

The Crisis of Masculinity and the Outbreak of the First World War

Malcolm Mafi

In *The Sleepwalkers*, one of the best recent works on the outbreak of the First World War, author Christopher Clark makes a point minor in the realm of his argument but important in the wider historiography of the period: “This was a play with only male characters—how important was that?...it is striking how often the key protagonists appealed to pointedly masculine modes of comportment and how closely these were interwoven with their understanding of policy.”¹ He proceeds to note a few examples of this phenomenon, but subsequently leaves this tantalizing point to continue with his analysis of the July Crisis, the diplomatic conflict that led to the outbreak of war in 1914. Historians of gender have rightly argued that all men and women are actors in the performance of gender, and that beliefs and anxieties about gender can affect human behavior. Clark suggests that, for humans who hold in their hands the reins of state, their understanding of behavior can shape policy. This is a virtually unexplored topic in the entire opus of diplomatic history, and in terms of the outbreak of the First World War it is veritable *terra incognita*. It is in this vein that I will pick up where Christopher Clark leaves off—to demonstrate that the statesmen who steered the course towards war were influenced by wider societal concerns about gender in Europe during the Belle Époque.

Given the spatial limitations of this paper, I will largely focus on decisions and those who made them in Berlin and Vienna. I made this selection for two main reasons. First, having evaluated no small cross section of the voluminous secondary literature on the origins of the First World War, I believe that Germany and Austria-Hungary were more aggressive in the plunging towards war than Russia, France, or Britain. Therefore, focusing on the Germans and Austro-Hungarians allows for a stronger link to be drawn between diplomatic actions and conceptions of gender, a fact with obvious importance to my project here. Second, I believe that the juxtaposition of the two Germanic empires is an excellent one, both for what they had in common—German language, common culture, political authoritarianism—and what set them apart—ancient Habsburg power against a new creation, a dynamic upstart against the Sick Old Man of Europe, and the progeny of nationalism against its antithesis. The similarities and differences between the two nations will allow me to establish some measure of that chimera which oft eludes the historical case study: representivity.

¹ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2012), 359.

The Crisis of Masculinity

The Road to War

In the summer of 1914, war broke out among the Great European Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, and Britain. The historiography of that outbreak has focused on both long-term and short-term origins. For the former, the still-dominant authority is Sidney Bradshaw Fay's 1928 classic *The Origins of the World War*. Fay's "slide into war" thesis contends that, during the July Crisis, leaders were swept away by events and none of them really wanted to provoke war. Instead, the long-term trends of nationalism, imperialism, militarism, and overlapping alliance systems bear responsibility for the carnage of 1914-1918. For Fay, the idea that Germany, or the Central Powers in general were responsible for the outbreak of war was "historically incorrect...and morally unjustifiable."² Says Fay: "Germany did not plot a European War, did not want one, and made the most genuine efforts to avoid one. She was the victim of Austria and of her own folly."³ Other works, such as Paul Kennedy's *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* and David Fromkin's *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?*, focus on the long-term shifts in international alignment that left the Triple Alliance (of Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary) ranged against the Triple Entente (of Britain, Russia, and France) in 1914 and increased the likelihood of conflict breaking out as a result.

On the other hand, the short-term origins of the war have been the battleground of more controversy. The foundational works from the middle of the twentieth century are Fritz Fischer's *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, which claims that German leaders provoked the Great War as a premeditated grasp for international hegemony, and A.J.P. Taylor's *War by Timetable: How the First World War Began*, whose "timetable thesis" argues for the primacy of railroad timetables and mobilization plans in unsheathing the swords of reluctant European leaders. Fischer's "smoking gun" vis-a-vis Germany's aggressive designs is the "September Programme" he discovered in the archives and made public; this programme, from September 1914, detailed German plans to acquire French, Belgian, Dutch, and Russian territory and gain a large economic union under the suzerainty of the Reich. Taylor, for his part, sketches the picture of a Europe with no recent experience in mass warfare (other than the Russian empire), but wherein each nation had mobilization timetables that it had mastered in theory but knew nothing about in practice. Throughout his captivating account of the lead up to war, Taylor constantly uses language of urgency, wasted time, panicked scrambling, miniscule windows of time, and extreme

² Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1928), 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 552.

temporality...hereby the “time-tables take command.”⁴ While emphasizing the railway and mobilization timetables, Taylor’s thesis fits neatly into Fay’s idea of a European “slide into war,” already mentioned. Says Taylor: “the statesmen were overwhelmed by the magnitude of events...winning the war was the end in itself...[all nations] were trapped by the ingenuity of their military preparations.”⁵

In the past two decades, further revision has emerged from such academics as Niall Ferguson and Sean McMeekin, seeking to place responsibility for the outbreak of war on Britain and Russia, respectively.⁶ Ferguson absolves the Germans for any part in instigating World War I, arguing that the latter was a preventative war fought against the aggressively- and irrationally-Germanophobic British Empire. Far from being unwillingly driven into entente with France and Russia by German naval plans and colonial schemes, Britain actively sought to encircle Germany because of hatred for her political system and fear of her capitalistic competition. For his part, McMeekin argues that the real object of all powers involved was control over Constantinople. In pursuit of that glorious aim, Russia played a double game, both masquerading as a guardian of the Serbs and feigning self-defense against Austria. McMeekin’s most innovative argument is that Russia feared losing its naval dominance in the Black Sea, which was to happen no later than 1915 as the Porte purchased foreign dreadnoughts that would obsolete the entire Russian fleet. With this “straits window” closing and the Ottoman Empire close to eclipsing Russian naval power in the Black Sea and Mediterranean, St. Petersburg decided upon aggressive war to meet the challenge before it was too late.⁷

Christopher Clark’s work is representative of the most recent trend in the historical literature vis-a-vis responsibility; going further than arguing that none of the Great Powers were truly responsible for unleashing the war, he disputes whether it is even a question worth asking. Says he: “accounts structured around blame come with built-in assumptions” of moral superiority and inferiority, but “the question is meaningless.”⁸ Moreover, such theses merely obscure the “multilateral” nature of interaction between states and impose a false coherence upon events that have no intrinsic narrative. Narrating the outbreak of the First

⁴ A.J.P. Taylor, *War by Timetable: How the First World War Began*. New York: Macdonald & Co., 1969), 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 121.

⁶ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (London: The Penguin Press, 1998). Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013).

⁷ McMeekin, *Russian Origins*, 38-41.

⁸ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper, 2012), 560.

The Crisis of Masculinity

World War is simply telling a story, and it is not the job of the historian to make villains and heroes out of the characters bequeathed to him. Finally, Clark concludes that “There is no smoking gun in this story...the outbreak of war was a tragedy, not a crime.”⁹ This juxtaposition, of crime or tragedy, is an apt way of categorizing the opposing views of the historians who wish to account for war responsibility and those who question its existence.

Clearly, a great many historians have written quality work on the subject of the diplomatic course that led to war in 1914. As we shall see below, many others have expertly elucidated the crisis of masculinity that plagued Europe in the half century before the First World War began. What has been utterly absent in the published mainstream, except for three pages in Christopher Clark’s *Sleepwalkers*, has been the joining of the two subjects. Why would such an important link be lacking? For one possible explanation, there is not much of an overlap between the two bodies of literature. Europeanist works with gender analyses of diplomatic history, insofar as they exist, tend to be the exception rather than the norm. The lens of gender has been sublimely used to elucidate subjects such as cultural history, economic history, and social history, but in the aftermath of the cultural turn and the postmodern revolt, diplomatic history (sometimes called international history, perhaps, a cynical reader may hazard to guess, as a means of softening the blow) is lamentably one of the least popular and innovative areas of historical inquiry, arguably second only to the much-maligned military history. Therefore, the lens of gender has not been applied as extensively as it ought to have been to the study of historical diplomacy, a wrong I hope to partially right with this paper.

The Crisis of Masculinity

European historians have long seen in the Belle Époque a breaking point between traditional western conceptions of manhood and a new and precarious ideal of masculinity. In the 18th century, masculinity was defined through aristocratic values. At a time when political and social supremacy were inextricably tied to maleness, true manhood was bestowed by noble birth and demonstrated through cultivated taste and proper deportment. But in the 19th century, when the nobility declined and the middling classes began to rise, demonstrative masculinity needed to take a new form. After all, if a lowly clerk, shop owner, or civil servant could appear to hold the status of an aristocrat, than those whom birth designated as superior needed something to differentiate themselves, just as during the reign of the Sun King, the nobles of the sword endeavored to differentiate themselves from the rising nobles of the robe. As

⁹ Ibid., 240

George Mosse shows in *The Image of Man*, a new ideal of masculinity needed to be defined in opposition to its counterpart.¹⁰ Not only were middle-class men threatening elites by their rise to positions traditionally held solely by elite men, there were also working-class men who turned to socialist parties and labor unions to lay claim to their share of political and economic power.¹¹ To this class-based development were added social and cultural changes.

One of the most important and most visible threats to traditional masculinity was the New Woman. As described by John Tosh in *A Man's Place*, the term was coined in 1894 but the phenomenon which it described "had been discernible since the 1880s."¹² These New Women, emblematic above all of feminine independence, smoked cigarettes, rode bicycles, and spoke their minds. Many took on jobs, postponed or eschewed marriage, and renounced familial obedience. As Tosh demonstrates, traditional male elites found their authority questioned in every aspect—as fathers, husbands, teachers, and representatives as the state.¹³ Not only did allegedly rogue women put men on the defensive, so too did new laws that eroded male privilege in matters from parental prerogatives and property rights to access to education and the vote.¹⁴ In addition to the New Woman, so-called deviant sexuality began to become seemingly more prominent, from outspoken homosexuals such as Oscar Wilde to scandalous goings-on in the highest echelons of power such as the Cleveland Street Scandal.¹⁵ Like Lady MacBeth, the New Woman had unsexed herself, and like Lady MacBeth, in doing so, she threatened to unsex man as well.

As if these encroachments of working- and middle-class men, women, and homosexuals were not frightening enough, even elite men's own bodies were turning against them. As outlined by Margaret MacMillan in *The War that Ended the Peace*, European men began to fear the atrophy of their physiques engendered by technological improvements (entailing less exercise and manual

¹⁰ George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 78, 79.

¹² John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 152.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 188-191.

¹⁵ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 79. Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 189. The Cleveland Street Scandal occurred in London, 1889, when a police raid on male brothel exposed a number of clients from the highest corridors of power in the British Empire including, allegedly, Prince Albert Victor. The scandal was most notable for reinforcing the popular perception that homosexuality was a vice perpetrated by degenerate aristocrats who preyed on young working-class men.

The Crisis of Masculinity

labor), environmental pollution, and unbridled sexual permissiveness.¹⁶ These fears took substantial form through the invention of a medical disorder of “degeneration” that was the symptom of an overly-civilized and overstimulated male body and mind.¹⁷ All of these factors—economic, social, political, cultural, and sexual—took their toll on elite men for the crucial reason that they saw their right to dominance in all of these areas as justified by their male superiority. If they could not preserve their status as ideal men, they could not maintain their hegemony in the society of which they were a part.¹⁸

The New Man

Out of the Belle Époque crisis of masculinity came a new form of masculinity that I will label the “New Man.”¹⁹ Clark rightly states, summing up the consensus among gender historians of this period in European history, that among military and political leaders “stamina, toughness, duty, and unstinting service gradually displaced an older emphasis on elevated social origin, now perceived as effeminate;” moreover, among statesmen there was a marked preference for “unyielding forcefulness over the suppleness, tactical flexibility and wiliness exemplified by an earlier generation.”²⁰ As Sonja Levensen notes in a study of male identity during the period, “[m]asculinity was not regarded as given, but rather something that had to be acquired.”²¹ The New Man was less freethinking and outspoken. In reference to German university students in the Wilhelmine period, Levensen states that young students’ instruction was meant to “foster courage, self-discipline [and] fortitude.”²² These values formed the archetype of the New Man that emerged out of the ash heap of the old, now discredited male ideal of centuries past.

For a Europe in the midst of a crisis of masculinity, Wilhelm II, Kaiser of the German Empire, was the truest representative of his age. Edmond Taylor provides insights to Wilhelm’s character in *The Fall of the Dynasties*. Many historians have focused on the Kaiser’s troubled family—with a cold English

¹⁶ Margaret MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013), 262.

¹⁷ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 82.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91-98.

¹⁹ I use this term not only for convenience but also because I wish to juxtapose it with the New Woman and suggest that, just as the New Woman evolved out of traditional femininity, the New Man was also a novel and unique entity.

²⁰ Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 360, 361.

²¹ Sonja Levensen, “Constructing Elite Identities. University Students, Military Masculinity, and the Consequences of the Great War in Britain and Germany,” 149.

²² *Ibid.*, 150.

mother who admitted to neglecting him for years and a father who was totally absent—and the ways in which his upbringing came to bear on his attitude towards other nations, especially England, with whom he had a love-hate relationship. This analysis has its uses, but too seldom has the focus been put on Wilhelm's life as an actor of gender. Much like another man who wished to (and did) become a symbol of masculinity for his nation, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilhelm had childhood insecurities that he spent the rest of his life trying to cope with. For the American President, it was his past as a sickly youngster which made him a perfect target for bullies. For Wilhelm, it was a disfigured arm owing to difficulties during his birth.²³ The connection between physical infirmity and compromised manhood was clear at the time, which is what necessitated Wilhelm to cover up his deformity by posing for photographs turned to his side and even, later in life, to use prosthetics.²⁴

It was not only physical handicaps that affected Wilhelm and the New Man, however. Due not only to the stresses of modern life but also to the anxieties inherent in embodying the internal contradictions of the New Manhood, a host of new mental and nerve disorders, including the now famous *neurasthenia*, were introduced by the medical profession to explain how so many highly-civilized men seemed to be breaking down under the strain of modern life. According to Mosse, these types of nervous ailments were used by medical professionals to “safeguard the masculine ideal by setting pale-face and effeminate men needing treatment apart from robust and healthy manhood.”²⁵

For Wilhelm, for example, the public strain of holding up the image of ideal New Manhood led to the private unraveling of the strength of his nervous system. It is through this lens that we should see and understand the public persona projected by Wilhelm. Wilhelm became notorious among the public as well as the leaders of Europe for his bizarre, inconsistent, and bumbling behavior.²⁶ Worst of all, Wilhelm repeatedly pursued one course of action only to suddenly and inexplicably make an about-face, usually accompanied by emotional outbursts and vituperative rants. In the parlance of 21st century “science,” he might be labelled bipolar. In the language of his time, he was

²³ There are obvious limitations to psychoanalyzing deceased historical figures who cannot be interviewed and about whom definitive information can be difficult to come by. However, this particular idea of Wilhelm's insecurities vis-a-vis his arm is worth extrapolating, given other historical figures whom mirrored his circumstances—such as Joseph Stalin, who had a withered arm from a childhood injury and took similar pains to conceal it.

²⁴ Edmond Taylor, *The Fall of the Dynasties: The Collapse of the Old Order 1905-1922* (New York: Dorset Press, 1963), 12-15.

²⁵ Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 83, 84.

²⁶ Taylor, *Fall of the Dynasties*, 19-25.

The Crisis of Masculinity

labeled “hysterical.” Hysteria was a specifically gendered “disease” that had previously only been used to institutionalize women who did not fit the mold of what was expected of them at the time.

Despite these inconsistencies in behavior which so infuriated German political elites, both foreign leaders and foreign publics saw Wilhelm as the strongest advocate for war in the German leadership. In reality, as only those in the German elite circles knew, Wilhelm, for all of his bluster and belligerence, was ever a voice of caution when crises pushed forward towards the brink. This was made possible when he removed his public mask of fortitude and stoicism to expose his private face, one of panic, insecurity, and self-doubt. The kaiser was painfully aware of his reputation for backing out at the last moment. At the inception of the July Crisis, he remarked to a group of industrialists “this time I shall not chicken out.”²⁷ Of course, it was humiliating for the kaiser to consider that anyone knew about this tendency, for the simple reason that he was a New Man and that to back out of a course once set was deeply unmanly. While previous statesmen, such as the great Bismarck, had been able to provoke conflict and then back away from the brink of war—in 1872 with a resurgent France, in 1878 over the Russian-Turkish War, and in 1888 during the Bulgarian Crisis, among many other examples—by the early twentieth century, the men in power in Berlin could not back down from conflict without compromising their masculinity.²⁸ This gender-informed policy stance would have disastrous consequences during the July Crisis, and played no small part in leading the decision makers, who found themselves constrained and bullied by the same societal conceptions of the New Manhood as Wilhelm, to chart courses that would lead to the outbreak of the Great War.

The Battleground for Masculinity

The battle to define true masculinity was not merely one of discourse. It was also taking place on literal battlefields and drill grounds throughout Europe in the decades before 1914. During that period, the armies of the Great Powers regularly put on practice maneuvers to prepare their soldiers for conflict and to demonstrate the strength of their fighting forces. The British War Office published official reports on these drills for its government. In this section I will examine the reports on the German and French forces in the decade before World

²⁷ Quoted in Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 522.

²⁸ It has long been an aphorism among diplomats that a statesman must never commit himself to a position from which he cannot cleanly extricate himself if necessary. This simple yet brilliant axiom can become difficult to follow, though, when vital interests are seen to be at stake: in this case, one’s manhood.

War I. These reports have been well-mined by military historians such as David Herrmann, whom we will consult, but I intend to elucidate their relevance to conceptions of gender in the opposing armies of the German Empire and the French Republic.

Herrmann provides the British reports on French military preparedness; he mines this and other resources for a straightforward military appraisal of the armed forces of the Great Powers, but they also have clear relevance to the idea of true manliness.²⁹ The French military command harbored no illusions about their strength relative to the German Reich. Germany's armies were far larger, better equipped, and more expertly led. The alliance with the Russian Empire was meant to counterbalance this disparity, but when the Prussians came flooding through the frontier again, this would not be sufficient to save Paris before the Russian bear was aroused from his slumber. Instead, the French turned to the élan of the offensive and the French national attribute of *souplesse*, or flexibility.³⁰ By showing the "natural" Gallic tendency towards individualism and cleverness, French soldiers would be able to overcome the odds and triumph. As Herrmann shows, this was rooted both in the French Revolutionary tradition and, paradoxically, the older milieu of the French aristocracy under the Bourbons.³¹ It also represented the older form of masculinity that, as I have shown, had become largely obsolete by 1900. This is demonstrated by the fact that European observers saw the French reliance of *souplesse* as weakness and unpreparedness for war; even Frenchmen themselves decried the unreadiness of the French forces to match their Teutonic opponents in the inevitable next war.³²

The polar opposite of this unmanly *souplesse* was manifest in the German army. British officials who were present at the German drills used descriptions such as "martial appearance, steadfastness, solidity, and thoroughness."³³ Note how synonymous these terms are with the elements historians have ascribed to what I call the New Man. Moreover, many such qualities were exactly what made the German armed forces the most respected and feared in the world. While a few observers worried about the lack of individual initiative shown by such soldiers, most admired the German armed

²⁹ David Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 106-109.

³⁰ Min. Guerre, *Décret du 1904 portant règlement sur les manœuvres de l'infanterie* (Paris, 1904). Of course, today the idea of such national characteristics is considered archaic, but in the early 20th century to think of the Germans as sturdy and efficient, the Russians as melancholy and languid, Spaniards as indolent, Italians as fiery, etc. was typical.

³¹ Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe*, 81.

³² *Ibid.*, 83, 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, 85.

The Crisis of Masculinity

forces and their Prussian steadfastness, reliance, and orderliness. Given France and Germany's mutual past, it was taken for granted on all sides that the two nations would eventually go to war. For this reason, both foreign observers and the French and German command often evaluated their two armed forces in tandem.³⁴

Of course, in the question of the manliness of the opposing armies' soldiers, what was at stake was the outcome of the next war. Wilhelm himself had no doubts about this when, questioning the nature of the Franco-Russian Alliance, he remarked to his cousin Nicholas II, in 1913, that the Frenchman was "no longer capable of being a soldier."³⁵ As the July Crisis came to a head a year later, this perception became universally shared among the chief decision makers in Berlin and Vienna. As Hollweg said on the eve of war, "our army is in the field, our navy is ready for battle; behind them stands the entire German nation, the entire German nation united to the last man behind our heroic men at arms."³⁶ The manliness of the German soldier who stood by, ready to stoically and steadfastly do his duty, was what enabled a strong and assertive German foreign policy—and by extension, a strong foreign policy by Germany's junior ally Austria-Hungary—during the crisis that led to the First World War.

Old Against New in Berlin and Vienna

We have seen the ways in which new and older forms of masculinity conflicted in discourse from the highest echelons of society to the mass public, and even on the training grounds of the militaries of the Great Powers. In the July Crisis of 1914, four figures represented, in microcosm, this wider, civilizational crisis of masculinity. By no accident, these men also represented the highest levels of decision making in their empires: in Berlin, Chancellor Theobald Bethmann-Hollweg and Chief of the Imperial General Staff Helmuth von Moltke; in Vienna, Imperial Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold and Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. These men represented, in turn, the old and new forms of the male ideal that were in social conflict in Germany and Austria at the time. Before continuing with this point, a word about these men's backgrounds is in order.

Bethmann and Berchtold were diplomats of the old school, and progeny of the elites of their respective nations. Berchtold was the scion of an aristocratic Viennese family, while Bethmann was from a family with a long history of dutiful civil service. Edmond Taylor describes Berchtold as "a bit of a fop...often

³⁴ Ibid., 112.

³⁵ Quoted in MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, 282.

³⁶ GWB No 27, Speech of the Imperial Chancellor to the Reichstag.

snapped by contemporary photographers in a rakishly tilted silk hat, looking the perfect boulevardier.”³⁷ He was soft-spoken and tended to be conservative in opposition to his predecessor, the ghoulishly cunning Aehrenthal. Bethmann, for his part, was a cultured man who tended to hold his tongue except when necessary and who was originally chosen by the kaiser because of his deference to higher authority. Such subservience was part of an older form of masculinity which expected subordinates to obey and pay tribute to superiors: but the New Man took authority for himself and proved his manliness and thus his right to power. Bethmann and Berchtold’s understanding of masculinity was cultivated taste and civilized deportment, and both tended to be cautious and reactive in their diplomacy—at least until their hands were forced in July of 1914.³⁸

Moltke and Conrad came from different backgrounds, and their conceptions of gender were thus in stark contrast to their civil counterparts. Moltke was the nephew of a Prussian-German war hero known as Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. The uncle wrapped himself in eternal glory by leading the nation in the German Wars of Reunification against Denmark, Austria, and France. He also represented the older ideal of manhood, as a writer of poetry, a composer of music, a playwright, and a historian. His nephew could not afford such luxuries. Instead, Moltke the Younger lived in his uncle’s shadow, ever trying to be even manlier than his predecessor. In policy he was known for his deep pessimism and insistence on fighting a preventative war against Russia before the latter outpaced Germany.³⁹ As was the case with his Emperor, Wilhelm, Moltke’s nerves exerted great strain on him because of his need to project such a powerful persona.⁴⁰ Conrad came from an upper-middle class background and also descended from a long line of military officers, although none as legendary as Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. He became the most vehement jingo in Vienna, insisting upon war against Serbia, Romania, Russia, or even Italy, Austria-Hungary’s ally, in order to keep the decrepit Habsburg *demesne* intact.

After the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the July Crisis of 1914 began. The inception of the crisis was due to the insistence of Conrad and other like-minded officials in Vienna who demanded that the monarchy use the atrocity as a pretext to attack Serbia. And from the beginning, the pressures put on the recalcitrant Berchtold were gendered. In reference to the assassination, the German ambassador to Vienna told Berchtold “if you take this lying down,

³⁷ Taylor, *Fall of the Dynasties*, 205, 206.

³⁸ MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, 444, 482.

³⁹ Taylor, *Fall of the Dynasties*, 134, 135.

⁴⁰ As a telling coda to this narrative, Moltke had a nervous breakdown after the failure of his armies to capture Paris in autumn 1914. He was replaced by the Kaiser and died a few years later.

The Crisis of Masculinity

you're no man!"⁴¹ The situation was exacerbated by Conrad's pressure on the Foreign Minister. Conrad planned to crush Serbia before turning against the Russians in Galicia, and so he demanded the Berchtold put forth the ultimatum to Belgrade with enough speed to prevent other nations from coming to Serbia's aid. The idea was to win a lightning war and present Europe with a *fait accompli*. While Berchtold dragged his feet, checking on Germany's support and entertaining notions of mediation, Conrad accelerated the escalation by calling up the reserves. Conrad got his way in the end, from the terms of the ultimatum to the military focus on Serbia before Russia. His was a triumph of the New Man over the old.

Meanwhile, in Berlin there was also a conflict between an emblem of the older form of masculinity and a New Man, and, just as in Vienna, the predominance of the latter's manhood enabled him to gain *de facto* power over foreign policy. As the Austrians began to move against Serbia, Bethmann hoped for the best and tried to negotiate with Britain and France so as to localize the conflict between Austria and Serbia. Even if Russia became involved, Bethmann thought Germany could focus on the eastern front and keep the French and British out of the conflict.⁴² While Bethmann was occupied with these attempts at conciliation, Moltke worked to undermine his efforts.⁴³ Eventually, these two working at cross purposes found themselves in a dramatic climax in a meeting with the political and military bigwigs. When Bethmann argued that war could be avoided Moltke exploded into a rage, shouting that it would be suicide to leave their backs exposed to the French while engaging in the east. Bethmann caved into this argument, conceding that "Germany's sacred honor was at stake."⁴⁴ Given the danger of leaving Germany's virility and strength exposed, Bethmann could no longer hold the line against Moltke. In a revealing episode, when Wilhelm first read a memorandum detailing Bethmann's newfound willingness to go to war in support of Austria, he wrote in the margin "well, a real man at last!"⁴⁵ A real man, of course, was one who was willing to go to war rather than back down and "chicken out." Wilhelm, who, as we have seen, was an exemplar of the new masculinity, had already learned the hard way that backing down from

⁴¹ Quoted in Taylor, *Fall of the Dynasties*, 207.

⁴² Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 451-459.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 551.

⁴⁴ BDOW No. 612, German Foreign Office to German Ambassador, London.

⁴⁵ GDD, No 418, Bethmann Hollweg to His Majesty the Emperor. In context, it is unclear whether this annotation was meant to express the statement "*here* is a real man at last" or "*Bethmann* is a real man at last." Either way, though, the significance for my project is clear. A real man was one who would take the initiative in the plunge into war.

diplomatic confrontation without losing face, as Bismarck had so adeptly done for decades, was no longer possible in 1914.

On July 30, at the height of the crisis, Berchtold received two contradictory telegrams: one from Bethmann, urging caution, the other from Moltke, urging a speedy declaration of war. Berchtold remarked, “[W]hat a joke! Who rules in Berlin: Bethmann or Moltke?”⁴⁶ It was a fair question. Nominally, of course, Bethmann was the absolute architect of the Reich’s foreign policy, second in authority only to the kaiser. But Moltke, a New Man, had taken the “bull by the horns” and was now in control.⁴⁷ He had overpowered Bethmann, pushing forward both Teutonic nations towards war for the sake of the exigencies of the Schlieffen Plan, while in Vienna Conrad had cowed Berchtold to his will. Bernhard von Bülow, German Chancellor from 1900 to 1909, recalled asking Bethmann how the war had begun, only a few weeks after the fact. “Ah, if only one knew,” was his reply. This statement by Bethmann has been widely quoted by historians, usually either to be taken at face value as an example of the Chancellor’s incompetence, or to be cynically considered an example of his perfidious cleverness.⁴⁸ In fact, I view this as Bethmann’s retrospective realization that matters had fallen out of his control, and into the hands of a man imbued with the power of a more contemporary, and more forceful form of masculinity. By the time he wrote his memoirs after the armistice, the Chancellor came to admit that to have deviated from his duty to protect Austria, as he had been open to at the start of the July Crisis, would have in fact been “an act of self-castration.”⁴⁹

The Cult of Honor

Dominant in Belle Époque Germany and Austria-Hungary, and an indispensable link between the crisis of masculinity and the outbreak of the war, were the cult of honor and its spawn, the duel. One of the best works on this topic is Kevin McAleer’s *Dueling*, which focuses on Germany in the half decade before the outbreak of World War I. While dueling enjoyed a resurgence throughout the West in the nineteenth century, McAleer argues that the German case is unique in that it is representative of the German ideals of masculinity. What set the German duel apart from, for example, the French, was that the

⁴⁶ GWB No. 16, Ambassador to the Dual Monarchy to the Imperial Chancellor.

⁴⁷ “bull by the horns” from BDOW NO. 612, German Foreign Office to German Ambassador, London.

⁴⁸ For the former, see A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery of Europe 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954). For the latter, see David Stevenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

⁴⁹ Theobald Bethmann Hollweg, *Reflections on the World War* (London: T. Butterworth, 1920), 133.

The Crisis of Masculinity

former was far more rare, was less stringently dealt with by the law (given the arbitrary power of the state and the somewhat hampered power of the judiciary), and was far more lethal. French duels involved rapiers and almost always ended with the duelists embracing each other, while German duels involved pistols and were the most lethal in all of Europe.⁵⁰ By tracing the history of the duel from the ancient Germanic period, McAleer brilliantly illustrates the specificity of the German duel and how attached it was to particularly German conceptions of masculinity, which, in the Belle Époque, emphasized the stoicism, hardiness, and steadfastness we have already examined. Perhaps most important was the social nature of dueling: to face one's opponent was not merely a matter of personal revenge or anger but a higher calling. To duel was to validate one's social standing in the eyes of his peers.⁵¹ The greater honor was not that which "resided in one's heart," inviolable, but that which "existed in the heads of strangers."⁵²

The (German) cult of masculine honor was such that the punishment for violating it was death. For an elite man to dishonor himself was worse than death, and it is for this reason that McAleer contends that beneath the tip of masculinity and honor (and the dueling that went along with it) was the submerged iceberg of a suicidal instinct. McAleer states that, in researching his topic, he had planned to find "a depth of purpose" submerged beneath the surface conditions. Instead, he found a veritable value vacuum. Without, "noble values by which to live, duelists embraced a set of aristocratic guidelines for which to die."⁵³ This sounds remarkably similar to what Sigmund Freud called the "death drive" or *thanatos*. This death drive among elites was evident in the period before the war in cases such as that of Alfred Redl, an Austrian intelligence officer who was caught selling national secrets to Russia. His honor compromised, Redl was given an opportunity by his higher officers to do his duty; left with a pistol, he replaced some modicum of his honor by shooting himself.⁵⁴ The death drive, latent beneath the surface phenomenon of dueling, became a collective European plunge into suicide when the war of 1914 became global.

As Prussian military genius Carl von Clausewitz asserted, "war is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale."⁵⁵ For the Belle Époque Germans and Austrians, at least, this was no mere metaphor. On the eve of the outbreak of war

⁵⁰ Kevin McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1993), 5-7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁴ MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, 253.

⁵⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 101.

in 1914, statesmen in the two Teutonic powers repeatedly expressed their policy decisions in the language of the duel. First, the very foundation of the partnership between Berlin and Vienna was one built upon manly honor. Bülow recalled Wilhelm praising the Dual Monarchy as “a worthy second in any duel.”⁵⁶ And a second it was, as Germany was indisputably stronger than Austria-Hungary. But, as the mightier power, the former was duty bound to protect her friends. When the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, the honor of Austria-Hungary came into question. The fact that the archduke had been universally hated in Vienna for his brash personality, his contravention of royal etiquette, and his unpopular attitude towards the South Slavs was no longer of any matter.⁵⁷ Whatever he had been in life, in death he was a martyr whom must be avenged by the dictates of ancient Germanic chivalry.⁵⁸ This was in keeping with McAleer’s description of the conception of a “reprisal” duel, whereby a family member or friend of a killed duelist restored his prestige by challenging his killer.⁵⁹ Germany’s honor, by extension, held that she must stand by her ally in this matter of vital interest. Just as McAleer shows that the duelist’s honor was predicated upon the view and judgement of his peers, on the national scale Germany and Austria’s honor had to be maintained in the eyes of the other Great Powers; to back out of this challenge, according to Moltke, would be to “hazard the Reich’s international prestige.”⁶⁰ Such cowardice would be devastating for Germany’s honor in the eyes of her peers.

We have seen McAleer’s focus on the death drive as the undercurrent of the Germanic cult of honor: this was on open display during the July Crisis, especially in the Habsburg Empire, which was seen both internationally and domestically as the Sick Old Man of Europe. Given the inevitability of its destruction, the empire should do service to its honor with manly fatalism. Emperor Franz Joseph stated that if the ancient Habsburg monarchy was to perish, it ought to do so “decorously.” Conrad was the most explicit: the oncoming war would be “a hopeless struggle, but it must be pursued, because so old a Monarchy and so glorious an army cannot go down ingloriously.”⁶¹

Not only was the language of the duel present in terms of the cult of honor, but the nature of the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum reflected a facet of the German duels as described in *Dueling*. McAleer notes that particularly Machiavellian duelers could challenge men whom they knew, due to pacific

⁵⁶ Bernhard von Bülow, *Memoirs of Prince von Bülow Vol IV, 1849-1897* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1932), 367.

⁵⁷ MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, 222-229.

⁵⁸ BDOW No. 30, Akers-Douglas to Edward Grey.

⁵⁹ McAleer, *Dueling*, 49, 53.

⁶⁰ GDD, No.411, Moltke to His Imperial Majesty.

⁶¹ Quoted in MacMillan, *The War that Ended the Peace*, 554.

The Crisis of Masculinity

inclinations, religious beliefs, or other personal traits, would refuse to fight.⁶² This would allow the challenger to enhance their own prestige without risking physical harm. This mode of thinking had been on display for decades as nations humiliated opponents by issuing ultimatums that were never meant to be accepted. But in the July Crisis of 1914, the Austrians made a critical mistake. Determined to go to war with Serbia, they crafted an ultimatum not to humiliate their southern neighbor, but as an excuse to attack her. This fact, added to the wider European acceptance of the cult of honor and helps to explain why the rest of Europe was so sympathetic to Vienna when she was merely demanding satisfaction from Serbia (an honorable course of action), but quickly turned on her when it became evident that it had all been a ruse (an unchivalrous, dishonorable, and therefore, unmanly act).⁶³

In the end, the declarations of war were undertaken in form true to the manly legacy of chivalry. In the traditional style heralding back to the medieval age, the official declarations were handed personally from the governmental ministers to their foreign counterparts. Even the language employed in the declarations was that of a duel. On August 1, the German Ambassador handed to the Russian Foreign Minister a document simply stating, “His Majesty the Emperor *accepts the challenge* in the name of the Reich and considers himself at war with Russia.”⁶⁴ This use of nomenclature was the norm. The only exception was Austria’s declaration of war on Serbia. Upstart little Serbia was not seen as an equal to the ancient Habsburg monarchy, and so Berchtold withdrew the Austrian diplomatic presence in Belgrade and, for the first time in history, a declaration of war was sent by the novel device of the telegram.⁶⁵ It was the ultimate insult to the tiny South Slav kingdom, which the Austrians viewed as, in the duelist terminology, “*unsatisfaktionsfähig*”—not capable of giving satisfaction.⁶⁶ Moreover, it was the last portend of the shift from an epoch of honor to a more vulgar age.

The Plunge

In July-August of 1914, a handful of men in five European capitals made decisions that led to war. Christopher Clark is right to point out the importance of the fact that it was a handful of men and not merely of people. For at that time, in the wider cultural milieu, *man* and *men* were terms that had become loaded with

⁶² McAleer, *Dueling*, 39.

⁶³ BDOw No. 677, E. Goschen to Arthur Nicholson.

⁶⁴ GWB No 26, Imperial Chancellor to Imperial Ambassador in St. Petersburg. Italics mine.

⁶⁵ BDOw No. 225, Crackanhorpe to Edward Grey.

⁶⁶ McAleer, *Dueling*, 41.

meaning that was not universal to human experience but was specific to their historical period, their civilization, and their lived experiences. Of course, there are myriad forms of meaning that different historical epochs, nations, and individuals have attached to gender, but I contend that the particular forms present in Belle Époque Europe had a jingoistic effect on those men in power who held them. In this paper, I have endeavored to illustrate the way in which these men's decisions were informed by their understandings of these terms and their opposites, whether they be *feminine*, *weak*, *unpatriotic*, *unmanly*, *deviant*, *dishonorable*, or other terms salient to the discussion of gender.

Though the meaning of *man* and its opposites is not universal, perhaps there is a principle to be generalized here: that political decisions made by heads of state are informed by personal and societal ideas about gender, mixed somewhere in the stew along with political ideologies, religious sentiment, racial attitudes, personal prejudices, fears and resentments, desire for revenge, and the like. This wider point about the connection between gender conceptions and high-stakes decision making undoubtedly bears some significance for understanding foreign policy decisions in our own time. For if perceptions about gender can change so drastically in so short a time, so too can attitudes toward war. After all, the same European leaders and statesmen who plunged into World War I as a conflict over national interest came, after only a few years, to call the conflict "a war to end all wars." It is an end for which we are still waiting, and perhaps studying the actions taken by those in the past who believed that war was an honorable duel, a cathartic clearing of the air, or a contest between different claimants to manhood will enlighten those of us in the present who believe that war is a terrible crime.

Malcolm M. Mafi earned his M.A. degree from San Francisco State University in May of 2016. His field is Modern Europe, and he studies diplomatic and political history, often through an innovative lens. He currently works for a private college consulting company and is also writing a textbook for the AP European History exam; he plans to move on to a PhD program in 2017, and from there to an eventual teaching position at a university.

The Crisis of Masculinity

Bibliography

Primary sources:

Diplomatic documents [with abbreviations]

British Foreign Office. *British Documents on the Origins of the War, 1898-1914 Vol. XI: The Outbreak of War: Foreign Office Documents, June 28th-August 4th, 1914*. Edited by Gooch and Temperley. London, 1926. [BDOW]

German Foreign Office. *The German White Book*. Translated by Liebrecht and Theisen. Berlin, 1915. [GWB]

German Foreign Office. *German Diplomatic Documents, 1871-1914. Vol. IV: The Descent to the Abyss*. Translated by Lepsius, Bartholdy, and Thimme. Berlin, 1925. [GDD]

Memoirs

Bethmann Hollweg, Theobald. *Reflections on the World War*. London: T. Butterworth, 1920.

Bülow, Bernhard von. *Memoirs of Prince von Bülow Vol IV, 1849-1897*. Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1932.

Secondary sources:

Clark, Christopher. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*. New York: Harper, 2012.

Fromkin, David. *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* New York: Random House, 2007.

Funck, Marcus. "Ready for War? Conceptions of Military Manliness in the Prusso-German Officer Corps before the First World War." From *Home/Front*, New York, 2002.

Herrmann, David. *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Hoganson, Kristin. *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Levsen, Sonja. "Constructing Elite Identities. University Students, Military Masculinity, and the Consequences of the Great War in Britain and Germany." From *Past & Present*, 2008.

MacMillan, Margaret. *The War that Ended the Peace: The Road to 1914*. New York: Random House, 2013.

McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1993.

Mosse, George. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Stevenson, David. *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

- Taylor, A.J.P. *The Habsburg Monarchy, 1809-1918 A History of the Austrian Empire and Austria-Hungary*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- Taylor, Edmond. *The Fall of the Dynasties: The Collapse of the Old Order 1905-1922*. New York: Dorset Press, 1963.
- Tosh, John. *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.