

Causes for world war one



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Q1) The incitement of World War One was the result of different factors set in motion by various political situations with many believing Germany pursued war for aggressive reasons. Additionally, historians illustrate that Germany pursued war as a solution to domestic issues such as the rise of socialism.

Many historians believe that Germany pursued war through aggressive means such as policies and diplomatic decisions. Between 1890-1914, Germany adopted a new aggressive foreign policy that focused on territorial expansion called Weltpolitik. The German Foreign Minister, Bernhard von Bülow once said “ Only a successful foreign policy can help to reconcile, pacify, rally, unite.” Germany, as a result of this new policy, required a new larger naval fleet in order to push their expansionist ambitions which in turn threatened Britain’s status as the world’s ‘ colonial power’. Consequently, Germany’s Navy Laws of 1898 and 1900 upset Britain and sparked the Naval Race, a race to build the largest and most advanced naval fleet which in turn deteriorated Anglo-German relations. As a result, Britain entered into alliances with France in 1904 and Russia in 1907 respectively, creating what was known as the Triple Entente, meaning war with one nation could escalate into a European conflict. Additionally, Germany pursued foreign interest in Morocco, in what was to be known as the Moroccan Crisis, where he publicly announced Germany’s backing of Morocco’s independence. This was during the time France was hoping to colonise Morocco with British backing through the Anglo-French Entente and thus Germany hoped to

disrupt this relationship, feeling that it posed a threat to Germany's world influence.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Germany was undergoing rapid mass industrialisation with coal and steel production increasing. As a result German society was beginning to politically shift as mass urbanisation began with many flocking to cities to work, where there were greater inequalities between the growing working class in the cities and the rural aristocrats in the countryside. Discontent spread as workers working long hours for poor pay and conditions led changes for greater democracy and rights. This led to a rise in Socialism within German society that challenged the conservative and traditional Kaiser Wilhelm and the German government. This rise in socialist views was exhibited by the rise of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) who, representing the growing working class, pursued social and political change. By 1912 the SPD had 110 seats in the Reichstag as opposed to 35 seats in 1890. The German government and the Kaiser saw the SPD as a dangerous threat and would not let them the opportunity to govern despite their majority in the Reichstag. As the SPD grew, the right-wing parties in the Reichstag on whom the Kaiser's government relied were losing support. Thus the Kaiser introduced *Sammlungspolitik*, a domestic motion to support *Weltpolitik*. This was to ensure political and domestic unity in rallying together Germany's social elites (landowners, new industrialists, and the army) and encouraging patriotism and loyalty to the Kaiser and the government whilst encouraging opposition to socialism.

Q2) As Europe entered the period of June – August 1914 it became a diplomatic hotbed known as the “ July Crisis”. The July Crisis coins the

political and diplomatic situations following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a close ally of Germany. The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, was a member of a Serbian terrorist organisation fighting for Slav Independence from Austria-Hungary. Thus Austria saw this as a direct attack from the Serbian government and as a result sent them an uncompromising ultimatum or war. Germany saw this as an opportunity to push their expansionists aims and gave Austria their full backing. This “Blank Cheque”, as it was known, became a key step into outbreak of the war as with Germany’s full backing, Austria could push on into war with Serbia. Germany with their issue of the “Blank Cheque” believed Austria was ready to ignite an immediate and rapid war against Serbia despite their wariness of Russia’s Dual-alliance with Serbia, potentially escalating the war into a European conflict with the Franco-Russian Alliance causing France to support Russia. However, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, the German Chancellor, thought should a European war occur, that it was better to happen in 1914 than years later when Russia would be at a greater military capacity. Although Serbia agreed to meet some of the demands of Austria’s ultimatum, it did not fulfil all the terms and Austria with the “blank cheque” of Germany behind them, declared war on Serbia on the 28th July. During these last few days in July, the European political situation heightened to breaking point with Tsar Nicholas signing motions for plans to both partial and general mobilise the Russian troops despite firm warnings from Germany. On the 29th July 1914 there was telegram exchanges between the Tsar and the Kaiser regarding the newly erupted war in the Balkans. Kaiser writing” Of course military measures on the part of Russia would be looked upon by Austria as a calamity we both

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wish to avoid”[i], showing Germany’s unrelenting stance. This was followed up by the Tsar’s reply “ I hope from all my heart that these measures won’t in any way interfere with your part as mediator which I greatly value.”[ii]. From these telegrams both the Tsar and the Kaiser conveyed an unwavering stand that illustrates an inevitability between both nations involvement in the Balkan war. As July drew to a close, events accelerated towards war with Austria-Hungary ordering general mobilisation on the 30th July 1914 with Russia doing the same. News spread to Berlin and by the 1st August Germany had declared war on Russia and started general mobilisation, activating the Franco-Russian Alliance which meant that Germany on the 3rd August declared war on France. Part of Germany’s military strategy against France was the Schlieffen Plan that involved marching through Belgium, a neutral country. In order to help protect Belgian neutrality, Britain had no choice but to declare war on Germany on the 4th August and so Europe was plunged into war.

Q3) There are many varying interpretations on who was responsible and culpable for the origins of WW1 with two of the main differing theories being from historians Fritz Fischer and Christopher Clark. Fischer takes the stance that sole responsibility for the war lies with Germany while Clark on the other hand, looks at the origin of the war as a collective responsibility where all nations must take a share of the blame.

Fritz, on one hand, believes that Germany’s pursuit of war was just a progression of their vast, expansionist aims. He claims that Germany, in the interest of becoming a global great power, was ready to launch WW1 and

that once the war had started, its aims were precise and pre-determined especially in areas of territorial gains in Central and Southern Europe. Furthermore, Fischer believed that it was domestic factors that drove Germany's foreign policy as opposed to the orthodox view that it was external factors. At this time Socialism threatened the old, traditional empirical German society while industrialisation/urbanisation had caused growing inequalities between social classes which Fischer believed the Kaiser and the government wanted to resolve this through the pursuit of war. Fritz thought Germany was actively pursuing war to solve their domestic problems at home and fulfil their expansionist aims in one swoop. In this, he believes the blame lies solely at the step of Germany. On the other hand, Clark's thesis believes that a collective responsibility must be placed on all nations "There is no smoking gun in this story; or, rather there is one in the hands of every major character"[iii]. Clark states that the outbreak of the war was an accumulative result of political situations and diplomatic manoeuvres that metaphorically stumbled into a war. There is significant evidence to support this thesis such as Russia's and Germany's unwavering relentlessness to get involved in the Austro-Serbian conflict as exhibited by the "Willy-Nicky" telegrams.

Personally, the Fischer thesis provides the more convincing theory as it is supported by more significant evidence. In my opinion, Germany's adoption of Weltpolitik, an expansionist policy, forced other nations into alliances such as Britain who formed alliances with France following the Naval Race that was subsequently caused by this policy. Additionally, this aggressive foreign policy led to diplomatic manoeuvres such as the "blank cheque" to Austria –

Hungary, a promise of full support, that with its absence may have avoided the Austro- Serbian conflict that started the war. It seemed that Germany manoeuvred themselves into a position where war was inevitable in order to progress their expansionist aims and although many nations must take their share of the blame, it is in my opinion that Germany must take sole responsibility for the outbreak of World War 1.

[i]The “ Willy-Nicky” Telegrams, July-August 1914, Kaiser to Tsar (29th July 1914), History A: German Foreign Policy 1890-1914, Pg. 40.

[ii]The “ Willy-Nicky” Telegrams, July-August 1914, Tsar to Kaiser (30th July 1914) History A: German Foreign Policy 1890-1914, Pg. 40.

[iii]Christopher Clark, The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914(London: Harper Collins, 2012).

[http://www. history. com/this-day-in-history/kaiser-wilhelm-of-germany-and-czar-nicholas-of-russia-exchange-telegrams](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/kaiser-wilhelm-of-germany-and-czar-nicholas-of-russia-exchange-telegrams)

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