

The queen's funeral and the spectre of war and revolution

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Queen Elizabeth II's funeral was meticulous in its execution. Nothing was left to chance as the UK delivered on its sole remaining specialty—pomp and pageantry on a world-beating scale.

By 11.00am, heads of state from around the world had taken their seats amid the gothic splendour of Westminster Abbey, before the queen's coffin, draped in the royal standard and topped with the imperial crown and the Sovereign's Sceptre with Cross, arrived on the State Gun Carriage of the Royal Navy, drawn by 142 sailors. Guardsmen from The Queen's Company, 1st Battalion Grenadier Guards, took her body inside marching at a funeral pace. An hour of readings, prayers, hymns and eulogies followed.

The queen's coffin was then drawn in a walking procession from Westminster Abbey to Wellington Arch, at London's Hyde Park Corner, along a route lined by the Royal Navy, Royal Marines and the police. A guard of honour stood in Parliament Square made up of all three military services, accompanied by a Royal Marines band. The coffin was then transferred to the State Hearse for its final journey to Windsor Castle.

In total, 4,000 military personnel were involved in the funeral and parade.

With crowds standing 10 deep, nothing could have been better designed to reflect stability, order and permanence than the way Elizabeth Windsor was laid to rest beside her late husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, at the King George VI memorial chapel.

This was at least the shared hope of the almost 100 presidents and heads of government assembled in Westminster Abbey, including US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Italian President Sergio Mattarella, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, New Zealand Prime Minister

Jacinda Ardern, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol.

Biden spoke directly to such aims prior to the funeral in a statement that read, "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was more than a monarch. She defined an era. In a world of constant change, she was a steadying presence and a source of comfort and pride for generations of Britons... The seven decades of her history-making reign bore witness to an age of unprecedented human advancement and the forward march of human dignity."

The absurdity of Biden's statement is best illustrated by reference to a previous British royal funeral, more than a century earlier, that of Edward VII.

American historian Barbara W. Tuchman focuses on this event in the introductory chapter to her seminal work on the outbreak and first nine months of World War I—*The Guns of August*, published in the UK as *August 1914*. It begins poignantly:

"So gorgeous was the spectacle on the May morning of 1910 when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII of England that the crowd waiting in hushed and black-clad awe, could not keep back gasps of admiration. In scarlet and blue and green and purple, three by three the sovereigns rode through the palace gates, with plumed helmets, gold braid, crimson sashes, and jeweled orders flashing in the sun. After them came five heirs apparent, forty more imperial or royal highnesses, seven queens—four dowager and three regnant—and a scattering of special ambassadors from uncrowned countries. Together they represented seventy nations in the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever

gathered in one place and of its kind the last. The muffled tongue of Big Ben tolled nine by the clock as the cortege left the palace, but on history's clock it was sunset, and the sun of the old world was setting in a dying blaze of splendour never to be seen again."

Tuchman notes that Edward VII was often called the "Uncle of Europe". This was not purely an honorific. It pointed to his actual family relationships to, among "Other relatives, the progeny at various removes of Queen Victoria's nine sons and daughters... scattered in abundance throughout the courts of Europe," his nephews Kaiser Wilhelm II, the emperor of Germany, and Russia's Tsar Nicholas II. Tsarina Alexandra was his niece.

Edward's rule, spanning the first decade of the 20th century, is described by Tuchman as "a rich fat afternoon... Nineteen-ten was peaceful and prosperous, with the second round of Moroccan crises and Balkan wars still to come." The prospect of war was viewed widely in ruling circles as a foolish vanity as, thanks to the financial and economic interdependence of nations, there could be no real victor.

Yet four years later, August 1914, the world was plunged into a war in which 28 million were slaughtered and Europe left in ruins. The monarchs who had been able to put aside national tensions and assemble in London in 1910 soon found themselves on opposed sides of the battlefield.

The end of the war saw the downfall of the defeated.

The most historically significant casualties were the Tsar and the Tsarina of Russia, swept from power in 1917 by the February revolution unleashed by the horrors of war, and forever consigned to history by the October socialist revolution led by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks.

But revolution in Germany, though it did not lead to the overthrow of capitalism due to the absence of a Bolshevik-type party at its head, forced Wilhelm II to abdicate the throne and flee the country. Other kings within the German Empire followed. The crown heads of the Austro-Hungarian Empire met the same fate amid this continent-wide revolutionary upsurge.

In 2022, the ragtag of royalty assembled to mourn the passing of Elizabeth II—the emperor and empress of

Japan, the kings and queens of the Netherlands, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, rulers of the tiny tax havens of Lichtenstein, Luxembourg and Monaco, and various despots from the Middle East—are pale shadows of their forebears. But the presidents and prime ministers that govern the major imperialist powers have a future ahead of them no less terrible than the European royal houses of the last century.

The crisis gripping world imperialism is more starkly presented than it was in 1910. This is no Belle Époque. An economic nightmare is unfolding that is plunging millions into destitution. A policy of war is not being repudiated but pursued ruthlessly by the ruling elite. In the NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine, a catastrophe is unfolding in Europe that would dwarf even the horrors of 1914—one that threatens humanity with nuclear annihilation.

But this crisis is also creating the conditions for an eruption of a socialist and revolutionary struggle of the European and international working class—one that must not end a world war, as did October 1917, but prevent one from taking place through the overthrow of capitalism.



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