1870/71 eine gewisse Unentschlossenheit in Bezug auf die Anstöße zur Militärreform. Erst nach diesem Krieg wurden sie weiterverfolgt.

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Annika Mombauer

An improbable war? The Outbreak of World War I – Reconsidered. International conference at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, 13–16 October 2004

2004 saw many conferences to commemorate the 90th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War. In this case, the organizer, Holger Afflerbach, suggested a new focus on the old question of the origins of the First World War. Rather than taking as read the assumption that distinct nationalisms, imperialisms, militarisms and armament races in Europe before 1914 nearly inevitably led to war and that the Sarajevo assassination on 28 June 1914 was only the spark that unleashed a seemingly unavoidable European or even World War, the conference aimed to question that very inevitability. Twenty-five scholars agreed to re-examine the origins of the First World War by focussing not on its inevitability, but by highlighting how the conflict may have been avoidable and how war, rather than a foregone conclusion, may even have been an improbable outcome in 1914. They also focused on reactions to the war's outbreak, both in and outside of Europe.

At the same time, the organizer was keen to underline the way in which events of the past might still influence our own political thinking in the present. In the run-up to the conference, he posed some big questions: ›Was the international system in 1914 a Hobbesian society where only the law of the strongest ruled, or was it controlled by rules and international cooperation? How can we explain violence and war?‹ The discussions at Atlanta were, not surprisingly, not able to yield tangible results regarding such important questions, although their relevance was impressively underlined in the opening speech by Jimmy Carter, former President of the United States, who addressed the conference in his role as Honorary Professor at Emory University. In his reflections on a century of war and peace, so much of which has impacted on his own personal history, he identified similarities between the situation of 1914 and the present. By pointing also to the ›attractiveness of war‹, particularly for military decision-makers, he provided a fitting point of departure for subsequent discussion.

The first panel focused on long-term developments in European statecraft and emphasized the importance of the ›international system‹ before 1914. In examining Austria-Hungary's decision for war in 1914 in a systemic perspective, *Paul Schroeder* (University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign) introduced one of the themes which would be reiterated throughout the conference: the idea that before 1914 some countries would be able to ›steal horses to great acclaim‹, i.e. to embark on an expansionist foreign policy, while others, notably Austria-Hungary, were ›hanged for looking over the fence‹. This Spanish proverb provided an apt metaphor for

the way some countries were able to prosper within the international system before 1914, while others found themselves hemmed in and unable to do the same.

Matthias Schulz (Vanderbilt University) addressed the question if war could have been avoided in 1914 by investigating whether the ›concert of Europe‹ could have served as ›guardians of civilization‹. He was able to show that while the Great Powers had been ›the real arbiters of the Nations‹ in the nineteenth century, by the end of that century, their cooperation became undermined as the ambitions of those powers increasingly came into conflict with each other.

Holger Afflerbach (Emory University) expanded his thesis of an improbable war and provided much evidence from contemporaries who were surprised by its outbreak, although he conceded that such views are difficult to reconcile with the reality of the armaments race, imperialist rivalries and other tensions. Taking issue with Wolfgang Mommsen's thesis of the ›topos of inevitable war‹ in the years before 1914, Afflerbach offered the ›topos of avoidable war‹ as shorthand for his new thesis. In clear opposition to the widely-held idea of a general war mood in Europe before 1914, Afflerbach places his research in line, for example, with that of Friedrich Kießling, who stressed here and elsewhere the topos of the repeatedly avoided war before 1914. Wolfgang Mommsen's untimely death sadly prevented his attendance of this conference.

Another panel addressed the European military situation before 1914. It was in the context of military decision-making that the thesis of the improbable war of 1914 perhaps found least support. As *Günther Kronenbitter* (University of Augsburg) demonstrated in his analysis of the German and Austro-Hungarian General Staffs and their reflections on an impossible war, the decision for war in 1914 contained a number of inherent and ultimately inexplicable paradoxes. How do we explain why both Helmuth von Moltke and Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf wanted a war that they both feared they might lose? The answer, it seems, did not lie in their belief in an improbable war, but rather in their conviction that war was a high-risk gamble which offered a chance of winning (however small that chance), and that one either had to be willing to fight or surrender one's position altogether. In the end, for both military leaders ›war had to be possible‹. From the point of view of the Central Powers' military decision-makers, at least, war was far from improbable in 1914.

Jost Dülffer (University of Cologne) demonstrated that there had, of course, been attempts to curb the military desire for armaments when he outlined both the chances for and the limits to armament control and international agreements before 1914. The two international peace conferences at The Hague in 1899 and in 1907 (a third had been planned for 1915/16) considered the ›possibility of an agreement as to the limitation of armed forces‹ (1899) and resolved that the limitation of military expenditure would be ›highly desirable‹ (1907), but in practice, nothing tangible was achieved regarding this central question. Certainly these international meetings showed that peaceful alternatives were feasible, but the military leaders of many powers opposed the idea of disarmament and, in 1914, many of them were in favour of war, rather than against it.

The arms race of the prewar years is generally seen to have contributed to this desire for war. *Michael Epkenhans* (Bismarck Stiftung, Friedrichsruh) analysed the Naval Race before 1914 with a view to the question if a peaceful outcome may have been possible, while David Stevenson asked the same question of the military arms race. Epkenhans also made the important observation that in re-visiting the ori-

gins of the First World War, we should not lose sight of the question of war guilt. In that regard, his findings added to evidence presented by other speakers, particularly regarding the widespread feeling that an honourable end would be preferable to a slow (but seemingly inevitable) decline. Admiral von Tirpitz demanded, like many of his colleagues, ›either disaster or triumph‹, and preferred to perish with honour rather than to renounce a powerful position for Germany in the future. Epkenhans concluded that there can be no doubt that the naval question had decisively helped frame the grouping of the powers before 1914 and had made the outbreak of hostilities between the major European countries at least more probable, rather than improbable.

The arms race and the predominance of military reasoning in European politics in and before 1914 pose the greatest challenges to Afflerbach's thesis. In his investigation of the land arms race before 1914, *David Stevenson* (London School of Economics) addressed the organizer's speculative question of whether the arms race made the First World War inevitable by posing the counter-factual question whether this military posturing could have ended peacefully. In his analysis, the arms race had created tensions which made it ›highly probable that if another diplomatic crisis occurred it would end in war‹. However, such a crisis was not inevitable, and without Sarajevo, it is conceivable that a position of stalemate would have developed in which another German armaments increase would simply have followed the latest Russian move.

In a third session, the conference focused on non-governmental forces of internationalization before 1914. *Hartmut Lehmann* (formerly Max Planck Institut, Göttingen) examined international solidarity in European and North American Protestantism before and after 1914. Lehmann also posed the question if the First World War could have been prevented had the leaders of Protestant Churches of all countries been united in opposition against war prior to 1914. However, he argued that even if their influence could have been brought to bear on the decision-makers in Europe's capitals, their own leaders were far from united to affect such an influence.

Jessica Gienow-Hecht (University of Frankfurt) approached the First World War from a cultural angle. In focusing on international relations in the realm of the arts, culture and war before 1914, she argued that, in the long run, the war ›mattered very little to the development of cultural relations between Europe and the United States‹. British literature, French art and German music had dominated the cultural canon at the turn of the century and these cultural relations survived the war almost intact.

Madeleine Herren (University of Zürich) pointed out similar continuities in her study of international organizations and internationalism in European Politics before 1914. Many international organizations copied the way in which diplomacy visualized international cooperation. Their existence was not enough to make the outbreak of war improbable, but the institutional foundations of internationalism were not destroyed during the First World War, and many international organizations continued their activities and survived the war intact.

A whole day was devoted to a number of speakers focusing on individual states. *Friedrich Kießling* (Erlangen University) argued that in trying to explain the war's origins, it is a mistake to focus only on those factors which seemingly led to an escalation of international tensions. His study of détente proves that even steps which were taken in order to de-escalate the increasing hostility among Europe's leading powers could (and did) have the opposite effect. In that sense, détente was both counter-productive and led to the wrong calculations being made by some of

Europe's leading statesmen in July 1914. Because détente had been achieved in previous crises and war had repeatedly been averted before, the assumption may have been that in July 1914, too, war could ultimately be avoided. War, therefore, may have appeared improbable to contemporary decision-makers, even if from our vantage point its outbreak seems much less surprising.

Samuel R. Williamson (University of the South at Sewanee) invoked the comparison with today's fear of terrorism in his contribution when he asked if the contemporary fixation on terrorism offers us any insights into Habsburg behaviour in 1914. He emphasized that the decision-makers in Vienna did not feel pressured into action by Germany, arguing, like Günther Kronenbitter and Lothar Höbelt, for Austria-Hungary's key role in the events leading to the outbreak of war. At the same time, he outlined some striking parallels to more recent events. In 1914, a 'discretionary war became a total disaster'. Vienna's war did not result from aggressive intent as much as from 'defensive realism' as its statesmen made a last effort to rescue the monarchy. Such decisions were based on illusions and, in Williamson's words, 'of such illusions are wars made, whether in 1914 or 2003'.

Lothar Höbelt (University of Vienna) also focused on Austria-Hungary which, he argued, had 'started what it thought was an unavoidable war, thus unleashing the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th century'. In his investigation of the role of nationalism in the outbreak of war, he concluded that it was fear of nationalism, irredentists, fundamentalists and terrorists, rather than nationalism itself that contributed to the decision for war. The Austro-Hungarian monarchy certainly had more than its fair share of different nationalism. This, however, contributed only indirectly to the outbreak of war, in the sense that Franz Ferdinand's assassination provided the trigger for the July Crisis. Rather, Höbelt maintains that nationalism contributed – unintentionally – towards a certain system of checks and balances within the monarchy.

For the case of France, *Olivier Cosson* (École des Haute Études en Sciences Sociales) outlined a certain 'unreality of war', where only the military really recognized the new violence of the industrial battlefield. Here, as elsewhere, there was a perceived need to win a future war, rather than any sober questioning of whether war was indeed inevitable or unavoidable. French army leaders wanted a war from 1908 and looked for ways to make it winnable, although they did not seek a preventive war. And those who finally decided to go to war did not envisage any concrete action on the battle-field. Cosson suggested that it was perhaps that very abandoning of the realities of a European war that led the French, if not to war, then certainly to a misunderstanding of what the reality of that war might be.

Mustafa Aksakal (Monmouth University) examined the political and military culture that provided the context for the Ottoman decision for war in 1914. For the Ottoman leadership, the war seemed to provide the opportunity to establish their country as a state which would finally enjoy full membership in the international state system and access to international law. War was seen by some as a suitable way to affect a radical transformation of the Ottoman state with the help of the German Empire to which the country allied itself. Turkish historiography would have it differently, for in the aftermath of the war the new Turkish elite sought to distance itself from the responsibility of fighting against the Allied powers and from the atrocities committed against the Armenian population at home. Stressing the fact that the Ottoman leadership, like most of its European counter-parts, actually expected a short war, Aksakal demonstrated that the most important determinant of

Ottoman policy in 1914 was a concern for the long-term security of the country's borders as well as sustained economic development, both of which they hoped to achieve in an alliance with Germany. In all of this, however, the Ottomans did not enter the war enthusiastically. Once the alliance with Germany was secure, it took almost three months before they entered the war in earnest.

Germany's decision for war was the subject of the paper by *John Röhl* (University of Sussex), who focused on Wilhelm II as an example for the role of monarchs and the outbreak of war. In his investigation he found little evidence for the assumption that war was considered improbable. Rather, the evidence suggests a bellicose mood in Berlin in July 1914. All leading decision-makers, including the Kaiser, felt that if Russia could be made to appear as the aggressor, Germany could fight a war against France and Russia under favourable circumstances. Rather than hoping for a peaceful solution to the crisis, they and their Austro-Hungarian allies did everything in their power to affect an escalation. In his analysis, Röhl found Wilhelm II not to have been, as has so often been assumed, the innocent monarch who was unable either to understand or to control events, but rather to bear a major responsibility for the outbreak of war which his actions, and those of his statesmen, helped to make inevitable.

Roger Chickering (Georgetown University) presented the latest findings on the now widely questioned idea that European public opinion had reacted to the outbreak of war with widespread enthusiasm. His paper provided both an overview of the latest literature on the subject, and a case-study of the town of Freiburg. While such patriotic fervour at the beginning of August 1914 had always been assumed to have existed in Germany, Austria-Hungary, France and Britain, the evidence now suggests that this seems to have been largely exaggerated by governments eager to demonstrate unity to its people and allies.

In contrast perceived wisdom has often assumed a lack of patriotism before and during the war in Russia. However, *Joshua A. Sanborn* (Lafayette College) was able to show that while Russia's participation in the war was not inevitable as the July Crisis came to a head, and while the balance between war and peace was more even in St Petersburg than in many other capitals, in Russia, as elsewhere, rhetoric about the homeland, about the desirability of war, and strong anti-German feelings helped fuel and sustain the war effort. Russian elites saw their country's great power status threatened, and such patriotic feelings led the cabinet and Nicholas II to adopt a hard line in July 1914. Clearly, Russians followed their government's call to arm in great numbers, and only four per cent of conscripts did not report for duty. With the advent of war, previously 'patriotic pacifist' simply became patriots, and Russian patriotism not only led Russia into war, it also played a significant role in keeping it there for so long.

The conference also considered the outbreak of war from non-European perspectives. While 1914 marks a tragic caesura for Europe, *Fraser Harbutt* (Emory University) argued that for the United States, in the long run of history, 1914 marked a new beginning and offered the prospect of the ascension of the Republic to a position of hegemonic power. Americans had largely not expected the war, and when it came, many were bewildered by it. Given the fact that there were some eight million German Americans and some five million Irish Americans in the US at the time, impartiality was urged, not least for this reason. Harbutt analysed a number of different, though linked, reactions to the war, including a certain preoccupation with the war's economic repercussions for the US. In addition, the idea

of an American initiative to mediate and finally to help arrange for a more peaceful post-war world was also present from the beginning of the war.

David Sheinin (Trent University) explained that although Argentine scholars have long identified 1914 as a historical watershed, tracing the country's decline at the beginning of the twentieth century, ironically, this watershed tends to neglect the impact of the First World War. He also identified crucial changes relating largely to economic disruptions as a result of the war. The war produced international economic and financial conditions that led to increased American economic influences in Argentina, although generally speaking, Argentina remained much less affected by the war in Europe than the US or Canada.

For Japan, this was a different story, given its alliance with Great Britain, and its early involvement in the war. *Frederic Dickinson* (University of Pennsylvania) highlighted popular and press reactions to the outbreak of war. There was great interest in the events, though few were surprised by the conflict, which they had expected as a result of the European arms race. Japanese observers commented on the war's racial aspects (a war of Germans against Slavs), and, from the beginning, a consensus in Tokyo identified Germany as the principal instigator of hostilities. Yet, although Germany was Japan's enemy, Dickinson provided evidence of the deep admiration many Japanese observers felt for Kaiser Wilhelm II and his country. Despite Tokyo's early declaration of war against Germany there was a striking amount of positive media coverage on Germany, and Dickinson suspected that the motivation to avoid moves to support Germany may have been behind the Foreign Minister's swift declaration of war against Berlin on 23 August 1914.

In the final panel, the conference focussed on reflections on the First World War, and on the question of the long historiographical debate on its causes. *Joanna Scutts* (Columbia University) posed the question if the war had been a breaking point in literature, while *Sebastian Luft* (Marquette University) explored the influence of the war on twentieth-century philosophy.

Scutts contended that there is an inherent danger in identifying a clear break in literature as a result of an event as cataclysmic as the First World War. Of course it would seem as if the experience should have amounted to a radical break with old traditions and should have required a new voice. After all, the years 1914–1918 constitute a clear break in other areas. Yet, she argued that there is an inherent danger in viewing post-war literature as essentially changed and more insightful, for such an interpretation echoes the contemporary prewar view ›that literature and society needed to be »purged« of all that was weak, outmoded and degenerate by a burst of decisive violence«. Of course, it is comforting to think that lessons were learnt from the war which had an effect, among others, on writers and poets, and yet, in Scutts analysis, the war was not just a simple breaking point; rather, the war and its literature were closely linked to what came before and after it.

Sebastian Luft's paper focused on the reflections on war by two German philosophers, Max Scheler and Paul Natorp. As he explained, the onset of the First World War in 1914 produced a wide range of reactions from the intelligentsia of the combatant countries, and in Germany philosophers also felt the need to explain the meaning of war. Scheler and Natorp were among a group of philosophers who attempted to devise a specific ›war philosophy« and whose ideological writings formed part of the establishment's attempts to justify why Germany fought in the war. But philosophers were much more interested in war as a philosophical problem per se, rather than in the reasons for this war, and wrestled with questions about

war's inherent nature and whether it was part of life itself, rather than considering its probability or inevitability.

Hew Strachan (Oxford University) developed the theme of the war of ideologies with an investigation of British war-time sermons and pamphlets. Such publications were widespread, not least because, unlike its allies, Britain had had a choice in 1914 and had declared war of its own free will. The need to justify such actions thus became all the more pressing. This evidence reveals that people largely went to war, even if unenthusiastically, for abstract reasons, rather than in order to come to Serbia's or Belgium's aid. In the early months of the war, pamphlets portrayed the war as a war for civilization, a ›war on war‹, as such, its possible ›avoidability‹ never became part of this early ideological canon.

Recent trends and suggestions as to what the debate on the origins of the war might be concerned with in 2014, when the next round of conferences can be expected, were outlined by *Annika Mombauer* (The Open University). New and convincing emphasis has been placed upon the decisions made in Vienna. As this conference demonstrated, stress has also been put on the possibility of détente and the improbability of war. In addition, historians are focusing on the importance of human agency. Such an approach, while also allowing for the interpretation that war was to some extent ›avoidable‹, attaches responsibility for the outbreak of war most prominently to German and Austro-Hungarian decision-makers.

The final debate at the end of a fruitful conference also pointed to the direction of future research. The question of war guilt, once so prominent and contested, seems to feature less frequently in discussions about the origins of the war, yet many among the participants felt that this important aspect of the debate should not be overlooked. There was general surprise that, despite the fact that the Russian archives are now open to Western scholars, we still know so little about Russia's decision for war, and future research will certainly have to focus on the role of Russian decisions in bringing about the war, while Serbia's role also deserves more attention.

Exploring the ›topos of improbable war‹ has proved a useful vehicle for revisiting the long debate on the outbreak of the First World War, even if in the final analysis it seemed to many as if the evidence for an increasingly probable and ultimately almost inevitable war seemed to outweigh that which points to war having been a less certain outcome to a decade of mounting tensions in Europe. Holger Afflerbach is to be congratulated on the conception and organization of this excellent conference. He plans to publish the conference papers, and the resulting volume will be of great interest to anyone working on the First World War and its causes. More details about the programme can be found at <http://userwww.service.emory.edu/~dvigil/program.htm>.