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Jihad-cum-Zionism-Leninism: Overthrowing the World, German-Style

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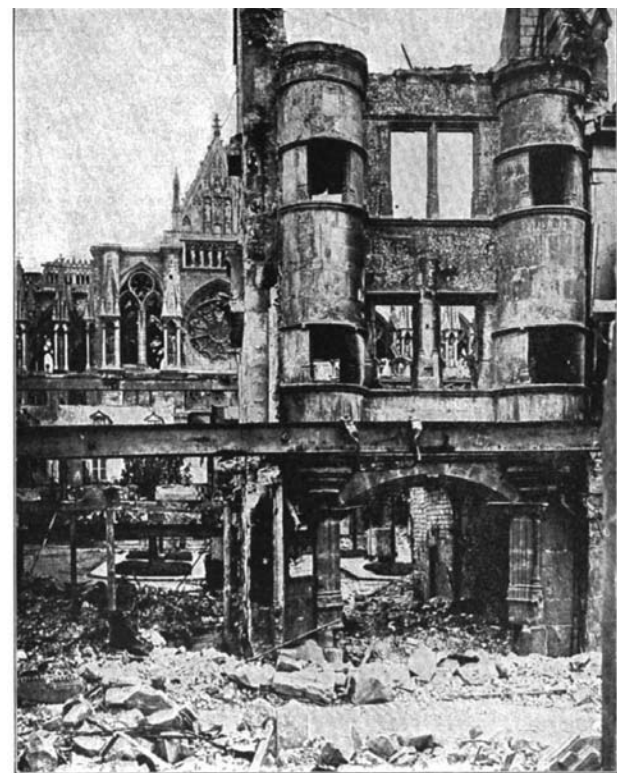
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JIHAD-CUM-ZIONISM-LENINISM: OVERTHROWING THE WORLD, GERMAN-STYLE

Sean McMeekin

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

If 1914-18 marked an epitaph for Old Europe, we may usefully ask: Was it murder or suicide? Popular historians have usually leaned toward the latter verdict, viewing the catastrophe of 1914 as a tragedy of miscalculation, the idea being that no European statesmen were truly guilty of *intending* the war, at least not the horrendous global war of attrition that it turned into.¹ Since the Fritz Fischer debate of the 1960s professional historians have generally favored the former explanation, explaining the war's outbreak in terms of German and/or Austrian premeditation, coming down with a verdict of, if not outright homicide, then at least civilizational manslaughter. The German decision for war in 1914, Holger Herwig writes in a recent scholarly collection on the conflict, was not quite Fischer's aggressive and deliberate "bid for world power" but rather "a nervous, indeed panicked 'leap into the dark' to secure the Reich's position of semihegemony on the Continent."² In the new "consensus" interpretation, Berlin still bears primary responsibility, no longer for premeditated imperial aggression in the sense implied by the Versailles Treaty and by Fischer, but for an impulsive preemptive strike to ward off incipient strategic decline, with further mitigation in that the Germans received a strong as-



A View of Ruined Rheims

From Albert Bushnell Hart, ed., *Harper's Pictorial Library of the World War, Volume 2* (Harper and Brothers, 1920).

sist in unleashing the dogs of war from their equally panic-stricken (and equally pessimistic) Austrian allies.³

This sort of moderate academic consensus is usually welcomed. Now that so few historians have a real personal or patriotic stake in the controversy (as many Germans with memories of both world wars still did in the 1960s), scholars working in the field today are spared the bitter acrimony of the Fritz Fischer years. Even on the level of practical politics, with the centennial approaching, there is now a sense of "goodbye to all that"—literally, as the last German reparations payment was finally processed in 2010!⁴

Much as there is to recommend the current consensus on the war of 1914, however, there is also much not to like. The first problem with any consensus is that it is static, and unlikely to inspire new scholarship. Say what one might about the nastiness of the Fischer debate: precisely because of its sharp edge it stimulated years of fresh research and passionate argument. A young historian today, by contrast, is not likely to be encouraged to tackle perhaps the biggest question of modern history (responsibility for the First World War and its consequences) after reading the kind of works published in recent years, which tend to declare the matter closed to further discussion.

The second problem grows directly out of the

first. Scholarly consensus, because it implicitly denies the possibility of argument, tends toward a certain smugness. As David Fromkin answers his own question in *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (Knopf, 2004), "Briefly and roughly stated, the answer is that the government of Austria-Hungary started its local war with Serbia, while Germany's military leaders started the worldwide war against France and Russia that became known as the First World War or the Great War." Alright, then. What else is there to say?

To be sure, there is wiggle room inside the current consensus. Some historians focus their fire on the Austrian statesmen who deliberately hounded Serbia into war, others more on the policy makers in Berlin who urged them on.⁵ Others, like Niall Ferguson, accept primary Austro-German responsibility but still have harsh words for Britain, which, alone among the five main powers, was aloof enough from the two main alliances to have easily stayed out. With her decision to enter the war, a European war became a global one.⁶ And some German authors continue quietly to question the Germanocentric explanation about the outbreak of the war of 1914, even if their works are usually dismissed or simply ignored by the dominant English-language historians.⁷

This, though, is about it. It's been almost forty years since a major non-German historian was brave enough to tackle the Germanocentric consensus about the outbreak of war in 1914. The historian was L.C.F. Turner, who looked seriously into Russia's role in the July crisis. Yet he focused mostly on the timing of Russia's early mobilization, while paying little attention to Russia's foreign policy objectives in going to war—a subject that remains largely opaque to most First World War generalists.⁸ Although this was not his intention, Turner's work indirectly buttressed the popular-historical explanation of 1914 as a "tragedy of miscalculation," as he showed how statesmen such as Sazonov and Bethmann Hollweg unwittingly boxed themselves in by authorizing "limited" military measures (Russia's "partial" mobilization against Austria in Sazonov's case, Austria's declaration of war on Serbia in that of Bethmann Hollweg) while failing to perceive that these "limited" measures made general war inevitable.⁹

If we take the modified Turner "tragedy of miscalculation" thesis as the popular pole in current thinking about 1914, and the modified Fischer (Herwig/Fromkin) "German-Austrian preemptive strike" as its scholarly opposite, there is a bit more room to maneuver than simply inside the latter consensus among professional historians. Even so, the two poles are not that far apart. Both interpretations still give the benefit of the doubt to statesmen like Bethmann Hollweg and Sazonov, if not also to the trigger-happy generals who advised them. On the

German side, Bethmann Hollweg and especially Moltke have been harshly judged, to be sure—Fromkin even fingers the chief of the German general staff as the "modest, unexceptional, and indeed rather ordinary career army officer [who] started the Great War."¹⁰ And yet there is mitigation even in this judgment: Fromkin cites as evidence of guilt Moltke's later "confession" to having started the war, which suggests a man wracked by moral doubts more than an unrepentant war criminal. This is characteristic of what we might call the post-Fischer view of 1914, in which the German "crime" was not one of conscious aggressive intention, but more a tragic decision born of a mixture of fear and foreboding.

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

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

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

The Germans were not alone in this prewar (and then wartime) geopolitical scheming, of course. Russian plans for the seizure of Austrian Galicia, along with Constantinople and the Straits,

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

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

If the Germans were not alone in cooking up plans of imperial conquest, however, they were uniquely prolific and even creative in doing so. Some of these plans, as Fischer showed us, were in place long before the war, especially those dealing with the Ottoman Empire. These preexisting plots to disrupt and dismantle the British, Russian, and French empires may not have *caused* the war in quite the way Fischer suggested; but they did help determine the uncompromising *character* of the war, along with much of its geographical and even political course. As the Kaiser himself wrote on July 30, 1914, "[England] must . . . have the mask of Christian peaceableness torn publicly off her face Our consuls in Turkey and India, agents, etc., must inflame the whole Mohammedan world to wild revolt against this hateful, lying, conscienceless nation of shopkeepers. If we are to be bled to death, at least England shall lose India."¹¹ Written at a time when Germany had not even begun mobilizing, and nearly a week before Britain entered the war, these words suggest that a good deal more than premonitory strategic fear was at work in driving the German decision for war.

Of course, Wilhelm II was notoriously moody and unstable, not least when he was composing these kinds of "marginalia" on diplomatic reports (in this case, on a dispatch from Friedrich Pourtalès, Germany's ambassador in St. Petersburg, reporting that general Russian mobilization was underway). And yet, however melodramatic in tone, the Kaiser's words were not idle: they represented real German policy. As early as August 2, 1914, after the war between Germany and Russia had begun but before France and Britain had gone in, Berlin signed an alliance treaty with the Ottoman Empire with the intention of unleashing Islamic holy war against the Entente Powers. As Moltke instructed the German foreign office just three days later (after Britain had finally entered the war), "revolution in India and Egypt, and also in the Caucasus, is of the highest importance. The treaty with Turkey will make it possible for the foreign office to realize the idea and awaken the fanaticism of Islam."¹²

To promote this Turco-German "jihad," and much else besides, the German foreign office estab-

lished a kind of all-purpose sabotage bureau for "Seditious Undertakings Against Our Enemies" (*Unternehmungen und Aufwiegelungen gegen unsere Feinde*), under the authority of Arthur Zimmermann, the under-secretary of state. The operational mastermind of the holy war stratagem was Baron Max von Oppenheim, a confidant of the Kaiser's who had been scheming for years to unleash global jihad against the British Empire.¹³ Alongside Oppenheim's jihad oper-



German Emperor Crown Prince Frederic William Prince Eitel Frederick Prince Adalbert Prince August Prince Oskar Prince Joachim
THE GERMAN EMPEROR AND HIS SIX SONS

From George William Hau, ed., *War Echoes: Or Germany and Austria in the Crisis* (Morton M. Malone, 1915).

ation, which primarily targeted Britain, Zimmermann's sabotage bureau also launched a "Zionist" initiative aimed at toppling the Tsarist regime in Russia. These two ideas were curiously blended together in a remarkable policy paper prepared by a functionary in Zimmermann's sabotage bureau (probably Otto von Wesendonck) on August 16, 1914—the fighting in Europe had still scarcely begun—on the "Revolutionary Activity We Will Undertake in the Islamic-Israelite World." Turco-German jihadi propaganda against British perfidy, spread cunningly among Hajj pilgrims coming to and from Arabia by way of Cairo, and backed by the distribution of weapons to Egyptian rebels and the emir of Afghanistan, would allow "the waves of rebellion to spread from Egypt to Mecca to the entire Islamic world as far as India." Meanwhile, the global Zionist executive (conveniently headquartered in Berlin) would prepare leaflets exhorting Jews in the Pale of Settlement to sabotage grain deliveries, thus literally starving the Russian army and permitting the Germans to advance with ease into the East European plain. Once the regime in Petrograd began to wobble, Russian Jews would then lead the way in toppling the Russian tsar, greatest enemy of world Jewry.¹⁴

There was a kind of mad prescience to German strategic thinking, such that policies hatched at the Wilhelmstrasse at the beginning of the war anticipated world-historical developments at its end—and indeed helped determine them, in the logic of the

self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course, not everything transpired precisely as Wesendonck predicted. The Germans likely exaggerated the potential for Islamic sedition in British India and Egypt, which both stayed relatively quiet during the war. Nor did the German jihad stratagem fare much better in Central Asia, which German agents (save one) never succeeded in penetrating, nor in French North Africa. The Sanussi order of Islamic warriors did capture a number of Egyptian towns from the British in the "coastal campaign" of the winter of 1915-16, causing serious concern in Cairo, but these victories, however dramatic at the time, were short-lived. The Zionists, too, proved a disappointment to Berlin, to the extent that most Western (although not German) Zionists even embraced the Entente side after the Balfour declaration of 1917.¹⁵

This is, however, taking perhaps too literal a reading of Wesendonck's memorandum. To modify Marx, imperial sabotage stratagems do not always produce the revolutions they foresee; but if prepared by serious and imaginative Germans, they do seem to produce revolutions. The German jihad stratagem, when combined with Berlin's ill-fated dalliance with Zionism, proved incendiary, not least because it provoked the British into taking aggressive countermeasures. Kitchener's notoriously ill-con-

ceived offer of a renewed, non-Ottoman Caliphate to Sherif Hussein of Mecca in the winter of 1914-15 actually rehashed an old idea born in the Cairo residency during the "Aqaba" crisis of 1906, the initiative on both occasions being provoked by the Germans' use of the Ottoman caliphate to stir Muslim opinion against the British. Hussein's vaunted "Arab revolt" of 1916, which according to the popular "Lawrence of Arabia" legend spawned secular Arab nationalism, was in fact couched locally in purely Islamic terms, as a protest against the sacrilegious acts of the Young Turks, beginning with their illegal deposition of Sultan-caliph Abdul Hamid II in 1909: Hussein was laying claim to the caliphate they had thus besmirched (and which Hussein thought the British had promised him). In similar fashion, the Balfour declaration of November 2, 1917 envisioning the creation of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine was issued in response to an editorial by a German Zionist in the *Vossische Zeitung* published several weeks previously, which frightened Whitehall into thinking the Germans were about to make their own move. The British endorsement of Zionism that led to the creation of the state of Israel, like the British-supported "Arab revolt" that helped split the Ottoman Empire in two, was hatched in retaliation to Germany's own revolutionary sabotage stratagems.

In the case of the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the connection to German policy was even more direct. German generals, on the advice of German

Zionists, drew up propaganda leaflets, which were dropped behind Russian front lines in 1914: they asked the “Jews of Russia” to “take up arms” against the tsar, whether they were “Nationalists, Zionists, or Socialists.” While it is true that very few Jews inside Russia followed this rather dangerous advice, and that the German Zionists themselves later had second thoughts about opening the “genie” of perceived Jewish disloyalty and sedition in the fevered atmosphere of wartime Russia, German support for Russian socialists in exile (many, though not all of them, Jewish) had more serious consequences. Perhaps fittingly, in that Zimmerman’s sabotage bureau saw the jihad and Judeo-Zionist stratagems as complementary, the key moment in the Russian stratagem occurred inside the German embassy in Constantinople, when in January 1915 Alexander Israel “Parvus” Helphand first proposed that Berlin fund Lenin. “The interests of the German government,”

Parvus told Ambassador Hans von Wangenheim, “are identical with those of the Russian revolutionaries.” (In a stunning and little-known parallel, just on the other side of Taksim square in the Pera Palace hotel, three months later Feisal, son of Sherif Hussein of Mecca, told Max von Oppenheim that “the interests of Islam are entirely identical with those of Germany.”)¹⁶ While it is true that German-financed revolutionaries played little role in the February Revolution of 1917, Lenin famously traveled from Switzerland to Russia under German military escort (at least as far as neutral Sweden), and received German funds wired via Stockholm during the crucial summer months when the Bolsheviks were gathering their strength. After the October Revolution, Lenin proved just as perfect a tool of the German government as Parvus had promised, sending an immediate request for a ceasefire *en clair* (that is, without encryption) to German military headquarters, dissolving the tsarist army, and not least browbeating his fellow Bolsheviks into signing the draconian Brest-Litovsk Treaty in March 1918, which turned over to Germany (and its new satellites) 750,000 square kilometers containing 55 million previously Russian subjects, more than half of Russia’s factories, and three-quarters of her coal and iron deposits (a supplementary provision of Brest-Litovsk, negotiated in August 1918, also guaranteed the Germans at least 25% of Baku’s immense oil output).¹⁷

It is testimony to the prolific, if slightly unhinged, quality of geopolitical imagination in the German foreign office that a revolution of another sort was cooked up at the same time, by many of the same people, with consequences just as enduring as the advent of communism. This was the ill-fated “Zimmermann telegram” dispatched on January 16, 1917, which promised Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico to

Mexico if she declared war on the United States. Intercepted and decoded by the British, who (very, very carefully) brought it to Washington’s attention, the Zimmermann telegram, compounded by the German resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, gave America its *casus belli* to enter the war in April 1917—and yet even then reluctantly, as an “associated” (not Allied) power of the Entente coalition.

This last revolution, of course, backfired badly on its authors. U.S. intervention, by summoning up 4 million American “doughboys” to tip the balance on the Western Front, cost the Germans the war. It is important to remember this, for had Zimmerman’s sabotage bureau not so stupidly sabotaged the German position in the West, the revolutions of the East would have turned out considerably differently. With a German occupation army, 1 million strong, backing their regime, the Bolsheviks were not truly sovereign until the German armies collapsed on the Western Front. Able to draw on

the immense resources of European Russia, as well as Baku’s oil, the Germans would have been in a virtually impregnable position from which to negotiate a compromise peace with Britain, with German primacy in the Balkans, Russia, and Turkish Anatolia granted in exchange for British control of India, Egypt, Arabia, and Palestine. Syria and Mesopotamia might then have been partitioned, with a French buffer zone separating the two giants along the lines of the Sykes-Picot agreement (i.e., with the Germans inheriting the “Russian” zone, now that Russia was a German puppet state). The French, to be sure, would have been embittered by such a settlement, but with the undefeated Germans dominating postwar Europe, they could have done little about it. Absent its *casus belli*, the U.S., too, would have had to accept German ascendancy, and might have been quite happy to trade with the new colossus. This profound revolution in global affairs could have been Germany’s to keep, had not the Germans unleashed one revolutionary gambit too many. Setting out, in Trotsky’s phrase, to “overthrow the world” as it existed in 1914, Germany’s peculiarly gifted geopolitical visionaries, with malice aforethought, had done exactly that, unleashing the deadly fires of war and revolution across half the globe. But they had also, unwittingly, destroyed their own empire.

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Bolsheviks (Yale University Press, 2008), which was listed for the Ed. A Hewett Prize in 2010, and The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West (Yale University Press, 2004). His next book, The Russian Origins of the First World War, is forthcoming later in 2011 from the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

¹ The classic popular account in English remains Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August* (Macmillan, 1962). William Jannen, Jr. argued in much the same vein in his *Lions of July: The Prelude to War, 1914* (Presidio, 1996).

² Holger Herwig, “Why Did It Happen?” in Herwig and Richard Hamilton, eds., *The Origins of World War I* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 455.

³ In this vein, see David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (Basic Books, 2004), chapter 1; Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Volume One: To Arms* (Oxford University Press, 2001); Norman Stone, *World War One: A Short History* (Penguin, 2008); and particularly David Fromkin, *Europe’s Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (Knopf, 2004).

⁴ David Crossland, “Legacy of Versailles: Germany Closes Book on World War I With Final Reparations Payment,” in *Spiegel Online* (English ed.), September 28, 2010, at www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,720156,00.html.

⁵ Among the former we might number Hew Strachan; among the latter, David Fromkin and Norman Stone.

⁶ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (Basic Books, 1999).

⁷ Among German historians who look critically at Russia’s role, see Horst Günther Linke, *Das Zaristische Russland und der erste Weltkrieg: Diplomatie und Kriegsziele, 1914-1917* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1982)—although Linke’s aim was not really to debunk Fischer *per se*. More recently Stefan Schmidt examined France’s long-neglected role in the outbreak of war in 1914 in *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ausbruchs des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Oldenbourg, 2009). It will be interesting to see if Schmidt’s book has much impact on discussions of the war’s origins in English (Linke’s did not).

⁸ This is the subject I will tackle in my next book, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, forthcoming from the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁹ L.C.F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (Edward Arnold, 1970); and “The Russian Mobilization in 1914,” in *Journal of Contemporary History* 3 (1968): 65-88.

¹⁰ Fromkin, *Europe’s Last Summer*, 305.

¹¹ Cited in Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany’s Bid for World Power* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 86.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ The initiative was also double-banked inside the Wilhelmstrasse’s Near Eastern Department, headed by Baron Langwerth von Simmern, which was supposed to oversee Oppenheim’s activities (although Oppenheim, in practice, acted largely as a free agent).

¹⁴ Otto von Wesendonck, “Überblick über die in der islamitisch-israelischen Welt eingeleitete Agitationstätigkeit,” August 16, 1914, in the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA), R 21028.

¹⁵ I discuss all these developments at length in *The Berlin-Baghdad Express*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁷ I discuss German support for Lenin in *History’s Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (Yale University Press, 2008), especially chapter 5.