

Exploring the Causes for World War I beyond German Culpability

‘War begins in the minds of men.’

Atharvaveda, ancient Indian text.

Prologue

Few events have left an imprint as vast and permanent as the First World War. The world had never seen before such an all-pervading conflict or the calamitous devastation it caused. It is, therefore, natural that we examine the processes, events, and persons most responsible for this grand war, which shook the earth to its very foundations.



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Trench Warfare in World War I

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Aggressive German nationalism did precipitate the conflict, but other nationalism variants were equally guilty. By 1870, Prussian Prime Minister, Otto von Bismarck, had welded fissiparous German principalities into a coherent nation. But in doing so, he sowed the seeds of distrust across Europe that would reap bitter harvest. Anxiously energetic, the young German nation impatiently sought a leading position at the high table of international politics.

Britain was the chief empire of the 19th century, an empire on which ‘the sun never set’. She and France were apprehensively jealous of Germany’s meteoric rise since 1870. Imperialists, all of them, take the mile when reluctantly conceding the inch. Britain and France ferociously denied the deserving inch to Germany who, then, decided to take the whole mile instead.

The Context

‘Oh! If I only knew’, was what German Chancellor Bethman [replied](#) when asked about the causes of the First World War. Complex and interrelated, developments that triggered the World War I (1914-18) have to be seen in the context of related phenomenon viz.:

- **European Industrialization**
- **Intense Nationalism**
- **Social Darwinism**
- **Globalization of Conflict**
- **Absence of Peaceful International Dispute Resolution Mechanism**

Rapid industrialization in 19th century Europe created the [need](#) for industrial powers to seek colonies in other parts of the world as a source of cheap raw materials and assured markets. This sparked off a mad race for colonies among numerous centers of political-military-commercial powers, and there emerged a newer, harsher version of imperialism.

Nationalism is a [sense of belonging](#), the sense of cohesiveness felt by a certain people. A positive concept, it was twisted by the politics of the day to mean industrial, military, and colonial might. In combination with the concept of [Social Darwinism](#) i.e. survival of the fittest, nationalism became a tool to legitimize imperialism.

Imperial powers were divided in armed camps. Russia was aligned with Serbia, France, and Britain while the Germans were in agreement with the Austrians and the Italians. In the absence of an international conflict resolution mechanism, a local discord between two rival powers conflagrated into a global war.

The Triggers

Summing up the sentiment in Europe at the time is a relevant quote by French politician Raymond Poincaré: 'if our generation has not been living in the hope of getting back Alsace and Lorraine, then I don't see any other reason why she exists'.

Following causes sparked off the war:

- **German Nationalism** was triggered by industrialization and her quest for a 'place under the sun'. Germans made rapid strides in coal, iron, and steel production – the essentials of any development – and rivaled Britain's production capacity by 1914

This sparked German aggression and gave cause for the conflict. In an atmosphere charged with suspicion and the distorted interpretation of nationalism, strife was inevitable



European Military Alliances in 1914

Image Courtesy of Historicair, Fluteflute, and User: Bibi Saint-Pol at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Europe_alliances_1914-en.svg

- **Bismarck's Policy of Backdoor Treaties and Manipulation** sowed suspicion and confusion in the minds of European rulers. Secret treaties meant nobody was sure who was supporting whom. The armed alliances were:
 - **Triple Alliance 1882** after Italy joined the 1879 accord between Germany and Austria-Hungary
 - **Triple Entente of 1907** when Russia joined the Entente Cordiale of 1904 between France and Britain. This was

preceded by the 1894 pact between France and Germany – a reaction to the Triple Alliance of 1882

An example of manipulative politics is how Bismarck stage managed the onset of the 1870 Franco Prussian War. Wanting a pretext for war with France, Bismarck tried to thrust a relation of the Kaiser (German Emperor) on the Spanish throne. If successful, France would be locked between Spain and Germany. The candidacy of the Kaiser's relation was withdrawn later



Image of Chancellor Bismarck playing Chess with the Pope: Bismarck was a Political Genius
Image Courtesy of Wilhelm Scholtz at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Kladderadatsch_1875_-_Zwischen_Berlin_und_Rom.png

Bismarck then publicly released a doctored version of the telegram the Kaiser had sent him. He made it appear that the Kaiser and the French ambassador had insulted each other in a meeting over the issue of Spanish succession. This heated public opinion on both sides and there began the war

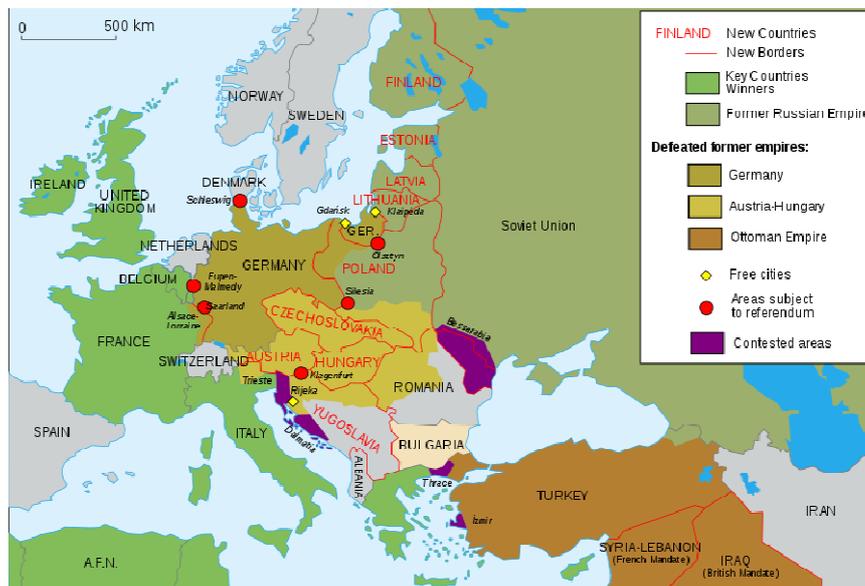
In this war, Germany snatched the resource-rich Alsace and Lorraine provinces from France that later became a cause for aggressive French nationalism

- **Military Build-Up and Naval Rivalry between Britain and Germany** gathered pace after the armed treaties. Germans started to bolster their navy in 1897. Britain reacted by launching the *Dreadnought*, the most advanced warship of the early 20th Century

Sensing multifaceted threats to her colonial empire, Britain ended her foreign policy of ‘Splendid Isolation’ in 1902. Isolation was no longer splendid! By 1914, Germans had over 4.5 million forces under training while Britain had less than a million. Russians up-scaled military training and expanded to 5 million

- **Tragedy of Miscalculations** by everyone precipitated the crisis. Serbian rise and her desire to throw off Austrian yoke gained strength, particularly after she fared well in the Second Balkan War of 1913. This irked Austria and Germany. Germans interpreted relative British detachment from continental politics as her unwillingness for war

The assassination of Austrian Duke and heir apparent Francis Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, Serbia served as the spark in such surcharged conditions. With unconditional German support, Austria issued an ultimatum to Serbia. The Russians ordered a military mobilization and so did the Germans



European Political Map 1923

Image Courtesy of Historicair and Fluteflute at

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Europe_1923-en.svg

Both sides wrongly interpreted mobilization as war. Germany declared war on Russia and France and attacked the latter via Belgium. This forced British entry in the war as Belgium is just opposite the English coast. The war had started and, soon, Europe would be the biggest loser

Epilogue

What was proclaimed as a ‘war to end all wars’ produced horrendous devastation. Directly, the war killed over [16 million](#). The figure jumps to an astounding [37 million](#) when we add the injured, missing, and prisoners as well as deaths due to war-caused disease, infection, starvation, and genocide.

European domination of international politics began to [wane](#) with the end of the war. Soon, another, larger global war – the Second World War – followed and the focus of international politics, economics, and military might permanently shifted across the Atlantic to the United States.

Industrial heavyweights of Europe went to the ‘war to end all wars’ to preserve and expand their global power and colonial empires. Paradoxically, they ended up provoking another, more calamitous war which ensured the opposite – perpetual weakening of their global influence and loss of colonies.
