

REMEMBERING WORLD WAR I

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

This year marks the centennial of the outbreak of World War I. It lasted four years, from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918, costing a total of nine million lives. What caused it?

Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, the War Guilt Clause, gave the answer of the victors. It stipulated that the war had been “imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.” However, rather than actually revealing the cause of the war, Article 231 only documented the vengefulness of a treaty dictated to the losers.



H.L. Mencken wrote: “The appearance of a new nation in the first rank causes painful concern among those already there, and history show that efforts are always made to put it down.” He saw the arrival of Germany on the world’s stage as “the principal cause of World War I.”

For Europe the status quo had been a Germany consisting of a countless number of states, which had been the case since the Thirty Years War (1618-48). Central Europe, which means the German states, often became the battlefield for wars, especially in the Napoleonic era. Alliances could conveniently be made with one or the other German state against the other, usually against Prussia or Austria.

Everything changed in 1870 with the unification of Germany under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck. Now there was a united nation-state in central Europe, a factor that clearly upset a century-old status quo of a weak and divided Germany. At the outbreak of World War I, Kaiser Wilhelm prophetically said: “The world will be engulfed in the most terrible of wars, the ultimate aim of which is the ruin of Germany.”



Each member of the Triple Entente had something to gain by war. France wanted the ethnic German province of Alsace-Lorraine, which Germany had annexed in 1870. Since the Thirty Years War, French foreign policy aimed at a border on the Rhine, which meant acquisition of the province, something it gradually acquired and maintained until Germany was united. Not surprisingly, its military plan called for marching through Alsace-Lorraine on the way to Berlin.

Britain could not accept the possibility of Germany as the major power on the continent, something that has held true up to the recent unification of Germany, when Margaret Thatcher's objections became known. Beyond Europe it could not accept Germany becoming a world power with a world-class navy as well. Since the 18th century the popular song "Rule Britannia" echoed Great Britain's view of itself as reigning supreme above all on the ocean. It was unthinkable that an upstart like Germany should seek its "Place under the sun."

Russia for its part considered itself the guardian of Slavic peoples, something that brought it to loggerheads with Austria-Hungary, a multi-ethnic state with Slavic populations. In the ensuing conflict it sought to ensure its pan-Slavic vision.



The opportunity came on 28 June 1914, when a Serbian radical assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. This would be comparable today to the assassination of the U.S. Vice-President. This didn't provide the spark that ignited the war, but rather the pretext for war.

The assassination caused Austria-Hungary to issue an ultimatum to Serbia, which it refused to fully accept. Germany of course supported its ally. Russia, goaded on by France, proceeded to mobilize its army against Austria-Hungary, setting the machinery in motion for the European powers to become engaged by means of treaty obligations.

Regarding Austria-Hungary's ultimatum it might be recalled that Woodrow Wilson ordered U.S. troops into Mexico (1914-17) as a result of the depredations of the revolutionary Pancho Villa. Other nations in North and South America did not immediately line up against the U.S. because of this. It remained a local affair. But the assassination of the Archduke was different: it provided the opportunity for the Triple Entente to proceed with war.

In the end, the Triple Entente got what it wanted: the downfall of the empires of Germany and Austria-Hungary, but their joy was short-lived, considering what followed in the ensuing years. Historian Niall Ferguson recently called the British decision to go to war "the biggest error in modern history". The same could be said for France and Russia.

Many events will be taking place in the next few years relating to the centennial of World War I. Hopefully, they will not be in the spirit of Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, but more on the order of Memorial Day and will give pause for reflection as to the underlying cause of the Great War, the so-called "war to end war," which was supposed to make the world "safe for democracy."

Source: Germerica.com. (February 3, 2014) and reprinted in: *German-American News*. 20:2 (2014) and: *German-American Journal*. 62:3 (2014): 5.