

On the Causes of World War I, 1900-1914

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Parts I and II: Most historians of this period assign responsibility to the outbreak of World War I in July-August 1914 to one or more of six Great Powers¹: Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire of the “Central Powers”; and Britain, France and Russia (joined by Japan) of the “Triple Entente.” (pp. 1 and 5)

Part III: The majority of historians also argue that this war--which left 12.5 million soldiers and 10 million civilians dead due to famine and disease on the Western Front, the Eastern Front and in the colonies of both alliances in the Middle East, Asia and Africa—could have been averted at one point or another. (page 9)

Part IV: Other progressive historians and revolutionary writers have explored the intensified economic and military contention after 1900 between the Triple Entente—led by Great Britain--and the Central Powers—led by Germany-- and argue that this inter-imperialist rivalry was the driving force in the outbreak of World War I, and that the drive to war could not have been avoided by either bloc of imperialists. (page 10)

Part I: The Central Powers

The Austria-Hungary Empire

In “The Origins of World War I,”² Samuel Williamson states that not enough attention has been given to the Eastern European origins of the war. He argues that the military and civilian leaders of Austria-Hungary were the primary force in initiating the war in the Balkans at the end of July 1914, with important but secondary roles played by Russia and Germany. Having benefited from Serbia’s military triumphs in the Balkan wars of 1912-1913, Russian policymakers displayed a new aggressiveness towards Austria-Hungary. Within a month after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, followed by the decision to go to war of the major European countries shortly thereafter. (795)

¹ Depending on how “empire “ is defined in political, military and/or economic terms, seven “Great Powers” can be understood to be empires in the period before the outbreak of war in 1914.. In addition, Britain, France, Germany, Japan and the United States were *imperialist* empires in a Leninist sense since they had reached the monopoly stage of capitalism before the war. The U.S. government joined the Triple Entente in 1917 and sent an expeditionary force to France in 1918. (See page 8.)

² *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Issue on The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars, Spring 1988) 795-818. Williamson is a Professor of History at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Examining the decisions made by the various governments during the decisive month of July 1914, Williamson states that “Each decision, one can argue, led to the next, and in the absence of any one of them, the crisis might have been averted.” He identifies General Franz Conrad von Hotzendorf, the chief of the Austro-Hungarian general staff, as the most important “hawk” who took Vienna down the road to war with Serbia, unnecessarily.

Another factor driving the July crisis was Germany’s decision to support the Habsburg (the Austria-Hungary monarchy) military against Serbia. According to Williamson, “Vienna probably would not have gone to war without Berlin’s assurances of support.” (806-807, 815) With this assurance from Berlin, at the end of July, Austria-Hungary issued an ultimatum, with a 48-hour expiration, that it knew the Serbian government would reject. Vienna understood that Russia would support Slavic Serbia, but believed that Germany’s backing would deter intervention by the Russian military. (810)

France and Russia provided public support for Serbia, strengthening the position of the Serbian government to reject Vienna’s ultimatum. The Austrians rejected Serbia’s answer and issued orders for partial mobilization to begin at the end of July 1914. At the same time, the Russian government initiated a series of military measures well in advance of the mobilizations of the other Great Powers outside of Eastern Europe. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. (811-813)

In the final days of July, in response to the Austrian declaration of war, Russia’s general mobilization made containment of the crisis a virtual impossibility. Russia’s alliance with France immediately brought France into the war.

The German leadership believed that it was facing a two-front war; it decided to concentrate their forces to destroy the French army before the Russian military could fully mobilize. As they brought up their armies and naval forces to full readiness, the German and British leaders—the principal leaders of the two alliances—waged rival propaganda campaigns to make their actions appear to be defensive in nature.

Williamson’s viewpoint on how “the third Balkan war became World War I” is based on the decision of Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia. The lesson and warning he draws from the crisis of July 1914 is that “a local quarrel does not always remain a local issue. Peace is more easily maintained if one avoids even the smallest incursion into war.” (818) However, Williamson does not address how the “incursion” between Austria-Hungary and Serbia could have been prevented from rapidly spreading and escalating throughout Europe in the fall of 1914.

Williamson describes how the rival alliances of the Triple Entente and the Central Powers were consolidated by the Bosnian Balkan Crisis of 1908-1909, and after Germany’s challenge to France over its North African colony of Morocco in 1911. In the months before July 1914, these two European alliances collided with each other on fundamental political and military issues, punctuated by brief periods of cooperation. From 1912 up to the eve of the war, France, Russia and Great Britain turned joint military and naval maneuvers into secret military alliances in the event of war. The French wanted immediate Russian pressure on Germany if war came,

and invested substantial amounts of capital on railway construction that could facilitate the movement of Russian troops to its border with Germany.

At the end of 1912, Germany and Austria-Hungary renewed their alliance for another five years, and stepped up joint military and naval planning. In a prologue to the outbreak of World War I, Russia and Austria-Hungary mobilized hundreds of thousands of troops to support their allies in the Balkans in 1912-1913. (799-800)

Williamson describes how in all of the most powerful Great Powers-- Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Russia and Britain-- military planners adopted the doctrine of offensive warfare with the goal of achieving a "short war." For all of them, "offensive warfare alone offered the possibility of quick success. Williamson makes the point that "Few realized that stalemate could also be the result of offensive operations." (801-802) After 1912, the military leaders of both alliances warned their civilian superiors of the dangers of falling behind in the race for military supremacy. Nationalism and militarism were established as both official public policy and in public opinion.

Especially in the Balkan "tinderbox," Austria-Hungary faced a growing challenge from Slavic Serbia. Serbia sought to develop a political following in Austria-Hungary's Slav minority populations. A secret organization of nationalists based in Serbian military intelligence played a direct role in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. (804)

Williamson argues that "the decay in the effectiveness of the political structures of the Hohenzollern, Habsburg and Romanov monarchies is noted as a final long-term cause of the war." The growth of the Socialist Party frightened the Prussian-German elites; the leaders of Austria-Hungary feared for the future of their fragile multi-national state; and the 1905 Russian Revolution had revealed the all-around weakness of the Czarist regime. (805)

Williamson examines the political and military actions of both alliances before World War I, but he believes that Austria-Hungary's declaration of war in July 1914 against Serbia was the "trigger" of the war, making Hotzendorf and the other "hawks" in Vienna primarily responsible for what followed. This is essentially an argument based on "who shot first" for explaining the outbreak of the first imperialist war of the 20th century.

The German Empire

In *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (1999), Niall Ferguson³ describes Germany's reasons for going to war in August 1914. He demonstrates that German planners had made pessimistic calculations about the relative present and future strengths of the European armies and navies.

³ Ferguson's work was supported by the Oxford University History Faculty and by Jesus College, Oxford. His book is an important source for the discussion of Britain's intervention in World War I on pp. 6-7 and Russia on pp. 5-6..

They believed that as a result of new armaments programs in France and Russia, Germany would be at a considerable disadvantage within a few years. This was especially true of the modernization of the 2.4 million strong Russian army, the completion of Russia's railroads in Poland to the German frontier with French funding, and the expansion of Russia's Baltic Sea Fleet. (Ferguson 151-152)

According to Ferguson, the German military leaders and the Kaiser adopted a plan for a "first strike" designed to pre-empt a deterioration in Germany's military situation on the continent. With this understanding, Russia's mobilization on July 28 gave Germany's rulers the pretext they wanted to launch a military mobilization of their own, not only against Russia, but also against France. (153, 157)

In "Why Did They Fight the Great War? A Multi-Level Class Analysis of the Causes of the First World War,"⁴ Aaron Gillette describes several stages of scholarship in assessing the culpability of the German military and civilian leadership for the outbreak of World War I.

Gillette explains that after the war, historians from the Triple Entente (and the U.S. beginning in 1917) have laid the blame for the war solely at the feet of the German government. In this narrative, France, Russia and Britain had no choice but to "defend" themselves from "German aggression" on land and sea. They argue that from 1905 to 1914, German Generals Schlieffen and Moltke drew up detailed plans to invade Belgium and conquer France in the first few weeks of a war, followed by an attack on Russia. (48-49)

Gillette proposes a counter-argument: That the goal of the Franco-Russian alliance was to encircle Germany, and that the British navy had embarked on an all-out arms race that had the goal of strangling Germany by means of a naval blockade. This geopolitical situation strengthened the hand of the "war party" in Berlin, who claimed that Germany's defenses were vulnerable, and that offense was the best defense. (48-49)

In the 1960s, the German historian Fritz Fischer published a series of books that argued that Germany was mainly responsible for World War I. According to Fischer, Germany's drive for war was motivated by a desire to become Europe's hegemonic and expansionist power; this drive was spearheaded by a reactionary aristocracy and a Kaiser who were suppressing the "internal forces of democratization."

According to Fischer, the goals of the German government in World War I included the annexation of territory in Belgium and France, the founding of a German-led Central European Customs Union, the creation of new Polish and Baltic states under German control, and the acquisition of new territory in Africa, so that its colonial possessions could be consolidated in a continuous Central African region.

Germany's military leaders also hoped to foment rebellions that would strip Great Britain of India, south and east Africa, and other profitable and strategically-located colonies. According to Fischer, Germany's political objectives in the

⁴ In *The History Teacher* (November 2006) 45-58. Gillette is on the faculty of University of Houston, Downtown.

early 1900s could only be achieved at the expense of Russia, France and Britain. (Gillette 49, Ferguson 169-170)

The Ottoman Empire

In 1911, the Ottoman Empire was centered in Turkey, but included much of the multi-ethnic Balkans, Greece, Libya and parts of what we now call the Middle East, including Palestine/Transjordan and the coastal areas of oil-rich Saudi Arabia. The Ottomans were shaken and the Sultans' rule were undermined by three wars between 1911-1913, particularly the invasion of Libya by Italy in 1911, which would later officially join the Triple Entente.

Even though it was geographically large, the Ottoman Empire was the least powerful member of the Central Powers in economic and military terms. Believing that the Central Powers would prevail, the Ottoman Sultans lined up with Germany and Austria-Hungary in the years before World War I.

Believing that the Eastern Orthodox Armenian minority was acting a fifth column for Russia, the Ottoman government and military sent Armenians from the Anatolia heartland on a forced march that killed millions of men, women and children from 1914 to 1916 in a genocidal "Catastrophe." The Sultans fought alongside the Central Powers up to their military defeat in 1918, when the Ottoman Empire was carved up by the British and French imperialists.⁵

Part II: The Triple Entente (including Japan and the United States)

The Russian Empire

Ferguson provides important historical context to the Russian mobilization on July 28, 1914, a month after Archduke Ferdinand's assassination in Sarajevo. Earlier in 1914, a German military mission to Constantinople signaled a German interest in forming a strategic military alliance with the Ottoman Empire.

This threatened Russia's southern economic lifeline. The Russians were heavily dependent on grain exports through the Ottoman-controlled Dardanelles Straits, with protection provided by an antiquated Black Sea fleet. This was one of the arguments for the Franco-Russian railway agreement of January 1914 and the arms program approved by the Russian Duma (Parliament) in July. (149)

According to Ferguson, even before the bombardment of the Serbian capital of Belgrade by Austria-Hungary began, Russia's military leaders issued orders for a partial mobilization. After a series of meetings and telephone conversations

⁵ *Empires at War: 1911-1923* edited by Robert Gerwarth & Erez Manela (Oxford, 2014). See "The Ottoman Empire" by Mustafa Aksakal. This book has additional chapters on the British, French, American, Japanese, Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian, Italian and Portuguese empires during these years.

on July 30, 1914, they persuaded the vacillating Nicholas II to agree to a full mobilization. The Tsar believed that it might still be possible to force the Austrians to the negotiating table with Britain in order to resolve the standoff with Serbia. In order to push ahead toward war, Russian Staff General Yanushkevich told the Foreign Minister to “smash my telephone ... and prevent anyone [e.g. the Tsar] from finding me for the purpose of giving contrary orders which would again stop our mobilization.” (157)

In an exchange on the subject of “Defensive Realism and the ‘New’ History of World War I,”⁶ Jack Snyder explained that after Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, the Russian military was “eager to mobilize first to gain a couple of days on the Germans.” The leaders of Tsarist Russia had already concluded that war had become inevitable.

The British Empire

In the early 20th century, Britain was the dominant naval power in the world. Beginning in 1911 under Admiralty Lord Winston Churchill, the British Royal Navy set off an arms race with Germany that kept the German navy--with the exception of its fleet of U-Boats-- bottled up in North Sea ports throughout the upcoming war. The disruption caused by British naval action to German sea-borne trade was severe; Germany’s total grain production dropped by one-half between 1914-1917. (Ferguson 251) Britain also had the advantage of being separated from Europe by the English Channel. This allowed the British government to maintain a relatively small standing army.

According to Ferguson, the strategy of British Foreign Secretary Grey in July 1914 was to persuade Germany to limit its war to Tsarist Russia in the East, with Britain and France maintaining a public position of neutrality. Grey and other British leaders, including the country’s financial leaders, believed that Germany might place limits on the war, and might still accept a four-power mediation on the Balkans. Grey was trying to avoid a French mobilization and a German attack on France, which would bring the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) into Belgium and northern France. (149-159)

In July, there was a substantial body of Liberal politicians who favored British neutrality, particularly opposing a monarchical British alliance with “undemocratic” Tsarist Russia. Churchill was able to persuade the Cabinet to let him place the Royal Navy on a war footing after Germany declared war on Russia in early August 1914. In the view of the Foreign Office, an 1839 treaty did not bind Britain to defend Belgium’s neutrality in all circumstances. The navalists argued that the application of British sea power alone could decide a war with Germany.

However, on August 2, Prime Minister Asquith described the strategic thinking behind the decision for Britain to send the BEF across the Channel and go to war with Germany: “It is against British interests that France should be wiped out as a Great Power” and “We cannot allow Germany to use the Channel as a

⁶ *International Security* (Summer 2008) 174-194.

hostile base.” Lloyd George, Ramsey MacDonald and the Liberal and Conservative leaderships agreed with Asquith. (160-167)

Another thing the British politicians agreed on was the widespread use of semi-slave laborers from China to do the dirty work of trench-building on the Western Front. 100,000 worked for the British army, while 40,000 worked for France. China was a non-belligerent country during World War I, but this was not an impediment to British and French empire-building in Asia.

The French Empire

Many historians and lay readers take the position that France was the victim of “German aggression,” since most of the fighting on the Western Front took place on French soil. In actuality, France was deeply involved in the confrontation between the rival military alliances in the Balkans, both before and during July 1914. The French leadership supported the Serbian government in its confrontation with Austria-Hungary. More importantly, beginning in January 1914, French industrial enterprises, construction companies and bankers built thousands of kilometers of new railroad track leading from the Russian interior to its borders with Germany and Austria-Hungary.

If war broke out, French military planners wanted to force the German military to split its forces on the Western and Eastern Fronts. In late July 1914, French military leaders reached secret agreements with their Russian counterparts which required them to “defend” each other against any country (i.e. Germany and Austria-Hungary) that posed a serious threat to them. Thus France was just as responsible as Germany for five years of fratricidal trench warfare on the Western and Eastern Fronts.

In its African empire, the French military instituted a “blood tax” that forcibly drafted 150,000 soldiers and construction laborers from Senegal in French West Africa to Algeria in French North Africa. To avoid conscription and forced labor in the colonies, tens of thousands of Africans engaged in “forced migrations.” Along with many war-weary French soldiers, many of these conscripted African soldiers engaged in insubordination and desertion in the French Army in France.⁷

The Japanese Empire

In 1914, the Japanese Empire was relatively limited in size, by European standards. It consisted of Korea, Taiwan, a small colony based in Qingdao in northern China; a concession at Darien (Port Arthur) in southern Manchuria; southern Sakhalin Island; and much of western Siberia. Japan had wrested these colonies and territories in wars from the Russian Empire in 1895 and from China in 1905. The Japanese government and militarists had strong ambitions to expand their empire in China and the Pacific prior to and during World War I.

⁷ *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present* by Richard Reid (Second Edition, 2012) 176-177.

In August 1914, Japan joined the Triple Entente and immediately attacked and seized Qingdao, Germany's "spheres of influence" in northern China and southern Manchuria, and several German outposts in the western Pacific. The Japanese navy and army worked closely with British in this offensive, and met with weak German resistance far from the Reich. Japan's military role during World War I was limited to buttressing its economic and military domination of areas of China and the Pacific.⁸

The American Empire

The British state in North America was an expansionist, settler-colony from its founding in 1619. The primary victims of this state were African slaves, Native Americans, Mexicans and immigrants from non-European countries. Depending on how you define "empire," a slave American empire in a political sense existed as early as the early 1600s; in an expansionist political, economic and military sense during the "Indian wars" of the 19th century and the Mexican-American War from 1846-1850; or in an imperialist Leninist economic sense beginning at the end of the 19th century. (See pp. 10-11 below.)

By any definition, a powerful, rapidly expanding American Empire outside of the continental U.S. existed prior to the Great War. An aggressive pre-War example of American imperialism was the "Spanish-American War" from 1898-1908, as a result of which the U.S. military invaded, seized and put down revolts in the Philippines, Guam, Puerto Rico and Cuba.

While the U.S. government was making loans to Britain and France during the early stages of World War I, it publicly claimed to be "neutral." The American government focused on locking down its economic, political and military control over the Caribbean through gunboat diplomacy (e.g. Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and throughout Latin America.

U.S. military support for Britain was revealed in 1915 when a German U-Boat sank the Lusitania, which was carrying a secret load of munitions to Britain. Much like Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the sinking of this passenger ship by a U-Boat provided a pretext for the U.S. entry into the European war in 1917.

The U.S. did not intervene in the war until 1917, when there was a danger of a French and British defeat. The U.S. would have lost its investments to a resurgent Germany, and there would have been an unfavorable redivision of the world for the U.S. after the war.

The public position of Presidents Taft and Wilson and the empire-builders of both political parties before and during the war was to "make the world safe for democracy." In fact, the goal of the American finance-capitalists was to make the world safe for American investment. In this arena it was much more successful than any of the European imperialist countries and empires that were being ground down by a war of unprecedented destructiveness.

⁸ *Empires at War: 1911-1923*. "The Japanese Empire" by Frederick Dickinson.

Part III: Was It Possible to Avert World War I?

In *International Security* (2008), Jack Snyder points out that each of the Great Powers adopted a strategy of offensive warfare. Based on their rival military alliances, they were under time pressure to mobilize and attack first. Snyder adds that these military plans “cut short last-minute diplomacy that might have avoided a continental war.”

However, Snyder does not identify the political and diplomatic forces that could have successfully headed off World War I. Snyder also suggests that if defensive military strategies had been adopted by the major powers in 1914, they “might have helped to avert the war.” (179) This requires a re-write of history. Both alliances adopted offensive strategies before and after 1914.

In the opening chapter of *The First World War* (1998), military historian John Keegan argues how at various points between 1899 and 1914 World War I could have been averted. However, the historical evidence that Keegan marshals contradicts this position.

Keegan describes the international financial system, centered in the City of London, that was supported by Europe’s major powers. All of Europe’s royalty were cousins, both genetically and through common financial interests. In 1899, Tsar Nicolas II convened a conference with the aim of decelerating Europe’s arms race. Privately the leaders of Germany and Austria-Hungary agreed that this was an admission of Russia’s military weakness. This Conference set up an International Court to mediate disputes, but it was voluntary and was ignored in Europe’s capitals. (17-18)

In 1900, Germany enacted a law that challenged the British Royal Navy’s domination of the oceans all around the world. In 1908, all of the major powers signed the Declaration of London, which provided detailed regulations governing economic warfare on the high seas. Not surprisingly, Britain never ratified the declaration. When the German military made inroads into French positions in Morocco in 1911, neither power called for mediation in the International Court. In the 1912-1913 Balkan Wars, none of the belligerents abided by either the International Court or the Declaration of London. (18-19)

On the continent, France and Germany created rival military alliances. France, a country of 40 million, set out to match the strength of 60 million Germans in their numbers of soldiers. In 1913, the French military extended the service of conscripts to three years; the German military drafted all young men for two years, followed by service in reserve units until they were 45 years old. (19-20)

By 1904, all of the Great Powers of Europe, grouped in two alliances, had plans to achieve military superiority over their rivals. In 1905, Germany’s Chief of the General Staff Schieffen prepared a battle plan to invade Belgium, drive into northern France and take Paris in a vast pincer movement. Under French Plan XVII, which came into force in April 1913, military operations on the frontier with Germany were designated to be offensive. Only the Fifth Army would be deployed

to Belgium and northwards to the sea. (Keegan 36, 38)

In August 1914, with the outbreak of war, German armies destroyed Belgium's network of armored forts with new powerful artillery pieces. To the south, French armies crossed the border and advanced 25 miles into Reich territory; they lost these gains within days due to the Germans' planned counter-offensives. The politicians who sent the British Expeditionary Force across the channel expected a short war that would be "over by Christmas." (90-91) Within a month, the fighting on the Western Front would settle into a stalemate that took the lives of over 10 million soldiers and civilians on all sides.

Keegan's Chapter One is titled "A European Tragedy." For him, "The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict. Unnecessary because the train of events that led to its outbreak might have been broken at any point during the five weeks of crisis that preceded the first clash of arms, had prudence or common goodwill found a voice." (3)

Keegan points to the domination of military planners over civilian political authorities during the pre-war period, reflected by the fact that "all European armies in 1904 had long-laid military plans, notable in most cases for their inflexibility." (27) However, Keegan does not identify where and when the escalating train of events in Europe could have been broken in July-August 1914.

Part IV. World War I as a Global Inter-Imperialist War

Two books and an influential revolutionary pamphlet written in 1916 examine the broader historical processes whereby two rival economic, political and military alliances dragged first Europe, and then the world, into an unjust war on all sides. They also take into account the military actions of each of the empires discussed in Parts I and II.

In the decades leading up to 1914, Great Britain was the dominant political, economic and financial power in the world. According to Ferguson, the British empire had a combined population of 655 million, against 144 million for Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire combined. The number of soldiers and sailors of the European states in 1914 was 5.7 million for the Triple Entente and 3.5 million for the Central Powers. (Ferguson 93, 249)

In 1913, the Central Powers accounted for 19% of the world's manufacturing output, whereas the Triple Entente were responsible for 28%. During the war, Britain financed its military budget by earnings of 2.4 billion pounds from shipping; sold \$236 million in foreign investments; and borrowed 1.28 billion pounds from foreign countries, mainly the U.S. On the other hand, in 1914 Germany held overseas investments of approximately \$1.2 billion pounds, most of which was confiscated by Britain, France and Russia during the war. (248, 253)

The First World War, 1914-1918 by Gerd Hardach⁹ (1977) provides important statistical information and analysis about the relative economic

⁹ Hardach was a Professor at the University of Marberg in West Germany.

strengths of the major imperialist powers leading up to the war. In the key iron and steel industries, Great Britain had been eclipsed by Germany and by the United States. Britain's share of world manufacturing declined from 20% in 1880 to 14% in 1911-1913. This was offset by high yields from Britain's direct investments in its colonies, especially India (South Asia today), the Middle East and Africa.

Germany's trade was largely confined to the continent, and its foreign investments in 1913-1914 were barely one-third of Britain's. Germany had ambitions to become a much stronger global power with a growing network of colonies. (3-4)

Hardach refers to Lenin's *Imperialism* for the argument that economic rivalry between the major imperialist powers prior to World War I was the underlying source of conflict. Hardach notes that "Germany was a comparative late-comer in the race to carve up the world and hence, in relation to her productivity, was under-represented. Of this discrepancy the ruling classes were very well aware." According to an authoritative German newspaper article in 1913, "We need land on this earth ... until such time as we are satiated to approximately the same degree as our neighbors." (8)

He states that "the problem posed by Lenin thus remains as pertinent as ever to historical research. 'It is questionable' he writes, 'whether, given capitalism, there is any other way other than war of getting rid of the disproportion between the development of the productive forces and the accumulation of capital on the one hand and, on the other, the distribution of colonies and financial capital's 'spheres of influence.' " (8)

Hardach also points out that the most powerful imperialist countries had been engaged in a steep arms race well before hostilities began. For all of the belligerent powers which had expected quick victories, "munitions crises" developed after 1914. Due to the discrepancy between the size of the economies of the Triple Entente and the Central Powers, Germany was ultimately bound to be the loser in this arms race. (95, 103)

Lenin on Imperialism

In the introduction to *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*,¹⁰ V.I. Lenin explained that in 1916 while he was in exile in Zurich, he set out to develop "a composite picture of the world capitalist system in its international relationships at the beginning of the twentieth century." (636) Lenin drew on books, newspapers and economic publications from Germany, France and the U.S., especially a 1902 book by the British economist J.A. Hobson. (Since he was hoping to smuggle this booklet into Tsarist Russia, Lenin did not include it in his analysis.)

In his introduction, Lenin wrote that "I trust that this pamphlet will help the reader to understand the fundamental economic question, that of the economic

¹⁰ *Selected Works*, Volume 1 (Moscow, 1977) 634-731. Also at www.marxists.org/lenin

essence of imperialism, for unless this is studied, it will be impossible to understand and appraise modern war and modern and modern politics.”

Lenin’s starting point was that by the end of the 19th century, bank capital and industrial capital had merged in all of the major capitalist countries. This process created the highest stage of capitalism--monopoly capitalism, or imperialism. This in turn led to the export of capital throughout the world: “At long as capitalism remains what it is, surplus capital will be utilized ... for the purpose of increasing profits by exporting capital abroad to the backward countries [where] profits are usually high.”

Because the world was already partitioned, an essential feature of imperialism was the rivalry between several European Great Powers in the striving for hegemony and the conquest of the territory controlled by their rivals. (664, 679, 702)

In 1914 in the three principal European economic powers, Great Britain had invested approximately 90 billion francs overseas, mainly in India and the Middle East; France had invested 60 billion francs abroad, mainly in Russia and North and North West Africa; and Germany had invested 44 billion francs abroad, mainly in Russia, eastern Europe and central Africa.

In describing the partition of the world between the principal imperialist powers between 1876 and 1914, Lenin emphasized the importance of the world’s railways, which were required by basic industries such as coal, iron and steel and the banking syndicates that financed them. By the early 20th century, the railway systems of the Great Powers allowed them to carry off the raw materials and the other economic “booty” of the world’s colonies in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and from the semi-colonies, including China and U.S.-dominated Latin America and the Caribbean. (637, 680)

Due to its vast network of colonies, in the early 20th century Britain increased the length of its railways by 100,000 kilometers, four times as much as Germany. On the other hand, Germany had overtaken Britain in the production of pig iron, an essential ingredient for heavy industry and munitions. In 1912, Germany produced 17.6 million tons of pig iron, while Britain’s figure was 9 million tons. (708)

Lenin stated that unequal development in railroad construction, pig iron production and other key areas of industry--particularly in Britain, Germany, France and the U.S.--set the stage for rival imperialist alliances to use military means to control Europe and the rest of the world. In the case of the United States, it extended multibillion dollar loans to Britain, France and their allies both before and during World War I.

Lenin explained that “The capitalists divide the world, not out of any particular malice, but because the degree of concentration which has been reached forces them to adopt this method in order to obtain profits. And they divide it ‘in proportion to capital,’ ‘in proportion to strength,’ because there cannot be any other method of division under commodity production and capitalism.” (689)

Even though World War I was mainly fought in Europe (and secondarily in the Middle East and Africa) when Lenin wrote *Imperialism* in 1916, he argued that whichever imperialist alliance emerged as victors from the war would be in a position to strengthen their control over the overwhelming majority of the people

of the world. As it turned out, Germany was stripped of its colonies by several treaties in 1919, and Great Britain and France resumed their positions as masters of their pre-war colonies.

However, the British and French imperialists were exhausted by the war, and were challenged by the arrival of a new, rising imperialism, the United States. Under President Wilson's public claim to "make the world safe for democracy," the American military intervened in the final stages of World War I to make the world safe for U.S. investment.

Two Revolutions in Russia

A different outcome of World War I was the development of a revolutionary crisis and movement in Tsarist Russia. Beginning in 1914, the Bolshevik Party rejected all participation in the war. In 1915 it led a successful boycott of the government's War Industry Committees. After Tsar Nicolas II was toppled in February 1917, the Bolsheviks raised demands for peace and freedom, land for the peasants, and bread due to the spread of famine. In October-November 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks led the first socialist revolution in the world.

The Bolsheviks' strategy was to transform the war waged by the Russian big capitalists and landowners into a revolutionary civil war. They added that they would negotiate a just, democratic peace without secret treaties and annexations after they took power. According to Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917, the solution to the war was revolution in the belligerent nations.¹¹

From 1917 to early 1918, Russia's Eastern Front collapsed as millions of peasant-soldiers deserted or turned their guns on Czarist officers. Large numbers of Russian soldiers stopped fighting and started fraternizing with German soldiers in between their trenches.

In March 1918, the Bolsheviks signed a separate peace treaty with Germany at Brest-Litovsk in modern-day Belarus. This more than anything else led the U.S. military to send an Expeditionary Force to France in 1918 in order to prevent a British-French defeat. Germany could now concentrate all of its forces in France. As it turned out, Germany faced mutinies among its own soldiers, and its military was overwhelmed by the combined British, French and U.S. armies in the last half of 1918.

Lenin later wrote about and supported the "anti-war internationalists" who had been jailed in Germany, France, Italy and Britain. Of particular importance, the Spartacus League in Germany led by Karl Liebknecht organized a revolutionary uprising in Berlin in late 1918 as anti-war sentiments grew in the left-wing of the German Socialist Party and within the German military. Though the Spartacus uprising in Germany, mutinies in the French army, and rebellions in Austria and Hungary were unsuccessful, they demonstrated the growth of revolutionary anti-war feelings within all of the European empires as the destruction of World War I grew deeper and more extensive.

¹¹ "Resolution on the War," *Pravda*, April 27, 1917, *Selected Works*, Vol. 2, 118-120.

