The Causes of WWI

The causes of the First World War are complex and are still debated by historians today. There are, however, several developments which historians generally accept as leading to the outbreak of the conflict. The rise of nationalism, European imperialism, and militarism played major roles in bringing on the war.

Nationalism is characterized principally by a feeling of community among a people, based on common ethnicity, language, and historical experience. Before the 18th century, when nationalism emerged as a distinctive movement, states usually were based on religious or dynastic ties; subjects owed loyalty to their church or ruling family. Concerned with clan, tribe, village, or province, people rarely extended their interests on a large scale.

The spread of education in vernacular tongues to the lower-income groups gave them the feeling of participation in a common cultural heritage. Through education, people learned of their common background and tradition and began to identify themselves with the historical continuity of the nation. The introduction of national constitutions and the struggle for political rights gave peoples the sense of helping to determine their fate as a nation and of sharing responsibility for the future well-being of that nation. At the same time the growth of trade and industry laid the basis for economic units larger than the traditional cities or provinces.

The underlying causes of World War I were the spirit of intense nationalism that permeated Europe throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, the political and economic rivalry among the nations, and the establishment and maintenance in Europe after 1871 of large armaments and of two hostile military alliances.

Nationalism

The French Revolution and the Napoleonic era had spread throughout most of Europe the idea of political democracy, with the resulting idea that people of the same ethnic origin, language, and political ideals had the right to independent states. The principle of national self-determination, however, was largely ignored by the dynastic and reactionary forces that dominated in the settlement of European affairs at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Several peoples who desired national autonomy were made subject to local dynasties or to other nations. Notable examples were the German people, whom the Congress of Vienna left divided into numerous duchies, principalities, and kingdoms; Italy, also left divided into many parts, some of which were under foreign control; and the Flemish- and French-speaking Belgians of the Austrian Netherlands, whom the congress placed under Dutch rule. Revolutions and strong nationalistic movements during the 19th century succeeded in nullifying much of the reactionary and antinationalist work of the congress. Belgium won its independence from the Netherlands in 1830, the unification of Italy was accomplished in 1861, and that of Germany in 1871. At the close of the century, however, the problem of nationalism was still unresolved in other areas of Europe, resulting in tensions both within the regions involved and between various European nations. One particularly prominent nationalistic movement, Panslavism, figured heavily in the events preceding the war.

Imperialism

The spirit of nationalism was also manifest in economic conflict. The Industrial Revolution, which took place in Great Britain at the end of the 18th century, followed in France in the early 19th century, and then in Germany after 1870, caused an immense increase in the manufactures of each country and a consequent need for foreign markets. The principal field for the European policies of economic expansion was Africa, and on that continent colonial interests frequently clashed. Several times between 1898 and 1914 the economic rivalry in Africa between France and Great Britain, and between Germany on one side and France and Great Britain on the other, almost precipitated a European war. As the Scramble for Africa came to a close it became clear that one of the last means to gain colonies was to take them away from other imperial nations.

Military Expansion

As a result of such tensions, between 1871 and 1914 the nations of Europe adopted domestic measures and foreign policies that in turn steadily increased the danger of war. Convinced that their interests were threatened, they maintained large standing armies, which they constantly replenished and augmented by peacetime conscription. At the same time, they increased the size of their navies. The naval expansion was intensely competitive. Great Britain, influenced by the expansion of the German navy begun in 1900 and by the events of the Russo-Japanese War, developed its fleet under the direction of Admiral Sir John Fisher. The Russo-Japanese War had proved the efficacy of long-range naval guns, and the British accordingly developed the widely copied dreadnought battleship, notable for its heavy armament. Developments in other areas of military technology and organization led to the dominance of general staffs with precisely formulated plans for mobilization and attack, often in situations that could not be reversed once begun.

Statesmen everywhere realized that the tremendous and ever-growing expenditures for armament would in time lead either to national bankruptcy or to war, and they made several efforts for worldwide disarmament, notably at the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907. International rivalry was, however, too far advanced to permit any progress toward disarmament at these conferences.

System of Alliances

The European nations not only armed themselves for purposes of "self-defense," but also, in order not to find themselves standing alone if war did break out, sought alliances with other powers. The result was a phenomenon that in itself greatly increased the chances for a generalized war: the grouping of the great European powers into two hostile military alliances, the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy and the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France, and Russia. Shifts within these alliances added to the building sense of crisis.