

# Perceptions of World War I

CĂTĂLIN TURLIUC

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*“You are setting Europe  
on fire.”*

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**T**HE FIRST World War has always provided a fertile ground for miscellaneous theories which try to explain and sometimes elucidate the evolution of modern societies. This huge confrontation, widely seen as unprecedented, was in many ways a revolutionary war given its sheer scale, intensity and consequences. Such impact on both military and civilian life through propaganda, ideology, mass conscription and the increased intervention of the state in society had never been experienced before. The character of this war was fundamentally different from that of earlier conflicts, in that it was based on mass-produced weapons, mechanized transport, an increasing role of the home front etc. In fact, it was the first *total war*, in which the belligerents were compelled to mobilize all their military, industrial and human resources in a conflict of unprecedented scale and impact. Human losses were enormous and unthinkable in the eve of the conflict; economies were devastated by invasion and plunder, as well as by the demands of the war effort; states were destroyed by their enemies, and new ones were created after the war. Four years of mechanized slaughter on the battlefields convinced many that armed conflict

## **Cătălin Turliuc**

Senior researcher at A. D. Xenopol Institute of History, Iași. Author, among other titles, of the book **Interwind Destinies: Modern Romania and its Ethnic Groups** (2003).

could lead to the greatest threat to humanity: the very extinction of the human race. When war broke out, most professional soldiers as well as politicians and the public had predicted a short dynamic war that would be over by Christmas 1914, but they had not correctly assessed the effects of the increased power of modern weapons which gave significant advantages to the defense. The “short war illusion” was widespread in military and naval circles as well as among politicians and the public. But this does not mean that the military did not expect heavy casualties. It was the duration that was unexpected. The civilian population on both sides had originally greeted the war with great patriotic fervor, but gradually their enthusiasm was eroded as the huge losses incurred in battle, and especially during trench warfare, accumulated with no apparent gains. In spite of the wars that followed—the Second World War, for instance—the first world conflagration acquired the reputation of being one of the most terrible of all modern conflicts. Until the outbreak of the war in 1914 the term “Great War” had been used to refer to the twenty-two years long struggle between Britain and France during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period. Before the end of hostilities in 1918, however, the term was being applied to World War I. The term “World War” was also applied to the conflict early on; for example, the twelfth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, published in 1922, was a facsimile of the 1911 edition with three additional volumes devoted largely to the “World War.” The war, as we have already pointed out, was truly global, affecting different spots of the world’s map. In East Africa the German General Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck conducted a brilliant campaign throughout the war, inflicting three times as many casualties on British imperial forces as they had suffered in the Boer War; in the Pacific, German colonies rapidly fell to the Japanese and British forces; small and distant countries declared war (Nicaragua is a good example in this respect) etc. However, these events were sideshows having a minor impact when compared with the main military theatres in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, armed conflict continued in parts of Eastern Europe into the early 1920s.

Quite naturally, the origins, developments and consequences of World War I, a real milestone in the history of mankind, constitute an important focus point in almost every European (and not only) national historiography. Many historians recognized in the First World War the end of an era and the dawn of a new age. That explains why today we have a huge amount of literature concerning this moment in history. Very often the long years of peace before the outbreak of World War I were regarded as an idyllic period of stability and prosperity, defined by a general acceptance of order and authority, undisturbed by violence, immorality and revolution. “La belle époque” was the widespread label applied to those years. The immense quantity of documents and historical sources available, and the abundance of theories and interpretations render futile and utopian any attempt at providing a full, exhaustive explanation to the long-

term causes, immediate origins, developments and outcomes of this terrible and spectacular event.

The fact that perception is quite often more important than reality motivates the interest in showing how the perceptions of World War I, at the dawn of the current iconic society, have modeled attitudes, behaviors and mentalities. The present paper aims to present and analyze the way in which the outbreak of the conflict and its further development were viewed by the main actors, namely, the Western nations in the Entente, with the United Kingdom as an example, but also the echo of these tragic events in the Romanian Old Kingdom.

When investigating the origins of World War I, we quickly find out that its premises are quite complex and also strongly interrelated, according to the actual perception of these events.<sup>2</sup> Also, we can discern long-term as well as immediate factors which, taken together, became crucial to the outbreak of the conflict a century ago. Among the long-term factors which favored the outbreak of the war we can enumerate: ideologies and doctrines—i.e. imperialism versus nationalism; mentalities and *forma mentis*—war was still *ultima ratio regnum* and was seen as a natural extension of foreign policy (see Clausewitz); political, social and economic trends, realities and developments—the balance between the Great Powers and, in this respect, the alliances between them, the great social discrepancies inside each society and the different levels of social organization in various countries, the massive industrialization in certain countries and areas resulting in trade rivalry etc. On the other hand, the immediate origins of the war could be found in the events (crises) of June–July or, at a larger extent, in the political and diplomatic crises (Moroccan, Balkan) and maneuvers (the establishment of a clear, definite, system of alliances on the continent) and, of course, in certain actions of governments and/or individuals (Bethmann-Hollweg,<sup>3</sup> Sazonov,<sup>4</sup> Moltke, Jagow, the Tsar, the Kaiser and so forth). It is obvious that one can add quite a lot of new long-term or immediate causes of the First World War, but our intention is to shed light on the relevant perceptions then and now.

The most influential and significant ideologies and doctrines of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were imperialism, nationalism and social-democracy. We will consider in our paper only imperialism and nationalism, both creations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which were largely opposed to each other in terms of their goals, if we consider the geopolitical context at the dawn of the last century. Both of them were aggressive toward the established order on the political map of the world, both advocated major changes to this map, both were very influential among elites and the general public. Social-democracy was mainly concerned with the internal order of societies. Another source of tension was racialism (based on social Darwinism) as well as the new science of geopolitics. Both reinforced the imperialist aims of the Great Powers. One should not

forget the important doctrines of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism which collided when the German *Drang nach Osten* was materialized in the Berlin–Baghdad Railway project.

In what concern mentalities and *forma mentis*, the only way of solving international crises was—in the opinion of politicians, soldiers and the general public in the period we refer to—war or political compromise. Gradually, as soon as successive compromises arose from various international crises, the chances of preserving the peace by such means diminished proportionally (i.e. a new compromise was out of question for the tsar and the Russian public opinion in the eve of World War I). The whole evolution of European societies (the main feature of this evolution was the constant growth in almost every field of activity beginning with industry, the arms race, and ending with the demographic factor or social discrepancies) was itself a fertile background for a “warrior attitude,” adopted by a large part of the elite and of the public. The self-confidence induced by “progress,” the absence of a major European war in the last four decades (we can consider that the generation of the First World war had never experienced a major military conflict), the growing intolerance and jingoistic attitude towards the “others,” the permanent need for heroic acts (cultivated by Romanticism and later on, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by neo-traditionalism) were, alongside other factors, powerful stimuli determining aggressive attitudes and mentalities. Also, the *forma mentis* of the military and political elite was an important factor, inducing a certain intransigence and lack of understanding and appreciation in international relations. Maybe that explains the big smiles on the faces of the soldiers departing for the front and the long queues in front of the mobilization offices in all the countries involved in the war.

European political history was always dominated by various alliances. This long tradition which continues to our day saw the emergence of two great military blocks in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the last century. Also, the “power,” the “prestige” and the “heritage” of certain states or politicians was measured in terms of military victories and territorial conquests. With political power concentrated in very few hands (emperors, kings, chancellors, prime ministers and so on), and with diplomacy still practiced “behind closed doors,” it is evident that the war *engrenage* was easy to switch on. In what concerns the long-term social trends, we can mention that the economic development, especially industrialization, urbanization, demographic growth and the emergence of both middle and working classes created new and growing discrepancies within modern societies. Also, the social organization of European societies differed gradually from the West to the East. In light of these realities, it is easy to demonstrate that social pressure grew considerably in this period. Economic development, and we already mentioned industrialization, favored

“savage” competition, trade rivalry, the scramble for colonies and for spheres of influence. This competition, accompanied by colonial expansion, was in the main a friendly business—at least it involved very little warfare—until there were scarcely any territories left to share among the Great Powers, and Germany was very ambitious and also very “hungry.” These conflicts of economic interest between nations became more severe in the period under analysis, when the area for peaceful expansion became smaller and smaller as the Great Powers absorbed the remaining free territories.

It is now the time to mention that there were also forces who were strongly opposed to the war. Among these we can identify the pacifist movements (more than one hundred pacifist societies were registered at the headquarters of the peace movement in Berne, Switzerland), some of the world greatest writers, international organizations (especially the International Red Cross), and of course such international initiatives as the disarmament conferences (1899 and 1907). Another important movement advocating peace was, of course, the International Socialist Movement. Unfortunately, these forces opposed to war were too weak and too small. We can conclude that the combination of social and international tensions of *Innenpolitik* and *Aussenpolitik*, of long-term and immediate premises, was the key factor in the outbreak of the first world conflagration.

In order to illustrate the perception of the imminent outbreak of the war in 1914 I shall focus on an interesting document, a protest statement signed by nine British scholars employed by prestigious universities<sup>5</sup> and published in *The Times*<sup>6</sup>—one of the most significant barometers of the British public opinion at that time—against a war with Germany. Considering Germany as a “nation leading the way in Arts and Science” the signatories regarded war upon it “in the interest of Serbia and Russia” as a “sin against civilization,” an attitude which can be explained by the Eurocentric mentality and the general arrogant behavior of the Great Powers towards the small nations (Serbians, in this case). We have to mention that pacifism had been embraced not only by some intellectuals but also by the socialist movement and a few other less important groups. Western European societies developed in that specific period a modern (bourgeois) approach to reality, including a strong belief in progress. Progress had a strong spiritual connotation associated with the moral and ethical context which spelt hope for mankind.<sup>7</sup> We can add the fact that the intelligentsia was acting, generally speaking, like a pacifist force in society, and a Eurocentric attitude was widespread among western societies, while a certain solidarity (almost a caste spirit) existed among the intellectual elite all over the world.

JUST LIKE its political elite, the Romanian society of the Old Kingdom was divided between two main trends: the strongest one favored the Entente, considering the fate of the Romanians living in Austria-Hungary and the general Francophile mood of the public opinion; the second one placed itself alongside Central Powers, thinking about the Romanians living in the Tsarist Empire and the troubled relationship with this Great Power. The Romanian press of the time copied and reflected these general attitudes, being sometimes financially stimulated by the interested parties.<sup>8</sup> During the neutrality period (1914–1916) the gap between the two trends widened and both camps used all sorts of resources in order to finally determine the general position of the country regarding the war. The confrontational mood of the two camps was demonstrated by bitter arguments and, on a few occasions, by street violence.

The progress of the war as it was presented by the belligerents was heavily influenced by propaganda, which became now a real force, especially on the “home front.” The famous and bloody Battle of the Somme was the biggest battle on the Western front before 1918. Seven weeks after the first attacks, on 21 August 1916, the film *The Battle of the Somme* opened in 34 cinemas in London and later in major provincial cities across Great Britain.<sup>9</sup> Of course, after that the movie was presented in various Allied countries and it is used even nowadays in documentaries regarding World War I. We see the soldiers marching in high spirits to the trenches. When the moment of the attack came, the tension on their faces is quite visible. Finally, we see them collapsing in pain and bewildered by the events of the battle. Film is, of course, only one of the media which helped to construct both historical and contemporary perceptions of the war. Literature in all its forms (short stories, memoirs, poetry etc.) newspapers and magazines, all these contributed to the image and perception of the First World War. The perception of World War I is generally one of unmitigated horror, of carnage and devastation on a large scale. After Romania entered the war in 1916, following a short period of optimism nurtured by the initial victories on the front-line, a similar perception of disaster and tragedy was sensed by the whole society, as proved by the media of that time.

Alongside some of the elites, the educated middle classes were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the war at its outset. By the end of the war and in its aftermath, numerous representatives of this social group found themselves regretting the “good old times” from before the war. The conservatives portrayed the war as having unleashed social revolution, democracy, equality and general emancipation. Liberals and socialists welcomed the new realities but saw the war as having released the cult of violence, militarism and intolerance, which found its most brutal expression in the rise of fascism. The governments of that time, mainly for propaganda reasons, greatly exaggerated the changes that were taking

place and would take place once victory was won. Ordinary people widely accepted the idea that because the war was so horrific, it must result in a big change. Many of those who left diaries, autobiographies or collections of letters (a tiny minority) stated clearly that they felt their world had been changed by the war.

Historians living in this period were heavily influenced by these opinions and they were inclined to idealize the period from before World War I. Later the perception of the First World War gradually changed. In the interwar period the historical discourse about the Great War was mainly politically motivated. The so-called colored books expressed the will to justify the decisions made by governments prior and during the war and assign responsibilities. After World War II and during the Cold War, a new perspective emerged: the internal factors were interrelated more profoundly with the foreign policy promoted by the Great Powers. Beginning with the 1980s new approaches were developed from the social and cultural history perspectives. The thesis that the First World War did indeed bring about major social changes gained massive support.<sup>10</sup> Some historians have pointed out that many of the social changes and political developments of the 1920s and 1930s had their origin in the prewar years. The interwar triumphs of dictatorships suggested that there was considerable continuity with the old patterns of authority than had previously been assumed. Some historians have tended to focus on long-term structural and ideological trends, seeing the war as of comparatively little real significance. Feminists argued that the political rights won by women in many countries during and immediately after World War I made little difference to their subordinate status in a male-dominated society. Quite a large number of historians found that liberalism's problems seemed to have begun long before 1914, and the break-up of old political structures was seen as having been at best hastened by the war, but in no way initiated by it. This was also the case in Romania, with the agrarian and electoral reforms announced by the liberals in the prewar period. Social historians became conscious that social change is generally a slow-moving, long-term process that does not easily conform to the chronologies laid down for political history by rulers or conflicts. It became compulsory for those who wish to argue that the war did bring social changes not only to list the social changes occurred during, at the end of, or after the war, but to prove how they are related to the actual war experience. More recently the debate over the origins of World War I focused again on the international tensions at the beginning of the last century. It is clear that with the changing historical perspectives lent by the increasing distance in time, new views of the origins and impact of the First World War were generated. It is now obvious that *post hoc ergo propter hoc* arguments are not sufficient in order to properly explain this topic.

Finally, one has to address two well established views regarding the impact and consequences of World War I: that the war was a great watershed in history, with effects which created a divide between the pre- and the postwar worlds; and that the war completed, perhaps speeded up, and, in some versions, was a culmination of pre-existing processes and tendencies. For the Romanian historiography the first “scenario” was, and still is, the most plausible and only recently have we started to raise questions regarding the real value of this perception. Concluding our brief remarks we have to point out that even a century later, the debate about World War I and the way it was and is perceived is still an open one, and renewed historiographical efforts are still needed in order to solve this rather complicated problem.

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## Notes

1. See C. Turliuc, “Major Factors which Determined the Conduct of the ‘Great War,’” in *Romania during the World War I Era*, ed. Kurt W. Treptow (Iași–Oxford–Portland, 1999), 99–109.
2. See C. Turliuc, “The Origins of the First World War: A Possible Interpretation,” *Anuarul Fundației Academice “Petre Andrei” Iași 2* (1992): 149–156.
3. German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg said on 1 August 1914: “If the iron dice must roll, may God help us.”
4. S. Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister in a discussion with the ambassador of Austria-Hungary said: “The fact is, you want war and you have burned your bridges. You are setting Europe on fire.”
5. The signatories of the protest were: C. G. Browne (Cambridge), F. C. Burkitt (Cambridge), J. Estlin Carpenter (Oxford), F. J. Foakes-Jackson (Cambridge), H. Latimer-Jackson (Essex), Kisopp Lake (Leden and Harvard), W. M. Ramsay (Aberdeen), W. B. Selbie (Oxford), J. J. Thomson (Cambridge).
6. *The Times*, 1 August 1914: 6.
7. J. M. Roberts, *Europe 1880–1945: A General History of Europe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London–New York, 1990), 64.
8. Newspapers like *Adevărul* and *Dimineața* were in favor of the Entente, while *Dreptatea*, *Seara* or *Minerva* were on the opposite side. *Moldova*, *Opinia*, *Steagul* and *Ziua* were favorable to German interests, while *Facla* supported the French ones. One of the major newspapers was *Universul* and its position generated a strong legal battle, finally won by the side which supported the Entente. See, for a lot of interesting details, Pamfil Șeicaru, *Istoria presei românești* (Bucharest, 2007).
9. H. Cowper, C. Emsley, A. Maverick, B. Purdue, and D. Englander, eds., *War, Peace and Social Change: Europe 1900–1955*, vol. 2 (Buckingham, 1990), 24.
10. See all the work of Arthur Marwick.



## **Abstract**

### Perceptions of World War I

World War I, or the Great War as it is remembered by many nations, witnessed a series of innovations both in the way it was conducted (breadth and amplitude, weaponry, strategy and tactics etc.), as well as in the way it was perceived and internalized by the participant nations and their societies. The fact that perception is often more important than reality motivates the interest in showing how the perceptions of World War I, at the dawn of the current iconic society, modeled attitudes, behaviors and mentalities. The present work aims to present and analyze the way in which the outbreak of the conflict and its further development were viewed by the main actors, respectively the Western nations in the Entente, but also the echo of these tragic events in the Romanian Old Kingdom. Beyond the information that supports this analysis and its inherent comparative nature, the author proposes a heuristic model of analysis derived from “Social change” analysis. Beginning with the various propaganda means used by the belligerent nations, the numerous testimonies (either individual or collective) which represent valuable sources, this work will highlight fundamental aspects of the way in which both the public and the individual perception of the war developed during the Great War. The conclusions of this work emphasize the fact that manipulation has become an efficient way of influencing public opinion in modern societies, especially in those experiencing a state of deep conflict.

## **Keywords**

World War I, perceptions, attitudes, propaganda, immediate and long-term factors, media