

# WORLD WAR I

## Introduction

World War 1 refers to the first most disastrous war that was fought on a global scale from 1914-1918. It was fought between Britain, France, Russia, USA, Italy and their allies against Germany, Austria- Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria and their allies on the other hand. The war was fought on land, in the air, on the sea, under and above the sea by both soldiers and civilians.

The World War was the climax of international tension that had been building up in Europe after the unifications of Germany and Italy. Such tension found a line of weakness in the Balkans to explode into a global war. Bismarck prophesized it when he told a friend that; **I shall not see the World War but you Will, it will start from the near east.** History proved him a true prophet when the First World War was sparked off after the assassination of France Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife Sophia in Sarajevo by a Bosnian on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1914. Austria issued an ultimatum which Serbia was to reply within 48hours. However, Serbia failed to meet all the conditions and Austria declared war against Serbia on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1914. Other powers joined the conflict which amplified (magnified) it into a European war and finally a World War. The war ended with the defeat and subsequent surrender of Germany in1918.

## CAUSES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The causes of the First World War are so complex and intertwined that no

single factor can be held absolutely responsible for this catastrophic event. Even the **Sarajevo double** murder that sparked off the war was itself a result of accumulated tension that had piled up in Europe for a long time. It is therefore logical that the causes of the war be traced from events that created such tensions and made the outbreak of the war inevitable be examined.

## 1. ALLIANCE SYSTEM.

After the Franco-Prussian war, Bismarck started the alliance system to isolate France and make it difficult for her to wage a successful war of revenge against Germany. During his lifetime, France was effectively isolated and the Alliance system became an instrument of peace in Europe. However, after his resignation (1890) the alliance system and European peace were left in the hands of young, inexperienced and aggressive men like Kaiser William II which drove Germany and the world to the First World War. A number of scholars have asserted that alliance system was primarily responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. By 1914, alliance system had divided Europe into two hostile and antagonistic camps.

The two camps were the German centered triple alliance (1882) that had Austria - Hungary and Italy and the Triple entente (1907), which comprised of Britain, France, Russia and Japan as the main allies. These contributed to the catastrophe of 1914 in a number of ways.

i) It grouped the major world powers into two hostile and antagonistic camps that became fighting camps.

By 1914 there was intensive hatred, jealousy, fear and rivalry between the two camps, which climaxed in the Sarajevo assassination to spark the war.

ii) Without the alliance system, the Sarajevo incident would have remained a localized conflict between Austria and Serbia. But Sarajevo was the only place where the triple alliance and triple entente collided with all their resources, emotions and hostilities. For instance, the triple alliance made Germany to declare war on Russia and France instead of Serbia. This amplified the Austro-Serbian conflict into a global war.

iii) The dual alliance of 1879 and triple alliance of 1882 tied Germany to Austria. This explains why Germany supported Austria which support made Austria to declare war on Serbia sparking off the bloody war of 1914 - 1918.

It also prompted Germany to declare war on Russia and France who were members of the triple entente. If the triple alliance had not bonded Germany to Austria and antagonized Britain and France from Germany, Germany would have found it difficult to act the way she did and the First World War would have been avoided.

iv) Bismarck's biasness against Russia in the 1878 Berlin congress forced Russia to ally with France in the Franco-Russian alliance of 1894. It was a diplomatic and defensive alliance directed against Germany and to some extent Austria-Hungary and Italy. It worsened the already bad relationship between Germany and Russia. This is what forced Germany to declare war on both Russia and France. Otherwise, Russia's mobilization after the Sarajevo assassination targeted Germany more than Austria.

v) In 1904, France moved closer to Britain and formed the Dual Entente. In 1907 Russia was admitted into the entente and this gave rise to the triple entente, which ended France's isolation in Europe and offered her an opportunity and confidence to revenge against her long time foe (enemy) - Germany. It's for this that France declined to be neutral in the Austro-Serbian conflict, which forced Germany to declare war on her.

**NB:** Before declaring war on France, Kaiser William II demanded France to clarify whether she would be neutral in the Austro-Serbian conflict but France declined to comment, a clear indication that she was not ready to be a spectator in the Austro-Serbian conflict.

The Anglo-Franco entente and triple entente certainly determined the direction of British policy up to the First World War. That Britain allied with France in 1914 was not necessarily because of Germany's invasion and therefore a violation of Belgium's neutrality, British policy was shaped in 1904 and consolidated in 1907. As a result by 3<sup>rd</sup> August when Germany invaded Poland, the entente had matured to exercise enough British influence in favour of France's security.

**NB:** One can therefore safely argue that however peaceful Europe seemed to be, the alliance system partitioned her into two hostile, aggressive, suspicious but confidently armed camps making it impossible to localize a conflict like that of Austria and Serbia.

vi) The alliance system gave the necessary courage and strength to the small and otherwise fearful states to provoke war. This is true of Austria and Serbia. Assured of support from other camp members, Austria and Serbia became very reckless and aggressive in dealing with the Balkan

affairs. Russia's backing (support) to Serbia is what made her to sponsor the Sarajevo assassination and defy Austria's ultimatum.

Otherwise, there was no way a 'tiny' state like Serbia could remain defiant to Austria in such a high profile case. On the other hand, if Austria-Hungary had not been assured of Germany's support, she would not have issued the high sounding ultimatum and risk war against Serbia because this would mean fighting Russia as well.

vii) Furthermore, the alliance system gave reinforcement to imperialism, which worsened the already dangerous situation in Europe. It bailed France out of isolation and counting on the backing of her allies, she started dreaming of re-possessing Alsace and Lorraine. Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Britain pursued their imperialistic ambitions without fear. This created more tension in Europe that led to war.

viii) To maintain the defensive terms of the various alliances, each camp had to increase her military might to the highest level. This became more urgent because the alliance system had created mutual fear, hatred and hostility between the two antagonistic camps. This led to military and naval race with a common view that none of the camps should be left behind and this drove Europe to the disastrous war of 1914-1918.

However, although the alliance system contributed to a large extent towards the outbreak of the First World War, nevertheless, its role should not be over exaggerated. In the first place it did not accurately determine the fighting camp. For instance, Italy that was a member of the triple alliance fought on the camp of the triple entente.

Secondly, states like U.S.A, Turkey and Bulgaria that were none members of any of the alliances also participated in the war. Definitely, this was due to other factors other than alliance system.

Thirdly, the inconsistent nature of alliance system becomes clear especially that Britain concluded an alliance with Japan in 1902, in which she promised to support Japan if France and Russia declared war on her yet in 1914 the three powers fought on the same side. Italy signed treaties with almost all the continental powers. This reduced alliance system to mere Jokes.

Fourthly, the creation of alliances and counter alliances was made possible because of international misunderstanding arising from nationalism and imperialism. For instance, Bismarck was able to hook Italy into the triple alliance (1882) only because she was thrown out of Tunisia by France. The 1902 Anglo-Japanese alliance was set against Russia largely for imperial interest in the Far East. This therefore shows that other factors were instrumental in the outbreak of the war.

## **2. ARMS RACE**

### **a) Naval race**

Arms race was started by Kaiser William II in an attempt to challenge British naval superiority and make Germany both a land and sea power. He made this clear in 1890 when he said; our future lies on water.

This was affected by modernizing and updating weapons and tactics at sea. Sea cruisers, destroyers and sub marines. In her effort to maintain her status as a water rat/sea power, Britain built the first all-big-gun turbine driven battle ship which she called dreadnoughts. She calculated that it would take the Germans some years to use dreadnoughts effectively since they would first have to enlarge the Kiel Canal. Germany reacted faster than Britain had thought by expanding die Kiel Canal so that her forces would easily enter the Adriatic Sea in case of war. She concentrated on building dreadnoughts and by 1913; Germany had 9 dreadnoughts while Britain had 18. At the apex of 1914 Germany had 13 dreadnoughts compared to 20for

Britain. Naval armaments were equally on a very scaring scale in France, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Turkey etc. These were preparations for war in advance which opportunity came through the Sarajevo double murder.

That Britain entered the war under the pretext of protecting the neutrality of Belgium yet she wanted to protect her naval base against Germany's

advance is a clear testimony that naval race made valuable contribution to the deadly war of 1914 - 1918.

## **b) Military race**

By 1914, naval race had extended to military race, which increased the means as well as the spirit of violence. Huge chunks of money were spent on the production of deadly weapons for land and air raids.

These included short, medium and long-range artilleries, machine guns, tanks, poisonous gas and fighter planes. Germany in particular trained and enlarged her army to the highest degree of efficiency while France, Russia and Britain increased periods of training and conscription. The deadly weapons were not flowers for decoration but instruments of war which had to be tested and the need to test these weapons is what made the outbreak of war in 1914 a reality.

The increasing level of armaments created universal fear, suspicion and hatred amongst the two antagonistic camps. Indeed it strengthened the alliances and increased hostility between camps. What has to be emphasized is that the powers fought with arms than treaties (alliances).

Arms race increased recklessness and created more tension and conflicts as European powers pursued their national and imperialistic ambitions. This brought in colonial conflicts that worsened the already bad relations between European powers leading to the outbreak of war in 1914.

The deadly weapons created gave confidence of victory in an event of war. This made public opinion in Europe to blindly fall in love with war. For instance, the British public opinion was in favour of war with Germany to destroy her fleet and protect British naval supremacy. The Germans on the other hand wanted war in order to prove to mankind their superiority over other races. Indeed, Germany declared war on Russia and France partly because German public opinion wanted a swift action.

Arms race played a big role in the Sarajevo incident that became the immediate factor in the war. In the first instance, the sophisticated weapon Serbia had is what was utilized by Principe to murder Franz Ferdinand and his wife. The dangerous weapons Austria had in comparison to Serbia are what made Austria to declare war on Serbia. Even Germany declared war on Russia and France because she assumed that she had the best army-and Navy. Otherwise, had it not been because of the sophisticated weapons European powers possessed, Ferdinand could have not lost his life, Austria and Germany would not have gone on rampage declaring war, Britain would

not have entered war and the First World War would have been avoided.

**NB:** In 1899, Tsar Nicholas II called the Hague conference whose priority was to arrest arms race between the great powers. Germany took the lead in opposing such a noble idea viewing it as Nicholas II's trick to save the economically backward Russia from matching the military expenditures of Germany and Austria.

At the second Hague conference, Germany still took the lead against British naval proposal, regarding it as a plan to keep her inferior at sea. When in 1913 Sir Winston Churchill called for a naval holiday, the same Germany refused. However to Britain, a strong navy was a necessity for her and a luxury for Germany.

Britain considered Germany's building a strong navy as a move to destroy her. This partly explains why Britain declared war on Germany merely over the question of violating Belgium's neutrality.

### **c) Militarism**

The political Landscape of Europe prior to 1914 was highly militaristic. War was seen as a divine element of the universe and a condition for progress. The role of politicians was hijacked by a powerful class of military and naval officers whose decisions were final in foreign as well as domestic affairs. They intensified conscription to a level conducive to world peace. For example Germany and France could raise 3½ million soldiers each while Russia could raise 4 million, Britain could raise a smaller but more efficient army. All resources were diverted towards defense. These made war inevitable because the well armed huge standing armies and reserve forces could not be left bored without war. Moreover, those who advocated for war received wide reception while those who stood for peace were condemned.

However, the year 1914 was not the first time Europe was experiencing arms race. It started much earlier and if it was so important then World War I should not have waited until 1914. Even if the weapons made prior to Sarajevo incident were more sophisticated, this should have been a warning to those who wanted war not to risk. This gives room for an analysis of other factors.

### **3. Role of the press**

The role played by the mass media cannot be underrated as a cause of the 1914 - 1918 disastrous war.

Radio presenters and journalists because of the need to amass wealth over exaggerated the suspicion, fear and international tension between the big powers. For instance, the London Times poisoned the British public opinion against the Germans and radio presenters caused more fear and panic after the Sarajevo double murder which created public outcry for war. This forced European powers to strengthen alliances and mobilize for war as Russia did.

**NB:** Before the outbreak of World War in 1914, there was already a newspaper war which acted as a curtain raiser to World War 1. The newspapers of two different countries often took up some point of dispute, exaggerated it and made attacks and counter attacks until a regular newspaper war was created.

Bismarck had earlier foreseen this when he lamented that; every country is held at some time to account for the windows broken by its press; the bill is presented some day in the shape of hostile sentiment in the other.

#### **4. Imperialism and colonial economic conflicts**

i) After 1871, European powers went on rampage to acquire territories in Africa, Europe and the Balkans.

By 1906, areas for peaceful expansion was already exhausted and further conquest could only be made by dispossessing or displacing someone from somewhere. This laid foundation for tension, mistrust and suspicion that spoilt diplomatic relations amongst the imperialists leading to the Great War. For instance, France was bitter over Germany's conquest of Togo and Cameroon. Britain was hurt by Germany's presence in South Africa and her conquest of Namibia while Germany was irked by Britain's conquest of Uganda. Poor relation between Germany and Britain was portrayed by Kaiser William II's congratulatory message to Paul Kruger of Transvaal upon his success in repulsing the Jameson raid of 1896. Germany, France, Britain and Italy also conflicted over Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt and Congo.

ii) It should be noted that Germany declared war on France partly because of tension created between her and France during the scramble and partition of Africa and Asia. Britain also declared war on Germany partly due to poor diplomatic relations cultivated in the era of European conquest in Africa and Asia.

Indeed, Britain was not prepared to give up her colonies, protectorates, spheres of influence and markets to Germany. As Germany was bent on



getting them at any price, Britain had to act faster and declare war on Germany.

iii) Outside Africa, Germany's commercial rivalry and strength was a disturbing factor to Japan, Britain and Russia in the Far East and the Pacific. Russian imperialism was a formidable threat to Germany and Austrian imperialistic interests in the Balkans. This explains why Russia mobilized in support of Serbia (where she had influence) against Austria after the Sarajevo incident. Russian imperialistic designs in Serbia threatened Austrian control and forced her to declare war on Serbia to crush her nationalism.

Equally so, Germany had to declare war on Russia because Russian imperialism was equally a scaring factor to her influence in the Balkans.

iv) One can therefore safely argue that Germany's support of Austria Hungary against Serbia and Russia's backing of Serbia were imperialistically motivated. This is why Lenin argues that; the war of 1914 - 1918 was imperialistic the part of both sides, it was a war for the division of the world, for the partition and repartition of colonies and spheres of influence. One has to emphasize that it was Austrian imperialism that clashed with Serbian nationalism to spark off the war in 1914. Had it not been because of the need to pursue Austria's imperialistic interest in Bosnia, France Ferdinand and his wife would not have traveled to Sarajevo. The assassination would not have occurred and the First World War would have not broken off at least in 1914.

v) The constant confrontations over colonies in different parts of the world made the imperialists to resort to the manufacture of sophisticated weapons for conquest and consolidation of their rule. The possibility of war amongst European powers over colonies also created more need for deadly weapons. This brought in arms race and militarism that made the outbreak of war in 1914 inevitable.

vi) To some extent, imperialism contributed to alliance system, which is a cardinal factor in World War I.

The Anglo-Japanese alliance was against Russia largely for imperial interest in the Far East. Bismarck was able to form the triple alliance in 1882 (by admitting Italy in the Dual Alliance of Austria and Germany which became triple alliance) only because Italy was frustrated by the French occupation of Tunisia (1881).

Never the less, the fact that Italy and France fought on the same side

shows that colonial disputes due to imperialism counted less in causing World War I. However this should not blind up from the fact that imperialism in the Balkans is what sparked off the war in 1914.

Again if imperialism was a serious factor, then Britain and France who were first class enemies in the colonial field would not have fought on the same front in the war. Yet other powers like Romania, USA and Bulgaria never involved themselves seriously in the struggle for colonies but participated in the war.

Suffice to note is that imperialism had existed for more than half a century without causing war until 1914.

If it was a major cause of World War I, then the war would have occurred in 1880's when colonial conflicts were at their climax.

Moreover, colonial conflicts due to imperialism was most intensive in Africa not Europe. If colonial disputes counts so much then World War I would have started from Africa and not Europe.

Lastly, by 1914 most colonial disputes had already been settled through the Berlin settlement and mutual agreements between European powers e.g. the Congo crisis was settled by the Berlin conference, Britain and France had reconciled over Fashoda and this explains why they joined hands in the war.

**NB:** Colonial disputes due to imperialism delayed the formation of rival alliance but strengthened it after they were formed.

ii) The role of economic factor can as well be seen from France's revengist spirit against Germany for the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Britain and France were flabbergasted by the Berlin-Bagdad railway because it was bound to jeopardize their economic interest in the region. Economic consideration was primary in the Congo crisis, Moroccan crisis and Austro-Serbian conflict that brought war.

However, one should guard against over estimating the role of economic considerations in sparking off the disastrous war of 1914-1918. Germany herself had more trade with Britain than any other power in Europe. Thus, if economic considerations mattered so much, then Britain would definitely not have fought her best customer in Europe (Germany). In 1906 a number of German industrialists openly complained about Kaiser William's aggressive character that was frustrating their trade. David Thomson clarifies that economic consideration were kept subordinate to political and

strategic considerations.

## **5) NATIONALISM/COMPETITIVE PATRIOTISM**

By 1914, a number of ill-conceived nationalistic movements had sprung up in Europe. The Great Serbian movement, Pan-Slavism, Revanchist movement and Jingoism bonded themselves in the triple alliance against pan Germanism. The Great Serbian movement had a divine mission of liberating Serbians including those in Bosnia and Herzegovina who were under Austrian's control. Pan-Slavism aimed at making Russia the custodian of all Slav speaking races irrespective of where they were living. The Revanchist movement in France was bent on revenging against Germany because of the 1870 – 1871 humiliating Franco-Prussian war. Jingoism aimed at maintaining British naval technological advancement above other nations while Pan-Germanism or Pan German League was created to unite all German speaking nationalities in different countries. Nationalism strengthened patriotism (love for one's country) and hatred to other nations, which made the following contributions to the First World War.

- i) The desire to pursue national interest made the big powers to clash with one another, which increased tension and hostility amongst the European nations. For instance, when Germany began to build a strong navy, Britain and France protested it as a threat to their national interests. These selfish national interests made it extremely difficult for international peace conferences to succeed leaving war as the only option.
- ii) The need to pursue, defend and promote national interest created prestige and made European powers to be on rampage for colonies. The struggle to promote national interests in Africa and the Balkans created some economic conflicts leading to World War I. In short, nationalism contributed to imperialism.
- iii) Nationalistic feelings made France obsessed with a revengist spirit against Germany. This forced Bismarck to venture into alliance system to isolate France and avoid a French war of revenge. It's on this account that one can argue that had it not been because of the fear of French nationalism, Bismarck would not have started alliance system and the First World War would have been avoided.
- iv. To defend national interest and sovereignty, the big powers hastened the manufacture of deadly weapons leading to arms race and war. Nations also engaged in cut throat competition in the number of soldiers each nation

could put in the battlefield, which increased militarism in Europe. Germany was in a dying need to show off and that's why she declared war on Russia and France. On the other hand, Britain, Russia and France had to defend their national interest against German aggression, which made war unavoidable

v) It was intense nationalism in Serbia that created hostility between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. The desire by Serbia to liberate all Serbians from Austria's imperialism and the attempts by Austria to tighten her control on the Serbs led to the Sarajevo assassination which sparked off the war. Actually, Principe who assassinated Ferdinand was a member of Pan-Slavism who conducted the murder just after attending an anti-Austrian meeting. The fact that the First World War broke out in the Balkans where national interests clashed most portrays the strength of nationalism in World War I. This is because the forces of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism conflicted most in the Balkans leading to the outbreak of war in 1914.

Serbian nationalism clashed with Austria's imperialism to spark off war in 1914. It's therefore clear that nationalism was an important factor in World War I. However, it's real significant came when it clashed with imperialism in the Balkans.

## **6) The Franco-Prussian war, 1870-1871**

i) In 1815, the Vienna Settlement gave Prussia the Rhine lands to the annoyance of France. This made Prussia to be a historical enemy of France, which climaxed into the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 -1871.

France was defeated and forced to submit to the harshest peace treaty of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (i.e. Frankfurt Treaty of 1871). In the treaty, she lost her mineralized provinces of Alsace and Lorraine that had up to 4 million Frenchmen. She also suffered a German army of occupation and was forced to pay a huge indemnity of 200 million pounds. This spoilt diplomatic relations between France and Germany leaving France boiling for a war of revenge. France therefore got a heaven sent opportunity of redressing the wrongs of Prussia's victory with the outbreak of the First World War. This is what forced Germany to act faster by declaring war on France before France could do so.

ii) The Franco-Prussian war changed the balance of power. It completed the unifications of both Germany and Italy at the expense of Denmark, Austria and France. Before the war, the balance of power was in favour of France and Britain with France as a new land power. But after defeating

France, Germany emerged as new land power and started challenging British naval supremacy. This forced Britain and France to ally against Germany leading to tension and the First World War.

The fear of a French war of revenge and the desire to protect and promote Germany's supremacy in European diplomacy while maintaining peace in Europe forced Bismarck to venture and start the alliance system. This sent France on a shopping spree for alliance since she could not successfully revenge against Germany single handedly. She found this in the triple alliance of 1907. The alliance system left Europe divided into two hostile and antagonistic camps, which made war inevitable. It's therefore safe to argue that if the Franco-Prussian war had not occurred, France would not have been eager for a war of revenge and consequently Bismarck would have not ventured into the alliance system hence the Austro-Serbian conflict would have remained a localized affair between Austria and Serbia.

iv) The threats of French revenge forced Bismarck to arm Germany in preparation for war. Other nations followed Germany and started prioritising defense expenditures. They were encouraged by Bismarck's' policy of blood and iron through which Germany was unified from 1864 - 1871. This created arms race and strengthened militarism, which made Europe a walking bomb that exploded in 1914.

v) The war contributed to imperialism leading to colonial economic rivalry and the First World War in 1914. The loss of the mineralized regions of Alsace and Lorraine forced France to look for compensation elsewhere most especially in Africa. Bismarck tactfully encouraged her since she would forget of Alsace and Lorraine while clashing with other powers in the scramble for colonies in Africa. This also encouraged Austria to tighten her control in Serbia, which raised Serbian nationalism leading to the murder of Prince Archduke and war.

The triumph of Italian and German nationalism in 1850's through the Franco-Prussian war inspired the oppressed nations to struggle for freedom using Bismarck's policy of blood and iron. Nationalistic movements like Pan- Germanism, Pan-Slavism and the Greater Serbian movement in the Balkans had a direct Xeroxing (copying) from Italian and German unification struggles from 1810 - 1871. Serbia was encouraged to challenge Austria since it was the same Austria that was defeated by Italians and Germans leading to their freedom. This made Serbia to act recklessly against Austria leading to the Sarajevo assassination and consequently the First World War.

vi) The success of Germany in the Franco-Prussian war coupled with the earlier military victories made Kaiser William II to believe that Germany was the mightiest (strongest) world power. It created in him a political stigma of arrogance and aggression in his efforts to preserve Germany's supremacy. This is what made him to recklessly send a blank cheque to Austria, declare war on Russia and France and violate the neutrality of Belgium. These moves by Germany amplified the Austro-Serbian conflict into the First World War.

**NB:** The Franco-Prussian war indirectly completed the unification of Italy and made Italy more ambitious to recover Trentino and Trieste that were inhabited by Italians but were still under Austria-Hungary's control. This is what made Italy to quit Austria's camp (Triple alliance) and join the triple entente tactfully to recover Trentino and Trieste, which she got at the Versailles peace settlement of 1919.

### **7) Kaiser William II's aggressive character/German aggression**

The role played by Kaiser William II of Germany was of paramount importance in the sparking of World War I. He was a bellicose (war like), arrogant and cantankerous leader who could not hide his hangover for war. In his foreign policy, he tried to intervene in each and every activity of world politics in order to make Germany a world power. He declared; "Nothing must go on anywhere in the world in which Germany does not play a part", William was too confident and proud of himself and he proclaimed; "God has called us to civilize the world". Consequently his character and policy played a cardinal role in World War I. Germany took the greatest blame in causing World War I because of the role played by Kaiser William II. He made a number of blunders and diplomatic errors that made the outbreak of the First World War inevitable.

i) He forced Bismarck to resign leaving the world with no capable statesman who could diplomatically settle world conflicts such as the Austro-Serbian conflict, which exploded into the First World War.

Kaiser William II had a very poor opinion and natural hatred towards the English people and other races. This made Britain, Russia and France to form the triple entente that ended the isolation of France. In 1897 - 1899, Joseph Chamberlain, the British colonial secretary tried to negotiate an Anglo-German agreement but this failed on both occasions due to Kaiser William's aggressive naval policy and his unfriendly attitude to Britain in the Anglo Boer war. He sent a congratulatory message to Paul Kruger for repulsing the Jameson raid in Transvaal. It should be emphasized that

British allies especially France and Russia were long time enemies to her (Britain) who would not have fought against Germany if it had not been because of Kaiser William's careless and aggressive policy. All these were because Kaiser William misused Bismarckian alliance system turning it to an instrument of war rather than peace as Bismarck had done.

ii) Kaiser William further antagonized Great Britain in a speech in Damascus when he offered German leadership to all Moslems in the world. This aroused British suspicions regarding Kaiser's intentions because a large number of Moslems lived in the British Empire. It also attracted the hostility of Christian powers like France and Italy against Germany, which created a favourable atmosphere for the explosion of world war I.

iii) The Berlin - Baghdad railway project that he embarked on was a threat to Russia, France and Britain whose interests in the east were bound to be jeopardized by Germany. This helped to consolidate the triple entente against Germany.

iv) Kaiser William II is blamed for starting the naval race to challenge British naval supremacy and militarism to maintain Germany's supremacy. He reinstated conscription and prolonged the period of service not only for defense but more to fulfill his imperialistic ambitions abroad. He deliberately disagreed with other leaders at disarmament conferences, yet this would have reduced arms race. Indeed, his activities and arrogance gave other powers every excuse to fear and re-mobilize against Germany just like Russia did after the Sarajevo incident.

v) It was Kaiser William's blank cheque to Austria that increased Austria's recklessness towards Serbian.

He openly promised Austria that; "rest assured that his majesty will faithfully stand by Austria- Hungary as required by the obligations of his alliance and by his ancient friendship". Surely, if Kaiser William had not given this assurance, Austria would not have taken a bold step against Serbia (to the extent of declaring war). Henceforth, World War I would have been avoided.

i) It was Germany under Kaiser William II that declared war on Russia, France, violated the London treaty of 1839, which dragged Britain into war. All these are what magnified the local Austro-Serbian conflict into a European and finally a World War.

**8) Weakness of international organisation and the collapse of**

## **international diplomacy**

The weakness of International organisation prior to 1914 made the outbreak of the First World War inevitable. The international court of justice at The Hague was perfectly inefficient and unable to settle major world disputes. It had neither moral authority nor force to implement its resolutions, which explains why the many resolutions of the Hague conferences of 1899 and 1907 remained on paper. The weakness of International organisation led to the collapse of International diplomacy. The outbreak of the First World War became inevitable because every state considered itself free to do anything according to its will since there was no authoritative organisation to restrain or punish her.

It should be noted that Serbia's attempt for a peaceful resolution with Austria failed because of the ineffectiveness of the international court of justice. Serbia accepted Austria's first two ultimatums and referred the third one to the international court of justice for arbitration. This failed because of the weakness of the International court of Justice, which had been discarded by Kaiser William II since 1907.

### **9) The Sarajevo double murder, 28th June 1914**

The immediate cause of the First World War was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife Sophia at Sarajevo- the capital of Bosnia (Bosnia had been annexed to Austria-Hungary in 1808) by Gabriel Principe a Serbian nationalist. Austria that was already sick of Serbian nationalism decided to utilize the event to destroy Serbia. She considered the incident as a Serbian conspiracy to destroy the Austrian monarchy, by assassinating the heir at a time when the ageing Emperor Joseph Francis was 84 years and was expected to die any time. Germany gave Austria-Hungary a blank cheque i.e. the freedom to do anything she wishes to Serbia with Germany's unconditional support.

Assured of Germany's backing, Austria sent an impossible ultimatum to Belgrade, the capital of Serbia on 23th July 1914. She demanded a satisfactory reply within 48 hours. These demands were that Serbia should among others;

- i) Declare her intention of being a good neighbour through the press and by suppressing anti-Austrian propaganda.
- ii) Dismiss anti-Austrian officials in her administration and the army.
- iii) Allow Austria's officials into Serbia to investigate the inquiry of Franz



Ferdinand's assassination.

Serbia accepted the first two conditions but rejected Austria's participation in the inquiry of Ferdinand's death on the ground that it was a violation of her independence and wisely referred them to the international court of justice at The Hague. However, the international court of justice had been discarded by Kaiser William II way back in 1907. Austria rejected Serbia's proposal and declared war on her on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1914. This determined the occurrence of the First World War. Russia mobilized in support of Serbia, Germany demanded that Russia should demobilize but when she refused, Germany declared war on her on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1914. Germany again demanded France to declare her neutrality and when she refused, Germany declared war on her on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914. On 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, German troops invaded Belgium in violation of the 1839 London treaty that had guaranteed Belgium's independence and neutrality, which forced Britain to enter the war against Germany on the same day. Thus, the First World War was on a high gear.

## **ROLE OF EUROPEAN POWERS IN THE OUTBREAK OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

Each and every power that participated in the war should be held responsible although the degree of responsibility differs. In other words,

the responsibility varies from country to country based on the magnitude of the blame; It should be noted that much as countries like Italy, Japan, USA, Bulgaria and Turkey participated in the First World War, they cannot be held responsible for the outbreak of the war. ■

This is because they joined the war later when it had already started i.e. "broken off". Thus, with or without them the First World War would still have been an important event in the history of Europe and indeed the whole world.

### **1. GERMANY**

By article 231 of the war guilt clause in the Versailles peace treaty, Germany was solely blamed for causing World War I. It was unanimously agreed that Germany alone was responsible for the outbreak of World War I and that is why article 232 subjected her to impossible reparation of 6,600

million pounds.

Although these were very unrealistic, Germany still shares the greatest responsibility in causing and sustaining World War I in as far as she;

i) Started the alliance system in an attempt to isolate France in European politics. After Bismarck, Kaiser William II misused the alliance system as a tool to raise Germany above other powers. This prompted the formation of triple entente, which became antagonistic with the triple alliance leading to World War I.

ii) It was again Germany that started the arms and naval race which was followed by other powers. This was to prepare for a French war of revenge, dominate other powers and challenge British naval supremacy. The sophisticated weapons created more suspicion, hatred, recklessness and courage leading to the First World War.

iii) In the colonial field, Germany acquired territories adjacent to Britain that was very provocative. For instance, when Britain acquired Uganda and Kenya, Germany moved to Tanganyika. When Britain declared a protectorate over Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone, Germany annexed Togo and Cameroon.

Germany also encouraged colonial conflicts between France and other powers purposely to isolate France. Kaiser William II himself irritated Britain when he congratulated Paul Kruger for his success in the Jameson raid of 1894. This worsened the already hostile relationship between Britain and Germany and partly explains why Britain declared war on Germany in 1914.

iv) In pursuit of Germany's imperialism in the near east, Germany in 1913 started building the Berlin-Baghdad railway. She continued to claim exclusive rights to train and command the Turkish army against the British claim of similar rights over the navy and foreign policy. This created more tension in the east and made it a storm centre for the explosion of World War I.

Germany under Kaiser William II shares a blame for militarism and chauvinism. Kaiser William II believed in the policy of "world power or downfall". The arrogance and superiority complex of the Germans increased the hostility between Germany and other races leading to World War I.

v) The unification of Germany in 1871 distorted the balance of power in

Europe and stimulated nationalism throughout Europe. In 1871, Prussia inflicted a humiliating defeat on France and completed the unification of Germany. France was subjected to a heavy war indemnity of 5 billion Francs, an army of occupation and was forced out of her two mineral rich provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. The humiliations and the losses from the Franco-Prussian war created bitter enmity between Germany and France and led to World War I.

**NB:** It has been argued that if Germany had not interfered in Morocco, France might have found some material compensation for the loss of Alsace and Lorraine and would have probably forgotten to revenge against Germany. However, the German interference in Morocco added the bitterness between the two countries.

vi) Germany stands in the dock of history in relation to World War I for supporting Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the annoyance of Serbia and Russia. This strengthened Austria's imperialism in Serbia and triggered off Serbian nationalism leading to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand and World War I.

vii) Germany shares the guilt of World War I for issuing a blank cheque to Austria, which increased Austria's recklessness towards Serbia after the Sarajevo incident. This made Austria to issue the unrealistic ultimatum and declare war on Serbia that became a prelude to World War I.

viii) Germany is blamed for issuing an unnecessary ultimatum to Russia. In the aftermath of Austria's declaration of war on Serbia, Russia started a general mobilization and Germany sent an ultimatum demanding for her demobilization, which prompted Germany to declare war on her. Germany is therefore blamed for issuing an ultimatum on her own terms rather than seeking the opinion of other powers in dealing with Russia's mobilization. The ultimatum could have possibly humbled Russia if it was a joint declaration by the big powers of Europe i.e. Germany, France, Russia and Austria. That it failed to humble Russia was because it was a German declaration that posed no serious threat to Russia.

ix) After the Sarajevo assassination, it was Germany that magnified the Austro-Serbian conflict into a World War. She declared war on Russia, France and Belgium.

The attack on Belgium violated the London treaty of 1839, which forced Britain and other powers to declare war on her.

**NB:** After Germany stationing her troops in Belgium in readiness for attack,

France and Britain demanded that the German troops should be withdrawn but the Germans did not respond, neither they send a reply. This forced Britain to join the war against Germany.

## **2. AUSTRIA-HUNGARY**

i) Austria's imperialism in the Balkans is what sparked off World War I. The Berlin conference of 1878 gave her the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina merely to administer and not to annex them.

However, Austria annexed the two provinces in 1908. This brought forth bitter protest from Serbia and Russia leading to the assassination of Ferdinand and World War I. It also explains why Russia mobilized in support of Serbia against Austria.

ii) Austria should be blamed for her recklessness towards Serbia through the unrealistic ultimatum.

Austria had long-term intention to fight Serbia but lacked an excuse. She purposely issued the ultimatum with stringent conditions knowing that the terms would be rejected by Serbia and that would justify war with Serbia. It's even on record that the Austrian cabinet debated and declared war on Serbia on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1914, before the ultimatum was dispatched.

iii) Austria is also to blame for violating the territorial and political integrity of Serbia. She declared war on Serbia even after Baron Von Wiesnerthethen Austria's ambassador to Belgrade (Serbia) reported that there was no conclusive evidence of Serbia's involvement in the Sarajevo assassination. Had Austria not declared war on Serbia; possibly other powers like Russia would have no reason to mobilize their troops and the timing of the war would have been different.

iv) Austria also got involved in the arms race and was one of the most militaristic nations by 1914. This increased her imperialistic ambitions in the Balkans, which clashed with Serbian nationalism to spark off World War I.

She had a very strong solidarity with Germany and was the closest to Germany than Italy and Russia in the triple alliance and Dreikaiserbund respectively. This created more confidence in Germany and made her the most aggressive nation prior to 1914. Had Austria abandoned Germany like Italy and Russia did, Germany would not have been so reckless to declare war on Russia and the Austro-Serbian conflict would have remained a local affair between Austria and Serbia.

v) Austria- Hungary is blamed for organizing the visit of Franz- Ferdinand and his wife at a time when the diplomatic relations between her and Serbia was at its lowest (worst) level. On 28<sup>th</sup> June 1914, Austrian authorities organized the royal visit that boomeranged and caused war when the royal couple was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist, Principe. Austrian authorities are therefore blamed for provoking Serbia by the visit because they were fully aware of the Serbian hostility towards Austria.

The poor relations between the two nations suggest that the Sarajevo assassination could not be accidental but an expected event that was ignored by Austria's lack of fore sight.

vi) Austria Hungary is held responsible for the outbreak of the First World War for internationalizing her conflict with Serbia. After the Sarajevo double murder, Austria rejected Serbia's demand to refer the third ultimatum for arbitration (Settlement) by the international court of Justice at The Hague. Emperor Joseph II of Austria instead consulted Kaiser William II of Germany, which dragged Germany with all her aggression into the conflict. Austria is also blamed for accepting Germany's advice to declare war on Serbia.

x) Austria's poor diplomatic relations with Russia make her accountable for the outbreak of the First World War. Austria antagonized Russia by opposing her imperialism in the Balkans. In 1877, Russia defeated Turkey and forced her to sign the treaty of Sanstefano in which the big Bulgaria was created.

Austria allied with Britain and threatened war against Russia for her illegal creation of the big Bulgaria at the Berlin congress of 1878. Austria stood against the creation of the big Bulgaria and it was dissected into three i.e. reduced in sizes. After the Berlin congress of 1878, Austria intensified her imperial designs in the Balkans that led to further conflicts with Russia. In 1879, Austria formed the dual alliance with Germany against Russia and France. Austria's activities threatened Russia's interest and dragged her into an alliance with France i.e. France Russian alliance of 1894. This set the pace for the formation of the triple entente in 1907, which caused more antagonism and tension that led to world war I by 1914.

### **3. SERBIA**

Serbia shares the guilt of World War I for engineering conflict in an economically, politically and strategically located Balkan region. In 1912, she mobilized Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece to form the Balkan league.

She used the league to fight Turkey and occupy her territories in Europe. She also fought and defeated Bulgaria in 1913, which increased her influence in the Balkans to the disappointment of Austria. Generally, Serbia contributed greatly to the Balkan wars of 1911 – 1913 during which she emerged as a leader of the Slave speaking race. This attracted the hostility of other powers particularly Germany, Austria and Turkey to defend their political, economic and strategic interest leading to the First World War.

i) Serbian nationalism was too ambitious to guarantee peace in Europe. Serbian nationalism clashed with Austria's imperialism leading to the Sarajevo assassination and the First World War. The assassin of Franz Ferdinand and his wife was a member of the Great Serbian movement, which was against Austrian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Whether Serbian government was responsible for the murder or not is still a subject of dispute but Serbia's failure to suppress the activities of the greater Serbian movement makes her politically responsible for the assassination.

ii) It was Serbia that provided Austria with an excuse to declare war by refusing to comply with the 3<sup>rd</sup> term of the July 23<sup>rd</sup> ultimatum. She rejected the third term of the ultimatum that demanded for the intervention of Austrian officials in the investigation of the Sarajevo double murder. This provided Austria with a convenient pretext to declare war on her. Had Serbia humbled herself to accept all the terms of the ultimatum and risked her independence, the world would possibly have been spared from the great war of 1914-1918. She also wanted war because before sending her reply to the ultimatum, she had ordered for a general mobilization. This was before Austria declared war.

iii) Serbia is also blamed for being a close ally of the Triple entente that was antagonistic to the triple alliance. She was also overwhelmed with confidence that she recklessly pursued her ambitions of uniting all the Slaves in the Balkans. It intensified conflict between her on one hand against Austria and Germany on the other hand. This created more tension in Germany and Austria that made them determined to fight to destroy Serbia after the Sarajevo assassination as a way of breaking the solidarity of the triple entente alliance. It should be argued that Serbia's aggressive and arrogant attitude partly made Germany to support Austria against her.

Serbia's aggressive and arrogant attitude towards Austria and Germany created more tension that led to the outbreak of the First World War. This partly made Austria to issue the unrealistic ultimatum and declare war against her in 1914.

iv) Serbia is also blamed for promoting anti Austrian activities and terrorist movements like the union, death and Black Hand society. Serbia started sponsoring these movements to sabotage Austrian rule after her annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. It was these terrorist movements that masterminded the assassination of Franz Ferdinand with his wife and sparked off the First World War.

v) Lastly, Serbia is blamed for magnifying her conflict with Austria by appealing for Russian support.

After the Sarajevo assassination, Serbia called for Russian support against Austria. This scared Austria and contributed to her declaration of war on Serbia. Serbia's appeal to Russia also explains why Russia mobilized in support of her in the aftermath of Sarajevo double murder. It was also Russia's mobilization that prompted Germany to declare war on her. One can therefore argue that if Serbia had not appealed for Russian support, Russia could possibly not have mobilized her troops and Germany would not have found a convenient pretext to declare war on her (Russia).

#### **4. RUSSIA**

i) Russia shares the blame for supporting Balkan nationalism and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Her support of Pan-Slavism led to the Balkan wars of 1878 and those of 1912-1913. The success of Slav nationalism in Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece stimulated greater nationalism, which undermined the existence of the Austrian Empire and even Germany. That Austria declared war on Serbia was because Serbian nationalism supported by Russia threatened her existence and the same explains why Germany declared war on Russia.

ii) It was Russia's support to Serbian nationalism that intensified Serbia's recklessness leading to the assassination of Prince Ferdinand and his wife that sparked off war in 1914.

iii) Even after the assassination, it was Russia's support to Serbia that partly made her defiant to Austria's demands. The Russian foreign minister Sazanov told the Serbian ambassador in Russia that; Russia would in no circumstances permit Austrian aggression against Serbia. This is what encouraged Serbia to reject Austria's ultimatum in full. Otherwise, Serbia in her relatively weaker position compared to Austria would not have dared take such a bold stand against Austria.

iv) Russia's interference in Serbian affairs with a claim to be the rightful protector of Slav population and orthodox Christians in the Balkans was

rejected by other powers. Although this is justifiable to some extent, it carried more of Russia's hidden imperial, economic and strategic motives than true religious and ethnic aims. This attracted the attention of other powers particularly Germany, Turkey and Austria making it impossible to localize any conflict such as the Austro-Serbian conflict.

v) Russia made Germany to declare war on her. She ordered for general mobilization on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1914 and refused to accept Germany's ultimatum to demobilize. This forced Germany to declare war on her as the only alternative. According to Professor Fay;

"It was primarily Russia's general mobilization when Germany was trying to bring Austria to a settlement which precipitated the final catastrophe, causing Germany to mobilize and declare war"

vi) Russia's expansionist policy in the Balkans and the desire to check Germany's advance to the east made her to get entangled in the arms race and militarism. This was to challenge Germany's military might amongst others, which forced Germany to declare war on her. Actually, Russia's mobilization was not just to assist Serbia against Austria but target fully mobilized for Germany.

vii) Russia's quitting of the Dreikaisabund in 1878 made it impossible for alliance system to be an instrument of peace. After leaving Germany's camp, she joined the French camp (Triple entente) yet France was Germany's number one enemy. This put Germany on tension, incited her to prepare for war and forced her to declare war on her (Russia) and France as well.

## **BRITAIN**

i) She shares the war guilt for being the most influential member of the triple entente that was antagonistic to the triple alliance led by Germany. Britain made separate treaties with Japan, France and Russia and consolidated the min the triple entente of 1907. This threatened Germany and made her to prepare for war and that is why she fought France, Britain, Russia and Japan.

ii) Britain is accused for causing World War I due to her international jealousy and self-seeking ambitions.

She was the champion of colonialism, enjoyed monopoly but never wanted other powers to challenge her status as the workshop of Europe. This accounts for imperialism and colonial economic conflicts especially with



the new Germany that precipitated war.

iii) Britain also protested the Berlin-Baghdad railway that aimed at increasing German trade in the east to the extent of encouraging Russia in the Balkans from 1908, which had not been the case before. She wanted to use Russia to block Germany's advance, which only brought war.

iv) By 1914, Britain had built a huge and strong naval force but still resented any other power's attempts to do so, especially Germany. When Germany tried to challenge her naval superiority, she began modernizing and speeding up naval and arms manufacture that led to the arms race. This turned European balance of power into a balance of terror to cause the First World War.

v) Britain stands in the dock of history in as far as she fought to defend her self-interest in Belgium. She had a naval base in Belgium from where she controlled the eastern waters. This is what made her to champion Belgium independence and neutrality in 1839. Thus, the British declaration of war based on the violation of London treaty of 1839 was a mere camouflage of protecting her naval base against the threats from German troops in Belgium.

vi) Britain's refusal to settle the eastern question peacefully by partitioning the Ottoman Empire made it to be a historical centre of European conflicts that developed into World War I. If Britain had accepted the Russian policy of dividing up Turkey as early as 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Balkan wars of 1911-1913 would have been minimized and World War I would have started from elsewhere not from the Balkans.

vii) The Anti German feelings and propaganda created by the British press makes Britain responsible for the First World War. The London Times exaggerated war threats by Germany after the Sarajevo assassination and turned public opinion against Germany. This encouraged Austria to declare war on Serbia and Russia to mobilize for war at the same time. The British press propaganda also influenced the government to declare war on Germany on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914.

## **FRANCE**

France is blamed for her desire to revenge against Germany for the humiliations and losses of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71. In 1871, Prussia defeated France and subjected her to a heavy war indemnity of 5 billion Francs, an army of occupation and snatched her two mineral rich

provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. After 1871, France had a burning desire not only to recover Alsace and Lorraine but also to revenge against Germany and restore her national pride and prestige as a great power.

Public opinion favoured war and a statue symbolizing revenge was erected at Strasbourg city. A revengist movement led by opposition politician General Boulanger advocated for a war of revenge against Germany. This made Otto Von Bismarck of Germany to take a precautionary measure of starting alliance system and arms race to isolate France and defend Germany. Declaration of war against France on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1914 was influenced by the need to suppress her spirit of revenge.

a) Although France fought a defensive war, there is evidence that she was not willing to be neutral in the Austro-Serbian war. In the aftermath of Austria's declaration of war against Serbia, Kaiser William 11 of Germany demanded France to state her position in the war. However, President Point care declined to guarantee the neutrality of France, which forced Germany to declare war on her. It must be noted that France's refusal to guarantee her neutrality was partly influenced by her desire to revenge against Germany and repossess her mineralized provinces of Alsace and Lorraine.

b) France contributed directly and indirectly to alliance system that led to the outbreak of World War 1. Indirectly, her desire to revenge the losses of the Franco-Prussian war is what primarily made Bismarck to form the Dreikaiserbund (1873), Dual entente (1879) and triple alliance (1882) i.e. to isolate her and frustrate her desire to revenge against Germany. Directly, France initiated alliances against Germany.

In 1894, she allied with Russia (Franco-Russian alliance). In 1904, she allied with Britain (Dual Entente) and in 1907; Russia joined the Dual Entente to form the Triple Entente. These alliances divided Europe into two hostile and antagonistic camps leading to the collapse of diplomacy and explosion of the First World War.

c) France was also entangled/involved in militarism, naval, and arms race. After 1871, France started rearming herself with sophisticated weapons, embarking on conscription and improving her naval capacity as a move to launch a successful war of revenge against Germany. She also ventured in colonial acquisition and adopted the policy of assimilation in her colonies in order to get more manpower to fight Germany.

Radical opposition politicians like General Boulanger became more popular because of their advocacy for a revenge war against Germany. All these

created fear suspicion, Jealousy and panic in Germany that calumniated into the outbreak of the First World War by 1914.

d) France is also blamed for colonial rivalry and conflict that created tension and war fever by 1914.

She clashed with Germany twice for the control of morocco in 1906 and 1911 i.e. The Tangier incident, 1905 (the 1<sup>st</sup> Moroccan crisis) and the Agadir crisis, 1911 (the second Moroccan crisis). Although these crises were settled diplomatically, Germany was left with a spirit of revenge, which she accomplished by attacking France in 1914.

e) France assured Russia of support in the Austro-Serbian conflict, which made it difficult to localize the issue. The French President Poincare visited Russia from 20<sup>th</sup> July to 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1914 and promised French support to Russia against Austria. To quote him, Serbia has very warm friends in the Russian people and Russia has an ally, France. This is what morale boosted Russia to mobilize for war after Austria declaring war on Serbia.

f) However, in comparison to other powers, France takes the least responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. This is because she fought a defensive war. Although she had the desire to revenge, she perused it with reasonable patience and never went for war over Alsace and Lorraine as an immediate reason. When Austria attacked France, Germany gave France a limited time to state her position and when France declined, Germany declared war on her, marched and stationed her troops in Belgium in readiness to invade France. France therefore had no other alternative other than to mobilize and defend herself, thereby sharing a lesser blame.

**REASONS FOR THE DEFEAT OF CENTRAL POWERS/GERMANY IN WORLD  
WAR I / REASONS FOR THE TRIUMPH OF ALLIED POWERS IN WORLD  
WAR I**

## **Background**

World war I was basically fought between two belligerent camps i.e. the triple alliance and triple entente.

Germany and Austria-Hungary were the core members of the triple alliance and were called the central powers. France, Britain and Russia were the dominant members of the triple entente and were known as allied powers. Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria joined the central powers and USA joined the allied powers in 1917 after the withdrawal of Russia. Italy, though a member of the triple alliance changed camp and fought on the side of the triple entente. The war also involved colonies and other powers that joined either of the camps. The central powers began the war with much vigor and successes but failed to sustain the war in the long run. They were over powered with massive losses and by 1918 all had surrendered. This was due to political, social and economic factors.

### **1. Military superiority of allied powers accounts for their success against central powers/ Germany.**

The allied powers had better military equipments like tanks that were first used by the British, sophisticated fighter jets and airplanes for spying on the position of troops of central powers. The central powers were militarily inferior which made them to lose several battles. The ranges of the German U-boats were short and inflicted maximum damage on civilians than allied troops, which attracted negative public outcry against the central powers. The Germans tried to use poison gas but abandoned it after realizing that winds were blowing it back to their own base. Besides, German allies like Turkey, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria were so weak that Germany would occasionally divert her troops to help them against the allied powers.

This diverted the German army and led to lack of concentration yet Germany was fighting two fronts i.e. The Western front against Belgium, France and Britain and the Eastern front against Russia.

### **2. The naval superiority of allied powers also explains the defeat of central powers/Germany.**

The allied powers were boosted by Britain who had the best dreadnaughts and battleships manned by well drilled and experienced naval officers. These were effectively used to block Germany and her allies from accessing most European waters, which limited their combat operations to the mainland. Imports and exports involving central powers were therefore severely reduced, which worsened economic crisis and weakened them

militarily. The British navy also demolished several German squadrons and U-boats on the Atlantic Ocean e.g. A very dangerous German squadron commanded by Admiral Graf that had inflicted severe damage on British ships on the coast of South America was finally crushed in Dec 1914. Thereafter, the several German squadrons that were scattered throughout the world were hunted down and demolished.

Naval superiority made allied powers to effectively control European waters and freely move troops to any theatre of war unlike the central powers, which made the defeat of the central powers inevitable.

### **3. The reckless German submarine warfare strategy also contributed to the defeat of Germany and her allies.**

The Germans used unrestricted U-boat warships that were banned in Europe because of their destructive nature. From mid 1915, the Germans without any preliminary warning recklessly used U-boats to sink any ship be it for civilians, merchants, traders, refugees; soldiers or passengers as long as it was sighted in the war zone. The U-boats even sunk ships of neutral countries like Spain, Portugal and USA.

This led to death of several innocent civilians' traders and refugees e.g. in May 1915; the Germans sunk the British ship (Lusitania) in which over 1000 passengers including 100 American citizens perished. This created a public outcry in America to punish Germany for the wanton massacre that made USA to join the war on the side of allies and defeat Germany. On the other hand, German's overreliance on U-boats was unsustainable by 1918. The allies countered it with the "Convoy system" which rendered the U-boat strategy ineffective hence accounting for Germany's defeat.

### **4. The German invasion of Belgium in 1914 was a military blunder that contributed to the defeat of the central powers.**

On 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, Germany invaded Belgium and attacked France. This was an outright violation of the 1839 London treaty in which the great powers had pledged to respect the neutrality and independence of Belgium. This portrayed Germany as an aggressive imperial power that does not respect international treaties. It irritated European powers most especially Britain who joined the war purposely to safeguard the 1839 London treaty, which had guaranteed Belgium's independence. Thereafter, Britain used her naval power to blockade Germany in European waters, which conditioned German's defeat by 1918.

## **5. Poor planning based on misconception created by the Schleinffen plan also contributed to Germany's defeat in World War I.**

The German war plan was devised by her chief of general staff, Count Von Schleinffen in which German troops were to quickly march through Belgium into France, overrun Paris and defeat France in about 6 weeks. Thereafter, the victorious troops were to rush to the East and defeat the 'inferior and backward' Russia in a few days. However the plan was a fiasco right from the moment it was tried. First of all, the war started with Russia on 1<sup>st</sup> Aug before France later on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Secondly, the Belgians waged a strong resistance and the quick march to France was a dream. Thirdly, the inferior and backward Russians advanced much faster and attacked East Prussia, which prompted the Germans to divert over 4 more divisions from France to the East. This disorganized and weakened German forces right from the onset and retarded their effectiveness.

**6. Numerical superiority of allied powers also contributed to the defeat of Germany and her allies.** The allied camp had more states including large and highly populated countries like Britain, France, Russia, Belgium, Japan, and USA etc. They were boosted by common wealth forces and vast colonies possessed by allied powers. On the other hand, Germany and her allies had very few colonies compared to those possessed by allied powers. Out of German allies, only Austria was militarily stronger while Turkey and Bulgaria were militarily inferior. The scale of the war subjected the four central powers to fight the whole world, which was impossible considering the fact that they were numerically disadvantaged.

**7. The entry of USA on the side of allies boosted the allies and contributed to the speedy defeat of the central powers.** In 1917, USA joined the allies against Germany partly to avenge the death of about 100 American citizens in the British ship Lusitania that was destroyed by German U-boat in 1915. Prior to 1917, USA had accumulated a lot of financial gains through sale of war related equipments and she was the most stable nation. It should be noted that by April 1917, the war had reached a stalemate where either side could not make significant gains and win. However, USA's entrance reinforced allied powers with financial and military backing at a time when both camps were exhausted and fatigued. It also helped to fill the gap left by Russia's withdrawal and that explains why the central powers failed to take advantage of it by making rapid gains, which could have won for them the war.

**Encirclement of Germany by 1917 greatly contributed to the defeat of central powers.** From 1916, the allies launched three simultaneous attacks from the Western, Eastern and Italian fronts. Americans launched a full scale invasion of Germans near Verdun, British used heavy tanks to shell German troops Amiens and Arras, and Canadians attacked German troops who had earlier on taken over press. French and Belgians intensified their attacks in the North of France. This encirclement overstretched and scattered the German troops and made the defeat of central powers inevitable since Germany was the only active member by 1918.

**8. High spirit of patriotism and nationalism also contributed to the success of allied powers against Germany and her allies.** Allied nations like Britain, France and Italy were led by democrats who instilled the spirit of patriotism and nationalism in their subjects. Their leaders used the mass media to mobilize all able bodied persons to fight and defeat the central powers. For instance, in 1916 when the Germans attacked the main military base of French forces at Verdun, Marshall Petain, the French commander issued an inspiring call to his troops that "they shall not pass". This call became the French patriotic slogan that inspired confidence and resilience in French troops, which made the Germans to be ejected from France.

**9. The role of charismatic leadership also contributed to the success of allied powers in the War.** The French prime minister, George Clemenceau and his counterpart of Britain were more experienced and competent than the leaders of the central powers. They mobilized and moral boosted their nationals to fight and defeat Germany and her allies. On the other hand, central powers were led by less experienced and shrewd statesmen. Germany after the downfall of Bismarck was led by Kaiser II and army commanders Von Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who were less oriented in European politics and military organization.

Austria-Hungary was led by Emperor Francis Joseph whose age (84 years in 1914) had partly made him incapable of holding the ramshackle empire together (the empire was crumbling due to the rise of nationalism). Turkey was led by Sultan Muhammad V who had also failed to maintain harmony and co-existence between the various nationalities struggling to regain their independence. This created internal weaknesses that reduced the effectiveness of the central powers in the war and favoured the success of allied powers in World War I.

**10. The defection of Italy and Romania to allied camp also contributed to**

**the defeat of the central powers.** Italy was a founder member of the triple alliance (led by Germany) and Romania was a close ally.

Germany and Austria thus expected both states to support them in the war. However in 1916, both Italy and Romania defected and joined the allies against the central powers. This created panic, confusion and low morale in the camp of the central powers. The defection led to leakage of long war plans and strategies and boosted the morale in the allied powers that led to the defeat of the central powers.

**11. Press propaganda** was used to decampaign the central powers and mobilize mass support that led to the success of allied powers. The mass media was manipulated to popularize malicious and ridiculous information about the central powers. The British and French media were used by opportunistic politicians to depict Germany and her allies as imperialists who were fighting to dominate and oppress the world.

Lord Northcliffe, who was in charge of propaganda in Britain, dispatched leaflets to Austria-Hungary in which he promised the various nationalities their independence, if they deserted the Austrian Empire. The Czechs, Poles, Slovenes and Croats responded to the offer and joined the allies. They contributed to numerical superiority of allied powers that overwhelmed the central powers.

**12. Economic hardship** also accounts for the defeat of Germany and her allies. This was partly due to the fact that Germany diverted resources from productive sectors like agriculture to sustain the war that dragged on for 4 years. Worst of all, as the war progressed, allied powers imposed economic embargo on the central powers that banned imports and exports of food, medicine, arms and ammunitions throughout Europe. Britain enforced naval blockade where she confiscated cargoes of neutral ships trading with Germany purposely to wreck Germany's economy. This led to acute economic hardship like inflation, financial crisis, unemployment, poverty and starvation. On the other hand, allied powers easily traded in arms, ammunitions, food and medicines, which favoured them against the central powers. One should recapitulate that financial crisis led to poor armament, slow reinforcement, poor motivation and low morale that subjected Germany and her allies' to defeat.

**13. Internal instability** also contributed to the defeat of Germany. By 1918, trade unionists, socialists and communists mobilized protests against the severe economic hardship and Germany's continuation of war against the



allies. The communists attempted a revolution that was ruthlessly suppressed. These diverted attention and concentration of German leaders and soldiers from the war. On the contrary, allied nations were relatively stable with the exception of Russia. Trade unionists cooperated with their governments and workers were silenced with high wages. This created internal stability that left the allies with much freedom to concentrate on the war against Germany and her allies.

#### **14. The abdication of Kaiser William 11 on 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 1918 and the signing of armistice by President Ebert**

Was the final step in the defeat of the central powers By 1918, all German allies had surrendered and Germany was still persisting with the war amidst severe economic crisis, internal protests and threat of military coup. This forced top army commanders i.e. Ludendorff and Hindenburg to relinquish their power to the Reichstag. Kaiser William 11 was also forced by pressure of events to abdicate and flee to Holland, which made Chancellor Prince Marx to handover government control to Fredrick Ebert, the social-democrat leader. On 11<sup>th</sup> Nov 1918, Fredrick Ebert signed an armistice with the victorious powers that marked the end of the war and the final defeat of the central powers.

### **EFFECTS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

The First World War was the most destructive war fought between the highly organized states of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was the first war on a large scale that dislocated the political, social, economic and military structures and the whole world. Every belligerent state bore lasting scars of the terrible ordeal between the years 1914 - 1918. Its impact will directly and indirectly continue to affect the style and pattern of life of mankind in the universe.

#### **Positive impact**

##### **i) Political freedom**

The war gave rise to new and independent states on the map of Europe. The Versailles peacemakers granted independence to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia etc. The independent Republic of Yugoslavia was created by merging Herzegovina, Croatia,

Slovenia and Montenegro.

Rumania also became independent and even acquired Bessarabia from Russia and Transylvania from Austria-Hungary. Most of the newly created states were formerly under the Ottoman Empire. However, the merging of different nationalities brewed conflict, which led to political instability that characterized the inter-war period.

## **ii) Territorial re-adjustment**

Some territorial changes were witnessed due to the outcome of World War I. At Versailles, France regained the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, the works of arts and her flag that were confiscated by Germany in 1871. Germany also lost Schleswig to Denmark, Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium amongst others. Italy gained Trieste and Trientino from Austria which were inhabited by Italians but still ruled by Austria. Austria lost Bosnia and Herzegovina to the newly created state of Yugoslavia and Slovenia to

Czechoslovakia. These territorial re-adjustments created new boundaries and redrew the map of Europe.

## **iii) Formation of the League of Nations**

The formation of the League of Nations in Jan 1920 was an outcome of the First World War. The devastations and sufferings of the Great War cautioned the great powers of the necessity to avoid a war of such nature in future. This gave rise to the League of Nations as an international organisation to maintain peace in Europe. This was because the weakness of the International Court of Justice was partly responsible for the outbreak of World War I and its disastrous consequences. The League of Nations was to diplomatically resolve conflicts and protect the territorial integrity and independence of weaker states as a strategy of creating a lasting peace.

## **iv) Rise of Japan and USA**

The war led to the rise of Japan and USA since they were not greatly affected. After the collapse of the Tsar's regime in Russia, Japan expanded in the east. She took advantage of the eastern markets to strengthen her economy. By 1917, USA had supplied the allies with ammunitions and other supplies, which brought her economic prosperity. She also gave loans to states for financing the War and post war recovery from which she reaped a lot of interest after the war. After the war Japan and USA continued their dominance in the supply of manufactured goods to the world. This consolidated the economic, military and political

influence of Japan and USA alongside Britain in European and World affairs.

## **V) The triumph of communism in Russia and its spread to Eastern Europe**

The First World War led to the rise of communism in Russia that spread to Eastern Europe by 1939. The chaos and catastrophic effects of the war in Russia created a revolutionary mood against the Tsarist regime led by Tsar Nicholas II. Consequently, revolutionary leaders like Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky mobilized the Russians in a dual revolution that ended in a communist government on Nov 1917. Thereafter, communism spread to Eastern Europe and became a threat to capitalist Western Europe by 1939. This later created an ideological struggle between communist Eastern Europe led by USSR and capitalist Western Europe led by USA that is known as the Cold war.

### **vi) The downfall of conservative and autocratic governments**

The collapse of conservative and dictatorial governments in Europe was also a consequence of the First World War. The negative effects of the war were blamed on conservative and autocratic regimes that were accused of provoking the war. The Germans blamed the Hohenzollem dynasty, the Russians accused Tsardom, Austrians and Hungarians 'fixed their eyes' on Hapsburg Empire as the Balkan states held the Ottoman Empire responsible for the horrible experience they went through. By 1939 these conservative and autocratic governments were overthrown and replaced by new ones.

### **vii) The rise of Republicanism in Germany**

The First World War led to the rise of constitutional and democratic government in Germany. As Germany was on the verge of her final defeat towards 1918, there was public outcry against Kaiser William II who eventually fled to exile and left a political vacuum in Germany. European powers like France and Britain were fed up of the autocratic German monarchical government and wanted a republican government in Germany. The British and the French therefore advocated for the establishment of a democratic government similar to those in Britain and France, which would be a puppet government of foreign powers. This led to the rise and existence of the Weimer republic which transformed Germany from a Monarchy to a democratic state between 1919 to 1933.

### **viii) Destruction of social class division**

The war ended social class division in a number of European states. The war destroyed investments and properties of wealthy people especially the middle class and landlords in states like Britain and France.

The chaotic atmosphere created by the war favoured looting by the poor especially peasants some of whom became rich and moved to the level of middle class. During the war, people of different social classes and nationalities fled and hid together and shared the same camps, sickbays and hospitals.

After the war, it became difficult to differentiate between a peasant and a middle class since the social gap was narrowed by the war. It led to the spread of the idea of social equality and fraternity that led to the rise of cultural tolerance in Europe. This ended Social class conflicts in Europe as there was mutual respect for all mankind without prejudice.

#### **ix) Women emancipation**

The First World War contributed to the growth of women emancipation movement. It created an environment that led to social changes in Europe and indeed the world. The war led to acute shortage of men since most of them were killed and disabled. It made women to be employed in factories, shops, public office, hospitals and schools that were formally for men. They started putting on tight miniskirts and trousers as they did work that were originally preserved for men. This led to women emancipation and the idea of equality since women's talents were realized. Women formed social movements to advocate for equality with men. Consequently, in Britain all women aged 30 and above were given the right to vote.

Thus the war led to social changes in the status of women that made them to play more active role in their communities.

#### **x) Improvement in education**

There was improvement in education, science, technology and further spread of industrial revolution. This was done because it was realized that Europe needed educated labour force for progress. In Britain, the 1918 education act tried to provide a full and adequate education for the country's children. Science and technology were also improved. After the war, wartime research and inventions were used to make industries more efficient and organized. For instance, there was development of bomber aircraft industry and air travel after the war. However, the progress of science and the sufferings experienced during the War made many people

to lose faith in religion and the idea of the existence of the almighty God. This led to a decline in religious beliefs that made 1920's to be referred to as the Gay years.

### **xi) Romanticism and merrymaking**

The War led to a culture of romanticism and merry making in Europe. The physical and psychological effects of the war made the youngsters and other survivors to resort to merry making in an attempt to forget the miseries, trauma, and stress from the war<sup>^</sup> In London and other big cities of Europe, people resorted to dancing, jazz music, parties and other leisure activities. Other drew pictures and made art pieces depicting the terrible experience they had witnessed. All these made the post-World War I period to be code- named Gay Twenties.

### **Negative impact**

#### **1) Depopulation**

The greatest effect of World War I was the loss of millions of able bodied persons let alone disabling many more. It's estimated that 13,000,000 people were killed in the actual fighting while 10,000,000 were permanently disabled. For every minute of fighting, four soldiers were being killed and nine wounded. At the national level, David Thomson reports that one Frenchman was killed every minute between August 1914 and Feb 1918. This death toll was further accelerated by famine, diseases during the war, appalling condition of prisoners of war and other calamities related to the war. The overall consequence was depopulation that left about 10,000,000 orphans and widows.

#### **ii) Change in the population structure**

The war changed the population structure in Europe. The massive death of men especially at the battle field created a demographic structure dominated by women and children than men. The high death rate was also followed by low death rate since the number of productive people was greatly reduced. It created labour shortage that made industrialists to resort to women and children. However most of the women and children were inexperienced and inefficient, which often resulted into production of sub standard commodities that could not be solved in the world market. On the other hand, employment of children in dangerous factories and mines

was the beginning of child abuse, which is a social evil up to today. Thus, the First World War can be blamed for availing a favourable atmosphere that led to child labour with all its dangers on the children.

### **iii) Displacement of people**

The war led to massive displacement of people in Europe. There was a large influx of homeless refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. It's estimated that about 21 million people were displaced and became homeless. Many of these were kept in camps in Western Europe during and after the war. This left the allied powers with the problem of how to repatriate and rehabilitate such displaced persons. This burden was shouldered by the international community through the League of Nations.

### **iv) The plight of prisoners of war**

The war left behind the challenge of prisoners of war. During the war, the allied powers got many Germans, Austrians, Bulgarians, and Turks etc as prisoners of war. The central powers also managed to take a good number of Russians, British, French, and Belgians etc as prisoners of war. After the war, belligerents had so many prisoners of war. For instance, Russia had about 427,000 prisoners of war. The challenge was big as such a state had to provide basic services like food, water, accommodation, medical services and security. This challenge ended after the League of Nations took over and repatriated the prisoners of war to their countries.

### **v) Destruction of property and infrastructure**

The war led to wanton destruction of property and infrastructure with the exception of USA and associated powers outside Europe. Production assets like industries, mines, hospitals, clinics, educational institutions, shops, hotels, administrative centers, residential houses, roads, railways, bridges, military equipments and weapons all suffered destruction during the war. Of equal importance was agriculture where valuable food and cash crops together with livestock were killed, confiscated or destroyed. France, Germany and Belgium experienced the worst damage because they were at the centre of the war. The damages led to famine, starvation and malnutrition in the whole world. These were worst in Germany where production fell by 70%. The Russians suffered severe famine due to the German destruction of Ukraine wheat field that used to be the principle supplier of wheat in Russia.

### **vi) Economic decline**

The war seriously drained the economy and resources of the world leading to economic decline and hardships. Huge chunks of money were squandered in financing the war and economic recovery programs after the war, yet most of the productive assets like industries and mines were razed to the ground. Some other industries that survived were closed and those that initially produced consumer goods resorted to production of war materials. This led to shortage of commodities, inflation, unemployment, heavy debt burden, poor standard of living and decline in international trade. Britain that had dominated trade as the workshop of Europe suffered greatly due to the war. She concentrated on the production of war materials, which made her customers to switch to other countries for essential commodities. When the War ended, they could no longer renew their trade relations with Britain. Yet the few customers that remained were so devastated by the war that they did not have the money to buy British goods. Germany herself was crippled by reparations that she paid in kind and this destroyed the British trade the more.

Germany's economy suffered most as she was deprived of all her colonies in Africa, Middle East and Asia. She was disarmed and forced to pay a heavy war indemnity of £6,600m. This made Germany to be on top of the great economic depression in Europe. For instance, by 1931 Germany had 6,000,000 unemployed people while Britain had 3,000,000.

### **vii) The Great Depression of 1929-1933**

The First World War, contributed to the outbreak of the World economic depression of 1929-1933.

Destruction and closer of industries led to mass unemployment and low purchasing power that huge quantities of commodities unsold. International trade declined because countries were left so poor that they could not import large quantities of foreign products yet their own domestic markets were flooded with surplus products. Above all many European countries were heavily indebted to USA as a result of loans borrowed to finance the war and reconstruct the economy after the war. The repayment of such debts to USA more over in form of Gold reduced money supply and led to the outbreak of the Great Depression by 1929.

### **viii) The downfall of Germany and her allies**

The war led to the fall and disintegration of Germany and her allies. After her defeat, Germany was partitioned into two with the Polish Corridor mining through it to the port of Danzig. The Austrian empire disappeared

from the map of Europe. Austria was reduced to a small land locked country with a population entirely German speaking of about 7 million while Hungary was isolated with a population almost entirely made up of Magyar of about 8million.

#### **ix) The end of former treaties and alliances**

The First World War destroyed and ended the then existing treaties and alliances. The German invasion of Belgium in 1914 violated the London treaty of 1839 that had guaranteed the independence and neutrality of Belgium. In 1915, Italy signed the treaty of London by which she joined the triple entente to fight against the triple alliance which she had been a member (since 1882 when she signed). With this, Italy fought against Austria and Germany who were her former allies. In 1917, Russia signed the treaty of Brest Litovsk with Germany by which she abandoned the triple entente and crossed to Germany's side after being defeated (by Germany). These shifting of sides weakened former treaties and alliances and made it impossible to renew them after the war. However, new treaties and alliances like the little entente of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia and France (1921-1927) and the axis alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan (1937) reemerged in the inter war period. The new treaties and alliances had different membership some of which included former enemies of World War I, hence the dynamics of inter war politics.

#### **x) Political changes in favour of dictatorship**

The war resulted into political changes that favoured the rise of dictatorship in Europe between 1919 and 1936. The social and economic problems created by the war made people to lose faith governments that led them into the war. This undermined the pre-war governments that was used by ambitious men like Lenin, Mussolini, General Franco and Hitler to mobilize the masses that led to the collapse of the then existing governments. This was responsible for the rise of Communism in Russia in 1917, Fascism in Italy (1922) and Spain (1939), and Nazism in Germany in 1934. These were because the masses preferred strong, militant and authoritarian governments that could effectively defend their territorial integrity and independence.

#### **xi) The Negative implications of the 1919 Versailles settlement.**

The First World War was concluded with the Versailles treaty of 1919 that had negative implications on Europe. The treaty was dictated and Germany plus her allies were forced to sign against their will. The terms of the treaty



like states; war guilt, reparations, and disarmament, territorial and mandate clauses brought several negative changes against the defeated nations in favour of the victorious powers. Japan and Italy who were on the side of the victorious powers were also unfairly rewarded for their efforts. Consequently, they joined Germany in the Tokyo-Rome -Berlin axis and waged a network of aggressions that destabilized European peace in the inter war period.

## **xii) The outbreak of World War II**

The First World War laid foundation for the outbreak of World War II. The destroyed European economy and led to economic depression that destroyed diplomatic relations and led to the outbreak of World war II by 1939. The war was also concluded by the unfair Versailles settlement that left Germany, Italy and Japan with a high spirit of revenge rather than reconciliation. It also led to the rise of aggressive leaders like Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy who waged a series of aggression that climaxed into the German invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II. To this extent, one can conclude that the Second World War was a continuation of the First World War.

