



The Spark That Set Aflame the World: 1912-1918

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“WILL THE PRESENT WAR in the Balkans,” a New Yorker asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “terminate in the world war?” “No,” he answered, “but within two years a spark will rise from the Balkans and set the whole world on fire.”

One of the main reasons ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had come to the United States was to warn about an imminent European war, and to push Americans to rally to prevent it. “Just now Europe is a battlefield of ammunition ready to spark,” he told a peace forum meeting in New York on May 12, “and one spark will set aflame the whole world.” After he visited Niagara Falls on September 10, the *Buffalo Courier* recorded him saying, “The continent of Europe is one vast arsenal which only requires one spark at its foundations and the whole of Europe will become a wasted wilderness.” Throughout his journey ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had argued that America, because it had no empire to protect, was uniquely positioned to call other nations to peace.

In 1912, several prevailing theories made a large-scale war seem unlikely. Norman Angell, an English journalist, argued in his book, *The Great Illusion*, that because industrial states had become increasingly intertwined economically, the dislocation caused by war was simply too expensive. No one with any business sense would seriously consider it. The drive toward international arbitration was also gaining momentum among peace organizations. But America’s enthusiasm for peace was not shared among European powers, and soon the spark ‘Abdu’l-Bahá predicted plunged them into a conflict of unimaginable scale.

Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian nationalist, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. The world watched in disbelief as secret treaties triggered other secret treaties, bringing one nation, then another, then another into belligerence by some sinister invisible momentum.

In America, Woodrow Wilson was reelected in 1916 on a plank of “He kept us out of war.” But German submarines kept sinking American merchant vessels, and Americans were dying on torpedoed passenger ships. On January 19, 1917,

British naval intelligence intercepted a telegram sent by German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmerman to the German Ambassador in Mexico City, promising Texas and other southern states to Mexico if it would declare war on the United States. Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war on April 2. This Great War, he said, had started as wars used to start, “in the old, unhappy days when peoples were nowhere consulted by their rulers, and wars were provoked and waged in the interest of dynasties, or of little groups of ambitious men who were accustomed to use their fellow men as pawns and tools.” “The world,” Wilson argued, “must be made safe for democracy.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá left New York aboard the SS *Celtic* on December 5, 1912. He arrived in Liverpool, England, on December 13, 1912, traveled through England, France, Austria-Hungary, and Germany for six months, then returned to Egypt. He did not finally arrive home in Haifa until December 5, 1913, a full year after leaving America. Within eight months, Europe was burning.

Martha Root, a forty-one year old journalist from Pittsburgh, found herself in Alexandria, Egypt in 1915 and tried to reach ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “I am within twenty-four hours ride of Haifa, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is,” she wrote to friends in Maine. “Day and night I try to plan how to reach him, but the way is mightily closed. No one can land in Haifa. The people in Palestine are starving, and massacres are hourly expected.”

Root wrote to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá through the American consulate in Jaffa, tried to get word and supplies to him through an American warship, and even asked a woman who was trying to enter Palestine and start a soup kitchen to write ‘Abdu’l-Bahá a letter, should she be successful. A Jewish man who had fled the region finally provided her with some news. “He works night and day helping the poor,” Martha Root wrote in her letter. “He will not leave them, as he could do, but insists on staying and caring for the poor, as many as he can.”

By 1912, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had already been preparing for the worst. He had purchased farmland in the Galilee to grow wheat, and stored the grain underground near Haifa. When a blockade threatened the region with starvation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá fed northern Palestine: rich and poor, Muslims, Jews and Christians — a humanitarian act for which he reluctantly accepted a knighthood from King George V.

In the spring of 1918, Lady Sara Blomfield received a telephone call in Paris. “‘Abdu’l-Bahá in serious danger. Take immediate action.” She learned that the Ottoman commander of Syria, Jamal Pasha, had announced his plans to crucify ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his family on Mount Carmel. She reached Lord Lamington at

Whitehall, and, with the consent of Lord Balfour, the Foreign Secretary, a telegram was sent to General Edmund Allenby, the commander of the British army in Palestine. In September, 1918, the British defeated the Ottomans at the Battle of Megiddo and marched on Haifa. Allenby sent messengers to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's home to inquire about the family's condition. Then he cabled Whitehall: "Have today taken Palestine. Notify the world that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is safe."

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FOOTNOTE / ENDNOTE:

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