

Causes of WWI

The origins of WWI are complex & cannot be explained solely on the basis of the events that immediately preceded it. Fundamentally the Great War was the product of destructive forces whose roots lay deep in the past. Among the deeper causes of the war were nationalism, the arms race & militarism, & the alliance system.

Nationalism

Nationalism, with its roots in the era of the French Revolution, had increased markedly during the second half of the 19th c. While the Germans & Italians had achieved nationhood, other groups had not. The divisive effect of ethnic nationalism was particularly evident in the Habsburg Empire. The dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary had kept the Slavs in the empire subordinate to the German Austrians & to the Magyars of Hungary. By the turn of the century Slavic nationalists, having concluded that their people would never acquire equal status, intensified their efforts to secede from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Such an event would permit some Slavic elements like the Czechs to set up their own independent state & others like South Slavs (Croats, Slovenes, Serbs) to join the national state of their kin across the border. Freed from Ottoman rule in 1878, Serbia was weaker than Austrian-Hungary, it launched a covert campaign of agitation & subversion designed to undermine & destroy the integrity of the dual monarchy.

Militarism

The atmosphere of suspicion & fear after 1870 gave rise to a bitter & costly armaments race. In the name of national security, Western states vied with one another in strengthening their armies & navies. Huge sums were spent on military equipment & ships, & all the major powers, except Great Britain & the United States, adopted conscription. German & Austrian military spending doubled between 1910 & 1914, & the expenditures of other powers increased markedly. By 1914 Germany & France each had about eight hundred thousand men in uniform, with millions of trained reservists. The military buildup on land was accompanied by a naval race between Great Britain & Germany. Great Britain in 1906 launched a new, superior class of battleships, the *dreadnought*; Germany followed suit. Such contests not only drained national reserves but stirred hostility & distrust.

The arms race also led to growing militarism - a spirit that exalts military virtues & ideals - which conditioned people to view war as a glorious adventure essential to human progress. This profoundly affected foreign policy, as political leaders more frequently sought & took the advice of army & naval officials. This was particularly evident during the summer of 1914, when military exhortations handicapped the search for a peaceful settlement. During the crisis in July 1914 governments confronted by the inflexibility of their generals often made decisions based on military rather than political considerations.

Besides the steps they took to strengthen their military capability, the European powers forged alliances among themselves to provide an additional margin of superiority that would deter aggression; the alliances in the late 19th & early 20th centuries were formed in hopes of preventing, rather than provoking, war.

Alliances

Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany originated Europe's system of alliances. Fearing that France might try to retaliate for its humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, he tried to keep France weak & diplomatically isolated. To that end, Bismarck engineered a major alliance in 1873, composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, & Russia. Known as the League of Three Emperors, it committed the signatories to maintain friendly neutrality in the event one of them was at war with a fourth power. That combination between Austria & Russia as each sought to expand in the Balkans at the expense of the declining Ottoman Empire. In 1879 Bismarck negotiated a defensive military agreement or Dual Alliance with the Habsburg government of Austria-Hungary. Two years later the partnership was expanded into the Triple Alliance when Bismarck brought in Italy which, owing to designs of its own, resented French occupation of Tunisia in North Africa. When the League of the Three Emperors finally broke down because of new tensions in the Balkans, Bismarck managed to retain the friendship of Russia by entering into a separate agreement, called the Reinsurance Treaty (1887), which provided for the neutrality of either power if the other became involved in a war. By a complex system of alliances as well of as by maintaining cordial relations with Britain, Bismarck had cut off France from any potential allies.

However, after 1890 Europe's alliance system moved toward war rather than peace. The impetuous new German emperor (Kaiser) William II (1888-1918), dismissed Bismarck, changed the direction of Germany's foreign policy, & allowed the Reinsurance Treaty to lapse. This unexpected turn of events prompted France to extend a hand of friendship to the Russians, offering as an inducement arms & large loans; the resulting rapprochement led to a defensive pact between France & Russia in 1894.

France scored another diplomatic triumph ten years later when it buried its differences with England & signed the Entente Cordiale. The accord was a friendly understanding to reconcile points of contention & not a formal military alliance. The next logical step for the French was to bring together Britain & Russia, two traditional enemies. The timing was propitious. Badly defeated by the Japanese, the Russians wanted to reestablish their position in Europe. The British, with the threat of Russian aggression in Asia removed, were more concerned about Germany's uncertain aims. The upshot was the Anglo-Russian entente of 1907. Again, there was no provision for mutual military assistance, but their conciliatory attitude made cooperation easier. The agreement completed the three power bloc of France, Russia & Britain, which came to be known as the Triple Entente.

Such were the alliances between the major continental players. There were other, smaller alliances too - such as Russia's pledge to protect Serbia, & Britain's agreement to defend Belgian neutrality - & each served its part in drawing each nation into the coming Great War.

Imperialism...which caused the occasional minor wars

In the interim however, there were a number of 'minor' conflicts that helped to stir emotions in the years immediately preceding 1914, & which gave certain nations more stake than others in entering the WWI.

- **Russian War With Japan: Shock Japanese Victory**

Ever since Russia declined Japan's offer in 1903 for each to recognize the other's interests in Manchuria & Korea, trouble was looming.

The Japanese launched a successful attack upon Russian warships in Korea, at Inchon, & in Port Arthur, China. This was followed by a land invasion of both disputed territories of Korea & Manchuria in 1904.

Among other set-pieces, the Japanese astonished the western powers by destroying the entire Russian fleet at the Battle of Tsushima (27-28 May 1905) for the loss of two torpedo boats - a humiliating Russian defeat.

The U.S. President, Theodore Roosevelt, mediated a peace agreement between Japan & Russia, one that resulted in material gains for Japan & with note being taken in Berlin of the fallacy of the myth of Russian "invincibility".

The scale of Russia's defeat in part contributed to the attempted Russian Revolution of 1905, & the battered & shaken Tsar, Nicholas II, was determined to restore Russian prestige (not least in the Romanov dynasty itself): & what better way to achieve this than through military conquest?

- **The Balkans, 1912: Italy Versus Turkey**

Strife in the Balkans was nothing new. In 1912 it continued with war between Italy & Turkey, over the latter's African possessions. Turkey lost & was forced to hand over Libya, Rhodes & the Dodecanese Islands to the Italians.

- **The Balkans, 1912 (Part II): The First Balkan War**

Turkey's troubles were not yet over. Having concluded peace with the Italians it found itself engulfed in war with no fewer than four small nations over the possession of Balkan territories: Greece, Serbia & Bulgaria - & later Montenegro.

The intervention of the larger European powers brought about an end to this the First Balkan War of 1912-13. Again Turkey lost out, shedding Crete & all of its European possessions.

- **The Balkans, 1913: The Second Balkan War**

Later in the 1913, conflict erupted again in the Balkans, as Bulgaria, unsatisfied with its earlier spoils, fought with its recent allies in an attempt to control a greater part of Macedonia; & when the so-named "Young Turks" - Turkish army officers - denounced the earlier peace as unfair.

Between May & July 1913 Bulgaria's former allies beat back the new aggressor, Bulgaria, & Romania captured the Bulgarian capital Sofia in August. Beaten & having surrendered on 10 August 1913, Bulgaria also lost Adrianople back to Turkey.

- **Troubled Peace in the Balkans**

Despite the re-establishment of peace in the Balkans, nothing had really been settled & tensions remained high. The numerous small nations that had found themselves under Turkish or Austro-Hungarian rule for many years stirred themselves in nationalistic fervor.

Yet while these Balkan nations sought their own individual voice & self-determination, they were nevertheless united in identifying themselves as pan-Slavic peoples, with Russia as their chief ally.

The latter was keen to encourage this belief in the Russian people as the Slav's natural protectors, for aside from a genuine emotional attachment, it was a means by which Russia could regain a degree of lost prestige.

- **Unsettled Empires**

Come 1914, trouble was not restricted to the smaller nations outlined above. The Austro-Hungarian empire was directly impacted by troubles in the Balkans &, under the ageing Emperor Franz Josef, was patently struggling to maintain coherence of the various diametrically opposed ethnic groups which fell under the Austro-Hungarian umbrella.

As such, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand by the Serbian nationalist secret society, the Black Hand, provided the Austro-Hungarian government with a golden opportunity to stamp its authority over the region.

Russia, ally of the Slavs - & therefore of Serbia - had been struggling to hold back full-scale revolution ever since the Japanese military disaster of 1905. In 1914, while the Tsar himself was reluctant, his government saw war with Austria-Hungary as an opportunity to restore social order - which indeed it did, at least until the continuation of repeated Russian military setbacks, Rasputin's intrigue at court & food shortages combined to bring about the long-threatened total revolution (which, encouraged by Germany, brought about Russia's withdrawal from the war in 1917).

Then there is France. Almost immediately following her defeat by Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, together with the humiliating annexation by the newly unified Germany of the coal-rich territories of Alsace & Lorraine, the French government & military alike were united in thirsting for revenge.

To this end the French devised a strategy for a vengeful war upon Germany, Plan XVII, whose chief aim was the defeat of Germany & the restoration of Alsace & Lorraine. The plan was fatally flawed, & relied to an untenable extent upon the "élan" which was believed to form an integral part of the French army - an irresistible force that would sweep over its enemies.

Germany's Path to War

As for Germany, she was unsettled socially & militarily. The 1912 Reichstag elections had resulted in the election of no fewer than 110 socialist deputies, making Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's task in liaising between the Reichstag & the autocratic Wilhelm, not to mention the rigidly right-wing military high command, next to impossible.

Bethmann Hollweg, who became most despondent, came to believe that Germany's only hope of avoiding civil unrest sooner rather than later lay in war: preferably a short, sharp war, although he did not rule out a European-wide conflict if it resolved Germany's social & political woes.

This outlook on life fuelled his decision of 6 July 1914 - whilst the Austro-Hungarian government was weighing its options with regard to Serbia - to offer the former what has been commonly referred to as "a blank cheque"; that is, an unconditional guarantee of support for Austria-Hungary no matter what she decided.

Germany's military unsettlement arose in the sense that Kaiser Wilhelm II was finding himself largely frustrated in his desire to carve out a grand imperial role for Germany. Whilst he desired "a place in the sun", he found that all of the bright areas had been already snapped up by the other colonial powers, leaving him only with a place in the shade.

Not that Wilhelm II was keen upon a grand war. Rather, he failed to foresee the consequences of his military posturing, his determination to construct both land & naval forces the equivalent - & better - than those of Britain & France (with varying success).

However his government & his military commanders assuredly did anticipate what was to come. A plan to take on both Russia & France, a war on two fronts, had long been expected & taken into account.

The so-called Schlieffen Plan, devised by former Army Chief of Staff Alfred von Schlieffen, had been carefully crafted to deal with a two-front war scenario. The plan, which very nearly succeeded, outlined a plan to conquer France, to knock her out of the war, on a 'Western Front', within five weeks - before, the Germans calculated, Russia could effectively mobilize for war on the 'Eastern Front' (which they estimated would take six weeks).

It is often speculated - & argued - that the plan would have succeeded but for the decision of the then-German Chief of Staff in 1914, Helmuth von Moltke, to authorize a critical deviation from the plan that, it is believed, stemmed from a lack of nerve, & crucially slowed the path towards Paris - with fatal consequences (& which ended in static trench warfare).

Still, the German plan took no real account of Britain's entry into the war. The German government gave no credence to the possibility that Britain would ignore her own commercial interests (which were presumably best served by staying aloof from the conflict & maintaining her all-important commercial trading routes), & would instead uphold her ancient treaty of obligation to recover violated Belgian neutrality.

British Dithering

It is also suggested that Germany would have backed away from war had Britain declared her intentions sooner. Believing that Britain would stay out of the coming conflict, & would limit herself to diplomatic protests - after all, Britain was under no strict military obligation to France - Germany, & Austria-Hungary, proceeded under the belief that war would be fought solely with France & Russia.

The British Government, & its Foreign Minister, Sir Edward Grey, attempted to mediate throughout July, reserving at all times its right to remain aloof from the dispute. It was only as the war began that the British position solidified into support for, ostensibly, Belgium.

Hence the oft-levelled criticism that had Britain come out clearly on the side of Belgium & France earlier in July, war would have been avoided: Germany would have effectively instructed Austria-Hungary to settle w/ Serbia, esp. given the latter's willingness to co-operate w/ Austria-Hungary.

Whether this would have transpired given the German war machine's determination for war is of course unknown.

A Family Affair

The First World War has sometimes been labeled, with reason, "a family affair". This is derived from the reality that many of the European monarchies - many of which fell during the war (including those of Russia, Germany & Austria-Hungary) - were inter-related.

The British monarch George V's predecessor, Edward VII, was the German Kaiser's uncle &, via his wife's sister, uncle of the Russian Tsar as well. His niece, Alexandra, was the Tsar's wife. Edward's daughter, Maud, was the Norwegian Queen, & his niece, Ena, Queen of Spain; Marie, a further niece, was to become Queen of Romania.

Despite these familial relations - nine Kings attended Edward's funeral - European politics was all about power & influence, of protection & encirclement. Thus the tangled web of alliances which sprung up in the wake of the rise of the newly united German Empire in 1871.

Conclusion

This is an attempt to pull together the main strands: Austro-Hungarian determination to impose its will upon the Balkans; a German desire for greater power & international influence, which sparked a naval arms race with Britain, who responded by building new & greater warships, the *Dreadnought*; a French desire for revenge against Germany following disastrous defeat in 1871; Russia's anxiety to restore some semblance of national prestige after almost a decade of civil strife & a battering at the hands of the Japanese military in 1905.