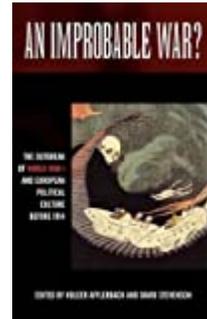




**Holger Afflerbach, David Stevenson.** *An Improbable War?: The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007. 380 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-275-9.



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## How Surprising Was World War I?

Originally delivered as papers at an October 2004 conference at Emory University, the essays in this volume focus on one question relating to the Great War: Was this conflict inevitable given the European geopolitical situation in 1914? Editors Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson provide a revisionist answer and suggest that the beginning of the conflict can better be described as “improbable” because numerous institutions (a global economy, disarmament conferences, international law) seemed to militate against its outbreak. Furthermore, they ask us to remember that plenty of evidence suggests the war came as a shock to many people. This issue holds substantial historiographical implications. It can plausibly be argued that World War I laid the framework for the Bolsheviks, the National Socialists, and the 1939-45 conflict. To press this point further, in a short foreword to the book, former U.S. president Jimmy Carter argues that the geopolitical consequences of the war set in motion a train of events that led to the Manhattan Project and the development of nuclear weapons. The editors also want to make a point about policymaking.

The conference took place eighteen months after the invasion of Iraq, another war of choice that confounded expectations and produced electoral upheaval across the West in ways that almost no one expected (whether they wanted the conflict or not). Afflerbach, Stevenson, and Carter diffidently ask us to remember the men who took Europe into World War I as a warning because we might not be as different from our predecessors as we think. Just because military disaster seems more improbable today than it did then does not mean it is impossible.

The controversy of this issue is evidenced by the divergent, nuanced answers provided in the articles. Although the editors make clear that they feel global military conflict from 1914 to 1918 was not inevitable, this is not the position taken by many of the contributors. Eminent diplomatic historian Paul Schroeder argues that the complicated choreography maintaining the balance of power in Europe broke down after 1890 as imperialist visions of nationalism became more and more dominant. The Austrian decision to fight over the Sarajevo crisis was the best option open to them in a system that ac-

cepted military force as a means of preserving or extending great power status. Similarly, John R hl pointed out that the venality of the men running the Kaiserreich was matched only by the dysfunctionality of the regime's decision-making apparatus. Wilhelm II alternated between demanding that his ambassadors not back down an inch to personally writing the czar to beg "Nicky" to call off mobilization. R hl traces this governmental system, a component of the diplomatic concert identified by Schroeder, back to the foundation of the German Empire. He reasons that it was bound to lead to unnecessary conflict sooner or later. The war planning system of the Central Powers, revolving around the General Staffs, also did not lend itself to the peaceful resolution of crises. For example, the German General Staff feared that as time went on the Kaiserreich would weaken in relation to Russia, England, and the United States. Their war gaming convinced them that conflict was desirable as soon as possible. These men assumed that military violence represented a normal solution to geopolitical problems. Speaking of military leaders, Ute Frevert showed that stereotypical versions of masculinity insisting that men had to defend the honor of the nation were ill suited to nonviolent conflict resolution. Many nationalist males looked at war as a metaphorical duel between countries; it could not be turned down without a loss of face. Since conscription into the military served to reinforce the connection between manliness, honor, and power, Frevert wonders how war could have been avoided in the long run.

However, plenty of other contributors agree that the situation before 1914 did not necessarily have to lead to war. Men in positions of power had to make decisions, and options besides military conflict were available to them. That they did not choose them was part of the tragedy. Stevenson shows that the massive build-up of land armaments after 1900 certainly made conflict more likely because societies felt geared up for a fight. He nevertheless does not believe that it made the war inevitable, because governments understood these investments to be defensive. To support his argument he cites the Soviet-U.S. experience in the Cold War to show that escalation and deterrence can go on for decades without direct conflict. Afflerbach presents evidence demonstrating that many Europeans of a liberal persuasion believed that a major war was impossible in the twentieth century, as did most diplomats. He points out the many high-ranking military officers in Germany feared that such peaceful sentiments were so ingrained in the population that war might not break out in time for Germany to achieve world power. For these people, the war

came as an awful, ominous shock. Samuel R. Williamson, Jr. argues that even after June 1914, war was not inevitable. The Austrian General Staff was plagued by fears that a failure to show military backbone would doom the monarchy. If they had been more permeable to outsiders with new ideas or less fixed on war as a solution, he believes conflict could still have been avoided. Finally, Roger Chickering focuses very closely on street demonstrations in the last week of July 1914 to show that no universal consensus prevailed that war represented the desired option for German citizens. While university students tended to be very belligerent, the Social Democrats staged large protests in support of peace. Chickering also asks us to remember that demonstrations by students were not inclusive; they defined Social Democrats, pacifists, and Jews as people who did not belong in the nation. In other words, there is much reason to think that public meetings about the June Crisis allowed ordinary citizens as much opportunity to protest as support the potential for armed conflict.

Like any provocative book, this one forced me to rethink some of my historiographical assumptions. When I teach World War I, I point out to students that once war broke out adults from a diverse cross-section of society supported their governments across the continent either out of a sense of enthusiasm, social duty, or a religious resignation to fate. However, my own research on an export industry in the Kaiserreich supports Afflerbach's point; liberal entrepreneurs looked at the disruption of the economy and the outbreak of war with helpless terror. I still conclude that in retrospect, the development of "imperialist" visions of nationalism and the widespread belief that war represented a clean problem-solving tool for a series of chronic political and social problems meant that a general war was highly probable in the early decades of the twentieth century. I am not yet convinced by their historiographical argument. I remain occupied by the policy issue, however, and the editors' inclusion of material by a recent policymaker suggests that this effect is not unintended. Like the cosmopolitan toy-sellers I study from the early nineteenth century, I myself assumed that war was impossible at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I did not believe for one second that a president could lead a multi-ethnic democracy of three hundred million people into a conflict of choice. Like Afflerbach's progressives, I constantly ask myself how I got it so wrong and what I might have done differently. I suspect that Afflerbach and Stevenson are right on the policy point; just because military disaster seems improbable in a cosmopolitan, integrated world does not mean that it is impossible.

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