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The First World War

John Keegan

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JOHN KEEGAN

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Contents

Cover
Title
Copyright
Dedication
About the Author
By the Same Author
Maps
Illustrations
Acknowledgements

Chapter 1: A European Tragedy
Chapter 2: War Plans
Chapter 3: The Crisis of 1914
Chapter 4: The Battle of the Frontiers and the Marne
Chapter 5: Victory and Defeat in the East
Chapter 6: Stalemate
Chapter 7: The War Beyond the Western Front
Chapter 8: The Year of Battles
Chapter 9: The Breaking of Armies
Chapter 10: America and Armageddon

Notes
Bibliography
Index
Plates

To the men of Kilmington
who did not return from
the Great War 1914–18

PIMLICO

373

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

John Keegan, the 1998 Reith Lecturer and Defence Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph*, is the author of several books on military history, including the following which are also available from Pimlico: *The Face of Battle, Six Armies in Normandy, The Mask of Command, Battle at Sea, The Second World War, A History of Warfare* (awarded the Duff Cooper Prize), *Warpaths, The Battle for History* and *War and Our World: The Reith Lectures 1998*.

John Keegan was for many years the senior lecturer in Military History at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, and he has been a Fellow of Princeton University and Delmas Distinguished Professor of History at Vassar. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and he received the OBE in the Gulf War honours list.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Face of Battle

The Nature of War (with Joseph Darracott)

World Armies

Who's Who in Military History (with Andrew Wheatcroft)

Six Armies in Normandy

Soldiers (with Richard Holmes)

The Mask of Command

The Price of Admiralty

The Second World War

A History of Warfare

Warpaths

The Battle for History

War and Our World: The Reith Lectures 1998

Maps

The Schlieffen Plan
The German advance, 1914
The Western Front, 1914–18
The Eastern Front, 1914–18
Germany’s African territories
The war in the Middle East
Gallipoli
The campaign in Serbia, 1915
Jutland
The battle of Verdun
The battle of the Somme
The Brusilov offensive
The Eastern Front, 1917–18
The war in Italy, 1915–18
The German offensive, 1918

Illustrations

First section

Schlieffen (*AKG*)
Hindenburg (*RHPL*)
Ludendorff (*RHPL*)
The Kaiser distributing Iron Crosses (*RHPL*)
Conrad von Hötzendorf (*RHPL*)
Joffre and Haig (*RHPL*)
Pétain (*ETA*)
Kemal Ataturk (*RHPL*)
Brusilov (*RHPL*)
The Guard Pioneer Battalion leaves Berlin (*ETA*)
French infantrymen off to the front (*ND-Viollet*)
A Russian reservist (*Novosti*)
Belgian infantry (*ETA*)
Machine-gun section of a French infantry regiment (*ND-Viollet*)
French 75-mm battery in action (*Collection Viollet*)
German infantrymen at Tannenberg (*ETA*)
Russian transport on the road to Przemsyl (*ETA*)
Soldiers of the French 87th Regiment at Verdun, 1916 (*ETA*)
The 1st Lancashire Fusiliers on the Somme (*TRH*)
A Grenadier Guards trench sentry, Somme (*ETA*)
A working party of the Manchester Regiment before the battle of Arras (*ETA*)

Second section

A water cart bogged at St Eloi (*ETA*)

Australians on a duckboard track, Château Wood, Ypres (*ETA*)
Serbian headquarters crossing the Sizir bridge (*RHPL*)
Austrian mountain gunners (*TRH*)
Austrian mountain machine-gun section (*TRH*)
French 75mm field gun (*RHPL*)
Austrian 305mm howitzer (*RHPL*)
British Vickers machine-gun crew (*TRH*)
A Royal Engineers Signal Service visual signalling post (*TRH*)
German infantry with an A7V tank (*RHPL*)
German infantry in a communication trench (*AKG*)
Breaking the Hindenburg Line: British infantry (*AKG*)
Breaking the Hindenburg Line: British Mark IV tanks (*AKG*)
American infantry advancing (*AKG*)
Turkish gunners (*RHPL*)
Australians and the Royal Naval Division share a trench (*ETA*)
Wounded ANZAC coming down, replacements waiting to go up (*TRH*)

Third section

Von Lettow-Vorbeck (*AKG*)
SMS *Seeadler* leaving Dar-es-Salaam (*AKG*)
SMS *Blücher* sinking (*TRH*)
The Grand Fleet in the North Sea (*ETA*)
The battlecruiser *Invincible*, broken in half by internal explosion,
Battle of Jutland; HM Destroyer *Badger* approaching to pick up the six survivors (*TRH*)
American armed merchant ship *Covington*, sinking off Brest (*TRH*)
The torpedo room of a U-boat (*ETA*)

Fokker triplanes (*TRH*)
Sopwith Camel (*TRH*)
A squadron equipped with the SE 5a (*TRH*)
A French soldier welcomed in the liberated war zone (*RHPL*)
A Hessian regiment marching back across the Rhine (*RHPL*)
A burial party at Windmill Cemetery (*TRH*)
Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele, today (*TRH*)

Abbreviations:
AKG – AKG, London
ETA – E.T. Archive, London
Novosti– Novosti Press Agency, London
RHPL – Robert Hunt Picture Library, London
TRH – TRH Pictures, London

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I grew up with men who had fought in the First World War and with women who had waited at home for news of them. My father fought in the First World War, so did his two brothers, so did my father-in-law. All four survived. My father's and my father-in-law's carefully censored memories of their war experiences first introduced me to the war's nature. My father's sister, one of the army of spinsters the war created, told me, towards the end of her life, something of the anxieties of those left behind. To them, and to the hundreds of other veterans directly and indirectly caught up in the war's tragedy to whom I have spoken over the years, I owe the inspiration for this book.

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The Manor House,
Kilmington,
23 July, 1998

ONE

A EUROPEAN TRAGEDY

THE FIRST WORLD WAR was a tragic and unnecessary conflict. Unnecessary because the train of events that led to its outbreak might have been broken at any point during the five weeks of crisis that preceded the first clash of arms, had prudence or common goodwill found a voice; tragic because the consequences of the first clash ended the lives of ten million human beings, tortured the emotional lives of millions more, destroyed the benevolent and optimistic culture of the European continent and left, when the guns at last fell silent four years later, a legacy of political rancour and racial hatred so intense that no explanation of the causes of the Second World War can stand without reference to those roots. The Second World War, five times more destructive of human life and incalculably more costly in material terms, was the direct outcome of the First. On 18 September 1922, Adolf Hitler, the demobilised frontfighter, threw down a challenge to defeated Germany that he would realise seventeen years later: 'It cannot be that two million Germans should have fallen in vain . . . No, we do not pardon, we demand – vengeance!'[1]

The monuments to the vengeance he took stand throughout the continent he devastated, in the reconstructed centres of his own German cities, flattened by the strategic bombing campaign that he provoked, and of those – Leningrad, Stalingrad, Warsaw, Rotterdam, London – that he himself laid waste. The derelict fortifications of the Atlantic Wall, built in the vain hope of holding his enemies at bay, are monuments to his desire for vengeance; so, too, are the decaying hutments of Auschwitz

and the remnants of the obliterated extermination camps at Sobibor, Belzec and Treblinka. A child's shoe in the Polish dust, a scrap of rusting barbed wire, a residue of pulverised bone near the spot where the gas chambers worked, these are as much relics of the First as of the Second World War.[2] They have their antecedents in the scraps of barbed wire that litter the fields where the trenches ran, filling the French air with the smell of rust on a damp morning, in the mildewed military leather a visitor finds under a hedgerow, in the verdigrised brass of a badge or button, corroded clips of ammunition and pockmarked shards of shell. They have their antecedents also in the anonymous remains still upturned today by farmers ploughing the bloodsoaked soil of the Somme – 'I stop work at once. I have a great respect for your English dead' – just as the barely viewable film of bodies being heaped into the mass graves at Belsen in 1945 has its antecedents in the blurred footage of French soldiers stacking the cordwood of their dead comrades after the Second Battle of Champagne in 1915. The First World War inaugurated the manufacture of mass death that the Second brought to a pitiless consummation.

There are more ceremonial monuments. Few French and British communities lack a memorial to the dead of the Second World War. There is one in my West Country village, a list of names carved at the foot of the funerary crucifix that stands at the crossroads. It is, however, an addition and an afterthought. The cross itself was raised to commemorate the young men who did not return from the First World War and their number is twice that of those killed in the Second. From a population of two hundred in 1914, W. Gray, A. Lapham, W. Newton, A. Norris, C. Penn, L. Penn and W. J. White, perhaps one in four of the village's men of military age, did not come back from the front. Theirs are names found in the church registers that go back to the sixteenth century. They survive in the village today. It is not difficult to see from the evidence that the

Great War brought heartbreak on a scale never known since the settlement was established by the Anglo-Saxons before the Norman Conquest and, thankfully, has not been known since. The memorial cross is, the church apart, the only public monument the village possesses. It has its counterpart in every neighbouring village, in the county's towns, where the names multiply many times, and in the cathedral of the diocese at Salisbury. It has its counterpart, too, in every cathedral in France, in each of which will be seen a tablet bearing the inscription, 'To the Glory of God and in memory of one million men of the British Empire who died in the Great War and of whom the greater number rest in France'.

Nearby, certainly, will stand a memorial to the locality's own dead, itself replicated in every surrounding town and village. France lost nearly two million in the Great War, two out of every nine men who marched away. They are often symbolised by the statue of a *poilu*, defiant in horizon blue, levelling a bayonet eastward at the German frontier. The list of names on the plinth is heartrendingly long, all the more heartrending because repetition of the same name testifies to more than one death, often several, in the same family. There are similar lists to be seen graven in stone in the towns and cities of most combatant nations of the Great War. Particularly poignant, I find, is the restrained classicism of the memorial to the cavalry division of the Veneto that stands beside the cathedral of Murano in the lagoon of Venice, bearing row after row of names of young men from the lowlands of the River Po who died in the harsh uplands of the Julian Alps. I am touched by the same emotion in the churches of Vienna where severe stone tablets recall the sacrifice of historic Habsburg regiments now almost forgotten to history.[3]

The Germans, who cannot decently mourn their four million dead of the Second World War, compromised as the Wehrmacht was by the atrocities of the Nazi state, found a

materially, if not morally equivalent difficulty in arranging an appropriately symbolic expression of grief for their fallen of the First, since so many lay on foreign soil. The battlefields of the east were closed to them by the Bolshevik revolution, those of the west made at best grudgingly accessible for the retrieval and reburial of bodies. The French and the Belgians found little room in their hearts or in the national soil for the creation of German war cemeteries. While the British were accorded a *sépulture perpétuelle* for their places of burial, which ramified during the 1920s into an archipelago of gardened graveyards along the line of the Western Front breathtaking in their beauty, the Germans were obliged to excavate mass graves in obscure locations to contain the remains of their casualties. Only in East Prussia, on the site of the Tannenberg epic, did they succeed in creating a mausoleum of triumphal monumentality for the fallen. At home, far from the fronts where their young men had died, they gave form to their sorrow in church and cathedral monuments that take their inspiration chiefly from the austerity of high Gothic art, often using the image of Grünewald's *Crucifixion* or Holbein's *Christ in the Tomb* as their theme.[4]

The Christ of Grünewald and Holbein is a body that has bled, suffered and died, untended in its final agony by relative or friend. The image was appropriate to the symbolisation of the Great War's common soldier, for over half of those who died in the west, perhaps more in the east, were lost as corpses in the wilderness of the battlefield. So numerous were those missing bodies that, in the war's immediate aftermath, it was proposed, first by an Anglican clergyman who had served as a wartime chaplain, that the most fitting of all the memorials to the War dead would be a disinterment and reburial of one of those unidentified in a place of honour. A body was chosen, brought to Westminster Abbey and placed at the entrance

under a tablet bearing the inscription, ‘They buried him among the Kings because he had done good toward God and toward His house’. On the same day, the second anniversary of the armistice of 11 November 1918, a French Unknown Soldier was buried under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and unknown soldiers were later reburied in many of the victor nations’ capitals.[5] When the defeated Germans attempted to create a national memorial to their dead in 1924, however, the unveiling broke down into a welter of political protest. The speech made by President Ebert, who had lost two sons, was heard out. The two minutes of silence that was supposed to follow was interrupted by the shouting of pro-war and anti-war slogans, which precipitated a riot that lasted all day.[6] The agony of a lost war continued to divide Germany, as it would until the coming of Hitler nine years later. Soon after his assumption of the Chancellorship, Nazi writers began to represent Hitler, the ‘unknown corporal’, as a living embodiment of the ‘unknown soldier’ Weimar Germany had failed as a state to honour. It was not long before Hitler, in his speeches as *Führer* of the German nation, began to refer to himself as ‘an unknown soldier of the world war’. He was sowing the seed that would reap another four million German corpses.[7]

War’s rancours are quick to bite and slow to heal. By the end of 1914, four months after the outbreak of the Great War, 300,000 Frenchmen had been killed, 600,000 wounded, out of a male population of twenty million, perhaps ten million of military age. By the end of the war, nearly two million Frenchmen were dead, the majority from the infantry, the major arm of service, which had lost 22 per cent of those enlisted. The heaviest casualties had been suffered by the youngest year-groups: between 27 per cent and 30 per cent of the conscript classes of 1912–15. Many of those young men were not yet married. By 1918, however, there were 630,000 war widows in France and a

very large number of younger women deprived by the war of the chance of marriage. The imbalance between the sexes of those aged twenty to thirty-nine stood in 1921 at forty-five males to fifty-five females. Among the five million wounded of the war, moreover, several hundred thousand were numbered as '*grands mutilés*', soldiers who had lost limbs or eyes. Perhaps the worst afflicted were the victims of disfiguring facial wounds, some of whom were so awful to behold that secluded rural settlements were established, where they could holiday together.[8]

The suffering of the German war generation was comparable. 'Year groups 1892–1895, men who were between nineteen and twenty-two when the war broke out, were reduced by 35–37 per cent.' Overall, of the sixteen million born between 1870 and 1899, 13 per cent were killed, at the rate of 465,600 for each year the war lasted. The heaviest casualties, as in most armies, fell among the officers, of whom 23 per cent were killed – 25 per cent of regular officers – as against 14 per cent of enlisted men. The surviving German '*grands mutilés*' included 44,657 who lost a leg, 20,877 who lost an arm, 136 who lost both arms and 1,264 who lost both legs. There were also 2,547 war blind, a fraction of those seriously wounded in the head, of whom most died. In all, 2,057,000 Germans died in the war, or of wounds in its aftermath.[9]

Germany, though it lost the largest number of counted dead – those of Russia and Turkey remain uncounted with any exactitude – was not the worst proportionate sufferer. That country was Serbia, of whose pre-war population of five million, 125,000 were killed or died as soldiers but another 650,000 civilians succumbed to privation or disease, making a total of 15 per cent of the population lost, compared with something between two and three per cent of the British, French and German populations.[10]

Even those smaller proportions left terrible psychic wounds, falling as they did on the youngest and most active

sections of society's males. It has, as the war recedes into history, become fashionable to decry the lament for a 'Lost Generation' as myth-making. The loss, demographers demonstrate, was swiftly made good by natural increase of population, while loss was felt, the harder-hearted sort of historian insists, by a fraction of families. At the very worst, they argue, only 20 per cent of those who went to the war did not return, while the aggregate was lower, 10 per cent or less. For the majority, the war was but a passage in their lives, an interruption of normality to which society rapidly returned as soon as the guns fell silent.

This is a complacent judgement. It is true that the Great War, by comparison with that of 1939–45, did little material damage. No large European city was destroyed or even seriously devastated during its course, as all large German cities were by aerial bombardment during the Second World War. The First World War was a rural conflict, on the Eastern as on the Western Fronts. The fields over which it was fought were swiftly returned to agriculture or pasturage and the villages ruined by bombardment – except for those around Verdun – quickly rebuilt. The war inflicted no harm to Europe's cultural heritage that was not easily repaired: the medieval Cloth Hall at Ypres stands today as it did before the bombardments of 1914–18, so do the town squares of Arras, so does the cathedral of Rouen, while the treasures of Louvain, burnt in an uncharacteristic act of vandalism in 1914, were replaced piece by piece in the war's aftermath.

Above all, the war imposed on the civilian populations involved almost none of the deliberate disruption and atrocity that was to be a feature of the Second. Except in Serbia and, at the outset, in Belgium, communities were not forced to leave their homes, land and peaceful occupations; except in Turkish Armenia, no population was subjected to genocide; and, awful though the Ottoman government's treatment of its Armenian subjects was, the

forced marches organised to do them to death belong more properly to the history of Ottoman imperial policy than to that of the war itself. The First, unlike the Second World War, saw no systematic displacement of populations, no deliberate starvation, no expropriation, little massacre or atrocity. It was, despite the efforts by state propaganda machines to prove otherwise, and the cruelties of the battlefield apart, a curiously civilised war.

Yet it damaged civilisation, the rational and liberal civilisation of the European enlightenment, permanently for the worse and, through the damage done, world civilisation also. Pre-war Europe, imperial though it was in its relations with most of the world beyond the continent, offered respect to the principles of constitutionalism, the rule of law and representative government. Post-war Europe rapidly relinquished confidence in such principles. They were lost altogether in Russia after 1917, in Italy after 1922, in Germany in 1933, in Spain after 1936, and only patchily observed at any time in the young states created or enlarged by the post-war settlement in Central and Southern Europe. Within fifteen years of the war's end, totalitarianism, a new word for a system that rejected the liberalism and constitutionalism which had inspired European politics since the eclipse of monarchy in 1789, was almost everywhere on the rise. Totalitarianism was the political continuation of war by other means. It uniformed and militarised its mass electoral following, while depriving voters generally of their electoral rights, exciting their lowest political instincts and marginalising and menacing all internal opposition. Less than twenty years after the end of the Great War, the 'war to end wars' as it had come to be called at the nadir of hopes for its eventual conclusion, Europe was once again gripped by the fear of a new war, provoked by the actions and ambitions of war lords more aggressive than any known to the old world of the long nineteenth-century peace. It was also in the full flood of

rearmament, with weapons – tanks, bombing aircraft, submarines – known only in embryo form in the First World War and threatening to make a Second an even greater catastrophe.

The Second World War, when it came in 1939, was unquestionably the outcome of the First, and in large measure its continuation. Its circumstances – the dissatisfaction of the German-speaking peoples with their standing among other nations – were the same, and so were its immediate causes, a dispute between a German-speaking ruler and a Slav neighbour. The personalities, though occupying different status, were also the same: Gamelin, the French commander in 1939, had been principal staff officer to Foch, the Allied Supreme Commander in 1918, Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty in 1939, had been First Lord of the Admiralty in 1914, Hitler, 'the first soldier of the Third Reich', had been one of the first volunteers of Kaiser Wilhelm's Reich in August 1914. The battlefields were to be the same: the River Meuse, crossed with spectacular ease by the German panzer divisions in May 1940, had proved impassable at Verdun throughout 1914–18; Arras, focus of some of the British Expeditionary Force's worst trench fighting on the Western Front, was the scene of the British army's only successful counter-attack in 1940; while the River Bzura, a narrow watercourse west of Warsaw, was to be critical to the conduct of operations on the Eastern Front both in 1939 and in 1915. Many of those who marched off in 1939 were the same people who, younger in age, junior in rank, had also marched away in 1914, convinced they would be home, victorious, 'before the leaves fall'. The fortunate survivors would, however, have admitted this difference. In 1939 the apprehension of war was strong, so was its menace, so, too, was knowledge of its reality. In 1914, by contrast, war came, out of a cloudless sky, to populations

which knew almost nothing of it and had been raised to doubt that it could ever again trouble their continent.

EUROPEAN HARMONY

Europe in the summer of 1914 enjoyed a peaceful productivity so dependent on international exchange and co-operation that a belief in the impossibility of general war seemed the most conventional of wisdoms. In 1910 an analysis of prevailing economic interdependence, *The Great Illusion*, had become a best-seller; its author Norman Angell had demonstrated, to the satisfaction of almost all informed opinion, that the disruption of international credit inevitably to be caused by war would either deter its outbreak or bring it speedily to an end. It was a message to which the industrial and commercial society of that age was keenly sympathetic. After two decades of depression, precipitated by an Austrian bank failure in 1873 but sustained by a fall in the prices to be had both for raw materials and for manufactured goods, industrial output had begun to expand again in the last years of the nineteenth century. New categories of manufactures – electrical goods, chemical dyes, internal combustion vehicles – had appeared to tempt buyers; new sources of cheaply extractable raw materials had been found; so, too, had new deposits of precious metals, above all in South Africa, to fertilise credit. Rising population – there was a 35 per cent increase in Austria-Hungary between 1880 and 1910, 43 per cent in Germany, 26 per cent in Britain, over 50 per cent in Russia – sharply enlarged the size of internal markets; emigration – twenty-six million people left Europe for the Americas and Australasia in 1880–1910 – increased demand for goods there also, while the enormous expansion of overseas empires, formal and informal, in Africa and Asia, drew millions of their inhabitants into the

international market, both as suppliers of staples and consumers of finished goods. A second revolution in transport – in 1893 steamship overtook sailing-ship tonnage for the first time – had greatly accelerated and expanded the movement of commerce overseas, while the extension of the railway network (virtually complete in Western Europe and the United States by 1870) in Eastern Europe and in Russia – where it grew in length from 31,000 to 71,000 kilometres between 1890 and 1913 – added that enormous region, rich in cereals, minerals, oil and timber, to the integrated international economy. It is scarcely surprising that, by the beginning of the century, bankers had recovered their confidence, gold-based capital was circulating freely, largely from Europe to the Americas and Asia, at a rate of £350 million a year in the first decade of the twentieth century, and return on overseas investment had come to form a significant element of private and corporate incomes in Britain, France, Germany, Holland and Belgium; Belgium, one of the smallest countries in Europe, had in 1914 the sixth largest economy in the world, the result of early industrialisation but also of intense activity by its banks, trading houses and industrial entrepreneurs.

Russian railways, South African gold and diamond mines, Indian textile factories, African and Malayan rubber plantations, South American cattle ranches, Australian sheep stations, Canadian wheatfields and almost every sector of the enormous economy of the United States, already by 1913 the largest in the world, producing one-third of its industrial output, devoured European capital as fast as it could be lent. The greater proportion passed through the City of London. Though its central banking reserve of gold was small – only £24 million in 1890, when the Bank of France had £95 million, the Reichsbank £40 million and the United States Federal Reserve £142 million – the worldwide connections of its private banks and

discount houses, insurance and commodity companies and equity and produce exchanges made it nevertheless the principal medium of buying, selling and borrowing for all advanced countries. Its predominance fed the belief so persuasively advanced by Norman Angell that any interruption of the smooth, daily equalisation of debit and credit it masterminded must destroy not only confidence in the monetary mechanism by which the world lived, but the very system itself.

Speaking to the Institute of Bankers in London on 17 January 1912, on 'The Influence of Banking on International Relations', Angell argued that

> commercial interdependence, which is the special mark of banking as it is the mark of no other profession or trade in quite the same degree – the fact that the interest and solvency of one is bound up with the interest and solvency of many; that there must be confidence in the due fulfilment of mutual obligation, or whole sections of the edifice crumble, is surely doing a great deal to demonstrate that morality after all is not founded upon self-sacrifice, but upon enlightened self-interest, a clearer and more complete understanding of all the ties that bind us the one to the other. And such clearer understanding is bound to improve, not merely the relationship of one group to another, but the relationship of all men to all other men, to create a consciousness which must make for more efficient human co-operation, a better human society.

W. R. Lawson, a former editor of the *Financial Times*, observed at the end of the speech, 'It is very evident that Mr. Norman Angell had carried this meeting almost entirely with him.'[11]

It was not only bankers – of whom many of London's foremost were German – that accepted the

interdependence of nations as a condition of the world's life in the first years of the twentieth century, a necessary condition and one destined to grow in importance. The acceptance was far wider than theirs. Much of it had a purely practical basis. The revolution in communications – by railway, telegraph and stamped postage – required international co-operation to service the new technologies and bureaucracies of travel and messaging. An International Telegraph Union was established in 1865 and the International Postal Union in 1875. An International Conference for Promoting Technical Uniformity in Railways was set up in 1882 – too late to standardise gauges between Western and Eastern Europe, where Russia had already adopted the broad gauge which was to make the use of its railways by invaders so difficult both in 1914 and 1941 but which, in peace, was nothing but an impediment to commercial traffic. The International Meteorological Organisation, set up to exchange information on the world's weather movements, of critical importance to maritime transport, appeared in 1873 and the International Radiotelegraph Union, which allotted separate wavelengths for the new invention of wireless, in 1906. All these were governmental organisations whose workings enjoyed the support of treaty or statute in member states. The world of commerce was meanwhile establishing its own, equally necessary, international associations: for the Publication of Customs Tariffs in 1890, of Patents and Trademarks in 1883, for Industrial, Literary and Artistic Property in 1895, of Commercial Statistics in 1913; an Institute of Agriculture, which collected and published statistics of farming production and marketing, came into being in 1905. Particular industries and professions meanwhile set up their own international bodies: the International Congress of Chambers of Commerce was established in 1880, the Congress of Actuaries in 1895, the Association of Accountancy in 1911, the International Electrotechnical