

## **Failures of the European States during 1914 Leading to the First World War**

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**Abstract:** The First World War also known as the Great War took the lives of an estimated 20 million men, women and children and an estimated 21 million were wounded. Of those who lost their lives during the Great War, nearly 9.7 million were military personnel and around 10 million were civilians. It is incredibly difficult to grasp the carnage, destruction and chaos that the Great War brought to those involved. Often, it is learned of the reasons that led to the Great War, but little is stated or discussed on the possibilities of factors that could have led to its prevention and allowed the European States of 1914 to avoid all-out war. This article looks into the discussions of political economy prior to the Great War, possible diplomatic outcomes, and the effects of mobilization just during the four weeks prior to the first shots being fired.

**Keywords:** Political Economy, Diplomacy, Mobilization, Crisis

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The multiple miscalculations of participating parties of the First World War truly exemplify dangers and gross mishandlings of policy and actions leading up to full scale war. Though the First World War was associated with the label of ‘the war to end all wars’ this tragic statement proved to be mistaken, following the conflict that would be the Second World War. Our basic history lessons teach students about the basic points that lead of the First World War with the narratives of the assassination of Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand. Though from the lessons learned from the aftermath of the First World War and the lead up to the Second World War is commonly discussed, the question of ‘how could the First World War have been prevented?’ needs to be examined. After further investigation and learning what actions the leaders of the major powers originally wanted to take, one can learn what courses and actions could have taken place that would have prevented the catastrophic First World War. The economy of Europe at the turn of the century was bringing prosperity unlike any it had felt before. A semi-renaissance of new ideas, growing economy, trade, mass movement of people, and new ways of communications had brought a new way of life to the citizens of Europe. John Keegan explains that the world was being reshaped and that war would only disrupt the growing prosperity of the European nations. It seemed that some elements of cooperation between the nation states of Europe bought about success that shed some light that mutual understanding and open dialogue that could keep peace and constrain themselves from armed conflict.

### **II. VALUES OF POLITICAL ECONOMY**

Europe at the turn of the century was growing economically rich and powerful. “Between 1870 and 1900, world trade almost doubled, and in the remaining years before World War I it grew nearly half again. This expansion of trade led to the growing exposure of regional and national markets to the world economy—a development that profoundly affected almost every aspect of European economic, social, and political life.” (Rowe 1999) Every power in Europe were benefiting from their colonies, with the intake of raw materials that lead to the factories on the continent to produce goods in mass quantities. Goods such as electrical goods, chemical dyes, and internal combustion vehicles had brought a new group of consumers to the market. With the population of Europe on the rise, there would be more goods consumed and the greater demands of goods, causing the economies to rise and bring a better standard of living to most Europeans. Michel W. Doyle, in his book *Ways of War and Peace*, notes that the understanding of commercial pacifism under the ideas of Adam Smith could bring about peaceful resolutions to governments. Many of the nation states such as Imperial Germany, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Imperial Russia, were not democratic or had capitalist based economies, but an understanding that the profits of a rising economy could have been a large influence and motivator to prevent the mindset of the leaders of the warring states to take the drastic actions that they did.

In most modern nations with a democratic background, it seems unnecessary to act in conflict if the economy is stable and productive. Looking at nation states of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, majority of the nations were indeed monarchical and usually had one supreme ruler that gave the final verdict of political decisions. Had there been a strong emphasis of the political economy in the decision making process, many nation states may have refrained from any involvement with the crisis between Austrian-Hungary and Serbia. "During this period, technological revolutions in communications and transportation, combined with international political stability, significantly lowered the cost and risk associated with international exchange and led to a dramatic and sustained expansion of the volume and range of goods, services, and capital being exchanged on world markets." (Rowe 1999) In terms of changes in the production of goods prior to the Great War, "In Britain, then the leading industrial country, annual iron production reached 6.5 million tons in the early 1870s, four times that of Germany (1.6 million tons) and more than five times that of France (1.2 million tons), with Russia trailing far behind at a level of 375,000 tons. By 1913 annual production of the German empire had not only increased almost tenfold (14.8 million tons), but it had also overtaken that of Britain (9.8 million tons). France's production had grown fourfold, but with 4.7 million tons the country was not that far ahead of Russia (3.9 million tons). As to coal mining, Britain was able to double its production between 1880 and 1913 and thus retain its lead over Germany (191 million tons, plus 87.5 million tons of lignite). In annual steel production, however, there was a marked change. In 1890, Britain was still well ahead of Germany (3.6 million tons versus 2.2 million). In 1913, however, the Germans out produced the British by a factor of three (18.6 million versus 6.9 million)". (Berghahn 2006) Using an economic standpoint, leaders may have found it too risky of a conflict to suspend the economic growth that they benefited from and turn out only as mediators to the crisis and contain the problem as a local or regional war.

### **III. FAILURES IN DIPLOMACY**

Keegan explains that several international organizations were established to benefit the nation-states and its citizens in an international setting. Organizations such as International Postal Union, Conference for Promoting Technical Uniformity in Railways, International Radiotelegraph Union, and also Patents and Trademarks to name a few were established to bring about a global exchange of ideas and standards that would bring closer ties and mutual cooperation among the European nations and the U.S.A united front on certain issues ignited quick and successful responses. For example the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900, where Chinese workers wanted to expel all foreigners, siege the Peking embassies, prompting a full-scale international relief expedition, consisting of British, Russian, French, Italian, Austro-Hungarians, Germans and also Japanese and U.S military personnel. (Ironically would be at war among each other in 14 years) "The expedition was a success and showed that Europe could act together if it chose." (Keegan, 1999) The educated class of Europe also felt unified in the understanding of the art, philosophy, and the classics. Graduates of the universities of Europe felt a common outlook and saw somewhat a single European Culture.

Many treaties during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century caused multilateral cooperation and brought an outlook that European nation states could work together on agendas and achieve common goals. What was missing from the all the organizations and treaties was a world forum, a forum where all the leaders of Europe could meet annually or in times of crisis to discuss or negotiate political agendas. This piece of politics was greatly missing in the new wave of European growth. Each nation had their own agenda and customs of discussion amongst each other, but none of which all could discuss under the same roof. Tsar Nicholas II tried to convene an international conference, which would similarly discuss issues, but only a world court would come out of the conference. The First Hague Peace Conference of 1899 was convened on the initiative of the Czar of Russia, Nicholas II, "with the object of seeking the most effective means of ensuring to all peoples the benefits of a real and lasting peace, and, above all, of limiting the progressive development of existing armaments" (Russian note of 30 December 1898/11 January 1899). The Conference, at which 26 governments were represented, assembled on 18 May 1899 and adjourned on 29 July 1899. It failed to reach agreement on the primary object for which it was called, namely the limitation or reduction of armaments, but adopted the three Conventions and the other acts mentioned in the Final Protocol. Provision was made for the convening of a second conference. This conference lasted from 15 June until 18 October 1907. The Final Acts constitute authoritative statements of the results achieved. They were signed by the delegates but not ratified by the participating states. (D.Schindler and J.Toman 1988) Had there been a successful forum, the weeks that lead up to the war could have taken a different turn.

The Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and his wife were murdered in Sarajevo, which triggered events that would cause the following four weeks into events that would lead to the First World War. The date was June 28<sup>th</sup> the anniversary of the defeat of the Serbs from the Turks, which since then caused Serbian aggression to foreigners. Austria-Hungary at the time had a dislike for Serbian nationalism. The empire consisted of multiple ethnic groups from Germanic Austrians, Croatians, to Hungarian Serbs. Nationalist Serbs were the major problem for the empire. After the Serbs removed the Ottoman Empire

from the region they established the kingdom Serbia, which in the minds of most European nation-states were very uncivilized and barbaric people because of previous actions of murdering the former King and Queen of Serbia and then mutilating their bodies. The assassins, who murdered the Arch Duke and his wife, through their confessions were apparently armed by Serbia. This led to Austrian-Hungarian Empire to further its goals in taking down the Serb threat. The Austrian-Hungarian military already wanted to attack Serbia before the assassination, and this caused the breaking point to allow force to attack Serbia. The Serbian military was relatively small but had a good reputation, and the Austrian-Hungarian military was much larger and would need a heavy force to overtake Serbia.

#### **IV. THE DANGERS OF MOBILIZATION**

The following actions would be fatal to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to the rest of Europe and to the world. Taking quick action and attacking Serbia immediately would have prevented the other nations from getting involved and thus would only have caused a regional conflict. The Austro-Hungarians stalled which caused further turmoil. The Austrians and the Hungarians one nation but separated by two rulers of equal power saw differences over the issue. The empire was already weak and more instability would lead to its collapse, feared the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. Count Tisza of Hungary believed that since there were many Serbs located inside of the Empire this would cause serious alarm and maybe insurrection. At this point had Austria-Hungary mobilized there would be not intervention from other nations. The Russians who see the Serbs, as Slavic brothers would not have intervened, as it did not intervene on the side of Bulgaria, which has a majority Serb population, during its conflict with its neighbors. Russia had no interest in the affair at the beginning, though it would have preferred a peaceful resolution. Then the Austro-Hungarians again caused more tension by bringing its ally and neighbor Germany into the equation. It wanted German support for any attack it would lay on Serbia; for fear that Russia might intervene. This was really unnecessary for Austria-Hungary; it was done only for fear of performing unilateral action against Serbia and failing. The reality was that the nations of Europe would not have acted aggressively to Austria-Hungary had force been used immediately.

France who supplied weapons to Serbia would not have done anything in military support for Serbia, Britain had no interest in the Balkan region, and Italy would have stood on the sidelines as it did in the actual war. Russia and Germany originally wanted peace in the region but to the Austro-Hungarians this was not acceptable. As Austria-Hungary continued to stall, this brought about more changes in sentiment to the rest of Europe. Russia and Germany began to get nervous around each other. The Russians began minimal mobilization, which the Germans saw as a threat, which the caused Austro-Hungarians to worry. The Austro-Hungarians sent an ultimatum to Serbia, which the Serbs would have agreed. This could have been the tide change from preventing the war to begin, but Russia began to mobilize which Serbia saw as a united response and rejected the most important clause, which was to allow Austro-Hungarian officials to oversee and interrogate Serbian officials.

“Secret plans determined that any crisis not settled by sensible diplomacy would, in the circumstances prevailing in Europe in 1914 lead to general war.” (Keegan, 1999) According to Keegan diplomacy had worked numerous times, mostly for matters of national interest. It seems that when European nations worked in common interest, the goals would be obtained. French and British ambassadors and advisors who could picture the near outbreak of continental war were not able to get their ideas passed. There was much channeling between the nation-states of Europe, but none that could direct all nations together. For example Germany would speak to Austria, France and Britain, but Austria and Russia would not converse, and Germany would speak to Russia on Austria’s behalf. Had there been uniformed discussion, an outcome of the crisis may have been different. There was no forum for multilateral talks among the nations. British Foreign Secretary Gray, wanted to arrange a four-power conference that would discuss the issue at hand. It would have brought to the table the decision makers and caused pressure on the Serbs and Austrians that some type of consensus would have resulted. The Austrians resisted any type of mediation and worried of any talks occurring, and they would soon declare war. Had Austria went on with the negotiation; again the tide of the crisis could have turned and maybe a deal that favored Austria could have occurred.

As soon as Russia remobilized the belief of a contained local regional conflict ended. Each nation was held to their alliances, though Britain and France who were not true allies would then join sides and Italy a central ally would sit out for the first series of the war. A major problem that contributed to the crisis was that all the countries had their own little alliances, which would cause the split of Europe. Austria had already mobilized against Serbia twice, and Russia did not react. Austria still feared Russian involvement in any crisis with Serbia, which caused them to seek German assistance and support. At the beginnings of the conflict there was little or desire to be involved with the crisis, but due to the Austrian’s fear, one by one the nations of Europe became a member of the crisis.

The delay of Austria-Hungary to act would put a fatal blow in the crisis with Serbia. Austria did not act soon enough and its slow reaction due to its King Franz Joseph and Count Tisza caused much of the stagnation that brought no resolve. Many of its ministers wanted quick rapid reactions. "Dare not Austrians might; in retrospect it is tempting to surmise that, had she struck at once in anger, trumpeting dynastic wrath and righteous belief in Serbia's guilt, Europe might have allowed her to mount positive measures without outside interference." (Keegan, 1999) This is notably true, since the other nations had little interest in the issue at the start. Once Austria took the declaration of war the other nations soon followed suit. The mass mobilizations of Germany, and Russia soon caused Britain and France to worry and begin their defense. France and Britain soon rejected to aid Austria for its stubbornness for rejecting and multilateral talks that would have put the situation in peaceful terms

## V. CONCLUSION

At the end of the four-week crisis, neither diplomacy, nor internal agreements would prevent war. The First World War would be the most devastating war in human history up until the Second World War, which was a product from the failures of issues from the first war. There were three major failures that could have prevented war or even keep it local and regional. The first was that countries took little attention to their economic growth because war to them would be quick and easily finished which did not prove to be the case. Second, diplomacy was not done multilaterally in the sense that all the leaders of the nations involved would sit in a round table discussion and shore out differences that would benefit these countries and prevent war. The neglect of multilateral talks would soon as we see, cause confusion and commotion that would prevent and sort of peaceful resolution to be brought about. Third, had the predominate powers of Russia and Germany not mobilize in any way and kept the military readiness level at the same point it had before the assassination of the Archduke, would have caused Serbia to accept all the demands of Austro-Hungary which would have kept the issue a local regional one. Mobilization of military forces caused the Serbs to change the outlook on the Austro-Hungarian threat. Had Austria reacted quickly none of the three issues would not have occurred. The First World War could have been easily prevented; it was the incompetent leaders who desired to make the issue larger than it was that caused the Great War to come.

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