

Analyzing the Causes of the First World War

Dr. Pushpalata Kumari¹, Nishikant Tiwari^{2,*}

¹Associate Professor of Political Science, Magadh Mahila College, Patna,
Patna University, Patna (Bihar), India

²Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Patna University, Patna, India

*Corresponding author: nishikanttiwari@gmail.com

Abstract

The world has recently celebrated November 11 as the Remembrance Day to recall the end of First World War. In the year 2021, 103rd anniversary of the formal end of the First World War provides an occasion to analyze the reasons which lead to this Great War.

The First World War was fought from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918. This is considered as the Great War which was combated between the Allied Powers and the Central Powers. The Allied Powers were Russia, France, Britain and Italy. The United States also fought on the side of the Allies after 1917. The Central Powers were Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. It engulfed almost whole of Europe but the battle field was over-stretched upto Asia, Africa and American continents as well. This war is also considered as First Total War in which not only the soldiers but even civilians participated. It left with an estimated death of nine million combatants and 13 million civilian as a direct result of the conflict. It created machinery for mass slaughter in the form of chemical and biological weapons as well.

Key words: First World War, Europe.

Understanding Causes of the First World War

The reason why World War I erupted is actually much more complicated than a simple list of causes since there was no single event that led to the war. There were political, economic, socio – cultural reasons and eventual situations that took place in the years building up to 1914. It is also pertinent to mention that one reason or situation is essentially related with other reason or situation and they all are linked with each other which make the global war inevitable.

The First World War was the logical culmination of aggressive nationalism, rising imperialism and growth in militarism. Even mutual fear and distrust played their role in it. Europeans values and ethics which were developed during renaissance and reformation also failed to undo European rivalries. Key reasons behind World War I are analyzed as hereunder:

1. Decline of the Ottoman Empire

Throughout the medieval period and in the early days of the modern era, the Ottoman Empire was known as the world's largest imperial power. Its rule covered all over the Middle East and much of northern Africa and Eastern Europe. But by the end of the 1800s, the Ottoman Empire greatly suffered by internal conflicts and instabilities.

The political turmoil within the Ottoman Empire led to the outbreak of the First Balkan War (1912 – 1913) between the Balkan League and Ottoman Empire. This saw Serbia (then part of the Balkan League) annex Albania. With the prospect of the Serbs gaining access to the sea, Austria-Hungary was set for an unavoidable clash with Serbia. Meanwhile, the Russians were eyeing Armenia and Britain. France was looking to conquer Iraq and Syria. Germany was already feeling left out in the race to extend its colonies and territory.

Needless to say that such a volatile situation, where every opportunist nation was lurking right around the corner, only made things worse. This resulted in creation of various mutual defense alliances among nations to counter external threats.

2. Mutual Defense Alliances

Prior to World War I, countries throughout Europe had created mutual defense alliances that would pull them into battle. Concerned states considered the alliances necessary for their security and survival in self help structured anarchical system. The alliances promised that each country would bound to support the other if war ever broke out between an ally and non-ally Power. Before World War 1, the following alliances existed:

- a) Russia and Serbia
- b) Germany and Austria - Hungary
- c) France and Russia
- d) Britain, France and Belgium
- e) Japan and Britain

It so happened that Austria - Hungary declared war on Serbia and Russia got involved to defend Serbia. Germany seeing Russia mobilizing, declared war on Russia. France was then drawn in against Germany & Austria-Hungary. Germany attacked France through Belgium, pulling Britain into war. Then Japan entered the war. Later, Italy and the United States would enter on the side of the respective ally.

It is highlighted here that the alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary at the start of World War I was known as the “**blank check assurance.**” In July 1914, during a meeting, Germany offered Austria-Hungary unconditional support in the wake of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria - Hungary. This “blank check,” via unconditional support is regarded as one of the most controversial decisions in the history because Germany failed to withdraw the unconditional support when given the opportunities which make it responsible for the escalation and continuation of World War I.

3. Division of Europe into Two Hostile Groups

Mutual Defense Alliances among nation-states got further consolidated to strengthen their military & strategic capabilities which effectively resulted in division of Europe into two hostile groups as under:

- a) By 1882, there was a group called '**Triple Alliance**' comprising of Germany, Austria – Hungary and Italy. In spite of being in triple alliance, Italy initially maintained neutrality but later it joined the war against Germany in 1915 breaking the triple alliance.
- b) In 1907, Russia, England and France entered into the '**Triple Entente**', which was later joined by Japan.

The Triple Entente caused the most friction among rival alliance. Germany felt that this alliance surrounding them was a threat to their power and existence. As tensions continued to rise over alliances, the preexisting alliances fed into other countries declaring war against one another in the face of conflict. Finally, it culminated into two sides of the war, one, the **Allied Powers** (Russia, France, Britain, Italy and United States) and the other, **Central Powers** (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria).

4. Nationalism

Nationalism is an emotional feeling of brotherhood among the people, by dint of common and shared history, socio – religious culture, geography and common expectations. Nationalism is normally good but its excessiveness sometime results in superior feelings, desire for excessive power, exhibiting military coercion and imperial choices. History tells us that 18th century Europe saw signs of excessive and extremist form of nationalism which resulted in expansionist and imperial designs.

In this context, it is stated that much of the origin of the World War I was based on the desire of the Slavic peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina to no longer be part of Austria -

Hungary but instead be part of Serbia. In this way, Serbian nationalism led directly to the War. Later, nationalism led to imperialism and European expansionism.

5. Imperialism and European Expansionism

Imperialism generally occurs when a country increases their power and wealth by bringing additional territories / colonies under their control. Before World War I, Africa and parts of Asia were points of contention among the European countries. This was because of the raw materials these areas could provide. The increasing competition and desire for greater empires led to an increase in confrontation that helped push the world into World War I. In the 1900s, several European nations had empires / colonies across the globe, where they had control over vast areas of lands. Prior to World War I, the British and French were the world's most powerful imperial powers having overseas colonies in India, Vietnam and West & North Africa.

The expansion of European nations as empires can be seen as a key reason of the war. As British and French expansionism continued, tensions rose between opposing empires including Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, leading to the creation of the Allied Powers and Central Powers during World War I. It resulted in increased tensions among other European countries. The tensions were a result of many colonies often being acquired through military coercion.

6. Industrial Revolution

The industrial revolution was the force behind Imperialism and European Expansionism. The revolution increased the production capacity of Western states manifold. The continuity of the increased production capacity of industrial firms necessitated enormous requirements of raw materials to accomplish enhanced demands. Consequently, there was dire need to conquer new territories and continuity of overseas colonies from where they can easily and cheaply extract raw materials on daily basis for their industrial production. Production of industrial goods at large scale further necessitated huge market to sell out excess manufactured products to these overseas colonies for profit. In

other words, overseas colonies become hub for supply of raw material and consumption of manufactured goods.

7. Race for Armaments: Rise of Militarism

New weapons produced during the Industrial Revolution in the late 1800s heightened existing tensions among European nations as countries strove to outpace their enemies technologically. This armament race accelerated in the decade before 1914 as the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy squared off against the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Britain. Germany's fears of increases in Russian armaments and British fears of the German naval buildup, contributed heavily to the outbreak and spread of the World War I.

By 1914, Germany had the greatest increase in military build-up. Great Britain and Germany both greatly increased their navies during this time period. Further, the military establishment in Germany and Russia began to have a greater influence on public policy. Military build-up was described as necessary for colonial victory. This increase in militarism and race for armaments helped push the countries involved into war.

8. Immediate Cause: Assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

The immediate cause of First World War was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary which made the aforementioned reasons come into play. In June 1914, a Serbian-nationalist terrorist group called the Black Hand sent groups to assassinate the Archduke. Serbian nationalist named Gavrilo Princip assassinated Ferdinand and his wife while they were in Sarajevo, Bosnia which was part of Austria - Hungary. Ferdinand was chosen as a target because he was to be the heir of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The assassination was carried out in protest to Austria - Hungary having control of Serbian region. This assassination led to Austria-Hungary declaring war on Serbia. When Russia began to mobilize due to its alliance with Serbia, Germany declared war on Russia.

Thus began the expansion of the war to include all those involved in the mutual defense alliances.

9. Lack of International Laws

Today there are various international laws and organizations like United Nations which are mandated to ensure that states adhere to international peace and security and maintain mutual respect to each other's sovereignty. However prior to the war when Europe was on the brink of creating chaos and disarray across the whole of the continent, there was no such international regimes which could enforce mutual peace and non-aggression. In other words, there was no international system to impose penalty to those who annexed territories in the name of their imperial aspirations. Though a global-level economy had already surfaced by the late 19th century, the global community as a whole was yet to devise a system of international law that could restrain one nation from using violence against another.

Conclusion

The above analysis suggests that there were involvement of many complex events in the build-up to World War I. One thing led to another and finally, Europe's biggest powers were divided into two factions. Following the above mentioned reasons and eventual situations, World War I moved into full force from 1914 through 1918, ending when peace was brokered between the German & Central Forces and the Allied Powers with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. However, this treaty forced punitive measures on Germany that further destabilized Europe and laid the groundwork for the start of World War II.

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