

# Crisis Management – Then and Now



## JACK E SPENCE

OBE was educated at the University of the Witwatersrand and the London School of Economics. He is a Visiting Professor in the Department of War Studies, King's College, London. He taught at the University of Leicester where he was Pro-Vice-Chancellor (1981-85); Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (1991-97); Academic Advisor to the Royal College of Defence Studies, London (1997-2008); currently Senior Visiting Fellow, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.

1914

*First a brief definition: "crisis management is the attempt to control events during a crisis to prevent significant and systematic violence occurring."*

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Imperial throne on 28 June 1914 was the trigger which set in motion a major European crisis. This was contrary to past experience and early expectations and could not be managed by orthodox diplomatic compromise short of war. After all, between 1898 and July-August 1914 the six European great powers (The United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire) had all endured several major crises in which one or other of their number had been forced to climb down, suffering a degree of mortification as the price of peace and the restoration of European order. It followed, therefore, that the manifest threat to this order – precarious as it was in 1914 – involved a determination by the ruling elites in these states to avoid a second bout of national humiliation even if the refusal to reach a diplomatic compromise led to war.

One major obstacle to successful management was the division of the great powers into two hostile camps: the Triple Alliance (Germany, Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire versus the Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia). This balance of power, successful as it was in maintaining order throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was, by 1914, relatively inflexible; thus a conflict between any two members of rival alliances (in this instance Russia and Austro-Hungary over Serbia's alleged involvement in the assassination of the Archduke) risked what otherwise might have been a limited conflict in the Balkans becoming a general one. The one exception to this principle was Britain's lack of commitment to supporting its Entente partners – France and Russia in the event of general war. Thus British policy remained ambiguous until very late in the crisis of August 1914.

There were, however, wider forces at work propelling the European powers into war. These were historical in origin resulting from nineteenth century industrial development, the spread of communication by land, sea and rail and the growth of a profound sense of national identity. Thus by 1914, the European states had embraced modernity; each of the six great powers were – in varying degree – characterised by (a) a massive increase in the size of their respective militaries armed to the teeth with weapons of mass destruction, the product of technological innovation in providing rapid and massive fire power via the machine gun and artillery in particular; (b) the creation of reasonably efficient bureaucracies capable of mobilising millions of men and women and rushing them by road and rail to the battleground. As an American civil war general remarked, it was crucial to get to the front line "fastest with the mostest". So important had this vital railway network become that the German General Staff had a special railway section devoted to the intricate planning required to move armies East to confront Russia and West to invade France via Belgium.

And once mobilisation was underway, governments were unwilling to reverse the process; this was an example of technology trumping diplomatic efforts to end the crisis by calling a halt to mobilisation. Finally – and perhaps most important in this context – was the potent force of a nationalist ideology which inflamed the perception of the belligerents as they squared up to each other in the crucial weeks before war began.

And yet the question still remains: why did the great European powers lumber into war? After all, Europe was the epicentre of a civilisation, the political and aesthetic culture of which had extraordinary achievements to its credit. Think of Vienna in the years before 1914, the home of Freud, Wittgenstein, and a host of intellectual luminaries; the music of Mahler and Schubert, think of Russia in the same period, the home of Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky; think of France, the impact of Impressionism, the novels of Flaubert and Zola; think of the German state, the birthplace of Beethoven, Goethe and Bismark, the greatest diplomat of the nineteenth century; think of Britain, the music of Elgar, the novels of Thomas Hardy; and the influence of liberal ideas on how best to order the business of domestic politics to provide welfare, education and good governance in general for the mass of the citizenry.

And for many among the elites in the major European capitals, war seemed a remote prospect. This – mistakenly as things turned out – was argued in Norman Angell's famous work *The Great Illusion*: mature states were so intertwined by ever increasing ties of trade, investment and other economic linkages that war between them would shatter a rapidly globalising international economy. Hence rational, liberal assumptions would ultimately prevail over aggressive warlike instinct. What this optimistic view ignored, following Clausewitz, was that war was regarded as a legitimate instrument of policy when all other diplomatic initiatives failed to avert it. There was also a widespread assumption among military elites that future war would be short following the examples of the Austro-Prussian war of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870/71. Yet the lessons of the three year long Anglo-Boer war and the five year long American Civil War were largely ignored.

*In this particular context strategy and technology were at odds with one another: a war of manoeuvre and rapid deployment was deemed to be the likely outcome, one aimed at breaking the enemy line of resistance by superior weight of numbers surging across national borders.*

Similarly, policy makers failed to acknowledge that in any future war defence would triumph over the offensive. In this particular context strategy and technology were at odds with one another: a war of manoeuvre and rapid deployment was deemed to be the likely outcome, one aimed at breaking the enemy line of resistance by superior weight of numbers surging across national borders. What emerged instead was two lines of trench emplacements stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border. These successfully withstood regular and indeed fruitless attempts to break the enemy will to resist. Thus on the first day of the Somme campaign in July 1916 the British Army incurred some 24,000 casualties as it failed to overcome the defensive advantage enjoyed by massed German rifle and machine gun fire.

There was also a failure of grand strategic thought; the German General Staff for example, was committed to the Schlieffen plan devised in 1904 and modified before 1914. It was based on the assumption of a German attack via Belgium on French fortifications followed by an attack on the rear of the French armies facing east. The assumption was that war on two fronts against France in the West and Russia

in the East required the rapid elimination of France before turning to deal with a Russia that was slow, in any case, to mobilise. This strategy seemed sensible in purely military terms, but it broke Clausewitz's golden rule: always bear in mind the political implications of grand strategy in both planning and execution. Belgian neutrality was, after all, guaranteed by solemn treaty signed in London in 1839 by the great powers, including Germany. Violation of this treaty via the operation of the Schlieffen plan finally persuaded Britain to support France with the despatch of the British Expeditionary Force to the Continent. Thus Germany faced two enemies on the Western Front rather than one – a direct result of ignoring the importance to Britain of what Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, disparagingly called a "scrap of paper". Thus morality, legal obligation and national self-interest coincided for a Britain always committed to preventing the Channel ports falling into a continental enemy's hands and threatening the English Channel and the North Sea. Similarly, German participation in a naval arms race with Britain from 1898 was a military strategy devised without thought to the possibility of permanently estranging Britain thereby strengthening of the Entente Cordiale. Finally, British participation was implicitly encouraged by the staff talks between Britain and France from 1911 onwards; these, in effect, agreed where the two countries armies and navies would be deployed in the event of war with Germany.

*"I adore war. It's like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I've never been so well or so happy... One loves one's fellow man so much more when one is bent on killing him...."*

Thus by July 1914, a series of developments some long term in origin had conspired together to bring the great powers to the brink of war. 'Soft power' diplomatic initiatives to avert war were fruitless as was a half-hearted attempt at mediation by Britain. In the closing days of the peace these efforts had no prospect of success in the absence of that crucial "overlapping interest" in preventing the outbreak of conflict. Austro-Hungary was, for example, spoiling

for a fight given the harshness of the ultimatum to Serbia, regarded as the sponsor of the terrorist group responsible for the Archduke's assassination. Indeed, some commentators have argued that elements in the Austro-Hungarian ruling class preferred glorious defeat in war to slow ignominious decline and ultimate imperial collapse. This – one might argue – was a product of that Romantic sensibility which swept through influential cultural elites in late nineteenth century Europe.

Similarly, France was not averse to war given French desire for revenge for the 1871 defeat and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Germany, too, or at least some of its key decision makers, saw war as inevitable contributing to assured recognition of its status as a great, indeed the dominant European power. There was, as well, in some quarters a belief that war would purge the body politic of the dross and boredom of everyday life and the messy compromises of domestic politics. This point is difficult to quantify, but contemporary poetic imagery produced a rough if highly selective guide to this particular reaction. Thus the poet Rupert Brooke wrote "now God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour, and caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping ...". Note, too, Julian Grenfell's extraordinary statement in a letter home: "I adore war. It's like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I've never been so well or so happy... One loves one's fellow man so much more when one is bent on killing him...."

Of course, it could be argued that there was still a role for crisis management once the conflict had begun. Yet despite the fact that by 1916 the protagonists on

the Western front were enduring "a mutually hurting stalemate" , calls for such negotiation were ignored by the protagonists for two reasons: first, the advantage enjoyed by Germany given its occupation of Belgium and part of northern France was likely to be a powerful bargaining counter in any negotiation with the Entente powers; secondly, electorates, aware of the carnage and massive casualties, might well have jibbed at a compromise peace with no real gains to justify such enormous sacrifice of human and material resources. And this perception was sharpened by a strident popular press promoting passionate nationalist feeling. Thus Germany was portrayed as the 'anti-Christ' the 'devil incarnate' with whom no deal could be done short of unconditional surrender.

Why did the war last as long as it did? Why were mutinies few and far between? Principally because despite the poets' view that the war was an exercise in futility, many on both sides were convinced that the enemy had to be defeated, that the war was just. There was also a belief that German victory would wreck the balance of power principle, so essential for maintaining order in the past. There was, too, the notion of 'primary group cohesion' those bonds men established even in the acute stress of trench warfare and the implicit acknowledgement that one could not let one's comrades down.

*The contemporary international scene is riddled with crises, some acute such as in the Middle East, Ukraine and West Africa; others festering over the long term, as in the Israel–Palestine case.*

The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The peacemakers, in effect, made future crisis management the responsibility of the international community rather than the individual states or coalitions of the willing: hence the provision in the Covenant of the newly established League of Nations for collective security ("one for all and all for one"). The assumption being that all states shared a common interest and moral commitment to manage crises and avoid war via the institutions of the League. Moreover, the League was provided with the right to take firm action via economic sanctions or the use of force to deter and defend against aggression. It's underlying philosophy was liberal in essence, but its efforts to manage crises in the 1930s failed with the emergence of totalitarian regimes committed – by war if necessary – to revising what was perceived to be the harshness of the Versailles Treaty. Moreover, the Anglo-French appeasement strategy of the 1930s (in part a response based on liberal guilt about that treatment) failed because of Nazi Germany's exploitation of such crises to its own very considerable advantage.

## 2014

The contemporary international scene is riddled with crises, some acute such as in the Middle East, Ukraine and West Africa; others festering over the long term, as in the Israel-Palestine case.

What lessons, if any, does the failure of crisis management both before and during World War I have with respect to its utility for the current international scene? Clearly during the Cold War its employment was relatively straightforward. Both superpowers had an overlapping interest in avoiding MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction) as demonstrated in crises over Berlin and Cuba in the early 1960s. We note, too, the combined efforts of the two superpowers to restrain their proxies – Israel and its Arab opponents – from pushing early military advantage to overwhelming victory and in the process forcing a superpower to come to the aid of its defeated ally.

Matters today are more complicated: so-called 'new' security threats have emerged which have become persistent and disturbing items on the international agenda requiring at the very least constant vigilance and a variety of countermeasures. Examples include 'apocalyptic terrorism' (Al Qaida and ISIS); enforced migration from the poor south to the rich north; protracted civil wars (eg Syria); disease which knows no boundaries (Ebola in West Africa); state failure (Somalia). These have all had the potential to erupt into full blown crises; successful management requires – at the very least – a high level of international co-operation. Thus, in coping with international terrorism, for example, sharing intelligence with allies and the co-ordination of police and military strategies across national boundaries are obviously crucial for success. (By contrast during the Cuban missile crisis President Kennedy handled the management process single handedly without asking advice from his NATO allies. They were informed, but not consulted. Thus, talking to Khrushchev his

Russian counterpart was considered more important than talking to General de Gaulle, the French leader, whose country was not a NATO member, but who nonetheless approved America's unilateral strategy).

*By contrast the apocalyptic terrorist is rarely, if ever, interested in such compromises; the suicide bomber, for example, prefers death and eternal salvation regardless of whether the objective is achieved or not.*

The contemporary management process is different in kind in many respects from its Cold War counterpart. This is the case because traditional inter-state crises, however intense, have often occurred between protagonists who are essentially conservative in the sense that their governments want to maintain security,

jurisdiction over the territory and the citizenry. This elementary commonality helps to promote diplomatic compromise in the event of an acute crisis of a traditional kind. By contrast the apocalyptic terrorist is rarely, if ever, interested in such compromises; the suicide bomber, for example, prefers death and eternal salvation regardless of whether the objective is achieved or not. It is this element of irrationality, the refusal to weigh up costs and benefits of a terrorist campaign which ultimately distinguishes modern day crises from its cold war counterparts or – as in the 1990s – organisations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the African National Congress (ANC) with whom negotiation was ultimately possible.

Finally twenty-first century terrorism can and does make effective use of the benefits of ever increasing globalisation: the development of social media as a means of mobilising support, planning and executing a campaign; the capacity to launder money at the press of a computer button and the ease with which terrorists can move speedily from one country to another – all these factors make current management difficult whether attempting to deter terrorist violence or defend against its use. Thus contemporary crisis management has to draw on the skills and competence of a range of public and private actors both at home and abroad: immigration and customs officials; bankers; climate change experts; medical expertise and law enforcement agencies. The distinction between the demands and constraints of foreign policy and its domestic counterparts has, in effect, been completely eroded.

## Conclusion

In July/August 1914 a local Balkan crisis escalated rapidly to a wider pan-European conflict and one that, in time, involved external powers such as Turkey, Japan and the United States and far flung reaches of empire. Does the arc of regional instability stretching from Ukraine to the Middle East to West Africa have the potential to

ignite a global conflict comparable to 1914? Probably not, providing governments and international agencies faced with crisis proliferation devise strategies to contain. At the very least, their impact and limit damage to the regions where conflict is most acute. Those concerned with this formidable task will have to recognise that the international community is faced with what David Cameron, Britain's Prime Minister, calls "a generational struggle", the management of which will inevitably be continuous and long term requiring the use of soft power, diplomatic negotiation on issues such as climate change and the spread of disease and hard power (military interventions by coalitions of the willing, witness the current campaign against IS). Old style crisis management, often successful in achieving short term results and a return to a degree of international order has had to give way to a regime of constant and sophisticated management based on the recognition that crises of one kind or another are likely to remain a permanent feature of the international landscape. Plus çā change...?

---

**NOTES**

- 1 Graham Evans and Jeffrey Newnham, *The Penguin Dictionary of International Relations*, Penguin Books, London, 1998, p.104
- 2 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society – A Study of Order in World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1977, p.164
- 3 Jon Stallworthy, *Anthem for Doomed Youth – Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War*, p.16, p.25.
- 4 W.I. Zartman's phrase, Evans and Newnham, *op.cit.* p.320