

Written by John Hallam  
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### War By Accident 1914 2014

#### Avoiding an Accidental Apocalypse

I first encountered the idea of 'war by accident' or an 'accidental apocalypse' 40 years ago as a 21 – year old 3rd year history student in 1974, doing a term essay on the origins of WW-I, at a time when WW-III was (as it is once again in 2014) definitely on the agenda.

The experience made a deep impression on me as I made my first foray into real historical sources (French and German diplomatic documents), and into the massive scholarship of Luigi Albertini's hefty tomes on the July 1914 crisis, that still form the basis for contemporary scholarship.

Most persuasive however, was AJP Taylor's 'War by Timetable' in which he argued, I believe fundamentally correctly, that what ultimately tipped Europe into war in July/August 1914 was the interaction of a series of highly complex systems. These were the mobilization plans of Germany, Austria, Russia and France. The big point, so applicable to subsequent events, was that the full implications of the interactions of these complex systems were not, and could never have been, evident to decision-makers until it was too late. The contemporary implications of that insight, not only to strategic nuclear systems, but also to financial, cyberspace, electrical, and other complex networked systems is evident.

All this led me over the years and decades to a concern with an 'accidental apocalypse', in the context both in 1974 and in 2014 of a possible WW-III. This was a connection that AJP Taylor himself made very clearly. It has also been made by both Christopher Clark and Paul Ham. And it is a connection spookily foreshadowed in the language of WW-I mobilization plans themselves – 'to push the button'.

The 'accidental apocalypse' thesis has not gone unchallenged however, in nuclear disarmament and 'left' circles. This is on one hand, because it is argued (both from left and even more from nationalist right) that 'failure to blame is a failure of nerve' that lets everyone off the hook and somehow inhibits investigation.

Precisely the opposite is true: Once we 'blame' somebody, analysis stops. There is no more whodunnit because we know whodiddit: It was the evil and perfidious Germans or the Russians or the French or the English. And further investigation is stopped dead.

We see exactly the same process happening right now with the vilification and demonisation of Putin. We don't need to ask what WE might do to prevent WW-III because its all Putin's fault and there is no more to be said.

The second reason for the occasional rejection of the 'war by accident' hypothesis is a tendency (in my view a paranoid one) to view world events as somehow 'fixed' by an all-powerful (and omniscient) global shadow elite who somehow know with perfect clarity and precision exactly how to act to further their own interests.

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I would argue that quite on the contrary there is no evidence whatsoever that any global elite is either unified in purpose enough (there are many elites rather than a single elite), or sufficiently enough in touch with reality to even know what its own interests really are, especially over the long term. Blind Freddie (in whose judgment I have much faith) is quite able often to tell them but by and large they are too blinded by ideology to listen.

The events of WW-I, the 1929 crash, the GFC, the Euro-zone crisis, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima not to mention the over a dozen occasions on which nuclear false alarms have come within minutes and seconds of literally ending the world give no reason to believe that global elites are blessed by any more prescience than anyone else. Indeed, the elite has an interest in NOT being prescient.

There is one final wrinkle:

Many global techno-systems have already become simply so complex that they persistently give rise to outcomes that are unpredictable IN PRINCIPLE. That can NEVER be predicted (if only because to predict them would be to change them). These systems range from global strategic nuclear weapons command and control systems, to the global financial system, to cyberspace, to electrical systems. All of them share the characteristics of being 'tightly coupled' and highly complex. A glitch in one system can bring down many interconnected systems.

These considerations do of course apply in spades to computerized, space-based, nuclear command and control and above all surveillance, systems.

There have been a disturbingly large number of events in which computer glitches, high clouds directly over North Dakota, and a Norwegian weather research rocket have bought the world within minutes and seconds of the launch of thousands of nuclear-tipped ICBMs. General Lee Butler, after having his finger on the metaphorical 'nuclear button' for over 20 years, remarked over a decade back, that we really should not be here – the only reason we are here, he opined, was 'blind good luck and divine providence – actually I think almost entirely divine providence'.

Those of us with a similar theology to General Butler may well ask when the miracle supply might dry up.

We have an unlikely series of saviors from the apocalypse including the unknown advisor to President Boris Yeltsin who as the Norwegian weather research rocket was mistaken for an incoming US First Strike, uttered the immortal words 'Mr president, lets wait another minute'. Then there was the US Launch control officer who as a practice launch sequence for 10 minuteman missiles each with 10 warheads in 1980 turned into the real thing and would not stop, ordered heavy military vehicles driven on top of silo doors.

Finally there was Colonel Stanislav Petrov, who amid wailing sirens on 26Sept (now officially designated by the UN as International Nuclear Disarmament Day), took decisions that resulted in a flashing red button that would have initiated the computerized launch of between 5,000 and 15,000 warheads NOT being pressed because 'I had a feeling in my gut that there was a

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mistake somewhere...I didn't want to make a mistake'. While we are on the subject of divine intervention – he wasn't supposed to be on duty that night, having swapped his shift with someone junior to him.

It is no Hollywood fancy, but rather quite reality based, that all doomsday movies assume almost as a given, an 'accidental apocalypse' as their starting point.

Finally it is worth asking just where are we now, with reference to what, should it ever take place, will be the end of what we call civilization (at a minimum – this can be accomplished by electromagnetic pulse with as few as 5 warheads in space), and is more likely to be end of either most humans, or possibly all humans via decades of subzero temperatures and darkness resulting from the smoke of burned cities.

The recent warnings by President Putin that 'we have nuclear weapons' in and of themselves help to put WW-III back on the agenda.

The danger here is that if the NATO-Russia confrontation worsens, there is more and more room for miscalculation/malfunction to bring about an accidental apocalypse.

Already, US and Russian nuclear forces have (back in March) conducted their rehearsals for Armageddon (large-scale exercises) within days of each other. Russian forces are scheduled to do further large-scale exercises at the end of this month.

A hundred years ago in August, a series of miscalculations and the ghost of General Von Schiefflen bought us WW-I with its 4 years of trench warfare and its 17-35 million body – count. (depending how you count the 'flu at its end).

If we blow it once more, one hundred years later, the MINIMUM cost will be what we (mis)call 'civilization'. The more probable cost will be the greater part of the human population, and perhaps all of it.