

[Bruce Anderson](#), *The West Has Lost Control of the World and Disaster Awaits*. The Telegraph, UK, December 28, 2013.

As we look forward to the First World War commemorations, three stark conclusions are hard to refute. First, that in the course of this century we will need a great deal of luck to avoid a nuclear catastrophe. Second, that the Enlightenment has failed. Third, that this can all be traced back to the Great War.

As a result of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, it seemed that mankind might make a decisive break with the scarcity and oppression that had characterised previous eras. There was, admittedly, one early warning. The French Revolution proved that a radical reconstruction of society on abstract principles was likely to end in tyranny and bloodshed. But after 1815, the 19th century developed into one of the most successful epochs in history. Living standards, life expectancy, productivity, medicine, the rule of law, constitutional government, versions of democracy – there was dramatic progress on all fronts, and in the spread of civilisation across the globe.

Then one of the scourges of modern life struck and killed. In 1888, Frederick III became Emperor of Germany. Queen Victoria's son-in-law, he was a thoughtful man who had an easy relationship with his English relatives. By temperament he was a constitutionalist, a liberal and no enthusiast for militarism. As he had served in the field with distinction, Frederick could have mobilised the prestige to justify his pacific inclinations.

It was not to be. Already in the grip of cancer when he ascended the throne, he lived for only 99 days. There is an irony. Frederick, not a blood relation, would have had much in common with Prince Albert. The new Emperor, William, Albert's grandson, was more like some of the worst Hanoverian princes. Envious and insecure, he was a strutting little ponce of an emperor: Kaiser Sarkozy. It is by no means certain that 1914 could have been avoided. There was a great deal of tinder around, and most of the policymakers had a wholly insufficient understanding of the horrors of modern war. But a German emperor of immense authority, who would have been seeking a 20th-century version of the post-1815 settlement, who might even have invented the concept of collective security – it could have worked.

If so, Adolf Hitler's name might now be gathering dust in a police file: "Failed artist and casually employed house painter, who sometimes tries to rabble-rouse the bierkeller dregs in the poorer quarters. Once spent the night in the cells for

causing a disturbance outside a Jewish household..." An early British socialist, Robert Tressell, wrote a novel about house painters, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*. Without the Great War, Hitler would have been a mere unchronicled ragged-trousered misanthropist.

If only; 1914-1945 was the worst period in European history since the Dark Ages. In 1914, there was talk of "the war to end all wars" – possibly the most fatuous geopolitical mistake of all time. It makes "the new world order" sound like common sense. By the end of the First World War, they were rolling the pitch for the Second. Enlightenment, the Whig theory of history, any other theory based on inevitable and steady improvement: they had all formed a Pals' battalion and died in the trenches.

The deaths continued. By 1945, Europe was staring into the abyss, and we know what Nietzsche said: "If you stare into the abyss for long enough, it will stare back at you." The stare was broken, the Third and final war avoided, not by a reassertion of civilised values, but by the atom bomb. Mankind survived because of mutually assured destruction.

Apropos of atomic weapons, there is another terrible thought. If Hitler had not been anti-semitic, he would have won the Second World War. Instead of dismissing atomic/nuclear physics as "Jewish science", suppose he had persuaded enough Jewish scientists to work for him? He would almost certainly have had the Bomb first. But anti-semitism was at Hitler's black and evil core. In the bleak midwinter, why do we need ghost stories to provide a frisson of pretend horror, when real horror is available in unlimited quantities just by contemplating the last 100 years? The wars left Britain too exhausted to deal with a brace of imperial difficulties. Even if we had not been so depleted in blood and treasure, India would have been tricky. From Macaulay onwards, the wisest intellects who involved themselves with Indian affairs knew that English rule was a trusteeship, not a 1,000-year Reich. But when it came to India, Churchill's was not a wise intellect, and he would have had supporters. No wars, therefore no imperial overstretch: assuming that wisdom had prevailed, India could have been brought to independence gradually, not in a post-war scuttle. It could also have been brought to independence as one country – so no Pakistan, that most dangerous of all failed states.

Equally, if there had been no First and Second World Wars, there would have been nothing like the same pressure for a Jewish nation in Palestine. The odd rich philanthropist, satiated with first-growth claret and sick of the falsity of drawing

rooms, might have persuaded some similar-minded kibbutzniks of the delights of ditch-digging. As they would probably have paid the previous Arab proprietors 50 times what the land was worth, there might have been no trouble. It should have been possible to create a self-governing Jewish enclave in Palestine for the price of a few broken heads in the odd inter-communal riot.

Without Pakistan, without a chronic and insoluble Palestinian crisis – those two Ps that will continue to torment mankind, no matter how many mattresses are used to squash them – this century would look promising.

As it is, we have the two Ps, and mutually assured destruction is breaking down. It worked during the Cold War, and it has worked between India and Pakistan. Could it work between Israel and Iran? Could the Iranians be trusted not to hand some stuff out at the back door? For that matter, is it inconceivable that there could be a seepage from Pakistan? What about miniaturisation? A couple of hundred quid in a high-street computer shop will buy you something more powerful than the Pentagon's computer resources 40 years ago. All other forms of technology are becoming smaller, cheaper and more accessible. Is nuclear weaponry really immune from that?

While the whole world was turned upside down in the 20th century, Islamic societies were not immune. Though it would be absurd to talk as if Islam was the same from Morocco to Malaysia, there are forces and fractures in the Muslim world, many of them related to religion; some of them producing young men who hate us and everything we stand for. The West has lost control, and it all started in 1888. We will need a lot of good fortune to steer through the next few decades. Happy New Year.