

Burhanuddin Mogul

HIST 390

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Origins of the Great War

At the cusp of World War One, European politics and the environment were in a delicate state. Nationality had begun to become an identity akin to that of one's family, and any insult to one's nation had become an insult to oneself. Wars as a whole cannot be simply rationalized to singular events, but rather a collage of various factors. At the start of the twentieth century, rising nationalistic ideals, weak diplomatic relations and complex alliances created a house of cards that was the European world.

When looking at Europe before World War One, the ideals of nationalism can be seen everywhere. The power of the nation and the pride in one's nation is a relatively new phenomena, where before, people believed more in the identity of a feudal lord, a city state or even a religious sect rather than that of the nation (Kohn 2). Nationalism started to rise between the late 18th and 19th centuries and at the start of the 20th century, the European people believed in the identity of the state of a common people, in a nation. Many of these nations suffered from internal strife, conflicts began to rise due to these nationalistic beliefs. Looking at Austria-Hungary, it was a nation where people of various ethnic groups resided. With the rising belief of nationalism, each of these groups wanted a nation of their own, causing a divide

within the nation (Findley 56). This same issue could have also been seen in most of the key players in the war; the Russian and Ottoman empires, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany. Where nationalism aimed to unify people, it led to more divide and stimulated conflict. Nationalistic ideals allowed the common man to justify killing each other. They no longer saw themselves as Europeans but rather “Frenchman, Germans, Russians” (Findley 58). The film *All Quiet on the Western Front* portrays the power nationalism had on the common folk when its protagonist Paul returns home from the war while on leave. Paul goes to his old school and sees his old teacher spewing the same nationalism propaganda that got him and his friends to join the war effort. Paul, who now has suffered greatly due to the horrors of war, starts describing to the young students that war is not some amazing opportunity to make a name for yourself but rather a hell on earth. After hearing this first hand account, the students and teacher start insulting Paul for his lack of nationalism and none are swayed from their support of the war (*All Quiet on the Western Front* 01:55:00). Even when faced with accounts of the war, the people are still ready to continue sending people to their deaths for the sake of a “nation”.

Another aspect of the European climate that led to World War One was the weak diplomatic relations and complex alliances. A series of bad diplomatic relations / decisions and various alliances allowed for a series of events that led to death on all sides. At the time, tensions were high due to the diplomatic relations nations held. Germany was tense all around as a growing sense of being surrounded started to rise in it’s political atmosphere during the start of the century.

Germany had felt alienated and under threat from the surrounding major nations, but this was due to “their central position to create fear on all sides, in order to gain their diplomatic ends” (Trevelyan 463). A set of bad diplomatic policies had set Germany in a situation where they were now in bad terms with Russia, France and England. Another set of bad diplomatic decisions was seen by Austria-Hungary when conflict arose with Serbia. In favor of ending the conflict, “Austria-Hungary dispatched to the Serbs an insulting set of demands that no independent nation could have been expected to accept” (Findley 56). Austria-Hungary’s lack of respect for Serbia led to an act of insulting and ingenuine diplomacy. Not only was treaty misguided but so was the action of starting the conflict itself. Austria-Hungary had not taken military alliances into account before starting the conflict, so once a conflict with Serbia had begun, Russia had been pulled in, and once Russia was pulled in so were its allies, France and Britain. This brings the complex web of alliances into view. Austria-Hungary, allied with Germany, the Ottomans and Italy until the start of the war, all nations who were allied for military protection. On the other side, France, Britain, and Russia had a similar alliance with each other. Each of these nations were under the impression that powerful allies meant protection, but failed to fully comprehend that it also meant more opportunities for war (Findley 56). These alliances created obligations such that a major event that should only be on a national scale, is now an international threat.

In most public education institutions, it is commonly taught that World War One had begun when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. The

assassination of Ferdinand was simply a single card falling in an already delicate structure. The European powers were already in a tense state due to weak diplomatic policies and actions, various alliances that created many obligations and the overwhelming ideals of nationalism. The European world had been viewing “the world as an arena of conflict rather than interdependence”, this shared world view allowed for the mass killing of common men for powers far removed (Findley 59).

Works Cited

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