaiser (without anyone's authorization) assured the Austrians that "in this case, as in all others, rely on Germany's full support." The next day, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg of Germany seconded that view, although somewhat more temperately.

On July 23, 1914, Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum to Serbia. Among its provisions were:

- The suppression of anti-Austrian publications in Serbia.
- The suppression of the “Black Hand,” an anti-Austrian secret society in Serbia.
- The arrest of government officials involved in the assassination.
- The participation of Austrian jurists in the investigation of the events of June 28.

Should Serbia have accepted these provisions, its independence (won in 1876) would have been compromised. The Serbians temporized and on July 28, 1914 the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia. Kaiser Wilhelm had been on a cruise in the Baltic and returned to find what Bismarck had prophesized as “some damn foolish thing in the Balkans” had turned into a potential pan-European war. Nothing like that had happened since Bonaparte. The Kaiser tried urgently to stave off the crisis, writing a series of “Dear Nickie” letters to his cousin the Czar. To no avail.

Cousin Nicholas, too, was horrified at the prospect of what was happening. When Austria declared war on Serbia, he ordered the mobilization of Russia’s huge army. Then he reconsidered and called for a stand-down. When his military staff advised him that he was creating chaos in the ranks, Nicholas changed his mind and rescinded his order. Russia now mobilized its millions for an invasion of Germany.

Here is the grim cycle of events:

- France orders partial mobilization on July 30.
- July 31, Austria-Hungary orders mobilization and Germany issues an ultimatum to Russia and France to stand down in 24 hours.
- August 1- With no response from either party, Germany declares war on Russia.
- August 3- Germany declares war on France.

- August 4- German troops cross the border and invade Belgium. To their surprise, the Belgians resist and upset the Schlieffen timetable.
- That same evening, Britain declared war on Germany and on August 6 the Cabinet authorized the BEF expedition.

What follows is another course. But just to give you an idea of the enormity of these events, let me summarize one chapter from Tuchman's Guns of August.

There was on August 4, 1914 a small German flotilla in the Mediterranean, consisting of the battle cruiser *Goeben* and the cruiser *Breslau*, under the command of Admiral Wilhelm Souchon. The French were transporting Moroccan troops to the Western Front and this German squadron was a serious threat to that movement. The British obliged by chasing down the Germans, but Admiral Souchon evaded them and sailed into the harbor at Constantinople with Turkish permission. The presence of those German fighting vessels in the Turkish capital had a major influence in causing the Turks to cast their lot with the Germans in the emerging global conflict. As a result:

- Russia was cut off from supply by the Western Powers through the Black Sea and slowly lost its combat effectiveness.
- Britain and France were free now to attack Ottoman territories in Palestine, Syria, what became Iraq, and the Arab Peninsula. The world is still reeling from the consequences of the Turks' defeat and Allied occupation of the Middle East after World War One.

I want to conclude this course, "Twilight of the Royals," with the following quotation from The Guns of August, describing the funeral in 1910 of Victoria son, Edward VII. She wrote:

*So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning of 1910 when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII of England that the crowd, waiting in hushed and black-clad awe, could not keep back gasps of admiration. In scarlet and blue and green and purple, three by three the sovereigns rode through the palace gates, with plumed helmets, gold braid, crimson sashes, and jeweled orders flashing in the sun. After them came five heirs apparent, forty more imperial or royal*



*highnesses, seven queens—four dowager and three regnant—and a scattering of special ambassadors from uncrowned countries [including Theodore Roosevelt]. Together they represented seventy nations in the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place and, of its kind, the last. The muffled tongue of Big Ben tolled nine by the clock as the cortege left the palace, but on history's clock it was sunset, and the sun of the old world was setting in a dying blaze of splendor never to be seen again.*

British Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, turned to an aide in London on the evening of August 4, 1914 [as Britain's declaration of war was delivered in Berlin] and said famously: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them again in our lifetime." The words of prophecy.