

THE GREAT WAR - WHY DID IT START?

By Ian Duffin

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War, I find myself wondering why the assassination of an Austrian Grand Duke by a young Bosnian in the Balkans lead to the Great War and the collapse of empires. Assassinations and wars in the Balkans were not uncommon without causing world or even European wars. What follows is my understanding of the answer to that question and is based on my reading of a very complex period of history. As one author has said there are really two questions to be answered. How did the war start? And, why did the war start? The first is fairly straight forward and I will try that one first, the second is more difficult. I hope my efforts will be of interest and will provoke others to comment. A short bibliography is at the end.

It is difficult to know where to start. At the end of the Versailles conference in 1919 M. Clemenceau is said to have remarked to a German politician who had asked what history would make of it, 'history will not say that Belgium invaded Germany'. That invasion, like the assassination, was certainly a trigger, at least for Great Britain, but neither the assassination nor that event explains how the gun came to be loaded, in other words the how but not the why.

To find the why perhaps one should start with the Ottoman empire which, at its peak, encompassed most of north Africa and lands around the Black Sea but was, in the 19th century, 'the sick man of Europe'. In 1911 Italy took advantage of the situation and invaded Libya to establish an African empire. Their action seems to have had tacit European support. In effect the French had a free hand in Morocco and the Italian could have Libya. Britain already controlled Egypt and the Suez Canal would not be affected.

The Italian action, confirming the weakness of Ottoman Empire, had an effect on the Balkans, a territory that for centuries had been part of the Ottoman Empire. The weakening of the Ottomans helped provoke the Balkan wars which preceded WW 1 . The results of these wars increased the area of Serbia at the expense, mainly, of Bulgaria and added weight to the Slav irredentist aims which were supported by the Russians. Also in 1911 Austro-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina which was also part of the Ottoman Empire. The Austrians had already instituted many improvements in that somewhat primitive country including the building of schools and the training of teachers. Their actions were viewed with suspicion by some Serbs, who felt that the country should, because of its Slav content, become part of a greater Serbia. A secret society the 'Black Hand' (Ujedinjenje ili smrt -

Union or death) came into being to further that aim. The Grand Duke had attended Austrian army manoeuvres in Bosnia-Herzegovina before his fatal visit to Sarajevo. He was a reformer and when he inherited the empire would have been likely to instigate further improvements. To counter such a possibility the Black Hand, in Belgrade, planned the assassination and trained the perpetrators. Trigger number one!

Trigger number two, the critical one for Britain, was the German invasion of Belgium. The link from the assassination is tenuous. The major players in Europe: France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia and to somewhat lesser extents Britain and Italy were linked by a number of treaties and understandings, often referred to as the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. The Triple Alliance linked Germany, Austria and Italy and required them to come to each others aide if attacked by France or Russia. The Triple Entente were less formal understandings between Britain, France and Russia. The British understanding with France was essentially an agreement over a number of colonial issues not related to Europe and that with Russia was a resolution of interests in the Persian area - the approaches to India. There were also formal treaties between France and Russia to come to each others aide if attacked by, on the French side, Germany and on the Russian by Germany or Austria. Some three weeks after the assassination Austria issued an ultimatum to Serbia requiring, amongst other matters, that Austrians should join in the investigation of the assassination plot. Serbia accepted most of the ultimatums demands but declined to accept that requirement and Austria declared war on Serbia. While considering the ultimatum Serbia consulted the Russians who considered the ultimatum outrageous and decided on a partial mobilisation of their army in the frontier region with Austria to add weight to their opinion. However, their mobilisation plans only dealt with the whole army thus including those parts facing Germany. Germany considered this a threat and demanded that the Russians stop their mobilisation and when they refused declared war.

Once Germany decided to go to war the invasion of Belgium was inevitable if the principles of the Schlieffen plan were to be followed. In 1914 von Schlieffen's successor von Moltke adopted those principles and the outcome is well known. That's how it started.

Libraries of books have been written seeking to explain why the war started, and author's conclusions have been modified as more and more papers came to light. My handful of sentences can only scratch the surface. The years before the outbreak of war were to an extent dominated by tensions and competition between empires as the parts of the world available for colonisation were swept up. Britain and France resolved their differences as did Britain and Russia. Germany, a newcomer to the competition, was trying to catch up. Britain's empire was supported by the Royal Navy the largest by far of the world's navies. Germany was increasing its navy and a naval arms race emerged stretching the economies of both

countries. The German army was large, well trained and expanding. Its General Staff was efficient and had planned for a defensive war taking into account their geographic situation between France and Russia. Some authors have argued that German plan was actually offensive. Certainly at the time many officials and politicians considered that Germany was aggressive, although that feeling may have been engendered by Germany's industrial performance which was overtaking the other powers. The French and Russian armies were also expanding and had their own plans should Germany attack.

Over the years before the war crises had occurred but were resolved without war. Britain sought to protect her position and empire by a series of understandings aimed at ensuring that no single state dominated Europe. Attempts at some understanding with Germany failed. Following the understanding with the French the British Imperial General Staff had talks with their French opposite numbers and had plans to deploy a force to France if France was attacked by Germany. These talks had only been authorised by the Foreign Secretary and no inter government treaties were involved. I would suggest that in 1914 Europe was prepared for war, which the military thought could be won quickly, but its politicians while ready to meet, talk and resolve difficulties did not realise that if they failed they were lighting a very short fuse and that time was running out fast. 25 days elapsed between the assassination and Austria's ultimatum, only 5 more before their declaration of war. Russian and German mobilisation followed in quick time. Germany invaded Belgium 5 days later, on the 3rd August 1914. Britain declared war on Germany the next day.

Bibliography:

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