



The Causes of World War I

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

Diagnosing the causes of World War I would be similar to diagnosing the cause of a patient's embolism that results in a stroke. A stroke is caused by a clot that builds up and obstructs the patient's blood vessel, with all sorts of bad outcomes for the human body. The bad outcome that was World War I in Europe was caused by a "buildup" of nationalistic grudges, arms races and competition for colonies and a web of alliances and war treaties that sucked everyone into this useless, futile conflict.

Nationalism and grudges

France in 1914 was still smarting for their loss in a war with Prussia in 1871. The newly united Germany's prize in that war was the valuable industrial area of the Alsace-Lorraine. The French wanted it back.

Meanwhile, the superannuated empire of Austria-Hungary presided over a network of Balkan states with many national and ethnic groups.

Austria-Hungary. The “Pan Slavism” of little Serbia. Problems in the Balkans festered since Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia with its minority population of three million Serbs. Standing at the sidelines ready to support their Slavic cousins, were the Russians.

German might and the arms race

With its Prussian tradition of militarism, Germany was the acknowledged leader in military organization and efficiency and a model to the rest of Europe. Europe, likewise, followed German lead with a universal draft, war plans for mobilizing their forces and a buildup in munitions. Unfortunately, the plans were so intricate that they often could not be halted once begun. (German mobilization, for example, included an invasion of France through Belgium, which pulled England into the fray unnecessarily.)

Between 1870 and the beginning of World War I, the build up of navies and the standing armies of the major European powers led to an almost self-sustaining competition and a buildup that fed on itself.

The scramble for Colonies

Europeans were rivals in other parts of the world. They competed for markets and colonies in Africa. The British and the French were able to accommodate each other and solve their differences, but German interests clashed with Britain and France in Morocco. Also, as the Ottoman Empire began to crumble in the Middle East, Austria-Hungary and Russia cast jealous eyes towards potential spoils of the Sultan's demise.

Alliances that sucked everyone into the war

European leaders chose sides and signed mutual defense treaties. They were:

- * Triple Alliance A treaty between Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary signed in 1882.

- * Franco-Russian Entente - Formed in 1891 between France and Russia.

- * Russian Entente with Britain - Formed in 1907 to counter the Triple Alliance.

The tinderbox ignites

On July 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia, a Serbian nationalist shot Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austria-Hungary throne. Germany pressured Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia, while Russia backed Serbia. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia the same day, and Russia mobilized in support of Serbia.

France mobilized, and on August 1, Germany declared war on Russia. Germany likewise declared war on France on August 3. The Germany invasion of Belgium to get to France, violated Belgium's neutrality and Britain declared war on Germany.

Why the U.S. joined

President Wilson won reelection in 1916 on the slogan "He kept us out of war." The implication here was that Wilson could continue to steer the U.S. clear of the war in Europe with the U.S. friends (England and France) on one side and "Kaiser Bill and the Huns" on the other. As it turned out, "Kaiser Bill" through his recklessness and diplomatic ineptitude had only himself to blame when American troops embarked to tip the balance

against him. German submarine attacks on shipping cost American lives and outraged American public opinion.

Then there was the infamous Zimmerman Memorandum where the German foreign minister promised Mexico return the American southwest as an incentive to declare war on the United States. The British intercepted a copy of the memorandum and saw to it that it was published in the American press.

So World War I was a “blow out” resulting from nationalism and historic antagonisms between Europeans, the treaties and counter-treaties and arms buildups. It might have ended in a draw but for Wilson’s entry into what he liked to call “the war to end all wars...to make the world safe for democracy.” Sadly, World War I did not end all wars; it sowed the seeds for World War II. Also, it only made Germany “safe” for fascism and Russia “safe” for Communism.