

Wars and Rumors of Wars

2014 will mark a grim anniversary: 100 years since the beginning of World War I.

It was to be the “war to end all wars.” If only.

World War I is rapidly disappearing from modern memory. At the current pace of events, we often forget what happened last week, much less a century ago. We are twice as far removed from 1914 as Americans in that year were removed from the Civil War era. Another world war and scores of smaller ones have occurred in the generations since. Revolutions have shaken and reshaped entire chunks of the globe. Technology has transformed almost everything.

But we should never forget the consequences of “the Great War.” Aside from its staggering bloodshed and suffering (more than 30 million killed or wounded), it brought the end of the old order in Europe and laid the groundwork for a new one. It swept away monarchies and empires, set the stage for revolutions and years of global economic struggle—and ultimately led to an even more devastating global conflict.

Some historians believe we are entering a similar era of endings and beginnings. If Christians intend to make an impact on the world, we must strive to understand the times. We also must deal with the world as it is, not as we want it to be. If you’re waiting for general stability and peace before you launch out to the nations or lead your church to go, you’ve got a long wait ahead.

“The coming conflicts and challenges are pretty clear,” writes Gordon Adams, professor of international relations at American University, in *Foreign Policy* magazine. “We will hear a lot about the Syrian civil war, the fate of the Iranian nuclear program, conflict in Iraq, the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan—not to speak of what applecart Vladimir Putin

plans to upset next, whether the North Korean regime will implode, and whether China and its neighbors intensify their conflict over the rocky outcroppings they all want to own.”

“As we reflect on this [World War I] anniversary year, however, there are deeper rumblings afoot, rumblings that will color and shape many of these conflicts,” he continues. “The same was true 100 years ago. ... At the start of that new century, the shape of world politics was about to transform, while class conflict rose and shook the very foundations of the monarchies of continental Europe.”

“Between these two forces, they would wipe out the Austro-Hungarian Empire, remove royalty from power in Germany, bring revolutionary turmoil to Russia, undermine the colonial systems established by France and Germany, and bring a new power—the United States—to the center of the world stage,” explains Adams.

Now the United States and its allies seem to be receding as global power players, by circumstance or by choice, while economic, political and military conflicts simmer around the globe. If that withdrawal or decline continues, other forces will fill the power vacuum.

In some cases, the vacuum itself will bring chaos. It’s an old historical pattern, repeated many times through the ages.

“Why so much anarchy?” asks Robert Kaplan in a new piece for Stratfor, the global intelligence analysis service. Twenty years ago, Kaplan warned in an influential *Atlantic Monthly* article (“The Coming Anarchy”) of “unprecedented upheaval, brought on by scarce resources, overpopulation, uncontrollable disease, brutal warfare and the widespread collapse of nation-states and indeed, of any semblance of government. ... Welcome to the 21st century.”

Some of those predictions came true; some didn’t. But “what is not in dispute is that significant portions of the earth ... are

simply harder and harder to govern,” Kaplan reports. He identifies five major causes for the persistent upheaval of recent decades:

1. The end of imperialism. Empires and spheres of influence built by international powers often oppress and exploit the peoples they absorb. But they provide (or enforce) order. When they crumble, freedom may follow. Or chaos and blood.

2. The end of postcolonial strongmen. National dictators replaced departing colonial authorities in many places during the postcolonial era in the 20th century and again after the Cold War. Saddam Hussein, Moammar Gadhafi, Hosni Mubarak and many other strongmen are gone. But who—or what—will replace them?

3. No national institutions and feeble national identities. Postcolonial dictators typically ruled by fear and secret police, not strong social and political institutions. “It is institutions that fill the gap between the ruler at the top and the extended family or tribe at the bottom,” Kaplan explains. Without such institutions, “the chances for either [more] dictatorship or anarchy proliferate.” States with such weak national identities become particularly vulnerable to “non-state identities that fill the subsequent void.” Think al-Qaida, organized criminal cartels and other bad actors.

4. Doctrinal battles. Religious struggles have sparked many wars in the past. It’s happening again in the Muslim world “as state identities weaken and sectarian and other differences within Islam come to the fore, often violently,” Kaplan notes. Americans tend to focus on radical Islam versus the West. But the great ideological battle now tearing apart the Middle East—from Syria and Iraq to Iran and Saudi Arabia—is the blood feud between Sunni and Shiite Islam.

5. Information technology. Smartphones “can empower the crowd against a hated regime, as protesters who do not know each

other personally can find each other through Facebook, Twitter, and other social media,” Kaplan acknowledges. But they “cannot provide [or] maintain political stability afterwards. This is how technology encourages anarchy. The Industrial Age was about bigness: big tanks, aircraft carriers, railway networks and so forth. ... But the post-industrial age is about smallness, which can empower small and oppressed groups, allowing them to challenge the state—with anarchy sometimes the result.”

What comes next?

“The real question marks are Russia and China. The possible weakening of authoritarian rule in those sprawling states may usher in less democracy than chronic instability and ethnic separatism that would dwarf in scale the current instability in the Middle East,” Kaplan warns. “The future of world politics will be about which societies can develop responsive institutions to govern vast geographical space and which cannot. That is the question toward which the present season of anarchy leads.”

That might be the political question. The spiritual question for Christians: How do we continue to go into the world, declare the gospel and make disciples among all nations as yet another era of upheaval unfolds? There are as many answers as there are nations, cultures and peoples.

But retreat is not one of them.

Erich Bridges *is an IMB global correspondent.*