



The Origins of World War One

By Dr Gary Sheffield

Was World War One a triumph of democracy over imperial expansion or an exercise in military futility? Dr Gary Sheffield examines the origins of the conflict.



Kaiser Wilhelm II in
1906

Early signs in Europe

In *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Baldrick opined that the war began when 'Archie Duke shot an ostrich because he was hungry'. His garbled version of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary reflects popular opinion: that the issues were not worth the ensuing bloodbath. Most modern scholars would not agree. Germany and Austria-Hungary (the Central Powers) are seen, at the very least, as creating the conditions for conflict. Some go much further, blaming Germany for planning and waging a deliberate war of aggression.

'Europe was divided into two armed camps: the Entente Powers and the Central Powers...'

Under Kaiser Wilhelm II, Germany moved from a policy of maintaining the status quo to a more aggressive stance. He decided against renewing a treaty with Russia, effectively opting for the Austrian alliance. Germany's western and eastern neighbours, France and Russia, signed an alliance in 1894 united by fear and resentment of Berlin. In 1898, Germany began to build up its navy, although this could only alarm the world's most powerful maritime nation, Britain. Recognising a major threat to her security, Britain abandoned the policy of holding aloof from entanglements with continental powers. Within ten years, Britain had concluded agreements, albeit limited, with her two major colonial rivals, France and Russia. Europe was divided into two armed camps: the Entente Powers and the Central Powers, and their populations began to see war not merely as inevitable but even welcome.

In the summer of 1914 the Germans were prepared, at the very least, to run the risk of causing a large-scale war. The crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire decided, after the assassination on 28 June, to take action against Serbia, which was suspected of being behind the murder. The German government issued the so-called 'blank cheque' on 5-6 July, offering unconditional support to the Austrians, despite the risk of war with Russia. Germany, painted into a diplomatic corner by Wilhelm's bellicosity, saw this as a way of breaking up

the Entente, for France and Britain might refuse to support Russia. Moreover, a wish to unite the nation behind the government may have been a motive. So might desire to strike against Russia before it had finished rebuilding its military strength after its defeat by Japan in 1905.

German strategies



German soldier
on the attack

The most sinister interpretation is that Germany had been actively planning an aggressive war. In December 1912 the Kaiser held a meeting at which some historians believe it was decided to go to war some 18 months hence. This interpretation is controversial, but the bellicosity of Wilhelm and some senior advisors is clear, and the coincidence with the actual outbreak of war in August 1914 is remarkable.

A month after the war began, Germany drew up some far-reaching war aims. French power would be broken, Belgium reduced to vassal status, and a colonial empire carved out in Africa and elsewhere. Mitteleuropa, a German-dominated customs union, would give Berlin economic hegemony. As the war went on, Germany's appetite grew. In 1917-18 Germany set up a huge informal empire on the ruins of defeated Russia. There were distinct continuities with Hitler's aims in World War Two.

'In 1914 fate seemed to have offered Germany the opportunity to turn dreams into imperial reality.'

It is unclear whether Germany went to war to achieve these aims, or whether, having found themselves at war, they began to think about what they would do with the victory they hoped to win. Some important figures in Germany, including industrialists, politicians, and the Kaiser himself, favoured a radical approach. In 1914 fate seemed to have offered Germany the opportunity to turn dreams into imperial reality. Germany now controlled most of Belgium and some economically important parts of northern France. Campaigns in 1915-17 conquered Poland and portions of Russia. By the end of the war, the Germans were even casting covetous eyes on their ally, Austria-Hungary.

The size and wealth of the conquered Eastern territories easily outweighed what would have been lost had the Germans withdrawn from Belgium and France. Had they done so, France might have made peace and the anti-German coalition collapsed. Instead, in March 1918, the German army struck on the Western Front in an attempt to knock Britain and France out of the war. The gamble failed and the Germans were themselves defeated by the Western Allies. Having played for everything, the German leadership lost everything.

Compromise peace



Portrait of the Germans
surrendering to the Allies

On the surface, it is strange that despite the military deadlock, the belligerents did not reach a compromise peace. However, since Germany's aims were fundamentally incompatible with those of the Allies, and almost to the end both sides believed that the war was winnable, it is not surprising that the struggle went on. Despite some sporadic attempts to find common ground, it was not until autumn 1918 that Germany, clearly defeated, staged a deathbed conversion to the idea of a compromise peace.

'Britain went to war because it saw a German victory as a threat to its security.'

France's immediate aim was to expel German troops from its territory. In the longer term, many desired the return of the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, annexed by Germany after the war of 1870-71, and the crushing of German power in some form, thus enhancing French security for the future. Britain went to war because it saw a German victory as a threat to its security. For centuries, Britain had fought to maintain the balance of power in Europe, to ensure that no state became overmighty. The Kaiser's Germany followed Napoleon's France, and preceded Hitler, as a threat to stability. In particular, Britain was highly sensitive about Belgium. In the hands of an enemy, Belgian ports offered a major threat to the British naval supremacy and hence the security of the British Isles. Britain had no real option but to go to war in 1914. If France had been defeated, Britain would have been faced with the nightmare that since the days of Elizabeth I it had fought to avoid: the continent dominated by a single, aggressive state.

Ideological struggle



Painting of peace celebrations in
Piccadilly

We are not used to seeing World War One as an ideological struggle, a battle between democracy and autocracy. Yet that is in many respects exactly what it was. The original coalition of course contained Tsarist Russia, but Britain and France had a shared democratic heritage. In 1917, the defeat of Russia and adherence of the USA to the coalition polarised the conflict to one between a group of states committed to liberal and democratic values, and a militarist autocracy. The coalition was imperfectly democratic. Both Britain and France had large colonial empires whose people did not have access to democratic forms of government, and

both sought to extend their empires at the expense of their enemies. In Britain, universal male suffrage, along with the vote for some, but not all, adult women, was only introduced at the end of the war. All states behaved in some ways that were at odds with liberal democratic principles, persecuting pacifists for example.

' An Allied victory led to the maintenance and even extension of liberal democracy in Europe.'

Yet there was a qualitative difference between the democratic powers and Germany. For one thing, 'remobilisation' of the French and British peoples by playing the democratic card helped rally support for the war in 1917-18 whilst, in Germany, support for the regime crumbled. Britain and France came to be led by Lloyd George and Clemenceau, popularist democratic leaders, while Germany was ruled by a military dictatorship that sidelined the constitutional leader, the Kaiser. An Allied victory led to the maintenance and even extension of liberal democracy in Europe. A German victory would have snuffed it out. When the German army appeared to be on the verge of victory in spring 1918, the Kaiser crowed that this was the vindication of monarchy and autocracy over democracy.

New agenda

The British put forward 'democratic' war aims, offering the idea of some sort of self-determination for the nationalities within the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Empires, attempting to appeal to the German people over the heads of the Imperial government. The US President, Woodrow Wilson, went much further. In his 14 points of January 1918, Wilson announced a liberal internationalist agenda that was revolutionary in its implications.

'The old European empires were under strain, and would soon collapse.'

Based on the encouragement of democracy and nationalism, accompanied by liberal capitalism, Wilson's timing was perfect. The old European empires were under strain, and would soon collapse. The Bolsheviks seized power in Russia only weeks before the 14 Points speech, and Marxist-Leninism was to prove a powerful, similarly universalist, rival to liberal democracy for the rest of the 20th century.

Far from being fought over trivial issues, World War One must be seen in the context of an attempt by an aggressive, militarist state to establish hegemony over Europe, extinguishing democracy as a by-product. To argue that the world of 1919 was worse than that of 1914 is to miss the point. A world in which Imperial Germany had won World War One would have been even worse.

Find out more

Books

The Origins of the First World War by James Joll (Longman, 1999)

Western Front by Richard Holmes (BBC Books, 1999)

The Origins of the First World War by Gordon Martel (Longman, 1996)

The First World War and International Politics by David Stevenson (Oxford University Press, 1988)

Links

[First World War](http://www.firstworldwar.com/) [http://www.firstworldwar.com/] This website includes information on the origins and battles of World War One, and includes photographs and a timeline.

[Spartacus Educational](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWW.htm) [http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWW.htm] Spartacus' World War One website offers a growing encyclopaedia of entries about the war, as well as links to other websites.

[Trenches on the web](http://www.worldwar1.com/) [http://www.worldwar1.com/] This site contains a wide range of World War One material.

Places to visit

[Imperial War Museum](http://www.iwm.org.uk/) [http://www.iwm.org.uk/]

[National Army Museum](http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/) [http://www.national-army-museum.ac.uk/]

Related Links

Articles

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- Herbert Asquith - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/asquith_herbert.shtml
- Lord Kitchener - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/kitchener_lord.shtml
- Douglas Haig - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/haig_douglas.shtml

Timelines

- British Timeline - http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/launch_tl_british.shtml

BBC Links

- BBC News - The Great War: 80 years on - http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/10/98/world_war_i/197437.stm
- BBC Schools - World War One - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/>

External Web Links

- Commonwealth War Graves Commission - <http://www.cwgc.org>
- First World War.com - <http://www.firstworldwar.com/>
- Imperial War Museum - <http://www.iwm.org.uk/>

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