

Free essay about german expansionism vis--vis the first world war

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Essay for Lesson 1: The 1848 Revolution, the Second Reich, and the First World War

Introduction

Prior to 1871, no notion of a unified Germany has ever existed. Yet, the inevitability of the unification of the thirty-nine German states and cities that used to be independent from the control of one another into a single national entity under the Second Reich did not transpire without attendant internal and external power struggles. Given the variety of circumstances that allowed for the rise of a unified German state, it is noteworthy to pay further analysis to the role of Germany under the Wilhelmine Period - the period when Emperor William II ruled (1890-1918), in the buildup to the First World War. Was Germany ultimately responsible for starting the First World War? This study seeks to answer the foregoing question through a survey of military, colonial and industrial factors that contributed to the expansionist agenda of Germany as it has gained momentum in becoming perhaps the most powerful nation in Europe at the time. Moreover, addressing the foregoing question, which happened to constitute the concerns of several historians, requires the identification and relevance of several sociopolitical and cultural factors. The development of Germany as a powerful force in political, economic and military affairs - in turn having threatened other European powers, specifically England, France and Russia, provides an interesting connection to the premise that the Germans, indeed, may have started the First World War.

Military Expansionism

Catalyzed by the leadership of Prussia, Germany was able to consolidate its military power even prior to unification. Even during the years prior to the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), Prussia and its rival Austria were the most powerful of the 39 states that came to identify themselves as "German". The so-called German Question, however, gave Prussia a timely opportunity to exert its influence over the rest of the 37 states against that of Austria. The issue of whether Austria should join a unified Germany (Greater Germany) or not (Lesser Germany), given its problem over including non-German lands own by the Hapsburg noble family, has severely hindered the process of unification - a problem the Frankfurt National Assembly (1848-1849) sought to resolve. Although the Frankfurt National Assembly failed to secure its goal to unify the German states and install Prussia as the center of a unified Germany due to the rejection of the Prussian king himself, Frederick William IV, to become German Emperor, it nevertheless reflected the general sentiment of the 37 states in favor of Prussia. Soon thereafter, Prussia was able to influence the economic affairs of most of the 37 states and, under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, impress through its swift and successive military victories across Europe. Verily, the success of the German military during the Second Reich would not have transpired without the leadership of Prussia. The impressive financial and industrialization program spearheaded by Prussia, particularly under Bismarck, has won the support of the 37 states away from Austria, whose political system was relatively crude and outdated. Such has allowed Germany to develop its military, to the point where it has threatened its rivals England, France and Russia, particularly throughout the

Wilhelmine Period under William II (Fulbrook 131-143; Kaiser 443; Strachan 1-34).

Colonial Expansionism

Following the exit of Bismarck from power in 1890, William II sought to transfer the concentration of political powers under his control, underlining his desire to transcend the traditional role of his position as merely a state symbol at a time when the Second Reich entered its second phase - the Wilhelmine Period. Bismarck, whose reformative yet authoritative mode of leadership did not sit well with William II, fell from grace through his resignation as Chancellor in light of pressures coming from the increasing involvement of the masses in German politics. The goal of Bismarck to quell as much oppression against his rule backfired when William II challenged his political powers through securing the support of populist groups via negotiations. Under Bismarck, the growing military leadership of Germany has enabled the nation to secure several colonial strongholds, particularly those in Africa. William II sought to strengthen Germany in terms of its colonial expansionist agenda by promoting propaganda portraying the nation as the progressive leader of European civilization. Such has intimidated the interests of England, France and Russia both in Europe and in their colonial strongholds, thus leading the three nations to form the Triple Entente alliance. Germany, allied with Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey) that time, locked horns with the Triple Entente in the years leading to the First World War (Fulbrook 148-154; Kaiser 449-450; Strachan 1-34).

Industrial Expansionism

The leadership of Bismarck over Germany proved essential to the industrial growth of the nation. Prussia, whose military superiority mirrored its industrial strength, tactically industrialized the 37 states that eventually came together to form Germany through a series of strategic agreements that secured their patronage to Prussian leadership. With the formation of the Second Reich, Germany emerged as a highly industrialized nation at the time and it ensued throughout the Wilhelmine Period. The Triple Entente became highly critical of the industrialization trend in Germany; as the alliance sought to accelerate industrial growth within their jurisdictions, it inevitably provided the stage for an arms race against Germany and its allies, the climax of which transpired in the form of the First World War (Fulbrook 137-143; Kaiser 449-450; Strachan 1-34).

Sociopolitical and Cultural Factors Vis-à-vis the First World War

Sociopolitical Factors

The First World War was inevitably the result of tensions between conflicting factions in Europe - the German alliance with Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire and the Triple Entente. The foregoing scenario provides for a number of sociopolitical factors essential to analyzing the role of Germany in the buildup to the First World War. Firstly, the Wilhelmine Period propaganda portraying Germany as perhaps the most powerful European nation has caught the ire of the Triple Entente, in turn formed by three other European powers. Secondly, the military, colonial and expansionist agenda pushed forth by Germany under the leadership of William II threatened the

interests of the Triple Entente in the same arenas, with fears looming that Germany might perhaps take over all of Europe. Lastly, the national identity of greatness held firm by Germany since the Second Reich drove the Triple Entente to engage in an arms race in a bid to protect interests nations therein have seen as threatened by the growing German influence in Europe (Fulbrook 137-143).

Cultural Factors

Perhaps the main cultural crux behind the rise of Germany as a world power is the sheer lack of a single and all-encompassing German national identity. Having formed from the union of a multitude of independently ruled states, Germany does not have a single national identity encompassing all the states. Yet, during the Second Reich, Germany sought to focus on consolidating its political, military and industrial power in order for it to succeed as a nation. Eventually, the national identity of greatness espoused by Germany became the single most compelling cultural factor that drove the nation towards military, colonial and industrial superiority, particularly during the Wilhelmine Period. It is from the national identity of greatness where Germans during the Wilhelmine Period derived their sense of national pride, which in turn drove them to contribute to building the German economy at par with European rivals England, France and Russia (Fulbrook 144-147).

Conclusion: Did Germany Start the First World War?

There is sufficient evidence proving that Germany has an instrumental role in starting the First World War. However, a closer look at the circumstances

that influenced the Wilhelmine Period shows that Germany is not the sole culprit behind the First World War. Although aggression and dominance primarily characterized the formation of a unified Germany, such focused more on strengthening protective measures for German national interests, particularly in political, economic and military affairs. What triggered tensions that eventually catapulted Europe to the First World War is the threatened response rendered by the Triple Entente of England, France and Russia against Germany. The Triple Entente, being a consortium of three European powers, felt that the rise of Germany has imposed threats against its political and economic interests in Europe as well as its colonial interests, particularly in Africa. The resultant arms race further contributed to tensions between the German alliance and the Triple Entente. Given the foregoing context, it is clear that Germany contributed significantly to starting the First World War, but the impression it has exuded towards the threatened Triple Entente stands as another of the many reasons behind the First World War.

Works Cited

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