

History

A Thirst for War – The Buildup to the First Great War

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 8 min read

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There exist mountains of historical facts documenting the decades leading up to the First Great War showing how nations began to move towards conflict. Yet the finer details do not show the bigger picture. Backing off, we see national movements to craft alliances for protections. These protections were for the sake of economics, national interests, and resources, yes, but there was something deeper... something darker. It was as if the European continent itself – driven by both fear and anger – secretly begged for conflict, inviting it with threat and preparation for its eventual possibility. We see this hidden ill intent, not in the individual events of the times, but at the social level and within national movements over a period of time.

In reading this analysis, it is important to ask, what lessons can we learn from this period of the past that leadership(s) seem to be repeating today, and what lessons can we take with us on our own path? This is an historical analysis of the Buildup to the First Great War for the purpose of discovering such thoughts, and we will start by asking three particular questions for which to guide the analysis:

1. What kind of action-reaction decisions do we see – within chronological analysis – that one nation took strictly due to the action-reaction decisions of another?

2. Was there a domino effect created, fueled by national sentiments, that instigated and spurred negativity?
3. Why is it important to understand how this history is relevant to our world today?

Now, these questions are guides, and the reason is that, upon conclusion of our assessment, we will ask a series of entirely new questions designed to prompt critical thinking, and then use this new knowledge to apply towards our own advancement of self-improvement.

Upon conclusion of this analysis, take a few moments to carefully consider the questions at the end, **then share your thoughts in the comments below** so the community may benefit from open discussion.

The “First Great War” most certainly was not the first of its kind in regards to large-scale conflict. Even before the war – over the last centuries – did the world see conflicts at the hands of European advancement for the sake of ambitions and the drives of fear. After the fall of French conquests by 1870, new powers like the German Empire grew in the wakes of its crushing defeats against both France and Austria-Hungary, Italy had risen in status over Spain, assets in foreign lands had been lost, and the ideas of homogeneousness amongst the borders had began to tilt and find new favors.

By the end of the 19th century, the British – focused on what assets they retained – saw a shift in continental powers as a possible threat to personal interests. Indeed, despite being the world’s greatest expanding power at this point in history, the island nation was yet still plagued by the restrictions of life sustaining trade. As technological advancements increased, so too did capabilities follow. For Britain, whose empire largely depended on naval dominance to retain the security of fleet passages, increasing naval activity from the continent became a matter of concern. Across the channel, the French, now divided amongst progressives and those still clinging to the past, found itself with stunted growth. After the losses of 1870, England had seized a more dominant position by default, the French were still angered with Germany’s annexation of both Alsace and Lorraine, and Russia, in the wake of the Crimean War, was seen as an ally due to Germany’s newfound strength. This of course was a reciprocated affair, as Russia saw France as an economic ally able to finance a new economy.

Germany had unified, it had a new government and a new empire filled with the dynamics of a diverse clash of people now at the following of a Kaiser who was the embodiment of militarism, ambition, and insecurity. These qualities found homes in all levels of German society, and with advancements in industry, science, technology, and even the arts, had shortly become the envy of world powers. It was this national drive, combined with internal political strife amongst the major parties, which fed German propaganda aimed at further increases in power. Germany was already powerful, but England was more so, and as a source of major competition, became the focus of nation building for the purpose of increasing national status. This drive was only further enhanced with fears of growing English influences that the Germans saw as an encircling threat of web-like networks and treaties.

Fear amongst both sides increased as they began to see each other as natural enemies, and the political relationships amongst the larger European powers began to erode almost as quickly as they had been set in place. Austria-Hungary, who had previously used its dual-monarchy as a means to undermine German relations, now found itself in anger against Serbia, who after the 1912 wars in the Balkans, was a source of fear due to expansion. In June of 1914, the heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by Serb-trained teenage terrorist Gavrilo Princip, in Sarajevo, leaving Austria blinded with the enraged determination to crush the Serbs. They attained an agreement for aid from Germany, and issued an ultimatum they knew would not be tolerated by the Russians.

The Germans, enshrouded by now cemented fears of other powers, thought war was soon to come regardless, and due to current Russian weaknesses, felt it better to march on earlier rather than later. The Russian population favored the idea of war by now, even at the understanding of their current weaknesses, France had entered into a new period of militarist growth, and even England, who felt the matter was not more concerning than internal affairs, and had been blinded by the possibilities of increased power or

possible losses over any continental conflicts, was not simply going to be one to stand by and allow threats to her status and/or assets go unchallenged.

What we see in the buildup to the events of 1914 were an age of increasing fears over the worlds new powers. All nations had began the arms race to build up for the possibilities of war, and each felt it inevitable to the point of almost certainty. With alliances in place, and popular disdain for the other side due to events of the past, each made moves in international relations that seemed to senselessly encourage the outbreak of war. Several smaller conflicts had come and gone through the first decade – Russia and Japan, Revolutions, the Balkans – but despite these events, the toppling point came at the death of what would have been a future leader. Fear drove the populous towards shared hatred, creating a popular idea of war, feeding the buildup of armies that further convinced governments that the coming conflict was a certainty.

As Serbia scoffed at the demands of Austria, war was declared on the 28th of July, 1914, and Germany – key to the efforts success – was charged with holding off a Russian advance, yet knew that by doing so, they also needed to protect against Russian allied France. Classically, as they had learned over the past, German advancements were swift and overwhelming, believing that securing one side quickly would free them in ability to focus on the other. However, Germany left England out of the equation, and with a move into Belgium, evoked the push needed for England's decision to cross the divide and enter the fray. There was no going back at this point, the populations practically screamed for it, only later to find the taste of stalemate conflict and mounting loss of life detestably sour and bitter...

Questions to Ponder:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. What was the drive for war?
3. Who was ACTUALLY responsible for starting WWI?
4. What lessons can we learn that apply to our advancement of “Globalized Leadership”?
5. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
6. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
7. What are the effects?

Post YOUR replies in the [comments section below](#) so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

References:

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