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HIST 390

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Causes of WWI

It is a common understanding that the world changed on June 18th, 1914. The Archduke and heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in some town named Sarajevo, Bosnia. This one event waterfalled into the major conflicts of the 20th century, starting with the Great War. As important as the Archduke may have been, his assassination should not have been the cause of the most catastrophic war the world had yet seen, and it was not. The assassination had such a large impact because of the fragile structure of European politics and climate of the time. European countries were in a state of elevated nationalism alongside a complex web of alliances and weak diplomatic relations. These were some of the reasons why Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s death changed the political climate of the world forever.

Nationalism is an ideology that emphasizes one’s loyalty and devotion to their country while taking pride in a shared culture and traditions. This ideology was one of the main causes of conflict between and within nations. Austria-Hungary was “a state that included people of a dozen ethnic groups…” in an “age that believed every ethnic group should have a nation of its own” (Findley 56). Many other empires outside of Austria-Hungary had similar problems with diverse ethnic groups wanting their own nation such as the Ottoman empire and the Russian Empire. These internal conflicts caused strife within nations which led to tensions between allied nations. Nationalism also felt its affects in international affairs as well. Most people of the early 20th century believed “themselves to be not European but Frenchman, Germans, Russians” or any other nationality (Findley 58). This identity the people held made tensions between countries greater. This made countries feel obligated to strengthen themselves at the expense of others. Nationalism was used to round up people to take up arms and fight. In the start of the movie “All Quiet on the Western Front”, a group of young German men are fed German Propaganda by their teacher to enlist and fight for the fatherland (All Quiet on the Western Front 00:04:17). Nationalism was a powerful tool that helped countries enlist its population, but it was also the reason why the countries needed to go to war in the first place.

Another important cause of World War I was the intricate web of Alliances that existed in the early 20th centuries. Most nations were under the impression that they would be safer from attacks if they had powerful allies (Findley 56). This understanding was partially true, but it also became the reason why they had to fight. The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand set off a “chain reaction that within 10 days involved almost all the major powers” (Findley 56). Because of the obligations nations held to each other, one major event in a country that normally would only impact the people of that country, impacted the people of all the countries allied to it and all the countered allied to the opposition. The war was mostly composed of two major alliances, the triple alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, and the triple entente of France, Russia, and Britain. Once Austria fell into conflict, Germany and Italy were pulled in to support their ally. Austria declared war on Serbia, and ally of Russia, which in turn pulled in Russia, Britain, and France. In such a climate, any conflict between nations would have led to the massive war that was World War I.

Diplomatic relations between countries helped in starting the war. Most countries had incorrectly judged how safe their alliances made them and how their actions would bring other nations into the fold. When the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia started, “Austria-Hungary dispatched to the Serbs an insulting set of demand that no independent nation could have been expected to accept” (Findley 56). Austria-Hungary did not respect Serbia and in doing so they sent a treaty out of formality rather than sincerity. Austria-Hungary had not considered that by starting a war with Serbia, Russia and its allies would be brought into the fold and the conflict would grow rapidly. Another diplomatic issue was one between Germany and Britain. At the time, Germany was rapidly growing into a powerful nation but also pushing into conceptual and physical territories that Britain had deemed their own. Germany started to build a powerful naval fleet, which Britain took as a challenge and a threat, starting an arms race. In doing so the countries failed to consider that they were major trading partners (Findley 59). One of the core issues as to why many of the diplomatic conflicts aroused was due to the way the European world viewed most of these relations. They perceived “the world as an arena of conflict rather than interdependence” (Findley 59). By not considering alliances and political climates of other countries, many European countries made decisions out of the fear or desire of conflict instead of mutual benefit.

World War I was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but there were many different underlying issues that were the cause of the war. There existed a fragile political structure built upon heightened nationalism, intricate alliances, and a lack of diplomatic relations. The internal conflicts fueled by nationalism only helped in making countries more susceptible to conflicts with external countries. The alliances that existed only served as fuel to any conflict that may have occurred, substantially increasing the consequences. Strained diplomatic relations formed due to a lack of understanding, communication and disrespect created more political tension that would have gone off with a single gunshot. The events that led up to World War I highlight the importance of understanding the connection between nationalism, alliances and peaceful relations with neighboring countries.

Works Cited

"All Quiet on the Western Front." Directed by Lewis Milestone Universal Pictures, 1930.

“Chapter 3: World War I: The Turning Point of European Ascendancy”, Findley.