

2014 marks the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War.

Yet, a hundred years after, do we really comprehend how this Great War began?

As you will read in this overview, the murder by the Serbian terrorist organization Black Hand of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his spouse was the cause for a much greater crisis.

Shortly after the assassination, an ultimatum was given by Austria-Hungary to Serbia. Austria declared war on Serbia when the conditions were not fulfilled. Russia, Germany, and afterward France have moved to join the suit.

In this overview, you will find out what each of these countries has done, and why to intensify the conflict.

Chapter 1 - Several alliances and linkages among politicians played a vital role at the start of the war.

World War I was one of the twentieth century's greatest disasters. It turned the armies of most European countries against each other and their colonies, leading to millions of deaths.

But why did this even happen at all? Many European powers had treaties of alliance with others, ensuring that if one nation in the network were to be invaded, that nation could rely on its allies to come to their rescue. Many European powers had treaties of alliance with others, ensuring that if one nation in the network were to be invaded, that nation could rely on its allies to come to their rescue.

For example, the small country which is Serbia was allied to Russia, which saved it from an Austrian invasion. Austria has been forming an alliance itself with Germany, which vowed to respond if threatened. And Russia was allied with France, against the possibility of an invasion by Germany.

However, although the alliance system aimed to mitigate the danger of war, in fact, it raised the implicit risk in the power politics of Europe. If a war started out in one country, a chain reaction could be caused by the alliance structure which would lead to war across Europe.

The danger was further compounded as the coalition structure had relations with some of the most turbulent areas of Europe, like the Balkans.

Ottoman Empire had been ruling the Balkans which is in the southeastern corner of Europe for some while. However, the Ottoman Empire was in the midst of dissolution, and in the power

vacuum, both Austria and Russia were ready to use force in seeking to extend their objectives to the region.

But their goals were complicated by the fact that several different nationalities occupied the same area: Slavs, Germans, Bosnians, Hungarians, Romanians, and Bulgarians all lived in the region, unsegregated. This made the environment challenging, and unpredictable to control.

Chapter 2 - Europe's coalition structure separated the continent into two hostile groups, thus significantly raising the likelihood of conflict.

The coalition structure started as a trick against the war but ultimately led to broadly divided forces raising the atmosphere for war in 1914.

It was necessary to keep wars from escalating until Europe broke up into two parties. In 1887 there were several interlinked, non-polarized alliances intended to control and de-escalate any tension. Every coalition included a neutral force whose priorities were in peacebuilding.

For instance, when the Triple Alliance was already formed between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy in the 1880s, Great Britain has also been tied to Austria and Italy through the Mediterranean Agreements, and Russia and Germany signed a Reinsurance treaty.

But the alliances started changing from a network of deals to two blocs, without neutral states, setting the scene for World War I. In the one hand there was the Triple Alliance, a coalition between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy; on the other side, there was the Triple Entente, between Great Britain, France, and Russia. Many minor countries have also in some way been allying with both of these groups. Belgium, for instance, had a treaty of alliance with Great Britain.

The first flare of violence emerged on 28 June 1914, when Serbian nationalists in Sarajevo murdered the Austrian Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand and his wife.

The string of polarised alliances meant that the dispute between Serbia and Austria exploded through the whole continent – and the globe – in a matter of a few months.

But could the different parties have done anything to stop the war? In the sections below, we'll look at the roles each nation played in the outbreak.

Chapter 3 - Germany and Austria-Hungary partially have a responsibility to turn a conflict into a world war.

The conventional historical opinion is that Austria, in reaction to the murder of its Crown Prince and vigorously encouraged by Germany, first threatened and then declared war on Serbia and in doing so caused a catastrophic domino effect.

But is that a legitimate allegation? Well, partially, it is.

Surely the Austrian administration sparked a war with Serbia, but they did not understand the wider ramifications.

After the murder, the Austrian government sent the Serbs an ultimatum with a set of requests so serious that it was obvious that Austria wanted to punish Serbia instead of offering a reasonable settlement.

In this list were unreasonable demands such as the compulsory expulsion of all military and civil staff that Austria did not approve of, and the permission of Austrian security forces to operate in Serbia. These requests infringed the sovereignty of Serbia and one nation-state will never embrace them. Indeed, Austrian diplomats' diary records indicate that this was on purpose: Austria had already focused its eyes on Serbia. It wanted to start a war.

And even though the war is just what it got – shortly afterward Austrian forces occupied Serbia – their representatives had underestimated the possibility that making an alliance with Serbia, Russia would hurry to the protection of Serbia.

Austria, though, wasn't working alone; Germany, too, did plenty to intensify the situation that led to the war, prompting Austria to issue the ultimatum and pledging its unconditional support. In the defense of Germany, it assumed that Austria had the right to seek an investigation into the Sarajevo murders, and had no knowledge that Austria would make such a difficult series of requests. Nevertheless, Germany did not place any limitations on the ultimatum's composition nor did they call for it to be seen before it was published.

As this indicates, both Germany and Austria are holding their equal share of blame in the war outbreak. But as we shall see in the next section, they were not the only nations that are accountable.

Chapter 4 - Both Russia and France bear responsibility for the start of the war.

A well-known reality is a role that Germany and Austria played in causing the outbreak of war.

Although the guilt is also shared by two other countries-Russia and France.

Never before had both Russia and France regarded Austria-Hungary as an equal entity, and thus never really acknowledged the demands of Austria. They would certainly not accept Austria's right to raise questions about the role Serbia played in Franz Ferdinand's assassination.

Thus, while several signs clearly implicated the Serbian government in the assassination, such as including top Serbian leaders, France and Russia condemned Austria's efforts to address these problems with Serbian authorities or other governments.

The total disrespect for Austria displayed by both countries was mainly due to their view of Austria as a smaller European entity, an empire on the verge of imminent collapse.

But Russia's interference did not stop there. As the start of the war between Austria and Serbia was approaching, the Russian government ensured that the Serbs would ignore the Austrian ultimatum and deny further discussions.

Then Russia did quite a lot to intensify things after war inevitably broke out. Russia responded immediately after Austria declared war on Serbia, by involving its own forces against Austria. And by mobilizing again at the German frontier, they intensified the wider European battle.

France has urged Russia to react forcefully to the Austrian ultimatum for its role in worsening the Austrian-Serbian crisis. When Serbia and Austria were caught up in their conflict, French President Poincaré visited St. Petersburg, where he pledged full backing from France in the case of a Russia-German war.

Even though France and Russia are not usually found guilty of the outbreak of the war, they have certainly played a significant role in worsening the conflict and causing the outbreak.

Chapter 5 - Many have claimed the war was imminent, in the long term.

We have looked at the progress of the war in terms of the acts of nations thus far. Yet states are abstractions, after all. It is the people and regimes that compose the citizens, that actually make the decisions to commit their countries to war.

To explain how the Great War came about we ought to look at this time's common views.

There was a deep perception among many that a European war was inevitable. In fact, this view can be seen in numerous of the time's journal entries, and diplomats' and policymakers' speeches.

Viscount Esher, an English diplomatic analyst and counsel to King Edward VII, wrote in 1910: "The vision of lasting peace is an impossible illusion."

Most held this negative view, which contributed to the rise of a "defensive patriotism." In other words, people reacted not by consciously embracing the danger of the imminent war; rather, they surrendered themselves to its unavoidability and wanted to be on the winning side.

Numerous political decisions were influenced by this common image of war as an imminent reality.

The potential outbreak of war was specifically prepared and budgeted for in any strategic paper published. Political officials often used the threat of the imminent war as a justification for raising their respective nations' military expenditures, thereby strengthening the common perception that war was unavoidable.

For instance, in Germany, military expenditure unexpectedly and quickly rose, accounting for 3.8 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) by 1912.

The coalition between France and Russia also specified several arrangements and evacuation measures for the start of the war with Germany.

European politicians were so convinced the conflict would take place they did not consider how to avert it entirely

Chapter 6 - Several leaders in numerous countries saw a benefit in the early war.

When the inevitability of conflict became clear to those concerned, a pan-European insight took hold: it was best that this conflict could come earlier instead of later.

Why did each country's policy-makers reach the same result? Let's look at each country one by one.

Germany saw that Russia's military influence was increasing considerably in the years leading up to 1914. Russia also hired more men for its army and added modern, cheaper arms to its collection.

German diplomats and agents sent their government reports of these advances, and some reports massively inflated the development of Russian military power.

These reports left the German government very anxious and led them to the decision that only if it occurred within the next several years could Germany win a war against Russia. Russia will be too powerful, at that point.

The increasing power of Russia triggered some unease with its ally France too.

The French officials feared that Russia would no longer require an alliance with France quickly, with its increasingly growing strength, which might contribute to French isolation within the international community.

So, from the viewpoint of France, it had to be quick, if there was to be a war with Germany before Russia could break the alliance.

As for Russia, it was facing big difficulties globally amid its increasing military force, mostly because it was battling on so many fronts.

To add to the numerous wars between Russia and Europe, there were also disagreements with China and conflicts with the Ottoman Empire over the Russian use of the watercourses, the "Turkish Straits," which were vital to the economy of Russia.

Many Russian leaders viewed war as a simple way out to Europe's problems, and therefore as a good thing because it would allow Russia the time and money it needed to cope with its other issues.

It is important to keep in mind how the political and economic atmosphere of each region, which was compounded by political alliances, weaved together to create what seemed like an imminent war.

Lots of people didn't want a war. Although if possible, they felt it would be easier to do so sooner than later. This presumption played just as much a role as the current political atmosphere in the way the war broke out, and probably in breaking it out entirely.

Chapter 7 - It was impossible to predict the actions of other nations, leading to dysfunctional regimes and propaganda.

When we look at the actions of governments and policymakers leading up to the First World War, one issue stands out: Why did some nations make such huge errors in predicting other countries' actions? For instance, why did the Austrians not expect Russia's response to its invasion of Serbia? Or why was Russia mobilizing against Germany after its conflict with Austria was over?

One explanation for this is that, to say the least, the political system has been distorted in many nations.

For starters, it was never obvious what role the monarchy of each country performed, nor how much control they exercised.

There were already kings and queens in most European nations at the time, even though they had chosen parliaments. The royalty also had considerable control and authority over influential people, but the scope of their jurisdiction was always uncertain, which contributed to uncertainty.

For instance, German Emperor Wilhelm II constantly followed his own strategies and wrote letters to other nations' kings and diplomats explaining his own ideas about foreign relations.

This resulted in other nations being unable to tell for sure whether or not their communications and documents represented the official German line.

Any countries' actions were often messed up because ambassadors and international bureaus often used the press to make informal comments.

Unofficial announcements were very popular. The issue, however, was that the publications did not reveal that an official authority had written them, leading to a huge uncertainty about which declarations were official, and which not.

To add to the uncertainty, newspapers were often used to "test" popular views, to measure the response of the public. Thus, even though one could be certain that the government officials wrote a statement, one could not be certain that it followed the official line.

This misunderstanding in the media once again meant that it was impossible for foreign leaders to understand what other countries were thinking and preparing.

The case had been an intense one in 1914. Because of the structure of alliances, the general sense that a war was coming, and the many reasons that strained relations between countries, it seems a fair hypothesis that the war was imminent.

But was this really the case?

Chapter 8 - The alliances generally turned out to be indecisive and unstable.

To address the question of if the First World War was always imminent, it would help to examine one of the key reasons in the outbreak: the structure of alliances and Europe's subsequent polarisation.

Although in retrospect the different alliances seem solid, the reality is they were tender.

It is because the alliances were not formed on the ground of an established deep connection between nations, but they were the result of political need instead. And as the political atmosphere shifted, the coalition structure did the same.

For instance, Russia originally supported Bulgaria but then became allies with Bulgaria's competitor, Serbia, precisely because it fits their overall strategy better.

Here are a few more examples:

First, Serbia had long been an ally of Austria-Hungary, not Russia, primarily because Russia had an alliance with Bulgaria, the competitor of Serbia.

Serbian trade deals and other treaties with Austria were signed to make up for the failure of the alliance. These arrangements were only broken when Austria, in 1906, decided to sign new trade deals with Bulgaria.

Second, England has been uncertain about its long-term relationship with Russia.

England and Russia became competitors on a multinational scale, including in several colonies, despite a few of their shared goals in Europe. Russia, for example, sought to extend its power to India, which was the largest colony of the British Empire.

British leaders were also focused on undermining Russia, their perceived ally.

It was uncertain how long the Triple Entente would continue because of this undisclosed competition and because several Russian policymakers found the disputes at the eastern frontier more significant.

Therefore, had the conflict happened earlier or later, maybe the war wouldn't have occurred.

But is it accurate to say that the war was already imminent at the time the crisis happened?

Chapter 9 - There have been numerous optimistic efforts at successfully resolving the crisis, including in the last moments before it began.

Franz Ferdinand of Austria's assassination was a surprise to many and sparked a global crisis.

But although it may seem that all chances for reconciliation have been destroyed, the truth is that many political figures have sought gently to resolve the crisis.

Some countries did, in truth, refuse to enter the fight. For instance, Great Britain waited a long time prior to entering and forced both parties to stop the tension.

And Germany stalled before starting to mobilize its own forces, considering Russia's complete mobilization along their borders. Why? Some German leaders feared the consequences of war across Europe and decided to de-escalate it.

Political figures of some nations sought to use their power to convince other nations' leaders to discourage their armies from going on, and to pursue a more diplomatic solution instead.

Soon after the Russian call to arms, for instance, German Emperor Wilhelm sent out a telegram to the Russian Tsar, who was also his cousin, asking him to abandon the mobilization against Austria and Germany.

Wilhelm advocated negotiation between the two nations, without the possibility of war. Having heard this the Tsar put an end to the mobilization in Russia.

Sadly, the Tsar's military officials convinced him to reevaluate his decision. They concluded that all attempts at this stage to avoid the war were pointless because the war was imminent, and any pause or disruption in the mobilization would make Russia unguarded to attack.

It could be claimed that Europe's destiny wasn't determined until very late, while others sought to find a constructive path forward and in this state of revolution and armament.

Chapter 10 - Definitive arguments from existing, ancient documents are hard to make.

We looked at certain specifics and theories in the preceding chapters about how the First World War started out.

But there are several other details which remain unknown. It's impossible to make definitive conclusions about the war for different reasons, relying solely on ancient historical records.

Firstly, there is a large volume of information and literature on the topic, an enormous number to try to condense into one conclusive narrative.

For instance, a massive fifty-seven volume report on the battle, containing 15,889 papers, has been published by German scholars. And this is only one of the associated magazines.

Secondly, a number of valuable records were damaged or destroyed. Entries for important days, such as the initial days of the war, are absent in much of the time's government leaders' journals. In addition, some papers were purposely burned to conceal the part some leaders and nations played in the outbreak.

Thirdly, there have been several different characters, with their own backgrounds and motives, adding to the situation's complication. For example, the increasing power of the Russian military spurred France, Russia's ally, to pledge to war, for it feared Russia would desert it if the alliance was no longer necessary. The Cuban missile crisis, by comparison, had only two main players – though very complex and much discussed: the US and the Soviet Union.

France's motivation is only one tiny indication of how two nations can affect one another in different ways. There were several nations engaging with each other in the crisis which led to the Great War.

We will never know entirely all the puzzle pieces that work together to spark the First World War, due to numerous difficulties and study limitations.

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914 by Christopher Clark Book Review

In the aftermath of the First World War, the coalition structure and eventual division of the European nations played a crucial part. Many citizens assumed that war was imminent, and

agreed to go to war early on that basis to avoid numerous problems down the road. However, as suggested by the actions of some main figures, several strived to postpone going to battle until the final hour.

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