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German 2320W

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Lesson 1

German Wilhelmine Expansion and Effect on World War 1

Since the end of the Holy Roman Empire of Germanic Nations in 1806, the Germanic people have been split into several small nation states with very little unity and with little in common except language, but as powers such as Great Britain and France expanded and united the question of a national identity cast a shadow on the Germanic people for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This led people to ask, “The German Question” and what it meant to be German. This nationalism led to rise of the German empire and was a major contributing factor that led World War 1.

The Wilhelm Expansion Era is considered to be from 1890 to 1914, during the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, but to understand the expansion era the years leading up to this must be explained. From the end of the War of Liberation against Napoleon, many Germans had hoped the victory would help unite the Germanic states, but much like modern politics nothing is simple. During the restoration period (1815-1848) revolts against the monarchies were popular and helped form the Frankfurt National Assembly. The Frankfurt National Assembly was a parliamentary body which many hoped would finally unify the German states, but the major powers Austria and Prussia, in an attempt to remain in power, had successfully squashed liberals in the Frankfurt assembly who were hoping for a unified Germany. The Austrians accomplished this by withdrawing all their deputies from Frankfurt, while at the same time Prussia parliamentarians resigned all their mandates and left. With the two most powerful German states gone, the Frankfurt Assembly lacked enough power to accomplish its goals and slowly the rest of the conservative states left. With little power and becoming essentially a revolution, the wealthy member withdrew, disappointed, and the assembly ended. The assembly did play crucial role in the unification of Germany moving forward and was one step closer to solving the identity crisis of the “German Question”.

While the assembly formed, and died, a Prussian aristocrat who was serving in the Prussian parliament named Otto von Bismarck saw the opportunity Prussia had to become a leader in a unified Germany after it was clear that Austro-Hungarian empire would not compromise and release their non-German lands and colonies. In 1862, Bismarck became Chancellor and started laying the foundation for his goal of a unified Germany. In a speech to parliament, he said the failure of the Frankfurt Assembly was because they tried to decide things based on “discussion and majority decisions”; his solution was unification through “blood and iron”. The “blood and iron” Chancellor, as he came to be known, set a powerful precedent on how to rule and control as leader, though political maneuvering Bismarck could force other nations into declaring war, which was done to make it look like Prussia was not the aggressor. Through his political dancing and strong military victories, Bismarck defeated Denmark, Austria, and France all quickly and decisively. After these major victories, Bismarck began working with other German states to form the new Germany and in 1871, the Prussian King was crowned Emperor of the new Germany and began the Second Reich.

The Second Reich encompasses the Wilhelm Expansion Era and during this time, due to the increased production from the war, the economy was booming. Citizen benefitted financially and socially from the policies of the Second Reich and this created a nationalist identity and pride. The German people were excited to become a major world power, economically and military, and this nationalistic pride for their country would be an important factor leading into World War 1. This pride helped spearhead Germany into industrial revolution, albeit very late, because Germany was not a unified country until late the 19th century, but it was also a cause for divide between Germany and the rest of Europe as they were jealous of more developed countries and did not want to be seen as inferior. This led to many future policies in Germany was more powder for the keg that started World War 1. Wilhelm II politically maneuvered and forced Bismarck to resign so he would not have to be merely a puppet and could move his own agenda forward. This agenda included strengthening the nobility, becoming an industrial nation, and expanding colonies across the world, specifically in Africa and Southeast Asia. Wilhelm II felt that Germany was destined for greatness and that Germany would be at the helm to advance the European civilization as whole, as displayed by his drive for colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia, but Wilhelm proved to be an incompetent and clumsy leader and began unraveling treaties with other nations while simultaneously bolstering arms production. By 1907 Germany had built a naval to rival that of Great Britain and in doing so forced Great Britain to form an alliance with France and Russia forming the Triple Entente as it would become known. The combination of the web of treaties between nations, fear of other developing nations, the arms race to build up super fleets and armies, the increased nationalism, and economic factors led to the powder keg of World War 1 that was sparked when Archduke Franz Ferdinand. After the assassination of the Archduke, Austria declares war on Serbia, which causes Russia to mobilize in defense of Serbia, the forced Germany to mobilize against Russian in defense of Austria. This formed what would become known as the “Central Powers” of which consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. Opposite of the Central Powers was the Triple Entente, which consisted of France, Great Britain, and Russia, the Triple Entente would late be expanded as more allies joined the war to include other powers such as Japan, Italy, China, the United States, and Romania. The Great War had begun and it was the first war to span the globe and led to the death of nearly 18 million people and left another 23 million wounded, due to the modernization of weaponry including machineguns, advanced artillery and toxic gas, as well as the general dangers of trench warfare.

The rise of German nationalism and unification, coupled with the desire to expand into a world power under the leadership of a mentally unfit leader, set the stage for World War 1. Also, the nationalism and military buildup of other nations led to the rising tensions among European nations that forced them into defensive treaties with other nations. This web of treaties created the European powder keg that blew into the first World War and set the stage for the next World War.