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# Darwin goes to Sarajevo: Evolutionary Theories Underlying a Century of Historiography on the Outbreak of the First World War

## ABSTRACT

Historiography on the outbreak of the First World War is a useful touchstone for understanding in practice the conceptual architecture of historical storytelling. Along with overarching narrative concepts such as Fritz Fischer's German *Bid for World Power* (*Griff nach der Weltmacht*), historians could, and often did, employ implicit or explicit theoretical frameworks created in other disciplines such as economics or political science. Since Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, natural evolution was also one of the most widespread inspiring models.

A century of study on the causes of the Great War shows three major narrative patterns with underlying evolutionary assumptions: (i) the struggle for existence; (ii) the self-destroying system; and (iii) the chain of mistakes. They correspond in part to the temporal development of interpretations: from early narratives focused on *who*-questions, responsibilities, and personified nations (G-stories, for 'gigantomachy'); through syntheses aiming at *why*-questions, causes, and societies (D-stories, for 'doom'); up to current analyses of *how*-questions, origins, and elite decision-making (M-stories, for 'mistakes').

From G-stories to M-stories, Clio has been moving away from Darwin, thus reducing her explanatory capabilities. The paradox of a huge scientific effort ending in an unconquerable riddle could be overcome by linking D-stories to a nascent evolutionary social science.

Keywords: *Darwin, First World War origins, social evolution, Social Darwinism, narrative patterns, First World War historiography*

## Stories, Theories, Evolution<sup>1</sup>

It has been said, not without reason, that the narrative core is the main differential feature of historical knowledge when compared to social theory—even to *evolutionary* social theory.<sup>2</sup> Yet it has been also argued, with no less accuracy, that while direct description “bears the mark of artistic portrayal”, valid judgments, on the contrary, “always presuppose the logical analysis”, that is, “the use of concepts”; and that, therefore, historian’s presentation would be “an historical novel and not a scientific finding” as long “as the firm skeletal structure of established causes behind the artistically formed facade is lacking”.<sup>3</sup> Somehow, then, history honours its epistemic goal just through meaningful stories, but that does not entail that historical stories are possible at all without theoretical structures.<sup>4</sup>

Although the conceptual architecture of histories is thick and heterogeneous, narrative overarching concepts such as Fritz Fischer’s *Griff nach der Weltmacht*<sup>5</sup> (Bid for World Power) are fairly common in historiography. Furthermore, historical study may employ the most elaborate conceptual level by directly drawing models from scientific theories created in other fields: economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, linguistics, and biology. For example, some political scientists have tried to explain the outbreak of the First World War through a general theory on the causes of international

- 1 This essay is an ‘evolution’ of a homonymous paper presented in July 2014 in Oxford to the CHED-IRC Conference “Evolution and Historical Explanation: Contingency, Convergence, and Teleology”. (CHED= Centre for the History of European Discourses, University of Queensland, Australia; IRC= Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion, University of Oxford). My deep gratitude goes to two anonymous referees who highlighted several shortcomings in my first draft, leading me to a more detailed justification. I am also very grateful to Vivian Strotmann for her valuable guidance.
- 2 This is the main argument in Jürgen Habermas: *History and Evolution*, in: *Telos* 39 (1979), pp. 5–44, esp. pp. 42–43, section V.1. Original in: Habermas: *Zum Thema: Geschichte und Evolution*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 2, 3 (1976), pp. 310–357, esp. pp. 314ff, and pp. 351ff.
- 3 Max Weber/Edward Shils: *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, Glencoe, IL 1949, pp. 107, 176.
- 4 A thorough epistemological analysis, of which the present essay intends to be a preliminary case study, is forthcoming in *History and Theory*, March 2018.
- 5 Fritz Fischer: *Griff nach der Weltmacht; die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914/18*, Düsseldorf 1961. Fritz Fischer: *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, New York 1967.

wars.<sup>6</sup> Not really far from this generalising spirit was Margaret Sanger's neo-Malthusian contention that "battalions of unwanted babies" had provoked the demographic impulse for Germany's foreign policy.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, on this level history is related to actual or potential formal models. These have been provided, over the millenary evolution of historiography, mainly by philosophical, metaphysical or even theological presuppositions, very often embedded in common sense. However, from the Enlightenment onwards, history has been offered a growing panoply of scientific theories, among them the evolutionism inspired by Charles Darwin's thought. The fact is not that a formal theory of social evolution was deduced from biological evolutionism in order to apply it straightforward to the narrative of human history (albeit there were some attempts at doing so), but that the old background of enlightened philosophy of history, centred on the notion of *progress*, became densely impregnated by the evolutionist paradigm of variation, selection, and heredity. An image of this intellectual revolution was the growing debate on Darwinism and politics, which paralleled the other great intellectual struggle in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, namely that about socialism and historical materialism.<sup>8</sup>

When, in 1909, the Anglo-Saxon intelligentsia celebrated the first fifty years of *The Origin of Species* with a Cambridge-based book including essays by leading international scholars, the vast influence of evolutionism not only on natural science, but also on theology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, linguistics, and historical studies was crystal clear.<sup>9</sup> The influx was so widespread that the French sociologist Celestin Bouglé felt entitled to protest against social Darwinists: the Darwinians had "out-Darwinised Darwin".<sup>10</sup> In turn, the British historian John B. Bury highlighted that Darwinism had assigned to history "a definite place in the coordinated whole of knowledge" and related it "more closely to other sciences", even though he dismissed the notion that historical processes could be explained according to "general laws".<sup>11</sup>

6 Daniel S. Geller/J. David Singer: *Nations at War: A Scientific Study of International Conflict*, Cambridge 2009, pp. 156–190.

7 Margaret Sanger: *Woman and the New Race*, New York 1920, p. 171.

8 See e.g. David G. Ritchie: *Darwinism and Politics: Second Edition with Two Additional Essays on Human Evolution*, London 1891, and especially the analysis "Historian *versus* Evolutionist" in pp. 119–141.

9 A. C. Seward (ed.): *Darwin and Modern Science*, Cambridge 1909. The volume included contributions by, among others, August Weismann, Hugo de Vries, William Bateson, Ernst Haeckel, James G. Frazer, Adam Sedgwick, Georg Klebs, Francis Darwin, Conwy Lloyd Morgan, George Darwin, and Harald Höffding.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 474. Bouglé had already noted the danger of opposing an aristocratism derived from evolutionism to the egalitarian ideal of civilisation, thus juxtaposing democracy *vs.* science. See Celestin Bouglé: *La Démocratie devant la science: Études critiques sur l'hérédité, la concurrence et la différenciation*, Paris 1904.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 534–535, p. 539.

Ever since 1859, then, the challenge of fitting history into an evolutionary theory of humankind had been on the academic table, with Darwin himself as a forerunner.<sup>12</sup> Yet the distance between the general theory and the concrete historical sequences made it difficult to go beyond a broad and not always precise evolutionist background. Sometimes, this vagueness alimented the rhetoric of ideologies. In other cases, social evolution was the “unspoken assumption” of historians and social scientists (to borrow here an expression created by James Joll for explaining the outbreak of the First World War).<sup>13</sup>

As an ideology in the variegated forms of “social Darwinism”, the evolutionist framework, in a distorted manner, was itself a cultural cause of the Great War. The French politologist Thomas Lindemann has studied how some *völkisch* versions of Darwinism propelled Pan-Germanism and the climate driving to a general war.<sup>14</sup> That style of thinking was indeed found by the Stanford University entomologist Vernon Lyman Kellogg when he went to Europe in 1915; he was very surprised by the fierce political Darwinism prevalent in the high ranks of the German headquarters on the Western front. A German fellow biologist addressed him with the following theory:

We must inevitably win this war for we are biologically right; we are the fittest to live, and hence nature is with us. That group which can dominate other groups is the chosen of evolution. It should struggle with other groups and it should win over them and dominate them for the sake of the evolutionary advance of the human race.<sup>15</sup>

The ‘German Manifesto’ of the Ninety-Three professors, released shortly after the outbreak of the war, employed the coded expression “struggle for existence” (*Daseinskampf*) early in the text.<sup>16</sup> One of the signers, the Nobel Prize laureate in Chemistry Wilhelm Ostwald, argued on a propaganda tour in Stockholm that Germany, owing to her talent for organisation, had reached a degree of civilisation above that of other nations, and the war was the way to bring them “to a higher civilisation”, as well.<sup>17</sup>

- 12 Charles E. Darwin: *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, in Two Volumes, London 1871.
- 13 James Joll: *The Unspoken Assumptions: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered the 25 April 1968* (London School of Economics and Political Science), London 1968.
- 14 Thomas Lindemann: *Les doctrines darwiniennes et la guerre de 1914*, Paris 2001.
- 15 Vernon Lyman Kellogg: *Germany in the War and after*, New York 1919, p. 19.
- 16 AA.VV. (Professors of Germany): *To the Civilized World*, in: *The North American Review*, 210:765 (1919), pp. 284–285. German edition 1914.
- 17 Quoted in Anton Nyström: *Avant 1914, pendant et après ...*, Paris 1917, p. 302.

There had been in Germany not only more or less crude political versions of Darwinism, but also developments of an evolutionist social science: thinkers such as Paul von Lilienfeld, Albert Schäffle, and Ludwig Gumplowicz.<sup>18</sup> But the paradox lies in that, around 1900, leading German sociologists, such as Max Weber, were already leaving biology behind, even though it was so prominent in the political discourse, e. g. in Friedrich von Bernhardt's noisy book *Germany and the Next War*.<sup>19</sup>

The biology of war was, of course, not reduced to these German theories. Paul Crook<sup>20</sup> and Mike Hawkins<sup>21</sup> have shown the nice variety of Western evolutionary thinking applied to the problems of those times, including the First World War and its origins. There was also, for example in Jacques Novicow, a biology of peace underlining the evolutive advantages of cooperation and mutual understanding, against a mere brutal interpretation of the "struggle for life".<sup>22</sup> Many scholars highlighted that Darwin himself had considered the expression "struggle for life" in a rather "large and metaphorical sense", and that social evolution was idiosyncratic.<sup>23</sup> But these erudite complaints just confirmed the widespread diffusion of the vulgar interpretation.

Now, if some kind of evolutionary framework was already on the minds in the train of events driving to the First World War, it will not be surprising to find that later historiography was also affected by the Darwinian *élan* of contemporary thought. Our purpose is to analyse to what extent key narrative patterns in explanations of the outbreak reflect implicit models of social evolution inspired in Darwinism.

As a full First World War historiography is unmanageable for any individual historian, we must limit our choices. We can profit from several surveys which might help to structure our field, alongside with major books on the topic. Three analytical surveys are

- 18 Peter Weingart: *Biology as Social Theory: The Bifurcation of Social Biology and Sociology in Germany, circa 1900*, in: Dorothy Ross (ed.): *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870–1930*, Baltimore/London 1994, pp. 257–263. A theoretical overview is in Peter Weingart et al. (eds.): *Human by Nature: Between Biology and the Social Sciences*, Mahwah, NJ 1997.
- 19 Friedrich von Bernhardt: *Germany and the Next War*, Toronto 1914. German edition 1911.
- 20 Paul Crook: *Darwinism, War and History: The Debate over the Biology of War from the 'Origin of Species' to the First World War*, Cambridge 1994.
- 21 Mike Hawkins: *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat*, Cambridge 1997.
- 22 Jacques Novicow: *La critique du Darwinisme social*, Paris 1910; George Nasmyth: *Social Progress and the Darwinian Theory: A Study of Force as a Factor in Human Relations*, New York 1916. On France, see Jean-Marc Bernardini: *Le darwinisme social en France (1859–1918): Fascination et rejet d'une idéologie*, Paris 1997.
- 23 J. Arthur Thomson: *Biology and War*, London 1915 (*Papers for War Time* 24), p. 9; Havelock Ellis: *Essays in War-time: Further Studies in the Task of Social Hygiene*, Boston/New York 1917, pp. 27–41. Also, Edwin Ray Lankester: *Nature and Man*, Oxford 1905, p. 23.

selected: those of Jacques Droz, Annika Mombauer, and the couple Jay Winter-Antoine Prost. There is also a fine typological analysis in the study by Keith Nelson and Spencer Olin on the etiological theories of war.<sup>24</sup>

Ever since the outbreak of the war up to the study on its historiographical understanding, a distinctive sequence has been noted: responsibilities, causes, origins. Our analysis takes a new look at this hermeneutical progression (who, why, how).<sup>25</sup>

Both Droz and Mombauer choose the German thread as a guide. The first stage is the German war guilt established in Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty as an interpretive paradigm. The second stage, brought about by the revisionist campaign of the Weimar government and a certain detachment by Anglo-Saxon scholars, generalised the idea of a collective responsibility. Fritz Fischer's research on German war aims opened the third stage, again focused on the German role. After this, Mombauer follows the new period of revisions at the end of the century.

The broadening of historiographical scope in contents and sources gave rise to a more complex survey in Winter and Prost. They observe differences in generations of historians (the Clausewitzian, 1935; masses in movement, 1965; popular and micro-historical, 1992), but mainly three different notions of the same war: a *war of nations*, the last of the nineteenth century; a *war of societies* and revolutions; and a tragedy for individual victims, the *war of people*. Each interpretation presents elective affinities with more or less deterministic modes of understanding.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Nelson and Olin classify explanations according to their ideological inspirations (conservative, liberal, or radical) and theoretical foundations (social-psychological, structural-functional, group conflict interpretation).

Our task is to identify the evolutionist background that might illuminate what is often only a hint of formal framework. I hope the following analysis will justify that we can find out three major kinds of explanations of the First World War, with rather unspoken evolutionary assumptions:

- (i) the model of the *existential struggle*;
- (ii) the model of the *self-destroying system*, and

24 Jacques Droz: *Les causes de la Première Guerre Mondiale: Essai d'historiographie*, Paris 1973; Annika Mombauer: *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, Harlow 2002; Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, Cambridge 2005; Keith L. Nelson/Spencer C. Olin, Jr.: *Why War?: Ideology, Theory, and History*, Berkeley 1979.

25 See Franklin H. Giddins: *The Crisis in Social Evolution*, in: Albert Bushnell Hart/Edwin R.A. Seligman (eds.): *Problems of Readjustment after the War*, New York 1915, pp. 73–97, esp. p. 74; Jean-Jacques Becker: *La question des responsabilités Allemandes au lendemain de la guerre Mondiale: l'implication des historiens dans l'expertise et l'émergence d'une école historique*, in: *Sociétés Contemporaines* 39 (2000), pp. 85–94.

26 Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: *The Great War in History*, pp. 192–213.

(iii) the casuistic model of the *chain of mistakes*.

They are clear as narrative concepts, but they are also related to implicit evolutionary models that could be formally developed: a theory of power in group evolution; a cyclical eco-cultural theory; and a game-theoretical situation with epistemic darkness selecting path-breaking events.

These explanatory patterns we will call respectively G-stories (for ‘gigantomachy’), D-stories (‘doom’), and M-stories (‘mistakes’), for showing the bridge that history might build not only towards biology, but also towards literary theory, because of the common anthropological roots of historical and literary patterns, a much-debated issue that has never been consistently linked to the evolutionary challenge.<sup>27</sup>

The Great War marked the end not only of European world ascendancy, but also of faith in civilisation and progress. Anton Nyström regretted in wartime that “the Europeans who had looked at the Asiatic people from the heights of their proud civilisation have now nothing else to do than to veil their faces as a sign of shame”.<sup>28</sup> The year 1914 signals a universal divergence between evolution and progress. Besides, Winter and Prost conclude that history will never tell a global or integrated narrative of the Great War: we must accept the “irreducible plurality of histories”.<sup>29</sup> In studying our subject, then, we will explore both the limits of civilisation and the limits of representation.

## G-stories

G-stories are histories based upon the narrative framework of the First World War as a selective gigantomachy. In fact, it was titanic in character and the hugest war ever fought by humankind up to that time. Its main agonists were ‘great powers’, big polities, imperial states, massive armies and their industrial and societal backup. The sense of the showdown was a struggle for existence.

The principal actors in G-stories are proper names of political hypostases, like ‘Germany’, ‘Prussia’, ‘France’, ‘Triple Entente’, ‘Second International’, and so on. On their behalf, several proper names play the role of *dramatis personae* in the diplomatic and military theatres. G-stories were no doubt the earliest narratives on the world war. The unbelievable sacrifices that governments demanded of their peoples made absolutely essential a theory of the enemy’s war guilt.<sup>30</sup> These epic mentalities prevailed over

27 See, e.g. Elizabeth A. Clark: *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*, Cambridge, MA 2004.

28 Anton Nyström: *Avant 1914, pendant et après ...*, p. 276. Translated by the author.

29 Jay Winter/Antoine Prost: *The Great War in History*, p. 211.

30 As an Italian historian noted, the Entente managed to identify itself with universal values; see Guglielmo Ferrero: *Europe’s Fateful Hour*, New York 1918, pp. 36ff.

universalistic ideas such as Christendom, Proletarian internationalism, or Pacifism. The narratives have a tendency towards moral polarisation, with heroes and villains. Implicit in G-stories is the view of history as a scenario for a perpetual internecine fight between political collective units, in a Hobbesian or Huxleyan struggle; or, alternatively, as the civilised overcoming (just through “a war that will end all war”, as H. G. Wells put it<sup>31</sup>) of a brutal interpretation of human evolution.

In his wartime essay *Evolution and the War*, the Scottish zoologist Peter Chalmers Mitchell recalled his own article (*A Biological View of our Foreign Policy*)<sup>32</sup> published in 1896:

France, despite our historic antagonism for her, is no rival of England in the biological sense. She is not a nation that is growing and striving to expand beyond her boundaries. Her wars have been the dreams of rulers, not the movements of peoples. [...] Of European nations, Germany is most alike to England. [...] Were every German to be wiped out to-morrow, there is no English trade, no English pursuit that would not immediately expand. Were every Englishman to be wiped out to-morrow, the Germans would gain in proportion. Here is *the first great racial struggle of the future*; here are two growing nations pressing against each other, man to man all over the world. One or the other has to go; one or the other will go.<sup>33</sup>

Twenty years on, Mitchell was well aware that this kind of rude naturalisation of politics had made “the German *Kultur* the enemy of the human race”, and, as a professed “hard-shell Darwinian evolutionist”, he forwarded four cautions:

- (i) “even if struggle for existence were a scientific law, it does not necessarily apply to human affairs”;
- (ii) “modern nations are not units of the same order” as the units in animal or vegetal kingdoms;
- (iii) the struggle for existence, as propounded by Darwin, “has no resemblance to human warfare”; and
- (iv) man is not subject to the “laws of the unconscious”, but to the moral ideal.<sup>34</sup>

31 H. G. Wells: *The War That Will End all War*, London 1914.

32 Peter Chalmers Mitchell: *A Biological View of our Foreign Policy*, in: *Saturday Review*, 82, 210 (1896), pp. 118–120.

33 Peter Chalmers Mitchell: *Evolution and the War*, London 1915, pp. xxii–xxiii. Italics added.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 106–108.



This way, when the *struggle for interpretation* began social evolutionists essayed to establish a discontinuity between natural and cultural evolutions, in consequence of which a paradox emerged: while biological arguments in favour of militaristic policies were dismissed, the fact remained that powerful states, especially Germany, had embarked on aggressive international behaviour leading to a global war. Mitchell and many others, such as the Yale social evolutionist Albert Galloway Keller, judged this as a moral deviation from the right track of civilisation. Yet this only stressed, on the one hand, that states could act as the pseudo-Darwinian combatants they might think (even mistakenly) to be; and, on the other hand, that one had to presuppose, overlapping a natural evolution where the struggle for existence was the selective process, a sociocultural evolution where the pattern, derived from humankind's possession of consciousness, was alien to violent international relations.<sup>35</sup>

This is the evolutionary basis of the German guilt thesis: taking the liberal countries as the normal path in the progressive evolution of civilisation, Germany in her militaristic behaviour, and Austria-Hungary and Turkey as constitutional failures and prisons of nationalities, were deemed pathological trajectories, teratological states.<sup>36</sup> The standpoint was that Prussia had inoculated her warring tendencies to the whole of Germany. In so doing, Berlin had created a German *Sonderweg*, unlike the liberal-democratic evolution of the remainder of Europe. Germany was a deviated experience of modernity, a demographic and economic leader dressed in an archaic, backward, and authoritarian political culture.<sup>37</sup>

35 Albert Galloway Keller: *Through War to Peace: A Study of the Great War as an Incident in the Evolution of Society*, Revised Edition, New York 1921.

36 The self-defence of the German elite had a clear Darwinoid tune. The apologetic volume edited by the historian Otto Hintze insisted upon the necessity for Germany, because of her geographic position and the diplomatic “ring” in which she found herself besieged, of appealing to the army, military values, and the power of the State, with the aim of guaranteeing the survival of the country; see Otto Hintze et al.: *Modern Germany in Relation to the Great War*, by Various German Writers, New York 1916. German edition 1915. On the role of manly culture in the outbreak, see Ute Frevert: *Honor, Gender, and Power: The Politics of Satisfaction in Pre-war Europe*, in: Holger Afflerbach/David Stevenson (eds.): *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture Before 1914*, New York/Oxford 2007, pp. 233–255.

37 Rita Thalmann: *L'Allemagne, une “nation retardataire”?*, in: *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 43 (1996), pp. 2–8, doi: 10.3406/mat.1996.402062 (accessed 25 July 2017). She follows the “delayed nation” idea of Helmut Plessner: *Die verspätete Nation: Das Schicksal deutschen Geistes im Ausgang seiner bürgerlichen Epoche*, Zurich 1935. Plessner regretted that the political evolution of Germany since the eighteenth century had not kept the pace of the Western countries.

Thus, the French sociologist Émile Durkheim assessed, in his “*Germany above everything*”, the blind adherence to power politics, exemplified in the historian Heinrich Treitschke, as a major cause of the Great War.<sup>38</sup> The Germanic sin had been, then, its deviation from “the essentials of civilization”, in the expression of Keller, who highlighted the opposition between the Darwinoid “German code” and the “civilized code” of the Allies that forbade the war-selection by annihilation or enslavement. Therefore, he warned that, if war did not change the German code, this would mean “another war as soon as Germany has recovered”.<sup>39</sup> Also the French philosopher Henri Bergson saw the war as “the very fight of civilisation against barbarism”.<sup>40</sup>

In the G-model, therefore, we can find a double degree of evolutionist conceptuality. Firstly, there is the naturalisation of the political landscape and the personalisation of collective units. Secondly, there is the establishment of a liberal pattern of *normal* evolution, taking some Western countries as standards. In both cases, warfare is always likely, either because man is the fighting animal, or because the long march of humankind towards improvement needs to face, from time to time, the retrogressive energies of the Barbarians. Indeed, Robin G. Collingwood elaborated in the 1940s a theory on the Germans as the latest chapter in the Barbarian threat.<sup>41</sup>

This narrative concept of a *German challenge to the civilised world* forms a strong current in the historiography on the origins of the First World War. In his account on the Russian role in the struggle, the general Youri Danilov pointed at the latent forces accumulated in Germany that had been pushing her towards “an immense thirst of world hegemony”.<sup>42</sup> Even in one of the most recent and nuanced analyses, that of Hew Strachan, who rejects the plain generalisation about an exclusive German guilt, the negative consequences of the German *Weltpolitik* do not pass unnoticed. Speaking about the geopolitical views of Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg’s confidant, Kurt Riezler, which entailed the militarisation of international relations, the British historian concludes:

38 Émile Durkheim: “L’Allemagne au-dessus de tout”: La mentalité Allemande et la guerre, Paris 1915, p. 43.

39 A. G. Keller: *Through War to Peace*, pp. vii, 150.

40 Quoted in Annette Becker: *Racisme, barbarie, civilisation: les enjeux de la Grande Guerre*, in: *Cahiers de la Méditerranée* 61:1 (2000), pp. 159–169, quotation in p. 161, doi: 10.3406/camed.2000.1298 (accessed 25 July 2017).

41 Robin G. Collingwood: *The new Leviathan, or Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism*, Oxford 2005. Original 1942.

42 Youri Danilov: *La Russie dans la guerre mondiale (1914–1917)*, Paris 1927, p. 16. Translated by the author, p. 296.

Germany did not in the end go to war in pursuit of its *Weltpolitik*. But the conduct of *Weltpolitik*, and the setbacks which it entailed, contributed to its sense of humiliation, beleaguering, and fatalism in 1914. And, once war was declared, the continuity of *Weltpolitik* -both in terms of Germany's war aims and in terms of Germany's domestic political and social pressures- was to become all too evident.<sup>43</sup>

Strachan thinks that big ideas, more than concrete geographical aims, shaped the entry into the war. Bethmann Hollweg had seen a "battle for existence"; Alfred Zimmermann a conflict between two irreconcilable visions of man and society; H. G. Wells a war "to kill ideas", whose goal was "propaganda".<sup>44</sup> J. W. Carliol's standpoint is also quoted: "[A]t the root of this Titanic conflict, antagonistic principles and powers, [...] the ideal of faith and the ideals of force are contending".<sup>45</sup> Economic and diplomatic causes are not enough. Thus, Strachan sees an existential or even a metaphysical or quasi-religious war between worldviews. He underlines the paradox: caused by reasons of national self-interest, the War became immediately "defined in terms of universal values"; hence its epic features. From this viewpoint social evolution (of group interest) and cultural evolution (of values) are intertwined: as human beings are cultural animals, group selection operates through the selection of successful ideas of social order, but in a globalised world the candidates must be ideas globally acceptable, which goes against concrete group interest, as was discovered when, in 1919, the Versailles Conference tried to reconcile Woodrow Wilson's universalism and selfish national diplomacies.<sup>46</sup>

In a more geopolitical approach, David Fromkin contends that the outbreak consisted of two different but interlinked wars, deliberately started: one launched by the Habsburg Empire against Serbia, and another unleashed by the German Empire against Russia and France. Fromkin dismisses the idea that the war was pointless or absurd: "On the contrary, it was fought to decide the essential questions in international politics: who would achieve mastery in Europe, and therefore in the world, and under the banner of what faith".<sup>47</sup>

43 Hew Strachan: *The Outbreak of the First World War*, reprint, Oxford 2007, p. 44.

44 All three quoted in Strachan: *The Outbreak of the First World War*, p. 210. He drew on Bernd F. Schulte: *Vor dem Kriegsausbruch 1914: Deutschland, die Türkei und der Balkan*, Düsseldorf 1980, p. 116 (for Bethmann Hollweg), R. W. Seton-Watson/J. Dover-Wilson/Alfred E. Zimmermann/Arthur Greenwood: *The War and Democracy*, London 1915, p. 318 (for Zimmermann) and Albert Marrin: *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War*, Durham, NC 1974, p. 98 (for Wells).

45 *Ibid.*, p. 238.

46 *Ibid.*, viii. Strachan (pp. 171–180) avowedly follows Hawkins, cited above in n. 21, on Social Darwinism. On Versailles, Margaret MacMillan: *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World*, New York 2002.

47 David Fromkin: *Europe's Last Summer: Why the World Went to War in 1914*, New York 2005, p. 296.

A titanic struggle as an essentially German decision was the nucleus of several major works on the origins of the war, such as those by Camille Bloch, Pierre Renouvin, Luigi Albertini, and Fritz Fischer, although the main themes were already common in geopolitical analysis of Pan-Germanism by Frenchmen such as André Chéradame or Jacques Bainville during, or shortly after, the Great War.<sup>48</sup> Among the historiographical surveys, Droz and Mombauer subscribe to this line of reasoning.

Bloch summarised his research in 21 theses. He stated that only the Austro-German initiative had transformed the July crisis into a world war, which would not have broken out at the impulse of Serbia, Russia, France, or Great Britain: “The pacific frame of mind of these Powers never ceased to be recognised by their adversaries right up to the end of the month of July: in other words, after the Central Empires themselves had, as Bethmann-Hollweg put it, ‘thrown the iron dice’”.<sup>49</sup>

His aide and heir as head of the French institution for studying the Great War, Pierre Renouvin, would write one of the still classical books on the topic, balanced and scholarly. He depicts an international crisis evolving from 1904 to 1914: peoples and governments; relationships between states; the crises in Morocco and the Balkans; the emergence of the Entente; the innermost social and political changes; the alliances and the arms race; *l'inquiétude de l'Europe* (“Europe’s anxiety”), and the July crisis. Renouvin intends now to select the factor that played “the predominant role”. He surveys the general circumstances: psychological (enmity), “mechanic” (arms race), economic (competition), but concludes that these explanations express no sufficient causes. He needs to consider the “orientation of national policies” and “the actions of the governments”.<sup>50</sup> Besides, the catalytic effect of the Moroccan crises, the fragility of Austria-Hungary, and the naval Anglo-German rivalry. The global result was a dangerous system of alliances.

Within this system, Berlin and Vienna had tried to profit from the Russian defeat before Japan in 1905. Yet their actions did not lead of necessity to war. It was the resolution of the Central Powers to take risks what unleashed the catastrophe: “deliberately, they had created all the conditions for the conflict”.<sup>51</sup> Germany had accepted *de sang-froid* (“in cold blood”) the likely consequences of her strategy. Renouvin also observed the negative effect of the “hesitations of Great Britain”,<sup>52</sup> which encouraged Germany and Austria-Hungary in their offensive. “The firm decision taken by Germany of refloating Austria, even at the price of a European conflict: there it is, no doubt, the explanation of

48 André Chéradame: *The Essentials of an Enduring Victory*, New York 1918. Jacques Bainville: *Les conséquences politiques de la paix*, Paris 1920.

49 Camille Bloch: *The Causes of the World War: A Summary*, London 1935, pp. 183ff, quotation in p. 191. French edition 1933.

50 See Pierre Renouvin: *La crise Européenne et la Grande Guerre: 1904 à 1918*, 2e édition revue et augmentée, Paris 1939, pp. 178–183, quotations in p. 180. Translated by the author.

51 *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183. Translated by the author.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 183. Translated by the author.

the great war”<sup>53</sup>. No matter how foolish Serbian nationalism or Russian imprudence were: “without the will of Germany and Austria-Hungary the war would not have taken place”.<sup>54</sup> Previously, Renouvin had characterised, through several episodes, German popular and official aggressiveness.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike Renouvin, Albertini had no time to write his chapter of conclusions. He died in December 1941, before the publication of his *magnum opus*. The three volumes of *The Origins of the War of 1914* do not present an abridgement of the whole argument anywhere. Albertini puts a great charge of responsibility on the British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey’s shoulders, for having informed other powers belatedly of Britain’s intended intervention in support of France. Already on 24 July the British ambassador in Moscow had urged for that declaration, to induce restraint in Berlin and Vienna.

“*L’avesse fatto allora!*”, Albertini exclaims (“Had he done so then!”).<sup>56</sup> Grey threatened the Central Powers only in the evening of 29 July, but he was not guilty of having attacked somebody, only of not having deterred everybody. Likewise, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Sazonov, is blamed by Albertini, because the mobilisation of the Russian armies favoured the German justification for a declaration of war. As to the Austrians, they were obsessed with the punishment of Serbia, and they did not care about a general war, blindly going “toward the riskiest and most disastrous adventure”.<sup>57</sup>

Volume III analyses the fluidity of the German leadership in the final days of the crisis. Personal rivalries and jealousy between different powers of the *Reich* prevented their cooperation for the sake of peace. The leaders’ mediocrity and the attachment to the Schlieffen Plan, “perhaps a monument of the military art, but all the same a monument to the lack of political sense that is the major cause of disorder and trouble in Europe”, brought about the disaster. With these nuances, though, Germany was the main culprit, “*giacché fu essa a dar fuoco alle polveri*” — “since it was she who set fire to gunpowder”.<sup>58</sup> The evolutionary reading of Albertini’s masterpiece is the political *unfitness* of almost all contenders in the existential struggle. Albertini’s inspiration (he was a liberal journalist and senator disliked by the fascist regime) is that of the evolutionary *unfitness* of the elitist

53 Ibid., p. 183. Translated by the author.

54 Ibid., p. 183. Translated by the author.

55 See *ibid.*, pp. 159–161. Translated by the author.

56 Luigi Albertini: *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, Volume II: *La crisi del luglio 1914: Dall’attentato di Sarajevo alla mobilitazione generale dell’Austria-Ungheria*, Gorizia 2010, p. 559. Translated by the author. First Italian, Milano 1942–1943; English edition, London/New York 1952–1957.

57 Ibid., pp. 631 and 742. Translated by the author.

58 Luigi Albertini: *Le origini della guerra del 1914*, Volume III: *L’epilogo della crisi del luglio 1914: Le dichiarazioni di guerra e di neutralità*, Gorizia 2010, pp. 269, 271. Translated by the author.

and imperialist management of power politics as regards the demographic, technological, and cultural ecosystem of the Europe emerging from the revolutions of the nineteenth century.

Modern Germany was born thanks to diplomatic Machiavellism. Her Machiavelli was Otto von Bismarck. But the method had a dark side, and the reflections of the German historian Friedrich Meinecke after 1945 not only blamed the “ruinous experiment of the Third Reich”, but also the whole spirit of the Wilhelmine era:

The Empire gave too much play to Prussian militarism and with it to that dangerous mentality of Prussian self-sufficiency which it could create or foster in the Empire’s leaders and in the bourgeoisie. Thereby the path to mass Machiavellism became broader in Germany. The break with the Goethe period and its ideal of humanity became surprisingly sharp.<sup>59</sup>

This supposed break with the German Enlightenment fits very well the thesis of a pathological evolution. The American historian Hajo Holborn, a German *émigré* who had been a pupil of Meinecke, makes the reproach that “during the whole crisis prior to August 4, 1914, not a single constructive move was made by Germany to stave off the impending disaster”.<sup>60</sup> This points to the failures of the German governmental system, and the exaggerated role played by the army. Holborn contends that, “convinced of Germany’s military might, the German leaders, both civilian and military, were willing to accept war with Russia and France”.<sup>61</sup> He recalls, furthermore, the popular sense of might derived from the great achievements of the country in economy, science, and technology. The German government of 1914 “reflected both the lack of political realism and the isolation of national thinking which dominated the ruling and the educated classes of the country”.<sup>62</sup>

In *The Course of German History*, written during the Second World War, A. J. P. Taylor turns more ironical than that. Of course, it is Germany who provokes the First War in a “struggle for the German domination of Europe”.<sup>63</sup> Yet it was the Great Germany who had taken Prussia captive: “To outward appearance all Germany surrendered to Prussian militarism—in reality it was Prussian militarism which was fighting for an alien German cause”.<sup>64</sup> Taylor’s theory follows the pattern of an epic struggle for the mastery in Europe,

59 Friedrich Meinecke: *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections*, Boston 1963, p. 56. German edition 1946.

60 Hajo Holborn: *A History of Modern Germany*, Princeton 1982, p. 427.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 418.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 427.

63 A. J. P. Taylor: *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History Since 1815*, reprinted, London/New York 2004, pp. 192–193.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 193.

but the mover is a deviant Germany, not a deviant Prussia.<sup>65</sup> The American sociologist Randall Collins has examined in depth whether the usual description of Germany as a late moderniser, a very common interpretation in conventional and sociological history, is tenable. He finds that, on the contrary, Germany was on the forefront of European modernisation in four key processes: bureaucratisation, secularisation, capitalist industrialisation, and democratisation. Hers was not a belated evolution, but an accelerated one. Germany would be “an archetype of the difficulties inherent in modern social structures”.<sup>66</sup> The struggle for existence, then, should be read not as a deviant culture *vs.* the mainstream evolution, but as the vanguard *vs.* the rear guard within the same evolutive path.

The great renewal of G-stories came from the German historian Fritz Fischer (later on supported by Imanuel Geiss, and by the social historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler).<sup>67</sup> Fischer intended to document that the outbreak was neither “tragic doom” nor “ineluctable destiny”, but “a deliberate decision of policy” on the part of the German leadership: “The July crisis must not be regarded in isolation. It appears in its true light only when seen as a link between Germany’s ‘world policy’, as followed since the mid-1890s, and her war aims policy after August, 1914”.<sup>68</sup>

Fischer also quotes Bethmann Hollweg’s recognition before the *Reichstag* in 1916 that the huge development of Germany had driven to “over-estimating our own forces”. The book establishes the expansive continuity in Germany’s foreign policy: Berlin wanted to control Europe from *Mitteleuropa*, in order to negotiate with Britain, Russia and the United States the formation of a colonial empire in *Mittelafrika* and Asia Minor.<sup>69</sup>

However, was this German plan an anomaly in the political evolution of modernity, or rather the right reading of the tendency to imperial globalisation impressed by capitalism and the new means of production, transportation, and communication? Were some of Rudolf Kjellén’s geopolitical counsels from a century ago (quoted by Fischer), regarding the creation of a European federation under German hegemony, not realised at last in the European Union?<sup>70</sup>

65 See *ibid.*, p. 203.

66 Randall Collins: *Macrohistory: Essays in Sociology of the Long Run*, Stanford, CA 1999, pp. 152–176, p. 170.

67 Fritz Fischer: *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, New York 1967. German 1961; Imanuel Geiss (ed.): *July 1914: The Outbreak of the First World War: Selected Documents*, New York 1967. German 1965; Hans-Ulrich Wehler: *The German Empire, 1871–1918*, Leamington Spa 1989. German 1973. Later on, Fischer developed an analysis of pre-war aims in Fritz Fischer: *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, London 1975. German 1969.

68 Fischer: *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, pp. 91–92.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 29.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

In a moderately revisionist fashion, the German historian Andreas Hillgruber highlights the collision between Russian and Austro-German ambitions regarding the Balkan area. It is a clash of empires rather than an overall failure of the international system.<sup>71</sup>

Therefore, G-stories show elective affinity with what Winter and Prost considered historiographies of the First World War as a *war of nations*, told by Clausewitzian analysts. In the metatheoretical framework of Nelson and Olin, G-stories are prone to taking psycho-sociological and/or group conflict explanations, as in Fischer himself or in his liberal conservative critic Gerhard Ritter, for whom the role of militarism in the constitution of the German Empire had led to a lack of civil political leadership within an unstable international context.<sup>72</sup>

Summing up, evolutionary models underlying G-stories reflected an existential struggle in a landscape where power politics (which sometimes employed a debased Darwinism in its worldview) had become *unfit* before the challenging mass society. But this is already a general deduction, wherefrom systemic stories emerged, even in wartime.

## D-stories

D-stories are histories based on the interpretation of the Great War as the necessary outcome of an unstable system or mechanism doomed to self-destruction. The names are here common names of sociocultural features and processes; in short, *isms*: national-, imperial-, industrial-, armament-, militar-, Malthusian-, social-, racial-, capital-, and so on. These narratives are usually tragic in tone. D-stories seem more prone than G-stories to borrowing formal theories as explanatory frameworks. Bibliography shows many instances of this perspective: Leon Trotsky and the bulk of Marxist historiography, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Norman Angell, Guglielmo Ferrero, Vilfredo Pareto, John Maynard Keynes, Sidney B. Fay, Bernadotte E. Schmitt, George F. Kennan, Daniel Geller and J. David Singer, and David Stevenson, to mention but a few among many others.

The Russian Bolshevik Trotsky (and also Vladimir Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin) interpreted the conflict as a consequence of the tensions between global capitalism and the local political form of the nation-state. To cope with the new economy, the state had to follow the imperialist path, and thus, a clash of imperialistic capitalist countries was the inevitable outcome.<sup>73</sup> This would be the standard Marxist D-story throughout the century.

71 Andreas Hillgruber: *Germany and the Two World Wars*, Cambridge, MA/London 1981, p. 37.

72 See Keith L. Nelson/Spencer C. Olin, Jr.: *Why War?: Ideology, Theory, and History*, pp. 116–123.

73 Leon Trotsky: *The Bolsheviki and World War*, New York 1918, pp. 22–23.



In turn, the Italian sociologist and economist Vilfredo Pareto analysed the “sociological factors” of the war. He saw three expansive peoples—Germans, Slavs, and British—doomed sooner or later to clash. Pareto shows a mix of demographic and socio-psychological forces, and criticises the “anecdotal history” that employs “metaphysical abstractions and personifications”.<sup>74</sup> In the 1930s, another Italian, the historian Guglielmo Ferrero, identified the European War as a great crisis in civilisation:

[*The war*] did not create anything new: it simply speeded up all the revolutionary forces which had already been at work for a century; urbanism, sybaritism, plutocracy, industrialism, socialism, nationalism, individualism. Western civilization, which was already the victim of a general condition of fluidity before the war, now tends towards a gaseous state.<sup>75</sup>

The high probability of the Great War was theorised by Lowes Dickinson in 1916 as a result of the “European anarchy”, in which all powers lived “constantly under the threat of war”.<sup>76</sup> There is a clear continuity between Dickinson’s interpretation of a deficit of civilisation and the explanation given later on by David Stevenson, according to whom the iteration of crises before 1914 gave “a cumulative momentum” to deterioration of peace.<sup>77</sup> Besides the general lineaments of the system, Stevenson makes room too for the agents’ will and calculations. The constraints experienced as to the choices in fact converted game-theoretical situations into a kind of inexorable collective law. Thus, in another place Stevenson would further elaborate his thesis:

The European peace might have been a house of cards, but someone still had to topple it. It used to be argued that 1914 was a classic instance of a war begun through accident and error: that no statesmen wanted it but all were overborne by events. This view is now untenable. Certainly, in late July the frantic telegram traffic became overwhelming, but governments were clear enough about what they were doing. A general conflict was the optimal outcome for none of them, but they preferred it to what seemed worse alternatives. Although Berlin and St Petersburg indeed miscalculated, all sides were willing to risk war rather than back down.<sup>78</sup>

74 Vilfredo Pareto: *La guerra e i suoi principali fattori sociologici*, in: V. Pareto: *Fatti e teorie*, Firenze 1920, pp. 29–56, pp. 32–39, quotation in p. 52. Translated by the author.

75 Guglielmo Ferrero: *Peace and War*, London 1933, pp. 84–85.

76 Glasworthy Lowes Dickinson: *The European Anarchy*, London 1916, p. 135.

77 David Stevenson: *The Outbreak of the First World War: 1914 in Perspective*, London/New York 1997, p. 51, see also pp. 33–34.

78 David Stevenson: *1914–1918: The History of the First World War*, London 2004, p. 41.

To John Maynard Keynes, Europe had, since 1870, undergone several structural mutations, from a self-subsistent Europe with the population adjusting to scarce resources, to an “unstable and peculiar” situation: a steady growth of food availability, industrial production, and population. While Europeans appeared to have forgotten the Devil of Thomas Robert Malthus (a key thinker for Darwin’s discoveries, but also for Keynes’s analysis of war), the new trend had crystallised in political opinions and feelings leading to the Great War, linked mainly to huge demographic pressures and the economic challenges they posed:

The great events of history are often due to secular changes in the growth of population and other fundamental economic causes, which, escaping by their gradual character the notice of contemporary observers, are attributed to the follies of statesmen or the fanaticism of atheists.<sup>79</sup>

Another economist, Norman Angell, had prophesised in pre-war years the unfeasibility of a general war, given the economic interconnectedness among the advanced countries, advocated after the war. He was responded, under the pseudonym ‘A Rifleman’, by Victor Wallace Germain in a wholly social Darwinist fashion:

Mr. Angell’s argument then that the law of the survival of the fittest does not apply to man hardly bears the test of close analysis and, applying the same reasoning to nations as we have applied to business-firms, it follows in logical sequence that if a nation of capitalists is competing with another nation of capitalists the nation which is strongest in all-round qualities must inevitably push the weaker nation to the wall, and as there is no International police force to hold this trade-rivalry in bounds it follows as a logical certainty that this trade-rivalry will ultimately be decided by physical force.<sup>80</sup>

What was at stake in these disputes was the interpretation of social and political evolution. Wallace Germain believed in what we have been wondering about after reading Fischer: evolution could by force be producing great “combines” in economy and world politics, so a systemic Darwinian version was more accurate than the pacifist systemic expectation. “We are sailing ‘full steam ahead!’ to one of the most tremendous conflicts in history”, Wallace forecasted in 1913.<sup>81</sup>

79 John Maynard Keynes: *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, New York 1920, thesis in pp. 9–26, quotation in pp.15–16.

80 Victor Wallace Germain (pseud. A Rifleman): *The Struggle for Bread: A Reply to “The Great Illusion” and Enquiry into Economic Tendencies*, London/New York/Toronto 1913, p. 207.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

In Thucydides' Peloponnesian War, in Alexis de Tocqueville's French Revolution, and also in historiography on the outbreak of the Great War, a notorious interpretive divide is established depending on the temporal scale chosen as analytical standpoint. Whenever historians look at the remote, deep or long-term causes, the event seems absolutely inevitable; yet whenever they take a closer look at the unfolding in the short term of wars and revolutions, chance and personal instability seem to play the leading role. While underlying causes are evolutionary almost by definition, in the detailed narrative they look only like necessary but not sufficient causes.

Thus, in 1928, the American historian Sidney Fay listed five "underlying causes" in his first volume on the *Origins of the World War*:

- (i) the system of secret alliances,
- (ii) militarism,
- (iii) nationalism,
- (iv) economic imperialism, and
- (v) the newspaper press.<sup>82</sup>

Yet in the second volume, about the immediate causes, Fay escaped from a D-story: none of the powers had intended a European War in the summer of 1914; a chain of miscalculations had precipitated the catastrophe.<sup>83</sup> Shortly after, Bernadotte Everly Schmitt would publish another classical interpretation. He found that "the tradition of the balance of power", with two hostile great alliances, had been the reason why the Austro-Serbian quarrel had degenerated into a general war.<sup>84</sup> Again, a defective system is the major cause of derailment. George F. Kennan would agree to this part, analysing the problem created by the rigidity of the Franco-Russian understanding of 1894. He pointed further, as a cause of "self-destructive madness",<sup>85</sup> to the general structure of European civic culture around 1900: political ignorance about modern war, extreme romantic nationalism, professionalisation of the military career, emergence of a doctrine

82 Sidney Bradshaw Fay: *The Origins of the World War, I: Before Sarajevo: Underlying Causes of the War*, New York 1928, p. 33.

83 Sidney Bradshaw Fay: *The Origins of the World War, II: After Sarajevo: Immediate Causes of the War*, New York 1928, p. 547.

84 Bernadotte Everly Schmitt: *The Coming of the War, 1914: Volume I*, New York/London 1930, p. 8.

85 George F. Kennan: *At a Century's Ending: Reflections 1982–1995*, New York/London 1996, p. 18.

of total war. Then, it is the evolution of culture what works against the positive evolution of civilisation.<sup>86</sup> Schmitt's favourite 'ism', however, was the "intense nationalism": the fear of being "outdistanced in the eternal competition of peoples".<sup>87</sup>

In the study of international relations, we have some detailed analyses in which empirical patterns derived from the comparative scrutiny of many conflicts are implemented in the scientific explanation of the outbreak of the Great War. Geller and Singer offer a most impressive example:

Scientific explanation of individual events may be provided by their inductive subsumption under probabilistic laws. The [...] analysis demonstrates that World War I was a high-probability event consistent with a broad array of empirical patterns and that it was a specific instance of a set of intersecting uniformities which have appeared in a much larger number of war cases.<sup>88</sup>

They identify seven empirical patterns. *Proximity/contiguity*: proximity increases the probability of war between states; the presence of a contiguous (separated by 150 miles of water or less) land or sea border increases the probability of war. *Power status*: the higher the status rank of a state, the greater the probability of its involvement in war in general, and the greater the probability of its involvement in severe wars specifically. *Power cycle*: passage through a critical point in the power cycle increases for a major power the probability of a war involvement. *Hierarchy*: the presence of an unstable hierarchy among the major powers of the international system increases the possibility of systemic war. *Political system*: the absence of democratic governments increases the probability of war. *An enduring rival*: the presence of an enduring rivalry increases the probability of war between a dyad. *Alliances*: the presence of polarised alliances increases the probability and the seriousness (magnitude, duration, severity) of war. Given these systemic circumstances, the Great War was predictable.

Underlying this geopolitical stance, it is possible to discern bio-sociological motives, related to territory and resources, cycles of relay in powerful roles, lack of authority, and cooperation for violence. Geller and Singer suggest that democratisation is an instrument of peace. This would be a new evolutive pattern in politics, with internal constitutions overcoming international anarchy. This level of explanations tends to correspond to the Winter and Prost *war of societies* model, and also in Nelson and Olin to the 'functional-structural', or sociological, mode of explanation.

86 Ibid., p. 19.

87 Bernadotte Everly Schmitt: *The Coming of the War, 1914: Volume II*, New York/London 1930, p. 482.

88 Daniel S. Geller/J. David Singer: *Nations at War: A Scientific Study of International Conflict*, pp. 156–190, quotation in p. 190.

In *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger considers the First World War as unleashed conjointly by the “political doomsday machine” and by the “military doomsday machine”.<sup>89</sup> However, against a doomed structure and a fortuitous conjuncture, many historians have observed that the international system still had opportunities of salvation. Specifically, William Mulligan has protested against the “teleological tunnel”<sup>90</sup> that privileges, in the analysis of the years before 1914, the conflictive aspects, neglecting the positive results. Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson co-edited a renowned volume about the Great War as an improbable one.<sup>91</sup> The evolutionary model is now a complex progress of civility, which was interrupted by sheer mismanagement. Yet this is precisely the point of passage to M-stories, where the evolutive landscape is more diffuse and enigmatic, albeit not less important, because it is here where the shortcomings of an excessive distance between evolutionary social science and historical study are acutely felt. Somehow, D-stories are the only type of interpretation that avoids what Lord Acton criticised in the Cambridge historian John Robert Seeley: “[H]e discerns no Whiggism, but only Whigs”.<sup>92</sup>

## M-stories

M-stories interpret the Great War as the unfortunate result of bad luck, unawareness or accident: misunderstandings, miscalculations, mishaps, mistakes, blunders. As Paul Kennedy has said, “things going wrong”.<sup>93</sup> “A tragic and unnecessary conflict”, wrote John Keegan.<sup>94</sup> The naming level is composed of individual leaders and detailed descriptions of minute events. Their plots oscillate between a tragic and underserved fate for a previously self-confident Europe, and a satirical and deserved punishment to the “proud tower” (Barbara Tuchman’s coinage) of the old society. A strong ironic flavour in M-stories runs parallel with the perception of a deficit in human evolution, a lack of sufficient foreknowledge to avoid disasters. Indeed, this kind of history tries to unearth the rational calculations that the actors performed under conditions of epistemic darkness, and paradoxes of communication.

89 Henry Kissinger: *Diplomacy*, New York 1994, pp. 168–200.

90 William Mulligan: *The Origins of the First World War*, 4<sup>th</sup> printing, Cambridge 2013, p. 227.

91 Holger Afflerbach/David Stevenson (eds.): *An Improbable War? The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture Before 1914*, New York/Oxford 2007.

92 Quoted in: Herbert Fisher: *Studies in History and Politics*, Oxford 1920, p. 91.

93 Jay Winter (ed.): *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years on*, Columbia, MO 2009, p. 37.

94 John Keegan: *The First World War*, London 2014, p. 3.

This transition also emerges because an unavoidable war seems to diminish in an unacceptable way the freedom of human beings. For that reason, research went from the *who*-story of mega-states and the *why*-story of mega-structures to the *how*-story of persons. We can perceive this result in the secondary title of some recent narratives: “How Europe went to war in 1914”, or “How Europe abandoned peace for the First World War”.<sup>95</sup>

Historiographical M-stories are to be found totally or partially in authors such as Oliver Chitwood, Norman Angell, Sidney Fay, Barbara Tuchman, James Joll, John Keegan, Holger Afflerbach, William Mulligan, Samuel R. Williamson Jr, Frank C. Zagare, Richard Ned Lebow, Niall Ferguson, Christopher Clark, and Margaret MacMillan.<sup>96</sup>

The American historian Oliver Chitwood observed already in 1917: “[T]he game of bluff was carried too far. And thus, it seems that the war was not only a crime but also a blunder”.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, the Earl Loreburn, who had opposed the entry of Britain in the war, wrote: “The Ministers who guided us into the war and their supporters have the deepest interest in believing that the struggle was unavoidable. Few could reconcile themselves to the thought that so terrible a tragedy was in any sense due to their own shortcomings”.<sup>98</sup>

Niall Ferguson has been of the same opinion. In the concluding chapter of *The Pity of War*, the author asks ten questions, of which the first four are related to the issue of the cause of the outbreak. Ferguson contended that:

- (i) “neither militarism, imperialism, nor secret diplomacy made war inevitable”;
- (ii) there was no German “bid for world power”, because the leadership acted “out of a sense of weakness”;

95 Christopher Clark: *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London 2012; Margaret MacMillan: *The War that Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War*, London 2013.

96 Oliver Chitwood: *The Immediate Causes of the Great War*, New York 1917; Norman Angell: *America and the New World-State: A Plea for American Leadership in International Organization*, New York/London 1915; Sidney Bradshaw Fay: *The Origins of the World War, II: After Sarajevo: Immediate Causes of the War*; Barbara Tuchman: *The Guns of August*, New York 1962; James Joll/Gordon Martel: *The Origins of the First World War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Harlow 2007; John Keegan: *The First World War*; Holger Afflerbach: *The Topos of Improbable War in Europe Before 1914*, in: Holger Afflerbach/David Stevenson (eds.): *An Improbable War*, pp. 161–182; William Mulligan: *The Origins of the First World War*; Samuel R. Williamson Jr: *Aggressive and Defensive Aims of Political Elites? Austro-Hungarian Policy in 1914*, in: Holger Afflerbach/David Stevenson (eds.): *An Improbable War?*, pp. 61–74; Frank C. Zagare: *Explaining the 1914 War in Europe: An Analytical Narrative*, in: *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 21:1 (2009), pp. 63–95; Richard Ned Lebow: *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, Baltimore 1981, pp. 119–147; Niall Ferguson: *The Pity of War*, London 1998; Christopher Clark: *The Sleepwalkers*; Margaret MacMillan: *The War that Ended Peace*.

97 Oliver Chitwood: *The Immediate Causes of the Great War*, p. 101.

98 John Reid (Earl Loreburn): *How the War Came*, London 1919, p. 244.

- (iii) British generals and politicians secretly engaged the country in support of France, “misreading” German intentions, which they mistakenly imagined to be “Napoleonic in scale”.<sup>99</sup>

The evolutionary tale here is that the international system was evolving towards economic interactivity and interdependence, pacifist ideologies, diplomatic channels for dealing with crises, and that, in the words of Norman Angell,<sup>100</sup> war no longer had reward even for the victors. Cognitive dissonance and darkness show themselves in a twofold manner: firstly, as unawareness of the world’s evolution towards the global village; secondly, as asymmetries of information in the game of diplomacy and war.

The classical book by James Joll enters the M-model as well. After examining every general trend previous to 1914 (imperialism, militarism, alliances, capitalism, nationalism, domestic conflicts), the British historian could not find a better cause than “the mood of 1914”, the psychological climate in which decision-makers had to react in a few days to momentous geopolitical challenges.<sup>101</sup> Nonetheless, it could be argued that under such a timetable pressure, the evolutive trends, such as the conflict between capitalistic need of huge politically controlled markets and the nationalistic differentiation propelled by an age of popular education and information, imposed their force on the stressed minds of statesmen.

Mulligan has powerfully argued regarding the capabilities of the system for avoiding a general war in the previous 44 years. If everything failed this time, it was because a new factor intervened: the shared will to risk a war otherwise unwanted. Thus, “war was the result of an accumulation of decisions, each one of which individually was not designed to provoke war, but which interacted with other decisions to destroy the foundations of peace”.<sup>102</sup> This interpretation of a path-dependence is shared, as we will see, by Clark and MacMillan. Frank Zagare has even created a formal model for explaining the route taken by the events, suggesting that war was unintended, but not accidental.<sup>103</sup>

Afflerbach explains the fateful intermingling of two actually opposing topics before 1914: on the one hand, war was deemed improbable, as Angell had theorised and the management of international affairs since 1871 permitted to expect; on the other hand, war was deemed unavoidable because of imperialistic competition, alliances, and the

99 Niall Ferguson: *The Pity of War*, London 1998, pp. 442–444.

100 Norman Angell: *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power to National Advantage*, London 1912, p. viii.

101 James Joll/Gordon Martel: *The Origins of the First World War*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Harlow 2007.

102 William Mulligan: *The Origins of the First World War*, pp. 231, 232.

103 Frank C. Zagare: *Explaining the 1914 War in Europe: An Analytical Narrative*, in: *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 21:1 (2009), pp. 63–95, doi: 10.1177/0951629808097284 (accessed 25 July 2017).

arms race. In both cases, paralysis of pacifism ensued, either for not being necessary, or for not being useful. This paradox is typical of M-stories. The implicit evolutionary basis is a complete uncertainty as to the direction of human evolution.<sup>104</sup>

Clark assumes in turn a complex web of causality and co-responsibility regarding the outbreak, and also depicts the fluid circumstances in which the actors had to take decisions:

There is no smoking gun in this story; or rather, there is one in the hands of every major character. Viewed in this light, the outbreak of the war was a tragedy, not a crime. [...] But the Germans were not the only imperialists and not the only ones to succumb to paranoia. The crisis that brought war in 1914 was the fruit of a shared political culture. But it was also multipolar and genuinely interactive—that is what makes it the most complex of modern times.<sup>105</sup>

Reflecting on how open the future was before the July crisis, Clark perceives the unacceptable alternative between heaping up causes that render war inevitable (over-determination) or glorifying a contingency that would lead to “a war without causes” (under-determination). Nevertheless, he notes the intense “uncertainty in all quarters about the intentions of friends and potential foes alike”.<sup>106</sup> The evolutionary model that fits this analysis is the paradox of the growing power of organised societies (states, armies, demography, alliances, railways) and the elites’ diminishing capability. Emerging complexity may lead to an evolutive bottle-neck: its material force opens up new opportunities; its cultural frailty puts the catastrophic risk nearer than ever. After Hiroshima, this was undeniable.

The other great interpretation around the centenary of the outbreak is MacMillan’s book, which is again a *how*-history. For her, war could have been avoided, but it was just the concrete path followed during the summer what made the outcome unavoidable. “In 1914”, she writes, “European leaders failed it either by deliberately opting for war or by not finding the strength to oppose it”.<sup>107</sup> MacMillan, who has her own version of the war-responsibility (pointing to Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia), considers it more interesting to explore the individual framework of deliberation, because it was a situation in which a few persons took the relevant decisions.<sup>108</sup> If Angell was right, as she recognises, regarding the economic absurdity of a general war, then the question remains why the powerful trend of modern international capitalism was suddenly destroyed by a handful of generals and diplomats.

104 Holger Afflerbach: *The Topos of Improbable War in Europe Before 1914*, in: Holger Afflerbach/David Stevenson (eds.): *An Improbable War?*, pp. 161–182.

105 Christopher Clark: *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 561.

106 *Ibid.*, p. 362.

107 Margaret MacMillan: *The War that Ended Peace*, p. 592.

108 *Ibid.*, pp. xxx-xxxi.



Richard Ned Lebow, in turn, highlights that the First World War “probably could have been avoided”, but “cognitive distortions of German leaders” prevented the peaceful outcome.<sup>109</sup> This political scientist argues that, in the management of crises, ability for learning and consequently modifying the behaviour becomes crucial. Without learning, “policy comes to resemble a stone rolling downhill; it can neither be recalled nor can its path be altered”.<sup>110</sup>

Therefore, M-stories eventually demand, through their own perplexities, more than decision-makers’ individual motives; what is needed is a model in which the evolution of global capitalism collides with the evolutive trend to form national states on the ethnolinguistic basis.<sup>111</sup> As both processes came from a series of improvements in literacy, communications, transportation, medicine, and mastery over the natural world, it seems that M-stories need to be embedded in more overarching anthropological interpretations (this is not to assert that those interpretations are already available).<sup>112</sup> Somehow, M-stories look like a Claude Monet’s impressionistic picture seen at an excessively close range. Modern art, led by Paul Cézanne’s post-Impressionism, came in just to amend that loss of structure.

## Conclusions

Should Darwin be the Cézanne overcoming the impressionistic tendency of the historiography about the origins of the First World War? Throughout the development of the three major explanatory patterns, we see historical knowledge steadily running away from the old naturalist. G-stories based on the *who*-question were the closest to the political culture of Darwinism about 1914, implying a naturalisation and personification of nations (which are *cultural* and *plural*). D-stories based on the *why*-question still tried to produce an account in terms of a structural evolution of societies, even though social evolution had distinctive features when compared to natural evolution (culture can make evolution purposeful according to values). This pattern did not assume a naturalisation of all historical events, but was familiar with ecological or biological backgrounds. And M-stories disconnect epistemically the July crisis from social evolution, because if war broke out by mistake then evolution is causally neutral, or else we may understand that it is characterised nowadays by the inability for learning from crises, and thus by an underdevelopment of civilisation against the emotional legacy of hominids.

109 Richard Ned Lebow: *Between Peace and War*, p. 147.

110 *Ibid.*

111 An old suggestion; see Arnold J. Toynbee: *The World after the Peace Conference*, London 1925, p. 13.

112 But see Azar Gat: *War in Human Civilization*, Oxford 2006, pp. 133–145.

Thus, the more our interpretations move away from Darwinism, the more the outbreak of the First World War puzzles us. The historiographical fashion nowadays is the M-story, because historians are sceptic regarding human evolution and, anyway, there is no academic consensus about an evolutionary social science. Therefore, M-stories are not a culmination of historical science, but of historical prudence. Whereas Kennedy lists structural causes of the Great War, Ferguson responds with the uncertainty of the protagonists.<sup>113</sup> However, what kind of knowledge is history, when, after a century of research, it declares itself only a massively documented perplexity?

Charles Péguy, who was killed in the Battle of the Marne in 1914, had wittily written that ancient history is impossible owing to the scarcity of documents, and modern history too, owing to the excess of documents. The historical meaning of the Great War lies buried beneath a documentary Everest. Unless we get back to D-stories linked to evolutionary science, we will remain in the company of a sphinx.<sup>114</sup> As the sociologist Stephen Sanderson observes, human attitude towards war cannot be explained only in humanistic terms, because it belongs to the depths of our biological evolution.<sup>115</sup> A great effort is recently being made to bridge the gap between evolutionism and history,<sup>116</sup> but Darwin's journey to Sarajevo is still in its first stages, and more interdisciplinary research is needed.

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113 See Jay Winter (ed.): *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On*, pp. 39–60.

114 I have tried to explain the emergence of a messianic culture during the Great War as a cultural response to demographic pressures, economic constraints, and archaic political instruments; see J. L. Fernández: *Messianic Times: The Great War as the Trigger of World History*, in: Alexios Alecou (ed.): *Acceleration of History: War, Conflict, and Politics*, Lanham 2016, pp. 53–88.

115 Stephen K. Sanderson: *The Evolution of Human Sociality: A Darwinian Conflict Perspective*, Lanham 2001, pp. 328–329.

116 Peter Dickens: *Social Darwinism: Linking Evolutionary Thought to Social Theory*, Buckingham/Philadelphia 2000; Walter G. Runciman: *The Theory of Cultural and Social Selection*, Cambridge 2009; Marion Blute: *Darwinian Sociocultural Evolution: Solutions to Dilemmas in Cultural and Social Theory*, Cambridge 2010.