

The realism in world war i politics essay



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Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war is of every man against every man...Where there is no common power, there is no law, no injustice... (Thomas Hobbes; <http://courses.kvasaheim.com/pol365/docs/notes03.pdf>). The above quote by Thomas Hobbes speaks about the political theory of Realism and some of its aspects which best explain the outbreak of World War I.

Each of the key concepts in the war are presented in context of realism theory such as a need for security by building alliances before the start of the war, developing economically for the pursuit of personal interest, & protection from enemies both foreign & domestic. Realism is a theory discussed in international relations that displays the states' interest in gaining the most amount of power and ensuring its own security in what realists believe to be an anarchical system. States act in a unitary way to encompass the most power they can for their own national interest. Realism (who's four essential assumptions can be found in Thucydides' "History of the Peloponnesian War (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2011)) assumes that the states' are: power hungry [thus willing to go to any limit to attain said power], interested in their own security [by building up alliances with other states], acting as unitary actors [once one decision is made i. e. going to war, the whole state will support that decision] & functioning as the principal actor in both war and politics in general. St. Augustine added his own assumption to the realism theory that humanity is "flawed, egoistic and selfish" (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2011) which supports the reason

competition occurred between some of the major nations before the start of World War I.

World War I began in the year 1914, with the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian terrorist group, who Austria believed was sent by the Serbian government. This influenced alliances to be called into action and the war to commence, but it is evident that even before that occurred there were many a tryst occurring between some of the major nations in the world at that moment. In the years preceding the war there was a determined struggle for power which is the first assumption that the Realism theory takes on. Following the reunification of Germany in 1871, Germany had plans for its rise to power causing the tricky balance of power in Europe to be offset (Forsberg). During the Cold War, it was evident that there was bipolarity when it came to the balance of power: Russia & the United States were the top nations in control and who had all the power. Thus the nations knew who the enemy was. During the time of World War I or rather the Great War- as it was called before the events of World War II occurred, this bipolarity and division of power not evident as there seemed to be a multi-polarity of power with multiple nations attempting to seize major control in Europe.

The first of these power hungry actions was seen in Morocco. Morocco, which wished for independence, was wanted by the French to add to its empire. Germany, understanding the repercussions of France gaining Morocco quickly supported its wishes for independence and led to a clash of interest between Germany & France, the first of many problems Germany presented for various nations. This supports the assumption that nations are power

hungry because they are willing to do anything to ensure that they will gain or seize what they want despite the opinion of others. France wanted to add Morocco to its empire through sheer power without acknowledging Morocco's wishes to be independent.

A similar situation occurred in the Balkans when Austria had taken over Bosnia but Serbia wanted it as well, Germany decided to ally with Austria while Russia decided to support the Serbs. This leads into the second assumption of the realism theory about states wanted to manage their own securities by building alliances with other states. Another nation who also seemed to fall in conflict with Germany was Britain, Britain felt Germany was challenging it in every way it could i. e. building up its armies when Britain was building up its armies. The concept of building up armies & navies was present before the war actually began and although it increased the security potential of Germany & Britain, it lowered the security of other nations exposed their inert fear. This tied into the concept of balance of power being changed & the insecurity the states felt. The norm for the balance of power is for states to try to increase territories and population and develop economically which is precisely what Germany was attempting to do along with Britain; Germany it seems though had a more hostile approach to this. Instead of viewing other states as allies, they were determined to view them as enemies. Ultimately, Germany pursued their own national interests in increasing the amount of power they could have tying into the first assumption that all states are power-hungry and willing to fight to achieve power.

When the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was killed on June 28th, 1914 by the Serbians, Austria wanted justice so it sought to provide Serbia with an ultimatum expecting that Serbia would reject it, thus giving Austria a pretense for attacking Serbia. Serbia in fact agreed to certain terms but not all and furthermore began to assemble its armies; Austria saw this as a challenge and declared war on Serbia. Since Serbia had already formed an alliance with Russia, Russia felt bound to the dispute and Germany became bound to its support of Austria. With Germany's declaration of war on Russia, the alliances formed thus split the war not only into two opposing sides, but demonstrated the third vital assumption of realism, in that one state's decision to go to war immediately involves its allied states in a system of unitary acting.. Furthermore, France pledged its support for Russia inspiring Germany to declare war on it as well. The alliances created became: France, Britain, Russia, (& United States) & Serbia VS. Germany, the Ottoman Empire, and Austria-Hungary, as well as other states in Europe who slowly chose sides.

Realists believe that due to the states' existence in an anarchic international system; they are forced to become principal actors in both war and politics because they have no enforced authorities besides themselves. This segues into the fourth assumption of realism, as well as reinforcing the pillar of unitary acting, that states' protect their own interests. As principal actors, states make decisions in both war and politics in the name of the state and for its advancement. Germany's actions of developing economically and competing military/arms race displayed them as principal actors, as well as unitary actors because they made the decisions to declare war on other

states. Thus emphasizing their national interest and attacking before they are attacked which is a typical security blanket. The same can be said of Britain & France because they attempted to seize territories for their own personal gain/interest, even if the territories wanted independence but weren't able to go up against bigger powers. Offensive realists agree with the argument that states should look for opportunities to improve their positions and greater assert their powers. Realists believe that change should be slow and perhaps there are periods of greater or less stability as balance of power shift or if technological advances occur which can be seen in World War I with the introduction of the German U-Boats.

The theory of realism may be contrasted with the theory of constructivism in dealing with what explains the outbreak of World War I because it represents certain aspects of the same ideas but presented in different ways. The theory of constructivism was originally constructed by Alexander Wendt and defines that international relations are based upon the assumption that neither individual, nor state nor international community interests are predetermined or fixed (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2011). It states that the self-interest of states is not always a certain way and therefore, anarchy according to Wendt becomes " what states make of it "(Wendt, 1999 and Zehfuss, 4). Constructivism shows that international relations are determined by people and their shared ideas rather than by nature. Constructivism can also be used to explain certain details of the outbreak of World War I but not as thoroughly as does the theory of Realism. For example, Germany had similar ideas to those of France about the interest to gain power and security as well as more territory for its empire. But instead of agreeing on that idea,

they fought each other displaying the egotism described in the theory of realism. Furthermore, Germany attempted to change the norms of attack by constructing a plan to attack France through Belgium if Russia attacked them first, one nation cannot morally attack another for no reason (Germany attacking France) thus this shows the flaws in human nature. Although that plan was not implemented until after the war had already commenced it still shows that the norms of the war had changed before the war had begun.

Similarly, with Austria attacking Serbia instead of cooperating and working out their differences – they both believed that the terrorist group the “ Black Hand” (Justin and, R. (n. d.). World War I) was wrong for killing the Archduke but Austria blamed the Serbian government instead of the one group who attacked in particular. This is also seen in recent times as well, when the attacks of 9/11 by Al Qaeda occurred in America, the American government found a reason – some would say – to strike Afghanistan only on the basis that the government was harboring Al Qaeda and sending it to terrorize the United States. Later on when the ultimatum against the Baathist regime fails (similarly to the fail of the ultimatum given by the Austrians to the Serbians) U. S. attacked and entered Iraq (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2011).

Constructivism could explain why the Austrians attacked the Serbians and declared war on them, they broke the norms of peace by killing a major leader, but this can be dispute because Austrians did not believe a specific group had been responsible for the killing but rather held the entire government responsible for act of violence. Overall, constructivism focuses mostly on the social constraints in which states function while Realism displays each states’ personal motive thus better explaining the outbreak of World War I.

The outbreak of World War I is best explained with the theory of Realism because it provides the most concrete reasons for the war to have occurred. As described in the material above, Germany declared war on multiple states' in an effort to seek its own expansion of power, and resist its fellow states' attempts to limit its economic and territorial expansion. Realism's concepts demonstrate that each nation has its own agenda that they pursue without much thought to its effect except whether it will get them ahead in the game (their security equals others insecurity). Alliances between states also demonstrate the importance of security and knowing who ones enemies are. As it turns out, during multi-polarity it is often much harder to recognize who is ones enemy and who is ones friend.