

Bands and Flowers

When World War I began on July 28, 1914, few people thought about the horrors that lay ahead. On the contrary, many Europeans sang and danced in the streets, welcoming war as something pure and noble. One British poet wrote about how lucky he was "to be born just the right age and in just the right place." Soldiers throughout Europe rushed to recruiting stations to enlist, fearing that the fighting would end before they had a chance to participate. Men marched off to battle amid streets filled with flowers and joyful civilians. Everyone believed the war would be over in a few short months.



Military leaders were also unrealistic about what the war would bring. They still planned their assaults in terms of cavalry charges and bayonet attacks, not realizing that new weapons such as machine guns and long-range cannons would quickly make cavalries obsolete. Somehow, civilians and military personnel alike had visions of bloodless battlefields on which everyone attained glory and few were hurt.

One leader, however, did comprehend the realities of war. The British foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey, spoke as he watched the excited crowd in the street below his window, "The lights are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."

1. Europeans in 1914 were not the first to misunderstand the horrors of war. When the American Civil War began in 1861, some Northerners thought it would be over by the end of the first day. In fact, many people who lived in Washington, D.C., rushed out to see the first major battle, hoping the Union Army would quickly destroy the Confederates. They even packed their carriages with picnic baskets! Likewise, almost one hundred years later, when the first American troops joined the Korean War in June 1950, people expected them to quickly "wrap things up" and return home for the holidays. Why do you think people in the past had such an unrealistic view of war, while people today may be more likely to understand the consequences of war?

2. For what kinds of causes, if any, might you be willing to fight in a war?
