

# Column: War

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Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm II had a difficult birth, and 20 million people died as a consequence. You may not have realized there was a connection between World War I and injuries sustained by an infant who would someday become the German Emperor, but the connection is inescapable. The baby who would be king had an Erb's palsy. This means that as he struggled down his mother's birth canal, Freddy's left shoulder got stuck on her pelvic bone. As mom tried to push him out and the royal physicians tried to pull him out, the nerves to his left arm were stretched to the breaking point as his left shoulder refused to exit the pelvis. They eventually got Prince Freddy out of his mother, but the nerves to his left arm were irreparably damaged. This stretch injury not only affected the strength in the child's left arm, but also affected the growth of the arm. Kaiser Freddy's left arm was fairly useless and noticeably shorter than his right arm.

Given the high infant mortality in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Freddy's parents must have been grateful that the infant survived, bad left arm or not. As Freddy matured, he could not help but notice that the family into which he was born valued military prowess more than intellectual achievements. Some of his ancestors had been surprisingly innovative and progressive, but the Prussian environment in which this child grew up celebrated achievements in battle more than a social security system, which in fact his grandfather, Friedrich Wilhelm I, had promoted.

A monarch with a short, lame arm could not project military might through the usual mechanisms. Consequently, this Kaiser had to be more creative than his forbearers. He had photographs of himself with the usual, highly decorated military uniforms, but he held a glove hanging from his left hand to offset the obvious maldevelopment of that arm. He posed with a sword that he could not lift held in his left hand. He funded projects that advanced his nation's military strength well beyond that of any other European or Middle Eastern country. He tried to create a German Empire that would rival that of his relatives in the British and Russian royal houses. By 1914 he was ready to launch his juggernaut on the world, but discretion required an excuse.

When I was in junior high school, I learned that World War I started because Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. No one explained to me who that dead man was or why his death triggered the slaughter of more than 10 million soldiers and at least as many civilians, but I later learned that he was the heir to the crown of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That his murder (and that of his wife, Sophie) in Sarajevo by a group of politically-motivated killers should cause a conflict that would involve nations as far away as America and Japan made no sense. [Please note, the U.S.A. and Japan were allies during World War I]. The instant Franz Ferdinand stopped living, a new heir to the throne succeeded him, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire was unfazed and unaffected. The murderers who worked out the details of his killing were captured, tried, and sentenced for the crime. So, why the fuss?

Unfortunately, the answer appears to be the ego and ambitions of the Erb's palsy Kaiser and the military men with which he surrounded himself. The Kaiser invested the nation's wealth in building a fleet of submarines, battleships, and other such military paraphernalia to crush his European and Eurasian neighbors. He established treaties and agreements with nations that shared his yearning for expansion and colonization. His plans and objectives were adequately obvious for the First Sea Lord of the British Empire, Jackie Fisher, to predict the day Germany would launch the war. That Archduke assassination thing proved to be the just the starting gun for a race long-planned before

Franz and Sophie took their ill-advised trip to Sarajevo in 1914.

One cannot ignore the role that a medical issue, Erb's palsy, led to a blood bath never previously experienced by industrialized nations. As the war sank into a stalemate, another medical issue came along to break the tie: the flu epidemic of 1918. Although both sides were exhausted from the fighting, the German war machine had fewer manpower reserves. The flu routinely killed men within 30 hours of the first symptom. Thousand of soldiers died without ever firing a shot or being shot. A war of aggression became a war of attrition. Germany could not replace its losses as quickly as its opponents. A virus proved more formidable than all the big guns advancing toward Paris in 1918.

I suspect that Mother Nature simply gets fed up periodically with Man's stupidity and sends pestilence to quiet things down on the planet. Since the first Korean chemist wrote out the recipe for what subsequently became known as gunpowder, Man has applied his wits to devising instruments that kill his fellow human beings. After hundreds of years of murder and mayhem, we still wonder how wars or even mass killings, such as those in Georgia and Colorado most recently, could happen. Despite the varied explanations given by the perpetrators of war or mass shootings, the simple truth is that, whether it be a king or a quiet neighbor, the person declaring war or murdering a Bible study group does it because he (or much more rarely she) wants to do it. A king or an autocrat may choose to send millions to their death to prove he is as mighty or as terrible as any that preceded him. A recluse may shoot random shoppers at a supermarket just to prove that he can do it. Inevitably the basic motivation is the same: a desire to dominate. It is probably a genetic flaw that affects most of the species. If we cannot correct this error in our DNA, it, rather than a virus or an asteroid, will likely be the source of our extinction.

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