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What Was the Great War about?

War Aims, Military Strategies and Political Justifications
during the First World War

From 29 July 1914, the day when Austrian troops fired the first shots into Serbia, until 11 November 1918, the day of the armistice in Europe, the First World War lasted 1,566 days. The belligerent nations fielded about 66 million soldiers, 8.8 millions of whom died together with nearly 6 million civilians.1 This means that on average around 9,400 fatalities occurred on every day of the war – and this continued for more than four years. Death was only a part of the misery. We have to add the millions mutilated in body or soul, the hardships of war, the sorrow of many and the suffering of all.

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, an army commander on the Western Front during the First World War later described it as “the most stupid of all wars”.2 He did so, significantly enough, during the Second World War – which had, indeed, clear aims, being, for one side, a ruthless war of conquest and for the other an attempt to stop and destroy a merciless aggressor: a terrible war indeed, but one that had, for both sides, a clear purpose. World War I was different. It is possible that the fascination this war exercises on us, one hundred years later, is its lack of a clear purpose. Clausewitz said that “the reason [for war] always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object”.3 This seems only partially true in the case of the First World War. The war aims adopted during the First World War were not, for the most part, the cause of the conflict, but a reaction to it, an attempt to give the tragedy a purpose – even if the consequence was to oblige the belligerents to go on fighting until victory. War aims were created during the war, not before. This is at least true for the states which entered the War in August 1914. All the Great Powers of Europe were responsible for the outbreak of war in 1914, albeit perhaps to different degrees; but as most historians

would say today, the conflagration in the form it actually took was planned and 
desired by none.\footnote{Christopher Clark: The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to 
War in 1914. London 2012.} Alliance considerations, fear and the feeling of the need to react 
to, or to preempt, an unprovoked attack were the main reasons behind the actions 
of governments during the July crisis.

Once at war, the belligerents went on to develop widely different agendas. 
Nearly all of them had well-defined war aims and a “lust for conquest” was unde-
niable. This was also true for most of the powers that entered the conflict later – 
 witness the interventions of Italy, analysed here by John Gooch,\footnote{See the 
contribution of John Gooch in this volume.} and Bulgaria in 1915, and that of Romania in 1916. 
The Ottoman Empire was, as Mesut Uyar shows, something of an exception, and entered the war 
very much for defensive reasons; but also in this case the lust of conquest came later.\footnote{See the 
contribution of Mesut Uyar in this volume.}

This volume focusses on a number of aspects of the development of war aims 
and strategy during the Great War. One important aspect is the development of 
coherent strategies, considered not as a purely military task, but also, indeed 
mainly, as a political one, as defined Clausewitz: “War is the continuation of poli-
tics by other means.”\footnote{Von Clausewitz: On War (see note 3), p. 87.} Hew Strachan provides us with an important clarification 
of what contemporaries understood by the term “strategy”, namely something we 
today would describe as “tactics”.\footnote{See the contribution of Hew Strachan in this volume.} The tasks of the individual 
contributions will be to show the complex interplay between political war aims, military strategy, 
morale at home and at the front, economics and war financing.\footnote{Michael Howard: Grand 
strategy” as follows: “Grand strategy in the first half of the twentieth century con-
sisted basically in the mobilisation and deployment of national resources of wealth, manpower 
and industrial capacity, together with the enlistment of those of allied and, when feasible, of neu-
tral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime.” Andreas Hill-
gruber: Der Faktor Amerika in Hitlers Strategie 1938–1941. In: Wolfgang Michalka (ed.): 
Nationalsozialistische Außenpolitik. Darmstadt 1978, pp. 493–525, p. 493, defines strategy as “die Inte-
gration von Innen- und Außenpolitik, von militärischer und psychologischer Kriegsplanung und 
Kriegführung, von Wehrwirtschaft und -rüstung durch die Führungsspitze eines Staates zur Ver-
wirklichung einer ideologisch-politischen Gesamtkonzeption”/ (“the integration of domestic and 
foreign policy, of military and psychological war planning and war conduct, of defence economy 
and military build-up by the leadership of a state towards the realisation of a ideological-political 
concept”).} It will be neces-
sary to specify the war aims of the particular belligerent states and to show how 
they interacted with military and political realities. In the case of France, Georges-
Henri Soutou discerns a quite determined political approach and a military strategy 
that fitted French political aspirations.\footnote{See the contribution of Georges-Henri Soutou in this volume.}

Keith Jeffery argues that the British war 
effort was undermining the political coherence of the empire, which nevertheless 
proved to be victorious and to have attained, at least at first sight, the peak of its 
global power in 1918. Also the Austro-Hungarian government insisted stubborn-
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Equally important is the question of national consensus. What did the political and military elites do to rally their respective nations to continue the struggle? How was this consensus perceived, how do we see it today?

A second point is the nature of political decision-making under the pressure of an enormous crisis. The First World War was not only a global war but also one of the most severe and complex political crisis of human history. Analysing the decision-making of political and military leaders involves empathising with their mentalités, fundamental political attitudes and priorities; but we must also take account of contingent factors, such as the accidents of war, the need to take decisions under pressure, and the incalculability of interacting parties – all of which figure in this volume. War, of course, had a dynamic of its own; and war aims were not static, but were considered, and reconsidered, and modified countless times, even if there was, as in the French case, a very solid stock of unchangeable ideas. Political decision-making too was equally subject to unforeseen contingencies, unpredictable interactions, military and political stopgap measures to postpone rather than settle insoluble problems, and above all to the need to survive.

The same dynamics lay at the root of another important development: the longer the war lasted, the more the political opposition in the belligerent countries looked to it to bring them internal political change. People started to talk about fundamental reforms as a reward for their war contribution and their suffering, and the war aims debate was enlarged and became a debate on internal reforms. In some cases – for example, those of Germany and Russia, as described by Roger Chickering and Boris Kolonitskii – the demand for, and the resistance to, internal reforms started to overshadow the classic debate about war aims.

Moreover, as a political catastrophe, the war also pointed the way not only to internal reform, but to alternative structures for conducting international relations: Woodrow Wilson’s ideas about a new international order are discussed by Klaus Schwabe, and Holger Afflerbach.

Related to these issues of political options and dynamics in wartime is the question why governments did not try to reduce their war aims – or abandon them altogether – to save the lives and happiness of millions of people. Instead we see a picture of grim determination, a very striking example being Serbia, described by Dušan T. Bataković. Forced into exile by the Central Powers in late 1915, the Serbian government continued the fight on Greek soil, stubbornly refusing to reduce

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11 See the contribution of Marvin Fried in this volume.
12 See the contribution of Georges-Henri Soutou in this volume.
13 See the contributions of Roger Chickering (Germany) and Boris Kolonitskii (Russia) in this volume.
14 See the contribution of Klaus Schwabe in this volume.
15 See my contribution in this volume.
its political programme, let alone conclude a separate peace. Such tenacity came at a high price, however; and Serbia suffered, in proportion to its population, the highest losses of all belligerent nations.\textsuperscript{16} Serbia was perhaps an extreme case. All the other belligerents, however, were almost equally unyielding; and the question of why no political compromise was reached, and why this World War, despite costing more than 14 million lives, was continued until the complete defeat of one of the two sides is discussed here by Lothar Höbelt and Holger Afflerbach.\textsuperscript{17}

The editor and the authors of this volume are well aware of the enormous complexities surrounding the war aims and military strategies of the First World War, and have not even attempted to cover all the questions they raise – an impossible task when one considers that Fritz Fischer’s volume on German War aims alone runs to more than 900 pages and even then does not manage to cover all aspects of German strategy and war aims.\textsuperscript{18} We hope, nevertheless, that the present volume will offer an overview to our “ideal audience” of students and informed general readers with an interest in the First World War, and may invite them to reflect on the political and strategic reasons and rationales behind that catastrophe.

\textsuperscript{16} See the contribution by Dušan T. Bataković in this volume.
\textsuperscript{17} See the contribution of Lothar Höbelt and my contribution in this volume.