**JIHAD-CUM-ZIONISM-LENINISM: OVERTHROWING THE WORLD, GERMAN-STYLE**

Sean McMeekin

It is often said that the First World War marks a watershed in modern history. From the mobilization of armies of unfathomable size—more than 60 million men put on uniforms between 1914 and 1918—to the no less mind-boggling human cost of the conflict, both at the front and beyond it (estimated military and civilian deaths were nearly equal, at some 8 million each), the war of 1914 broke all historical precedent in the scale of its devastation. Ruling houses that had endured for centuries—the Romanov, Habsburg, and Ottoman—shook, tottered, and fell, unleashing yet more misery as these precariously assembled multiethnic empires were wracked by internecine warfare. As the war of 1914 spread beyond Europe into the Balkans and Middle East, racial and religious score-settling and reprisals led inevitably to large-scale ethnic cleansing, with millions of civilians uprooted from their ancestral homes, which most would never see again. Even the victorious Western powers, France and Britain, suffered a collapse in cultural confidence that arguably has never been repaired. After centuries of progress had brought the West to a position of unparalleled domination of global affairs, it took only four years for the whole glittering edifice of European civilization to fall apart.

If 1914-18 marked an epitaph for Old Europe, we may usefully ask: Was it murder or suicide? Popular historians have usually leaned toward the latter verdict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European dict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no Eu...
first. Scholarly consensus, because it implicitly denies the possibility of argument, tends toward a certain smugness. As David Fromkin answers his own question in *Europe’s Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914* (Knopf, 2004), “Briefly and roughly stated, the answer is that the government of Austria-Hungary started its local war with Serbia, while Germany’s military leaders started the worldwide war against France and Russia that became known as the First World War or the Great War.” Alright, then. What else is there to say?

To be sure, there is wiggle room inside the current consensus. Some historians focus their fire on the Austro-Hungarian statesmen who deliber-

Could the war really have been about nothing more than a German officer and his complexes?

German side, Bethmann Hollweg and especially Moltke have been harshly judged, to be sure—Fromkin even fingers the chief of the German general staff as the “most modest, unexceptional, and indeed rather ordinary career army officer [who] started the Great War.” And yet there is mitigation even in this judgment: Fromkin cites as evidence of guilt Moltke’s later “confession” to having started the war, which suggests a man wracked by moral doubts more than an unrepentant war criminal. This is characteristic of what we might call the post-Fischer view of 1914, in which the German “crime” was not one of conscious aggressive intention, but more a tragic decision born of a mixture of fear and foreboding.

Nuanced as it is, there still seems something odd about this sort of bloodless explanation of the outbreak of the bloodiest war in history (until its sequel arrived in 1939). Could the war really have been about nothing more than a German officer and his complexes? Or, adopting the only slightly less bloodless popular explanation, did more than 15 million people die, with countless more millions wounded and/or deprived of their senses by shell shock (not to mention those later killed in conflicts born of the breakup of empires in the First World War) all because of a series of accidental miscalculations by basically well-intentioned statesmen?

It is not impossible, of course, that terrible events can have senseless causes—one thinks of natural disasters like earthquakes and hurricanes. But this is hardly true of the First World War, which was a manmade calamity if there ever was one. Someone must have done something with malice aforethought to produce such colossal carnage. Presumably, considering the human scale and geographical breadth of the carnage, there must have been at least several rival someones, with different, presumably clashing plans, to conjure up such global destructiveness.

Which men, in short, made the various calamities of the First World War, and for what reasons? If we pose the question in this way, it becomes obvious that Moltke (or Bethmann Hollweg) cannot alone shoulder the burden of blame. Whether or not Fischer was right that the German statesmen of 1914 were collectively lusting for “world power,” that is, for an enlarged global empire that would rival Great Britain’s, there were surely some men in Berlin who thought in these terms—who were paid, in fact, to do so. Some of these men, in turn, must have dreamed up and written down plans envisioning how this might come about, plans that would presumably involve weakening the British Empire so as to enable the Germans to supplant it.

The Germans were not alone in this prewar (and then wartime) geopolitical scheming, of course. Russian plans for the seizure of Austrian Galicia, along with Constantinople and the Straits,
were far advanced by 1914 and no great secret among diplomatic professionals. France’s claim on Alsace-Lorraine was openly avowed, with her plans to conquer this lost province assumed matter-of-factly by German military planners. Britain’s plans to absorb Germany’s African colonies did not come out of nowhere, nor did her wartime initiatives in Arabia, Palestine, and Mesopotamia (even if these, like French encroachment in Syria and Palestine, were made possible only after Ottoman entry into the war, which both London and Paris initially sought to prevent).

If the Germans were not alone in cooking up plans of imperial conquest, however, they were uniquely prolific and even creative in doing so. Some of these plans, as Fischer showed us, were in place long before the war, especially those dealing with the Ottoman Empire. These preexisting plots to disrupt and dismantle the British, Russian, and French empires may not have caused the war in quite the way Fischer suggested; but they did help determine the uncompromising character of the war, along with much of its geographical and even political course. As the Kaiser himself wrote on July 30, 1914, “[England] must . . . have the mask of Christian peaceableness torn publicly off her face . . . . Our consuls in Turkey and India, agents, etc., must inflame the whole Mohammedan world to wild revolt against this hateful, lying, conscienceless nation of shopkeepers. If we are to be bled to death, at least England shall lose India.” Written at a time when Germany had not even begun mobilizing, and nearly a week before Britain entered the war, these words suggest that a good deal more than premonitory strategic fear was at work in driving the German decision for war.

Of course, Wilhelm II was notoriously moody and unstable, not least when he was composing these kinds of “marginalia” on diplomatic reports (in this case, on a dispatch from Friedrich Pourtalés, Germany’s ambassador in St. Petersburg, reporting that general Russian mobilization was underway). And yet, however melodramatic in tone, the Kaiser’s words were not idle: they represented real German policy. As early as August 2, 1914, after the war between Germany and Russia had begun but before France and Britain had gone in, Berlin signed an alliance treaty with the Ottoman Empire with the intention of unleashing Islamic holy war against the Entente Powers. As Moltke instructed the German foreign office just three days later (after Britain had finally entered the war), “revolution in India and Egypt, and also in the Caucasus, is of the highest importance. The treaty with Turkey will make it possible for the foreign office to realize the idea and awaken the fanaticism of Islam.”

To promote this Turco-German “jihad,” and much else besides, the German foreign office established a kind of all-purpose sabotage bureau for “Seditious Undertakings Against Our Enemies” (Unternehmungen und Aufwgewolngen gegen unsere Feinde), under the authority of Arthur Zimmermann, the under-secretary of state. The operational mastermind of the holy war stratagem was Baron Max von Oppenheim, a confidant of the Kaiser’s who had been scheming for years to unleash global jihad against the British Empire. Alongside Oppenheim’s jihad operation, the German military planners. Britain’s plans to absorb the Ottoman Empire in two, was hatched in retaliation for the British-supported “Arab revolt” that helped split the Ottoman Empire into thinking the Germans were about to make their own move. The British endorsement of Zionism that led to the creation of the state of Israel, like the British-supported “Arab revolt” that helped split the Ottoman Empire in two, was hatched in retaliation to Germany’s own revolutionary sabotage stratagems. In the case of the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the connection to German policy was even more direct. German generals, on the advice of German
Zionists, drew up propaganda leaflets, which were dropped behind Russian front lines in 1914: they asked the “Jews of Russia” to “take up arms” against the tsar, whether they were “Nationalists, Zionists, or Socialists.” While it is true that very few Jews inside Russia followed this rather dangerous advice, and that the German Zionists themselves later had second thoughts about opening the “ genie” of perceived Jewish disloyalty and sedition in the fevered atmosphere of wartime Russia, German support for Russian socialists in exile (many, though not all of them, Jewish) had more serious consequences. Perhaps fittingly, in that Zimmermann’s sabotage bureau saw the jihad and Judeo-Zionist stratagems as complementary, the key moment in the Russian stratagem occurred inside the German embassy in Constantinople, when in January 1915 Alexander Parvus Helphand first proposed that Berlin fund Lenin. “The interests of the German government,” Parvus told Ambassador Hans von Wangenheim, “are identical with those of the Russian revolutionaries.” (In a stunning and little-known parallel, just on the other side of Taksim square in the Pera Palace “are identical with those of the Russian revolutionaries.”) While it is true that German-financed funds wired via Stockholm during the crucial (at least as far as neutral Sweden), and received from the German government (that is, without encryption) the immense resources of European Russia, as well as the immense resources of European Russia, as well as Bakú’s oil, the Germans would have been in a virtually impregnable position from which to negotiate a compromise peace with Britain, with German priority in the Balkans, Russia, and Turkish Anatolia granted in exchange for British control of India, Egypt, Arabia, and Palestine. Syria and Mesopotamia might then have been partitioned, with a French buffer zone separating the two giants along the lines of the Sykes-Picot agreement (i.e., with the Germans inheriting the “Russian” zone, now that Russia was a German puppet state). The French, to be sure, would have been embittered by such a settlement, but with the defeated Germans dominating postwar Europe, they could have done little about it. Absent its caussi bols, the U.S., too, would have had to accept German ascendancy, and might have been quite happy to trade with the new colossus. This profound revolution in global affairs could have been Germany’s to keep, had not the Germans unleashed one revolutionary gambit too many. Setting out, in Trotsky’s phrase, to “overthrow the world” as it existed in 1914, Germany’s peculiarly gifted geopolitical visionaries, with malice aforethought, had done exactly that, unleashing the deadly fires of war and revolution across half the globe. But they had also, unwittingly, destroyed their own empire.

Sean McMeekin teaches diplomatic history in the department of international relations at Bilgi University in Ankara, Turkey. He has also taught at Yale, New York University, and the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power (Berkman Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), he is the author of History’s Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks (Yale University Press, 2008), which was listed for the Eid, A Hewit Prize in 2010, and The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West (Yale University Press, 2004). His next book, The Russian Origins of the First World War, is forthcoming later in 2011 from the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

3 In this vein, see David Stevenson, Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy (Basic Books, 2004), chapter 1; Hew Strachan, The First World War: Volume I: To Arms (Oxford University Press, 2001); Norman Stone, World War One: A Short History (Pen- guin, 2008), and particularly David Fromkin, Europe’s Last Sum- mer: How Started the Great War in 1914? (Knopf, 2004).
5 Among the former we might number Hew Strachan, among the latter, David Fromkin and Norman Stone.
7 Among German historians who look critically at Russia’s role, see Horst Günther Linke, Das Zarenreich Russland und der erste Weltkrieg: Diplomatie und Kriegsordnung 1914-1917 (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1982)—although Linke’s aim was not really to debunk Fischer per se. More recently Stefan Schmidt examined France’s long-neglected role in the outbreak of war in 1914 in Frankreichs Ausnahme: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aus- bruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges (Oldenbourg, 2009). It will be interesting to see if Schmidt’s book has much impact on discussions of the war’s origins in English (Linke’s did not).
8 This is the subject I will tackle in my next book, The Russian Origins of the First World War, forthcoming from the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
10 Fromkin, Europe’s Last Summer, 305.
12 Ibid.
13 The initiative was also double-banked inside the Wilhelmstrasse’s Near Eastern Department, headed by Baron Langenputz von Simmern, which was supposed to oversee Oppenheim’s ac- tivities (although Oppenheim, in practice, acted largely as a free agent).
15 I discuss all these developments at length in The Berlin-Baghdad Express.
16 Ibid., 195.
17 I discuss German support for Lenin in History’s Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks (Yale University Press, 2008), especially chapter 5.