

Factors that Lead to the Great War - Militarism

In seeking to comprehend the key reasons that lead to the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, one needs to appreciate how the unique but inter-related elements of Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism and Nationalism operated throughout the European continent in the 19th century.

In addition to those four inter-related factors, a fifth element – that of foreign diplomacy – also played a pivotal role in the downward spiral of relations between the super powers of Europe. The diplomacy aspect of the lead up to the Great War is brilliantly illustrated in the BBC docudrama – **37 Days**, the viewing of which was part of our pre-course preparation.

A European wide sense of Nationalism gave citizens in each of the continental nations an excessive and unhealthy confidence in their respective nations, their governments and the indomitable strength of their armies.

In the first section of the course we will explore and flesh out these concepts, and learn why, in combination, they determined that the world war of 1914 became virtually inevitable.

The Genesis of 1914 lay in the Franco Prussian War of 1870 -71.

While this relatively short war fought between France and Prussia lasted for just six months, it led to German unification and dramatically marked the final step in Germany's rise to the position of a major continental power and changed the balance of power in Europe. The end of the war marked the ascendancy of Imperial Germany to become the preeminent military power on the continent, ahead of France and Russia.

Just as significantly, this relatively short conflict displayed military features that were subsequently copied by each of the major continental powers, which would inexorably lead to the outbreak of the First World War some forty years later.

Among the reasons for the Prussian success were that prior to fighting the war, that State had introduced innovations including national 'conscription' and a national 'military academy' to effectively train the officers for its army.

After analysing the reasons for the German success in the 1870 War, the governments of France and Russia likewise introduced the concepts of 'military colleges' and 'conscription' into their respective armies.

Military Colleges and War Plans

As late as the time of Napoleon the process for training and educating army officers in armies on the continent was pretty much something learned on the job, where young officers learnt the craft of war from their more experienced elders in the field.

In 1810 however, on the same day the University of Berlin was founded, the Prussian government also established a War Academy to specifically educate and train its senior military officers.

Under the influence of Helmuth von Moltke the college initiated the innovation of making war plans in the abstract, involving a number of different possible scenarios. German military students were taught to think like generals, were involved in realistic war games and annual manoeuvres, studied historic battles and strategies and were required to devise 'solutions' for national strategic problems, involving potential conflicts with empires such as those of Russia and France.

Therefore, one significant consequence that followed the Franco Prussian War of 1871 was the modernisation of their respective staff colleges by the other continental powers, who likewise required their military leaders to prepare war plans covering ranges of potential conflicts.

The Ecole' de Guerre – France's War College – Source of Plan XVII



How Conscription Came About

In Prussia's successful wars over Austria in 1866 and France in 1870, that German state introduced the novel idea of forming an army from its young men who were required by law to undertake compulsory military service.

As a consequence of that Prussian initiative, over the ensuing 40 years up to 1914 each of the other European powers likewise introduced compulsory service, commonly known as conscription.

In a relatively harsh and monotonous lifestyle environment of the era, national annual conscript service commitments were generally perceived by the young men of all nationalities as an honourable national duty rather than an imposition. Also, for many it provided a welcome break from the routine day to day toil and provided opportunities for regular catch ups with old friends.

How Conscription Worked

The conscription systems employed by France, Russia and Germany displayed a number of similarities.

In each country the 1913 crop of conscripts (who completed their second year of service in 1914) formed what was termed the 'active' or 'standing' army. These young fit men experienced the most up to date training and were at the peak of their game. And because they were already formed into their various regiments, if necessary they could be transferred quickly to wherever they were needed.

Upon mobilization in August 1914, the reservists of the previous 1912-13 intake in Russia, France and Germany were the first to be called up for service with their regiments. Again these units consisted of young men in their prime with up to date training.

The soldiers in these regiments joined what were termed 'frontline' divisions. These were the army units whose purpose was to assault and defeat the enemy in battle.

However, as mobilization call ups were sequentially issued to earlier annual intakes, the men called up later were increasingly older, less fit and less well trained and up to date with current military tactics. They constituted what were termed second line reserves (*Landwehr*) and third line reserves (*Landsturm*).

For example the older men in these German reserve units were used to hold defensive areas, and to carry out policing/administrative duties in the occupied areas behind the front line in Belgium and France.

The French equivalents for the second line reserves were '*territorial army*' while the third line were the '*territorial reserves*'.

Military Preparedness in Pre-war Germany

In 1914 Germany had a population of approximately 67 million people with an 'active peacetime army' of 760,000 men. However, once her reserves were called up upon mobilization, her army grew to 2,147,000 men, deployed in 87 army divisions.

In pre-war Germany a male teenager was required by law at age 20 to begin his initial two years of compulsory full time military training.

After his discharge from basic training a German male was required to return to his regiment for three weeks of annual training in each of his next five years.

After completing that, he would continue to undertake his military obligations for a few weeks each year, in the *Landwehr and Landsturm* until he reached 45 years of age.

Because of its relatively large population in the pre-war decade, the German authorities were somewhat selective in their choosing of conscripts.

The German army preferred *rural conscripts* who it deemed were more imbued in German traditions, as compared to the better educated youth of industrial towns and cities. The latter were considered to be more prone to the notions of 'socialism', a concept that was then beginning to filter through all nations on the European continent.

However, those not selected for military service had their names put down on the *ersatz* (supplementary) reserve, which meant that an additional one million+ German men were also liable for call-up in the event of war.

Military Preparedness in Pre-war France

In 1914, France had a population of approximately 36,600,000 people, which was significantly smaller than that of Germany. Despite that, France was able to maintain an 'active peacetime army' of 827,000 men. However, once her reserves were called up as a result of mobilization, her army totalled 1,800,000 men, deployed in 80 army 'divisions'.

With a much smaller population than her larger neighbour, in order to maintain some sort of army parity with her bigger neighbour France was obliged to conscript a greater proportion of her young men

In 1913 Frenchmen from the age of 19 to 47 were conscripted for military service for a period of 28 years. This initially involved 3 years in full time service in the 'active' 'front line' army, followed by eleven years on a part time basis with the 'reserve', then seven years in the 'territorial army' and finally a further seven years in the 'territorial reserve'.

Integrated with the notion of conscription, the French nation was administratively divided into *twenty* military districts.

Each district in France was required to train sufficient conscripts to man its own *corps* (2 Divisions of 20,000 men each) within the 'active peacetime army'.

In addition, each district was also required to maintain another two reserve divisions that could also be called up in the event war. This effectively meant that France had a *normal peace time army* of **40 active divisions**. However with a mobilization in the event of war and the call-up of (second line) reserve units, the French could quickly put an **additional 40 front line divisions** into the field.

Military Preparedness in Pre-war Russia

In 1914 the Russian Empire had by far the biggest population in Europe, with some 164 million people. She maintained a standing peace time army of 1,445,000 men. However, once her reserves were called up via mobilization, her army totalled 3,400,000 men, deployed in 114 army divisions.

As we will discover further on in the course, while the vastly superior manpower position of Russia was of particular concern to Germany in the years prior to 1914, as events unfolded history would show that numbers would only be part of the story in the Great War, and that other factors would be pre-eminent.

Military Preparedness in Pre-war Britain

Pre-war Great Britain experienced a very different scenario to the nations of continental Europe. For one thing, because Britain was an island nation, rather than relying on a large land based army, her first line of defence was the Royal Navy, at that time by far the most powerful in the world.

Also, Britain had not fought a war on the European continent since Waterloo, some 100 years previously, and therefore British military thinking was largely isolated from the military thinking that had taken place on the continent during the second half of the 19th century.

Unlike the European powers who relied on conscription, Britain only maintained a small army, portion of which was stationed in Britain, with the larger part of her force stationed in her overseas colonies, and particularly in India, to control the natives.

In August 1914 the army in Britain consisted of just six well trained / professional infantry divisions and one of cavalry, together with supporting artillery and communications units. The total British army (BEF) of just 165,000 men, was tiny compared to the standing armies of Russia, France and Germany, each of which had in excess of 2 million soldiers.

Moreover, unlike the continental powers with their large pool of conscript reserves, in 1914 Britain did not have a deep manpower reserve of trained soldiers to call on.

Mobilization

Mobilization in 1914 was defined as the **moment a decision was made** by a nation to call up its extensive pool of troops and supplies in readiness for war. Two stages of mobilization existed in 1914 – *'partial mobilization'* which referred to preparation of a nation's 'standing army' and *'general mobilization'* which involved the much bigger process of the call up of a nation's (extensive) reserves.

For each of the European nations, with their vast pools of trained manpower, a key issue they faced in the event of a 'declaration' of war related to the speed and efficiency with which their soldiers in reserve and horses could be called up, brought together, properly equipped and then transported as quickly as possible to where they would be needed.

Mobilization' in 1914 needs to be viewed within the context of the 'core strategic belief' which was shared by the political and military leaders of each of the belligerent nations prior to the outbreak of war – they all believed that *whichever country was first to bring its available firepower into offensive action in the right place would win a war. Clearly* then the decision to call a 'general mobilization' by one nation would inevitably have meant that that nation's likely enemies regarded such a decision as *the first 'act of war'*.

The imperative for responsive action is reflected in the following quote in late July 1914 when Joffre warned the French government that *"each day's delay in mobilizing and concentrating would cost 15-20 kilometres of French territory."*

The initiation of the decision to mobilize in 1914 is compared to the 'toppling of dominoes' – for as the Russian War Minister, Vladimir Sukhomlinov *explained "Mobilization is not a mechanical process which one can arrest at will, as one can a wagon, and then set it in motion again"*.

The domino effect is further explained in a letter written in 1909 by Germany's War Minister Moltke to his Austro- Hungarian counterpart – *"The moment Russia mobilizes, Germany will unquestionably mobilize her whole army"*.

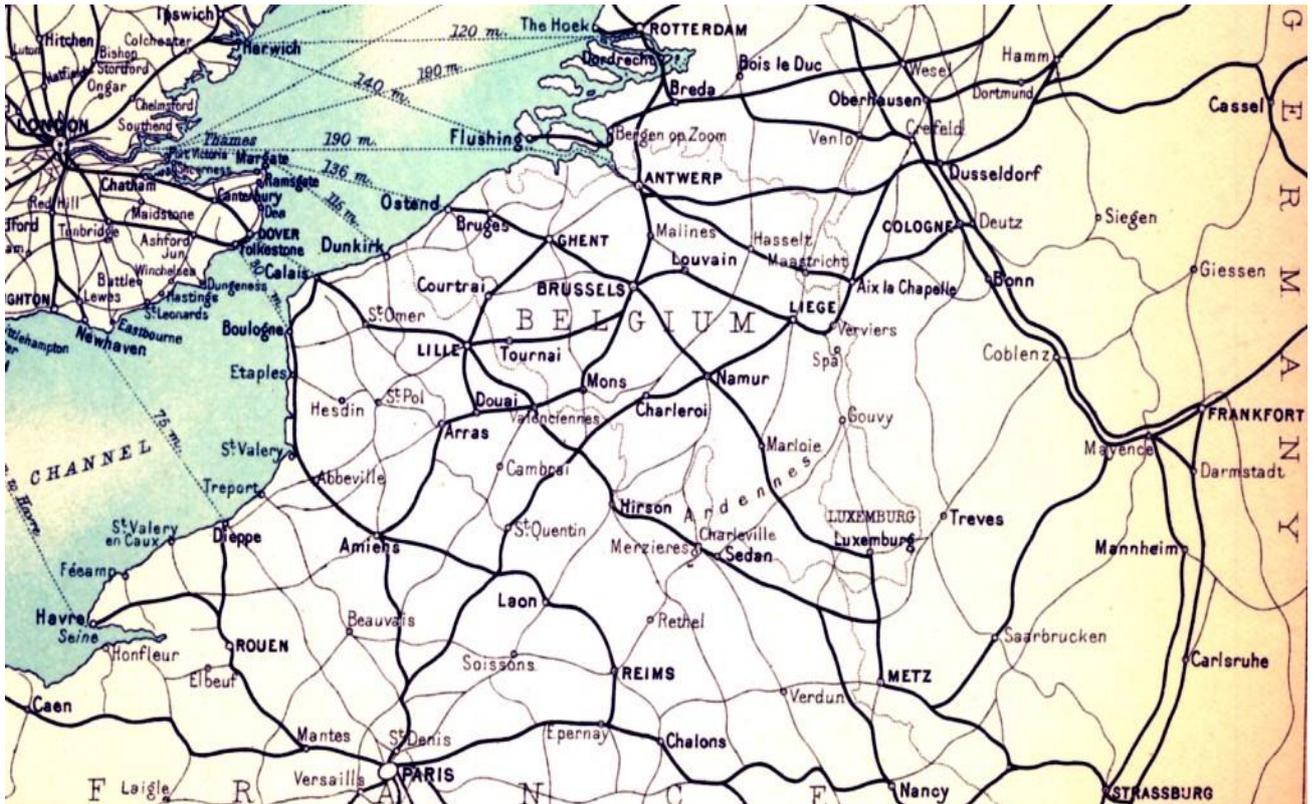
Full scale general mobilizations caused enormous upheavals in each of the major European nations and Britain, as each of these hitherto peaceful societies made the overnight transition to nations at war.



European Railways and Timetables

From 1830 on, the governments each of the key nations on the European continent undertook major infrastructure programs whereby they began rapidly building strategic railway networks, many of which continue to operate today.

European Railway Networks in 1914



The military hierarchies in the various nations quickly realized that the advent of the steam train would revolutionize war by making the movement and supply of troops many times quicker than the previous methods used that relied on horses or foot.

As a consequence dual line railway systems were constructed as a priority to all key points on the national boundaries of the respective European nations.

It was also grasped by military planners that the movement of large numbers of troops would have to be *meticulously planned to avoid bottlenecks*.

Therefore one of the key functions of military colleges across pre 1914 Europe required precise plans to move millions of men in a matter of days. This in turn involved the writing of **'railway movement timetables'** which became a vital peacetime military task.

In Germany the war planners timetabled some 11,000 train movements to transport their troops together with some 715,000 horses across the Rhine River to detrain at villages close to the Belgium and French borders.

On the French side 7,000 train movements were conducted in transferring the bulk of the French army to border locations in the Belfort and Champagne regions.