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Causes of World War I

The First World War had bad consequences because none of the participating nations knew about its trigger. It is even more surprising that most of the states that initiated it did not know much about the roles they played in instigating a war that tainted the face of the world for good. This review establishes that the rise of Germany, the introduction of alliances, the changes in economic power, imperialism, nationalism, and the cult of the offensive were the main causes of World War I.

The rise of Germany occurred after the 1871 defeat of France, an occasion that gave Germany the advantage of being the chief in International Relations. While it seemed to be an advantage it was also a challenging factor because it meant that it had come into conflict with its neighbors ("World Politics and Economics 1648-1945" 79). The most pertinent nation was France, which made the incoming Kaiser Wilhelm II suggest that Germany needed a greater navy to maintain its power. This decision created a security dilemma in Europe and, in 1914, after the German alliance with Austria, it was involved in a naval arms race with Russia and France ("World Politics and Economics 1648-1945" 80).

Alliances created after the collapse of the Bismarckian system also led to the impending end of World War I. When the conflict between Berlin and St. Petersburg began to increase, France started creating ties with Russia. The motivating factor was to counter the increasing power in Germany. Even though it was meant to make Russia and France feel secure, Germany

interpreted it as a hostile encirclement. Many other ties followed later such as the Britain and Japan treaty, Austria-Hungary and Russia, and the Ottoman Empire (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 81). These alliances had different motives because while Germany intended to increase its influence, Austria-Hungary wanted to recapture its previous powers. It is reported that the leaders of the Russian, Ottoman and Austrian entanglement then became desperate to do anything including war to maintain their international stature (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 81).

The need for economic power also led to the First World War because it increased competition leading to tension amongst the competing powers. The main trigger for this was the industrialization that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The rapid mechanization led to an increasing population in Europe, which created pressures on the economic systems of the states. The increase in population could only be matched with the increase in industrialization, even though the rate differed among different countries. As a result, the period between 1850 and 1914 saw the evolution where nations stacked up against each other in terms of their economic prowess that led to European conflict (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 81). It is, thus, believed that the increase in competition for resources and markets heightened the potential for conflict and the subsequent capacity to engage in war.

Nationalism has also been documented as a key factor in initiating the First World War. It is reported that the French revolution stabilized the nation-state as a focus of allegiance. Other regions that did not have independent states were dominated by competing powers. The best examples were the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian Empires that felt the need to suppress nationalism within their borders as a crucial factor for survival. These nations, however, encouraged the neighboring empires in an attempt to gain politically at the expense of their

rivals. This motive backfired because in 1914 the heir to the Austria-Hungary Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated which triggered war (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 83).

The tension, as a result of imperialism, heightened pressures because power and security were dependent on an empire’s ability to control resources and acquire colonies (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 83). After most parts of the world had been colonized, there was not much left for other states which then felt left out. Germany particularly became worried about its ability to obtain resources and trading partners. The effect led to tension among the European powers because of the need to expand their sphere of influence. Examples of conflicts that have been documented are the Britain and France conflict and Britain and Russian clash. The powers, however, restricted themselves and were not engaged in war in the nineteenth century. It was not until the twentieth century that colonial antagonism deepened between Britain and Germany that led to war (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 84).

Finally, it is said that the First World War was a result of the cult of offense. The stimulating factor, in this case, was the technological advancement which created the belief that the side that would be swift in mounting an effective offensive would overpower the others (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 84). Two major factors made this belief appear realistic at the time. First, technological advancement led to improved communication from the use of the telegraph that enabled generals to get reports and issue orders faster. Also, the expansion of the railway meant the rapid deployment of troops that made it possible for attacking troops to counter their rivals. Secondly, the cult of offensive created a security dilemma that made the states attack their enemies before they could be attacked. The principle behind this factor was the belief that the side that landed the first blow would become the eventual winner.

The states, therefore, began acting aggressively by increasing military buildups meant to create fear in their neighbors (“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945” 84).

In conclusion, there are six main reasons that led to the emergence of World War I. One major factor was that Germany rose as a reference for International relations which meant its neighbors felt envious and created conflict. Also, despite the motivation of forming alliances being a safety precaution, other countries such as Germany interpreted it as a threat to their dominance. The industrial revolution was also a cause of imbalance in economic power among European states. Some countries objected to the idea of nationalism while they encouraged other neighboring states to participate, a motive that backfired and resulted in war. It is also said that the desperation for the need to gain more access to resources led to colonization and the less influential states such as Germany created conflict for the fear of being left out. Finally, the two-faced technological advancement in the early twentieth century meant greater ability to gain information about and, thus, attack them. The cult of offense also led to states’ belief that if they attacked first they would create fear and, thus, easily win a war.

Works Cited

“World Politics and Economics 1648-1945.” *Foundations of World Politics*. N.p. 81–84. Print.

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