**Starting World War I**

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| **Introduction**  At the turn of the 20th century Europe had reason to gloat. Though it was the smallest continent in the world, the countries within it controlled vast empires that circled the globe. The standard of living for the average person in most European countries, even for the lowest paid workers, outpaced other areas of the world. European technology had led to colonization and unmatched economic strength. Even its culture of art and music were the envy of the rest of the world. In 1900 Europeans believed the world was their oyster.  But this feeling was not to last. By the end of 1918, after four long years of continental war, the foundation of European confidence had been shaken to its very core. Ten million soldiers had died on the battle fields and in the military hospitals; another twenty million soldiers had been wounded. Empires that had lasted for centuries lay in tatters. Cities, villages, and countryside were either in ashes or empty of young men. Military technology, that god of European power, lay fallen and twisted on the field of battle. European economies were broken, especially in Germany. Artists and composers were questioning long-held values. Europe had entered the Great War riding on a song. Now, in November of 1918, no one was singing. What had gone wrong?  **Creating a Balance of Power**  Since the Napoleonic Wars in the early 1800s, European leaders believed that by creating a balance of power they could prevent large-scale war. The idea was that if the major powers of Europe – countries like England, France, and Russia – were balanced in strength, no one country could dominate the rest. This idea was threatened when Italy and Germany unified in the 1860s and 1870s to create new large nations in central Europe that had never existed before. Still, a major war was avoided.  This did not mean that Europe was entirely at peace. Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, actually conducted three wars to gain allies and unify all the German states. But he was careful to limit the participants in each war and to conclude each within a matter of weeks. When the third war (The Franco-Prussian War) ended in 1871, the European continent would not have another military conflict involving major European powers until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.  Bismarck had a special stake in peace because Germany was | sandwiched between Russia and France. The last think Bismarck wanted was to fight a war on two fronts. His solution was to make an alliance with at least one of these nations. This proved to be difficult to do. When negotiations failed, he developed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, which became known as the **Triple Alliance**. In response, France and Russia signed an agreement of military cooperation. Later, Great Britain joined France and Russia to create an alliance known as the **Triple Entente.**  **Tension Between Nations**  On the surface, these alliances could be seen as a way to maintain the balance of power and thereby preserve peace. But suspicions ran high. Political and military leaders spent countless hours developing plans in case a war might break out. Germany was particularly jealous of the British strength in naval power. German leaders in the late 1800s and early 1900s decided to challenge the British for naval prominence. Other European nations, lacking a large navy, felt the need to devote more resources to their military to keep up. Russia emphasized the recruitment and training of soldiers, and developed the largest standing army in Europe.  The interest in military strength was matched by an interest in economic strength. This spurred the push for colonies where Africa was especially vulnerable. To Europe’s credit she avoided a big war for more than forty years. But storm clouds remained on the horizon.  **Tension Within Nations**  The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. The rise of Socialism and trade unions in the late 1800s and early 1900s promoted greater class consciousness. Working class people pushed for better wages, working conditions, and rights. Some countries, like Great Britain, extended voting to greater percentages of the population. Other nations, like Russia, tried to keep the cork on the democratic bottle; little did they know that building pressure from unhappy workers would one day force the cork to pop. At the extreme political edge, anarchists pushed for no government at all; they assassinated leaders to encourage revolt.  One of the greatest sources of conflict was around the issue of ethnicity and nationalism. Italian and German unification had |
| prompted other ethnic groups to break free and create their own little nations. The area with the greatest movement for this type of change was an area known as the **Balkans** in southeastern Europe. Since the 1400s most of the Balkans were controlled by the Ottoman Empire. Based in its capital at Constantinople, the Ottomans gradually lost their power. Some small areas revolted. Two large powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia, stood by to collect the pieces.  C:\Users\hahecht\Desktop\Capture.PNG  With the internal groups in the Balkan region pushing for their own nationhood and the two European powers trying to gain advantage as the Ottomans slipped from power, the area was a powder keg. All it lacked was a spark to set it off.  **The Spark**  Otto von Bismarck had predicted in the late 1800s that “some damned foolish thing in the Balkans” would ignite the next big war. In 1912 and 1913 two wars did break out in the Balkans, but the large European powers stayed away. In 1914 Europe was not to be so lucky. In June, the Archduke Francis Ferdidnand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, visited Sarajevo, a provincial city in the empire, to inspect some of the military stationed in the province. Seven assassins had been sent to Sarajevo by the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand, to kill the Archduke.  On the morning of June 28, a bomb was thrown at Ferdinand’s car, but the Archduke escaped injury. After he attended a reception at lunch time, the Archduke’s car was instructed to take an unannounced route, but the driver of the car got confused and drove down a main road where Gavrilo Princip, one of the Serbian assassins, happened to be walking. Princip was unmarried, | unemployed, and afflicted with tuberculosis; he expected to die in a year or two. As the car stopped to turn around, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed the Archduke and his wife.  **Chain Reaction**  The Black Hand assassins hoped to use the killing to trigger a rebellion that would lead to a larger Serbian nation. But they triggered a lot more than that. The Austrian government was furious at the assassination. They blamed the Serbian government for not suppressing groups like the Black Hand. In fact, the Serbian government had learned of the assassination plot before June 28 and tried to stop the assassins from going into Austrian territory. But the order to stop the men at the border crossing was received too late to prevent them.  Would Austria retaliate? Realizing they needed the support of their ally Germany, the Austrian ambassador in Germany met with the Kaiser of Germany on July 5. The ambassador got what he hoped for – a promise of full support. This “Blank Cheque” in hand, and brimming with confidence, Austria stood poised to act. The dominos fell:   * On July 23 Austrian leaders issued a ten-point ultimatum. It demanded apologies from Serbian leaders and insisted Austrian officials be allowed to investigate the assassination plot inside Serbia. * On July 24 an angry Serbia sought help from Russia and received promise of support if Austria were to attack. * On July 25 Serbia accepted most of the points of the ultimatum, but not all of them. In response, Austrian officials demanded that all parts of the ultimatum be met and mobilized their troops on the Serbian border. * On July 28 with no further response from the Serbian leaders, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. In the next several days, Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary, Germany declared war on Russia, France declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary, and Britain joined France and Russia. Europe was at war!   **Questions:**   1. Which of the MAIN causes of the Great War do you think was the greatest cause of the war? Explain. Provide at least three examples to prove your point. 2. Could the war have been prevented? If so, how? If not, why not? |