National Pride and National Positioning Made World War I Inevitable
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The First World War was the true turning point of the twentieth century. It brought down dynasties and empires. It changed the United States from a provincial nation into a world power. It made The Second World War inevitable and the set the stage for the Cold War. In his book *The First World War* John Keegan describes the war as a European tragedy and unnecessary conflict. He writes, "...unnecessary because the train of events that led to its outbreak might have been broken at any point during the five weeks of crisis that preceded the first clash of arms, had prudence or common goodwill found a voice…" In hind-sight the events that led to World War I seem foolish misunderstandings yet, while there were some moderating voices on the continent, most were not ready to listen to reason. Each of the great powers believed they had something to gain from war, fostering the national pride and the national positioning that made World War I inevitable.

During the summer of 1914, most of the average citizens and the business community in Europe believed that general war was impossible. After two decades of depression, industrial output had begun to expand. New categories of manufacturing in the form of electrical goods, chemical dyes, and internal combustion vehicles had appeared to tempt buyers. Rising populations on the Continent sharply enlarged the size of internal markets while the enormous expansion of overseas empires in Africa and Asia drew millions of people into the international markets. By the first decade of the twentieth century, capital was circulating freely from Europe to the Americas and Asia providing returns on overseas investment that became a significant element of private and corporate income in Britain, France, Germany, Holland, and Belgium. It was a period of growth and peaceful productivity.

In this backdrop of peace and productivity, the governments of Europe were acting quite differently. They transformed the balance of power that had existed among them into an armaments race. The major disagreements of the eighteenth century had been settled by war and there continued a strong and matching military rivalry between the continental powers. In his book *Diplomacy* Henry Kissinger ascribed some responsibility, writing, "Though all the nations of Europe contributed to the disaster with their politics, it was Germany and Russia which undermined any sense of restraint by their very natures." In order to understand the political dynamics that contributed to the inevitability of the war, it is important to examine the war climate in each country and the role Germany, France, Russia, Britain, and Austria-Hungary had in promoting the conflict.

Pre-war Germany was bursting with vigor and bulging with material success. Energies were expended on the development of physical resources. Since the late 1890s, Germany enjoyed a period in which population increased by 50 percent, railroad-track mileage by 50 percent, cities sprang up, colonies were acquired, giant industries took shape, and wealth accumulated from their enterprises. Germany's national income had doubled, although it was still behind Britain's. German banking houses opened branches around the world and German salesman sold German goods from Mexico to Baghdad. German universities and technical schools were most admired and German philosophers dominant. No visitor could fail to be impressed by flourishing, well-kept farms and estates. Theaters and museums where everywhere and recreation and amusement venues were models. Over all reined the Army with its discipline and high standards of professional conduct.

The Army's view was that for 200 years Germany had been the victim, not the instigator, of the wars of Europe. The Germans feared that in another European war the new German Empire might be torn to pieces. They formed a military alliance with Austria-Hungary and

later added Italy. This alliance lasted until the First World War. German businessmen began to challenge the British in their traditional markets and other European states began to gravitate to Berlin and a friend of their interests. The German people felt they needed and deserved an acknowledged supremacy like that of the British. Trying to achieve absolute security for their country, German leaders adopted a belligerent attitude threatening every other European nation causing them to organize coalitions designed for their own protection. Kissinger offers an explanation for Germany's behavior:

> The reason German statesmen were obsessed with naked power was that in contrast to other nation-states, Germany did not posses any integrating philosophical framework. Bullying tactics seemed to Germany's leaders the best way to bring home to their neighbors the limits of their own strength and presumably, the benefits of Germany's friendship.

Believing that its neighbors were preparing for war, German military plans became more designed around preemptive actions.

The pre-war mood in France was very different then what existed in Germany at the time. Emerging as the Third Republic after 1871, France had revived, prospered and acquired and at the time a new empire. On the hundredth anniversary of the Revolution, they elected the tallest structure in the world, the Eiffel Tower. In political life the nation was at odds with itself, annoyed from within by the un-reconciled adherence to an aristocratic social and political system of the past, and oppressed from without by the superior strength of Germany and the sense on unfinished war between them. They yearned for the regaining of the Alsace-Lorraine region, lost after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, without the means to achieve it. In the eyes of the people the Army was above politics. It was the nation. It was France and represented the greatness of France. France had been the greatest military power in Europe until the rise of Prussia. By 1914, under the shadow of Germany, the Army was both the defender of the nation and the instrument the regaining of the Alsace-Lorraine. Men lifted their hats when the colonel and the colors at the head of a regiment marched by. Many believed it was the means of restoring, someday, the national glory. All European armies by 1904 had military plans, notable in most cases for their inflexibility and France was no different. The French plan called for an advance with all forces united to the attack on the German armies into the Lorraine region. The Russians, allied with France, had accepted by 1910 that Germany would be the chief enemy. By 1912, the Russians promised France that if it were attacked by Germany, Russia would attack Germany with 800,000 men.

Russia's vastness and her persistence worried Europe. Throughout numerous crises, a reasonable settlement often seemed well within Russia's reach. Yet Russia always preferred the risk of defeat to compromise. This had been true in the Crimean War of 1854, the Balkan War of 1875-78, and prior to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. Russia seemed driven to expand by a pace all its own. Many thought they were only containable by the development of superior force and by defeating them in war. Russia seemed to belong partly to Europe and partly to Asia. Russian leaders were generally impatient with appeals to stability and prone to resorting to war if their demands were not met. In European forums, Russia would listen to the arguments on behalf of the balance of power but did not always abide by agreements made. For example, the nations of Europe had always maintained that the fate of Turkey and the Balkans had to be settled by the international conference. Russia invariably sought to deal with this question unilaterally and by force. Russia expected Europe to look the other way and felt hurt when it did not.

In 1908, the Russian-Austrian detente in the Balkans came to an end when the government in Vienna exploited the confusion caused by the Young Turk revolution by annexing Bosnia-

Herzegovina. Austria's borders penetrated deep into the Balkan interior. There was talk of Russia and Austria drifting towards war. Russia, however, felt itself weak after the Russo-Japanese War, while Britain and Germany were quietly in agreement that the troubles in the Balkans might be of some use in promoting Anglo-German cooperation in Europe. Russia adopted a policy of encouraging all Balkan states, including the Ottoman Empire, to enter into alliances which would function as a system of collective security against further Austrian infringement. Fearing the possibility of being isolated and left out of any strategic decisions Russia had allied itself with France and agreed to war plans against German and Austria-Hungary. The Russia's destiny became tied to that of France after they realized that if France fell to Germany, the Russians had little hope of holding out against the combined armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

By the turn of the century Europe was divided into two opposed camps, the German-Austrian-Italian against the Franco-Russian. For a time it seemed that this rigid division might soften. Germany, France, and Russia cooperated in the Far Eastern crisis of 1895 to stem the expanding power of Japan. All were anti-British at the time of Fashoda incident in 1898 and at the end of the Boer War in 1902. Germany and France outlined pictures of a Continental league against the global domination of England and its empire. A new kind of race began to emerge with the naval competition between Germany and Great Britain. British sea power for two centuries had been successful and the foundation of their greatness. They believed that in the long run sea power must always choke off and ruin a power operating on land. Beginning in 1898 the British began to be concerned with the German naval program. The Germans insisted that they must have a navy to protect their colonies, secure foreign trade and for the general purposes of their greatness. The subsequent naval race produced a sense of profound insecurity in Britain. Slowly and cautiously they emerged from their diplomatic isolation and by 1907 England, France, and Russia were acting together against German tactics. There was no issue likely to turn Great Britain into an adversary as a threat to its command of the seas. Yet this was precisely what Germany undertook. Germany managed to add Great Britain to its growing list of adversaries. England had no choice but to resist Germany who was already in possession of the strongest army in Europe and who began aiming for parity with Great Britain on the seas.

By 1914 Austria-Hungary had lost faith in the international order established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, whose strength had prevented major war on the continent for a century. Austria-Hungary was a power in decline since her defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1866. Their main foreign policy goals were to gain land in the Balkans at the expense of Turkey and to prevent the growth of South Slav nationalism undermining her Empire. She viewed with considerable unease the growth of Serbian power in the Balkans. Serbia was seen as the major threat to the unity of the Empire as there was a large Serbian minority in the Empire. Austria-Hungary was a sprawling empire in central Europe. It was made up of people of different ethnic groups to include Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs and many others. Each group had its own customs and language. Many of these groups wanted independence from Austria-Hungary. In the north the Czech people wanted to rule themselves. The Slav peoples in the south-west wanted their own state. The Serbs living in the south wanted to be joined to the neighboring state of Serbia. By 1914 the main concern of the Emperor of Austria-Hungary was how to keep this fragmented empire together. Austria-Hungary also faced problems from neighboring states. Its newly independent neighbor Serbia was becoming a powerful force in the Balkans. Austria was very anxious about it possibly becoming stronger. Its other neighbor Russia supported the Serbs, and had a very strong army, which also worried Austria-Hungary.

After the assassination of Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo, the Austrians, armed with the German Kaiser's unqualified promise of support, felt they had to act against Serbia. Sure of Serbia's involvement on the assassination on July 7, 1914, Austria-Hungary's council of ministers was assembled to discuss measures to put an end to Serbia's intrigues once and for all. Much of the discussion focused of the idea that Serbia should be presented with a set of demands. Most of the council members agreed that diplomatic success alone would be a sign of weakness so the demand on Serbia must be hard so their refusal would be certain, this way they could be punished. Given this climate, there are some who believe that World War I was not inevitable. They believe that should cooler heads have prevailed the tragedy could have been inverted. Henry Kissinger writes:

> There was still a chance to avoid catastrophe because there were actually few issues that justified war dividing the alliances. No other member of the Triple Entente would have gone to war to help France regain Alsace-Lorraine; Germany, even in its exalted frame of mind, was unlikely to support an Austrian war of aggression in the Balkans. A policy of restraint might have delayed the war and caused the unnatural alliances gradually to disintegrate, especially as the Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia, had been forged by fear of Germany in the first place.

Although none of the countries could foresee the full extent of the ordeal that lay before them, not even the Germans believed that war would be easy or without significant damage. They all, however, believed they had more to gain from war than peace.

For Germany and Austria-Hungary there was a lot to be gained by war. The domination of the Balkans and perhaps the Middle East was at stake. The final reduction of France to a position from which she could never again pose a military threat were high on their list. The establishment of a position on the Continent that would enable Germany to compete on equal terms with England and attain the status of world power was perhaps Germany's top goal. These goals appeared perfectly feasibility in July 1914. In September, when the program of their war aims was drafted, it looked as if their goals were achievable. The opportunity must have seemed too good to miss in the self-confident Germany at the time.

In Russia, the ambitions for Balkan expansion and the recovery of Constantinople, which had been checked in 1878 and again in 1885, were far from dead. A serious consideration for Russia remaining at peace would mean abandoning Serbia and all the gains of the past five years, and watching the Central Powers establish and consolidate an unchallengeable dominance in southeast Europe.

As for France, a successful war would certainly remove a major threat to their security. The advantages to be gained by war did not enter into their calculations whereas the perils of remaining at peace eventually did. The French government took little comport from the long-term advantages to be gained from the growth of Russian military power and paid little heed to the consequent advisability of postponing the issue until 1917. It was more conscious of its immediate weakness in the face of the growing German army.

To the British government, comprised largely of men to whom the whole idea of war was antipathetic and who were responsible to a parliamentary party deeply suspicious of militarism and of Continental involvement, there appeared nothing to be gained by war. In this atmosphere Britain came to two conclusions. The first was that if France and Russia defeated Germany unaided, the two victors would regard Britain with hostility and contempt. The second was that if Germany won and established a Continental hegemony, Britain would face a threat to her security unknown since the days of Napoleon.

In conclusion, the Great Powers, within their two alliances, were facing each other across a gulf of growing mutual distrust. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the balance of power had degenerated into hostile coalitions whose inflexibility was matched by reckless disregard for consequence. The mood in Europe was of war. Everyone talked about the inevitability of it and soldiers sang about it. Many felt that war was a fine heroic thing, an experience were gentlemen proved their worth. Each country in the war was caught up in national pride and national positioning. Countries could see no way of turning back and believed they had more to gain from war than peace. When misunderstandings occurred in the pre-war rarified climate, one can see how the onset of World War I was inevitable.

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