

World War I, The Unexpected War

After 1871, it was in the interest of the newly created German nation to preserve peace. In the next thirty years Germany was transformed from a predominantly agricultural country to a predominantly industrial state, and material progress became the outstanding feature of German life. In thirty years Germany achieved what it had taken England one hundred years to accomplish. By 1914, Germany was the outstanding competitor of the Britain and the United States in World trade, in banking, in insurance, and in shipping. Germany seemed to be in a glorious age of economic prosperity and comfort. War seemed out of the question. No country seemed to want war and no one expected it.

Why, then, did war break out? On June 28, 1914, the heir to the throne of Austria, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by Serbian youths in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia (present-day Yugoslavia). Although this was a sensational event, no one expected war to result. Yet one month later Austria declared war on Serbia and by August 2, Germany, France, England, and Russia had all declared war.

World War I was unexpected and unwanted, yet it was quite logical in the sense that it symbolized the failure to resolve problems and tensions between countries. Chief among the underlying causes of the war were these:

Entangling, secret alliances- After 1871 no European country felt strong enough to rely solely on its own resources. Bismarck of Germany established the Triple Alliance with Italy and Austria. Eventually a rival alliance system, the Triple Entente, was formed among France, England, and Russia. The purpose of these alliances was to prevent war.

The alliances in practice often served to make war possible. Smaller countries within each alliance tended to be more aggressive. Countries supported one another blindly, regardless of their self-interest. The alliance system made it certain that any war would be of major proportions. The German ambassador Zimmerman explained the coming of war this way: "It all came from this dammed system of alliances, the curse of modern times."

Nationalism – National pride and inflated patriotism became a new religion after 1871. Nationalism emphasized the uniqueness of each country; one people, one culture, one government, one identity, one purpose. History books were rewritten to glorify each country's achievements and gloss over its shortcomings. National self-glorification became the theme of writers who exalted their own cultures and ridiculed and detested others. To demonstrate their greatness, European countries acquired colonies in Africa and Asia, took pride in the defeat of enemies, and refused to believe that their nations could ever be wrong.

Militarism – After 1871 nations increased their armaments so that other countries would not attack. An armaments race began and the faster it went, the higher tensions mounted. Europe became an armed camp in the latter part of the 19th century, and only England did not have a military draft.

Thousands of trained specialists were needed. Plans had to be made for or against invasion. All of this gave rise to a powerful class of professional soldiers or militarists. With the concept of militarism, the army assumed controlling interest over the civilian government and the military way of life was considered to be the highest form of life.

Militarism and the huge supply of weapons inevitably led some to justify war on the basis that war brings out the noblest and most unselfish virtues in people and that war was an instrument for weeding out weak nations. War was justifiable to achieve what a nation wanted when peaceful methods failed.

Imperialism – The period from 1871 to 1914 witnessed a struggle for the establishment of colonies and control of Africa and Asia. European businesses urged their governments to acquire territory both as a market for the increased industrial productivity and as a source for raw materials. Nationalist urged the acquiring of territory for purposes of increased national prestige. This frantic scrambling for territory brought many nations to the brink of war and produced war in some cases: England fought in the Boer War in South Africa in 1899, Japan defeated Russia in 1904-1905, and three wars were fought in the Balkans in the period 1911-1913. All countries recognized no authority higher than their own and obeyed rules of international law only if they did not conflict with national interests.

Given these underlying causes, the coming of war seems logical. Yet few people expected it, and it came to all countries as a complete shock. There had been no major war since 1814.

The war itself was more shocking still. Sixty-five million persons were involved in the war and about 50 percent of them were either killed or wounded. There were 1,500,000 casualties in the first six months. Although the military leaders of each country promised a short war and Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany promised that “the troops will be home by Christmas,” the war was largely one of stalemate; it lasted four years. And the defeat of Germany meant a return to the tensions and differences prior to 1871.

Germany from War to Peace

Peace came to Germany in November 1918 at the request of the Supreme High Command of the German Army. As early as September 1918, the Supreme Command demanded that the government request an armistice immediately. The news of the request for an armistice astounded soldiers at the front and produced mixed reactions.

Chaplain Raymund Dreeling wrote that when the government decided to ask for peace “It was as if a nightmare were over.”

. . . What the average fighting man wanted and demanded was an end should be put to the war and then peace and nothing but peace. . . No power in the world could have induced the average soldier at the front to take part in fighting that was to last still longer.

But Ernst Junger viewed the end of hostilities differently. He wrote:

War, father of all things, is also our father. It has hammered us. Chiseled us, and hardened us into what we are. . . It has reared us for battle and we shall remain fighters as long as we live. . . That is the new man, the pioneer of the storm, the choice product of Central Europe. . . This war is not the end.

The Germans had no choice but to sign the Armistice agreement. Failure to accept the terms of the Armistice would have resulted in the Allied invasion of Germany. Since the government of the German emperor Wilhelm II had collapsed on November 9 and the emperor had sought exile in Holland, the Armistice was signed by representatives of the newly created republic. The signing took place on November 11, 1918, at 5 am in a railroad car in Compiègne forest in France. The fighting officially stopped at 11 am.

Germany's loss in World War I was particularly crushing. When Germany entered the war on August 1, 1914, the country was united as never before with "the spirit of 1914." Germany's carefully planned strategy to defeat France in forty days failed, and the war became a war of trenches. The stalemate was broken after the United States entered the war in 1917.

The victorious powers gathered at Versailles in France in January 1919 to draft a treaty of peace. Twenty-seven countries were represented and some countries sent as many as seventy delegates. One British delegate later described the conference as "having that sense of order of a riot in a parrot house."

The year 1919 was a high water mark for democracy in world history. The Allies (England, France, and the United States were the principal countries) had won the war and democracy seemed to be the wave of the future. President Wilson of the United States had taken his country into war "to make the world safe for democracy."

The Versailles Conference was dominated by President Woodrow Wilson of the United States. Prime Minister Lloyd George of England and Premier Georges Clemenceau of France. Wilson had drafted a "Fourteen Points" statement in which he suggested that fairness and justice would remove any further incentive for war. England felt that a Germany that was weakened economically would be disastrous for all Europe, yet Lloyd George had to show some results that would justify England's large casualty toll. Clearly, any treaty would have to be a compromise settlement.

The treaty negotiations were further influenced by the fact that all countries had expected a short war and all had expected to win it. Countries had not raised taxes sufficiently to pay for the war, expecting that the losers would pay. Four years of bloodshed left the victors even more determined to punish the enemy who had made them suffer. Germany was not allowed to participate in the deliberations of the conference and only came to sign the agreement.

The treaty was signed on June 28, 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. The site was the same one used to proclaim the creation of the German Empire in 1871.

The right-wing German newspaper, *Deutsche Zeitung*, published the following statement on its front page on June 28:

Vengeance! German nation! Today in the Hall of Mirror of Versailles the disgraceful treaty is being signed. Do not forget it! In the place where, in the glorious year of 1871, the German empire in all its glory had its origin, today German honor is being carried to its grave. Do not forget it! The German people will, with unceasing labor, press forward to reconquer the place among the nations to which it is entitled. Then will come vengeance for the shame of 1919.

The Versailles Treaty had been called the most controversial treaty of all time. Since World War II some critics have labeled the treaty differently. Some have seen it as

a just peace, others have considered it a harsh peace, and some others have viewed it as a just peace under the circumstances.