

Prelude to the Guns of August

Conventional wisdom says that WWI was caused by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, but that was merely a handy event used by leaders to push their agendas.



AP Images

Countdown to war: With various European nationalities vying for their own independent countries, and with established countries both arming themselves and making pledges of aid in case an ally was attacked, WWI was *almost* inevitable. The assassination of the archduke provided only a pretext.

by Brian Farmer

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop. Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies,

the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities....

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.

— from George Washington's Farewell Address

It has been a hundred years since The Great War (better known now as the First World War or World War I) broke out during the summer of 1914. The conventional wisdom generally leads us to believe that the war was caused by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, on June 28, 1914. In reality, the shooting began a chain of events that led to war, but it did not cause the war or make war inevitable. The war could have been avoided if Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the other major European powers did not want to fight. They did not declare war on each other until the beginning of August, a full five weeks after the assassination. The logical question is: What happened that caused such a calamitous conflict to break out? Let us put conventional wisdom aside and take a closer look.

Napoleon's Nationalism

The fundamental causes of the First World War were grounded in the European history of the preceding century, particularly in the political and economic policies of the major European nations after 1871, the year in which Germany emerged as a world power. Those policies, in turn, were driven by a spirit of intense nationalism that prevailed in Europe throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. That nationalism had sprung up because the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era had spread the idea of political democracy throughout most of Europe, and along with that went the notion that people of similar ethnicity who shared the same language and political ideals had the right to form their own nation. However, when the Congress of Vienna convened to settle the affairs of Europe at the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the principle of national independence was largely ignored by the ruling dynasties that dominated the Con-

gress. A number of populations that wanted an independent nationality of their own were put under the control of local rulers or other nations. For example, the German people were left divided into numerous duchies, principalities, and kingdoms, and Belgians were placed under Dutch rule by the Congress of Vienna. Eventually, revolutions and strong nationalist movements succeeded in overturning the anti-nationalistic work of the Congress. Belgium won its independence from the Netherlands in 1831, and the unification of Germany was achieved in 1871.

At the close of the 19th century, however, there were a number of areas in Europe where the problem of nationalism remained unresolved, resulting in tensions within those regions and also between various European nations. One such region was Alsace-Lorraine, located between France and Germany, which had been under French rule since the end of the 17th century. After defeating the French in the Franco-German War of 1870-71, Germany annexed the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. France, bitter over the loss of those provinces, nursed the desire to regain them, even if it meant fighting another war. A second European area of contention was the Trentino, in the Tyrol region between Austria-Hungary and Italy, and a third was Trieste, a port city at the head of the Adriatic Sea. The populations of both areas were largely Italian, but both remained under Austro-Hungarian control after the Kingdom of Italy was formed. The desire of Italy to gain possession of those areas was a constant source of friction between Austria-Hungary and Italy. A fourth area in which the problem of national self-determination caused conflict was the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself, and a fifth was the Balkan region. Austria-Hungary was made up of a mixture of peoples, such as Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Italians, and Slavs, who strove to achieve national autonomy.

The government of Austria-Hungary was able to quickly neutralize any revolts that occurred, but its control over the various nationalistic populations within its borders remained tenuous. The tension between the Austro-Hungarian government and the Slavic peoples within the empire was kept alive

by successful revolts against Turkish authority in the Balkan region. Those revolts resulted in the establishment of the kingdoms of Greece in 1829, and Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria in 1878 (all but Greece and Romania being Slav kingdoms).

A strong, nationalistic Slav movement, known as Pan Slavism, which promoted the cultural and political union of all Slavic peoples, grew up in the Slav nations of the Balkans, especially in Serbia and Montenegro, as well as in the leading European Slav power, Russia. The program of Pan Slavism was vague, but its spirit of pride in Slavic cultural and military achievements, and the hope that it held out for a future union of all European Slavs, inspired constant agitation for national autonomy among the Slavs within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The aspirations of the Slavs living in the Balkans and within the borders of Austria-Hungary were strongly supported by Russia, not only because of common ethnicity, but also because any force that might serve to weaken Austria-Hungary would aid Russia in achieving its ambitions. In particular, Russia wanted to gain control of the Dardanelles and Black Sea ports, in order to facilitate trade with the countries bordering on the Mediterranean Sea. On the other hand, Germany supported the policies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, not only because Germany was ethnically

linked with the Austrians, but also because Austro-Hungarian domination in the eastern part of Europe would aid German ambitions. In particular, Germany wanted to establish an economic sphere of influence extending from the Balkans through Turkey to the Persian Gulf, a plan that became known as the *Drang nach Osten*, or “drive toward the East.”

Colony Clashes

The spirit of nationalism in Europe also manifested itself in heightened economic competition. The Industrial Revolution, which began in Great Britain before 1800, in France around 1830, and in Germany about 1870, caused a great increase in the manufacturing capability of each country and the resulting need to find foreign markets to absorb the surplus of goods that could not be consumed domestically. Also, there was a need to find places to invest surplus capital that could be used to develop the natural resources that would serve to provide the raw materials needed for the manufacturing industries. This led Great Britain, France, and Germany to develop an imperialistic policy, based on economic needs, which essentially boiled down to the acquisition of colonies for economic exploitation. The primary target area for their policies of economic expansion was Africa, where their colonial interests frequently clashed.

Economic tension also existed in Eu-



History isn't dead: In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Europe was divided without regard to ethnic groupings, leaving many Europeans angry. This led to WWI. After WWI and WWII, much of Europe and Asia was again divided without regard to ethnicities, causing world strife since then.

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rope between Germany and Russia, each of which raised tariff barriers against the commodities of the other while at the same time insisting that it be able to more easily sell its commodities in the other country. In 1904, the two nations signed a 10-year treaty whereby each agreed to make certain reductions in its tariff duties. But in 1914, as the time drew near for the renewal or modification of the treaty, Germany feared that the recently increased size of the Russian army would encourage Russia to push for changes that Germany was not willing to accept. In addition, economic tensions arose due to Germany's desire to have a seaport closer to the Atlantic Ocean, such as Ostend in Belgium. Similarly, Serbia desired a port on the Adriatic Sea in an area controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Austria-Hungary wanted to annex the Aegean port of Salonika, which was located in Greek territory.

The aforementioned political, social, and economic tensions led the nations of Europe to adopt domestic and foreign policies that steadily increased the risk of war. Between 1871 and 1914 the major European nations became motivated by the conviction that their national interests were being threatened. As a result, they began to maintain large standing armies and to increase the size of their navies. In particular, Germany, which attributed British economic strength to the superiority of the British navy over all other navies, set out to create a navy that would rival that of Great Britain. Eventually, political leaders everywhere began to realize that the ever-growing expenditures on armaments would ultimately lead to either national bankruptcy or to war. This led to several efforts to work toward worldwide disarmament, most notably at the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907. But international rivalry was too far advanced to make possible any progress toward dis-

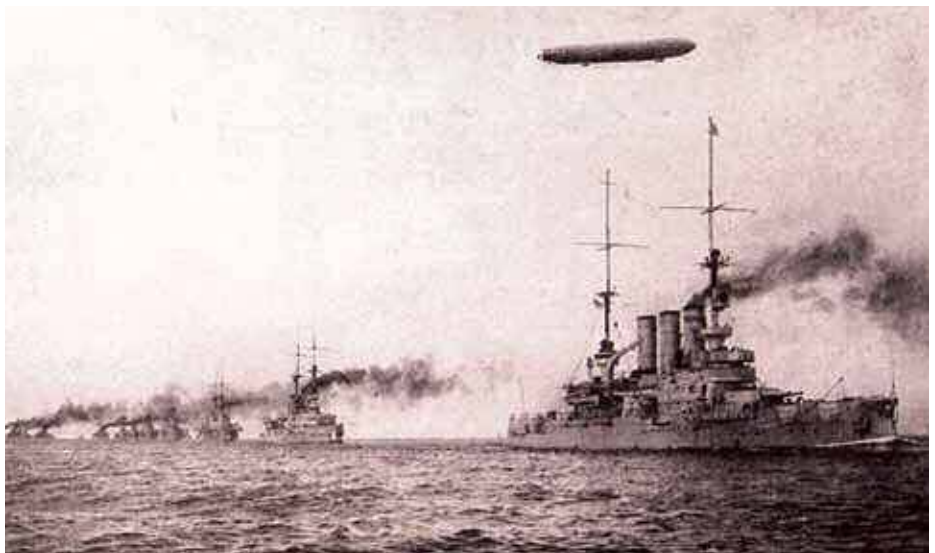
armament at those conferences. Each nation considered it a matter of common sense to arm itself while its neighbors were armed and threatening, and each nation hoped the fact that all were prepared for war would prevent any of them from actually resorting to war.

Balance of Power

This balance-of-power system had been successful in keeping the peace in Europe for many decades and reflected a pattern of international behavior whereby no one nation was allowed to gain a dominant position over the others. Great Britain, in particular, pursued a policy of maintaining a "just equilibrium" among the continental powers of Europe. While Great Britain remained relatively aloof and uncommitted, it was also vigilant against any threat to the balance of power on the continent, and was able to bring pressure to bear when needed, as long as the Royal Navy ruled the seas. But a serious threat to this British-dominated balance-of-power system began to come about with new advances in science and the expansion of industry, which promoted the development and production of all types of weapons and military equipment, together with rapid means of communication and transportation, such as the telegraph, the railway, and the steamship. As a result,

military strategies and tactics could be developed without having to worry so much about the uncertainties relating to unfavorable weather, bad roads, and the lengthy time periods between the obtaining of valuable military intelligence and the taking of appropriate offensive or defensive maneuvers. Military planners could now count on greatly increased firepower and the rapid concentration of forces to overwhelm any resistance. The British were not to realize until too late how much their *Pax Britannica*, so to speak, had been undermined.

A major lesson had been learned by the nations of Europe as a result of the Franco-German War of 1870-71, namely, that no nation could feel secure if it did not train all of its young men for war, establish a system of manpower reserves, and create a general staff to prepare mobilization and war plans. Consequently, by 1890, the major European powers had armies maintained through conscription, beginning at the age of 19 or 20. The average requirement was three years of active duty, followed by up to 15 years in the reserves, during which there was periodic refresher training. Mobilization could triple or quadruple the manpower strength of the peacetime army within 48 hours in Germany or France, which had the most efficient communication and transportation systems. Russia, with its vast distances and scanty railway network, had the least efficient system.

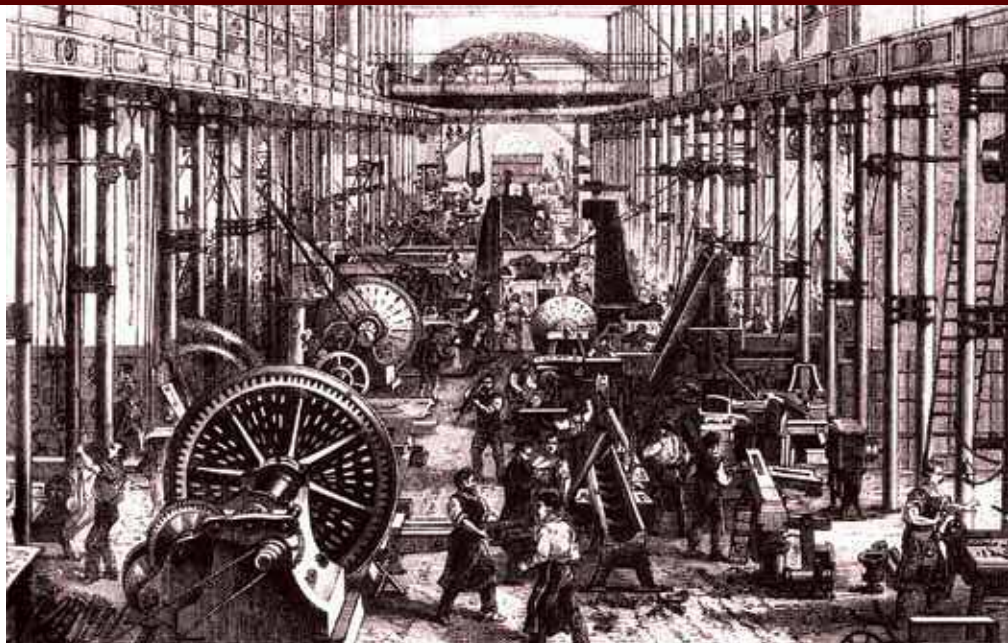


A fleeting ally: A little more than a decade before WWI, Great Britain was actually trying to draft a treaty with Germany to come to its aid if war broke out, but because Germany had the audacity to create a navy comparable to Britain's, called the High Seas Fleet, Britain sided with France.

Upon reporting to their mobilization centers, the reservists found weapons, uniforms, and equipment ready for their use and quickly joined their units. Then the war plan created by the general staff went into effect, which provided for the rapid movement of troops by rail to the assembly areas of the larger military groups, such as divisions and army corps. These areas were located so as to facilitate entry into action against the enemy at the earliest possible moment. A nation that could launch a full-scale offensive before its opponent could fully deploy its forces would gain a tremendous advantage. Hence, once any nation put the mobilization process into motion, no targeted adversary could afford to take even one day's delay in doing likewise without risking almost certain defeat. In other words, as soon as the order to mobilize was given, there was no turning back.

For purposes of self-defense, the European nations not only armed themselves but also sought out alliances with other powers so that they would not find themselves standing alone if war did break out. The result was the development of a situation that greatly increased the chances that war would, indeed, break out, namely, the grouping of the major European powers into two hostile military alliances. The first, which became known as the Triple Alliance, was put together by Prince Otto von Bismarck, chancellor of the German Empire. In order to prevent a possible resurgence of French power after France's defeat in the Franco-German War, he forged an agreement with Austria-Hungary in 1879 for mutual support in the event of war. Italy was also unfriendly toward France over a dispute in Tunisia during 1881 and, therefore, joined with Germany and Austria-Hungary to form the Triple Alliance in 1882.

To offset the Triple Alliance, France and Russia formed the Dual Alliance in 1891. Great Britain, due to rivalry with France in Africa, and due to rivalry with Russia in Asia, tried to come to an agreement with Germany between 1900 and 1902. The failure to do so, combined with Germany's plan for the creation of a navy that would be large enough to compete with that of Great Britain, convinced the British of Germany's hostility and led Great Britain to seek an understanding with France. Since France needed a friendly Great Britain to advance its plan to establish French authority over



Competition for raw materials: With the advent of the industrial revolution, European powers began to step up colonization efforts to gain raw materials. This caused additional friction between them, increasing the likelihood of war.

Morocco, it concluded an agreement with Great Britain in 1904 whereby the British promised not to interfere with the French in Morocco, and the French promised not to interfere with the British in Egypt. Although no formal treaty bound Great Britain to the members of the Dual Alliance, Great Britain, France, and Russia generally acted as a group in diplomatic affairs, standing together in what became known as the Triple Entente, as a counterbalance to the Triple Alliance. With regard to their rivalry in Persia (now Iran), Tibet, and Afghanistan, Great Britain and Russia came to an understanding in 1907, which increased the cohesion of the Triple Entente.

With Europe divided into two hostile camps, every disturbance of the political or military situation in Europe, Africa, and Asia brought on a crisis. Between 1905 and 1914, several international crises and two local wars took place, all of which threatened to bring about a general European war. The first crisis occurred over Morocco, where Germany intervened to support Moroccan independence against French political and economic pressure during 1905-06. France threatened war against Germany, but the crisis was finally settled by an international conference at Algeiras, Spain, in 1906. The second crisis took place in the Balkans over the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary in 1908. Since one form

of Pan Slavism was a Greater Serbia movement in Serbia, which had the objective of acquiring the southern part of Bosnia, the Serbs threatened war against the Austro-Hungarian Empire. War was avoided only because Serbia could not fight without Russian support, and Russia was unprepared for war at that time. A third crisis occurred in 1911, again in Morocco, when Germany sent a warship to Agadir in protest against French efforts to gain domination over Morocco. After threats of war on both sides, the crisis was defused by a conference in Agadir.

Seeing that the major powers were preoccupied with the Moroccan crisis, Italy, desiring to annex the Turkish provinces of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in North Africa, declared war on Turkey. Since Germany was interested in cultivating a friendship with Turkey, in pursuit of its *Drang nach Osten* (drive toward the East) policy, Italy's war against Turkey had the effect of weakening the Triple Alliance and encouraging the Alliance's adversaries. On top of that, the two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 resulted in an increased desire on the part of Serbia to annex the parts of Austria-Hungary that were inhabited by fellow Slavs, which served to strengthen Austro-Hungarian suspicion of Serbia. Meanwhile, Bulgaria and Turkey, which had been defeated in the two Balkan Wars, were left with a desire for revenge. As a result of Turkey



Mechanization and logistics: Prior to the onset of WWI, the rapid advances in transportation, such as trains and trucks, and communications meant that countries had to mobilize troops quickly or risk being overrun. Such advances in preparedness didn't leave much time for diplomacy.

being deprived of its European territory by the First Balkan War, Germany decided to increase the size of its army. France responded by lengthening its peacetime military service from two years to three years, and the other nations of Europe continued to spend huge sums for military preparedness. With all of Europe armed to the teeth and torn by national rivalries, the assassination of the Austrian archduke on June 28, 1914 would turn out to be like a match thrown into a tinderbox.

After the Assassination

The assassination immediately brought to a head the already strained relations between Serbia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The latter took the view that the assassination was the work of the Greater Serbia movement and that, unless the movement were suppressed by a military excursion by Austria-Hungary into Serbia, it would become powerful enough to cause major disruption within the Austro-Hungarian Em-

pire. On July 23, Austria-Hungary sent to Serbia an ultimatum containing 10 specific demands, most of which had to do with the suppression of anti-Austrian propaganda within Serbia. Some of the demands called for the participation of Austro-Hungarian officials in the undertaking of investigations on Serbian soil and, therefore, were almost certain to guarantee rejection by Serbia. With the urging of both Great Britain and Russia, Serbia accepted all but two of the demands by the 48-hour deadline on July 25, but Austria-Hungary declared the Serbian response to be unsatisfactory. The Russians then attempted to persuade Austria-Hungary to modify the terms of the ultimatum, stating that, if Austria-Hungary marched into Serbia, Russia would mobilize against Austria-Hungary.

On July 26, the British foreign minister, Sir Edward Grey, submitted a proposal that a conference of Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy should settle the dispute, but it was rejected by Germany. The Austro-Hungarian Empire then declared war against Serbia on July 28, apparently under the impression that Russia would not actually intervene to defend Serbia. In any case, Austria-Hungary was evidently prepared to

risk a general European war in order to put an end to the Greater Serbia movement. But Russia responded by partially mobilizing against Austria-Hungary, which induced Germany to respond by warning Russia that continued mobilization against its ally would lead to war with Germany. Germany urged Austria-Hungary to enter into discussions with Russia to try and defuse the situation but also demanded of Russia that it immediately demobilize. Russia refused to do so, and on August 1 Germany declared war on Russia. The French began to mobilize on the same day.

On August 2, German troops entered Luxembourg, and Germany informed Belgium of its intention to enter Belgian territory, allegedly in order to prevent an attack upon Germany by French troops that would soon be marching through Belgium. The Belgians refused to allow German troops to enter their country and called upon the nations who had signed the Treaty of 1839 (which guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium in the event of a conflict in which Great Britain, France, and Germany were involved) to defend Belgian neutrality. On August 3, Germany declared war on France, and on August 4 German troops marched into Belgium, thereby circumventing France's well-fortified frontier with Germany to the south. Great Britain, one of the signatories to the Treaty of 1839, sent an ultimatum to Germany demanding that Belgium's neutrality be respected and that German troops immediately withdraw. When the ultimatum expired at midnight without a reply, Great Britain declared war against Germany.

After a century of relative peace, a general war, not just a local war, had once again broken out in Europe. In the end, the conflict would grow into a global conflagration involving 32 nations. The principal cause was ultimately the decay of responsible political leadership in Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary at a time when technological developments and industrial growth had provided the major European powers with military forces far exceeding in size and might anything that had ever existed before. On top of that, the "artificial ties" and "permanent alliances" that George Washington had warned his fellow Americans about ended up pulling the major Europe-

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Eager to get it over with: Here the 98th Austro-Hungarian Infantry Regiment is on parade before heading for the front at the beginning of WWI. It seems that few people at the time expected the war to become a protracted bitter slog that would claim millions of lives.

an powers into a war that was ultimately against their best interests.

The peace of Europe had been preserved for a century by a system of collective security based on a balance of power, but as with the links of a chain, this system was no stronger than the national governments of which it was composed. Its survival required, in each nation's capital, a responsible political authority that was capable of reason and restraint, and that could control its military forces. Unfortunately, too few European nations had developed political institutions that were capable of exercising such authority on a constitutional basis. Military objectives, defined by military leaders who had no political training, determined what the national objectives would be. Hence, it was virtually inevitable that military goals would come to dominate the issues of war and peace. Under such conditions, what is surprising is not that war broke out in 1914, but that its outbreak was delayed for so long. ■

THE NEW AMERICAN will be featuring additional articles on the causes, effects, and legacy of World War I during the 100th-anniversary period.