

## **Nationalism and World War I in Europe**

**By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.**

In his book *New History of the World*, J. M. Roberts writes, "By 1900 the peoples of European and European stocks overseas dominated the globe." Nationalism abounded and the Great powers competed on the world stage. According to Roberts, "The political principle which undoubtedly still had the most mass appeal was nationalism." Change was occurring not only in science but also in religion. Christianity had not proved that it could check violence and people began to question religion. Natural science was damaging to traditional religions, giving impetus to a new morality revolving around material success. Each country, during the time, was caught up in national pride and competition. Countries could see no way of turning back from it and believed they had more to gain from war than peace. Each of the Great Powers had their reasons and justifications why they should be the dominant force in Europe, even if it meant war.

Pre-World War I Germany was bursting with vigor and bulging with material success. Over all reined the Army with its discipline and high standards of professional conduct. The German people felt they needed and deserved an acknowledged supremacy like that of the British. The French yearned for the regaining of the Alsace-Lorraine region, lost after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Many believed the army was the means of restoring the national glory. In European forums, Russia would listen to the arguments on behalf of the balance of power but did not always abide by agreements made. Russia expected Europe to look the other way and felt hurt when it did not. In *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger writes, "England had no choice but to resist Germany who was already in possession of the strongest army in Europe and who began aiming for parity with Great Britain on the seas." By 1914 Austria-Hungary main foreign policy goals were to gain land in the Balkans at the expense of Turkey and to prevent the growth of South Slav nationalism undermining her Empire. In some degree, each of the major powers had something to gain from war.

For Germany and Austria-Hungary there was a lot to be gained by war. The final reduction of France to a position from which she could never again pose a military threat were high on their list. The establishment of a position on the Continent that would enable Germany to compete on equal terms with England and attain the status of world power was perhaps Germany's top goal. These goals appeared perfectly feasibility in July 1914. Austria saw it a way to gain territory and to stop her decline.

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

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

Britain came to two conclusions. The first was that if France and Russia defeated Germany unaided, the two victors would regard Britain with hostility and contempt. The second was

that if Germany won and established Continental control, Britain would face a threat to her security unknown since the days of Napoleon.

In conclusion, the Great Powers were facing each other across a gulf of growing mutual distrust, fueled by nationalism and global competition. The balance of power had degenerated into hostile coalitions whose inflexibility was matched by reckless disregard for consequence. The mood in Europe was of war. Everyone talked about the inevitability of it and soldiers sang about it. Many felt that war was a fine heroic thing, were gentlemen prove their worth. Each country in the time was caught up in national pride and competition. Countries could see no way of turning back and believed they had more to gain from war than peace.

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