



The terrible logic of WWI

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The tensions that led to the conflagration of 1914-20 had their origins in the depression of 1873 to 1896, when the industrial economies had a long period of slow growth, deflation and unemployment.

Capitalism was reshaped during the depression in three ways. First, by the growth of monopoly. Small and medium firms went to the wall in the hard conditions, and markets became dominated by giant corporations that organised themselves into cartels as a way of managing prices and protecting profits. The industrial giants relied on government contracts and bank loans, creating a tight nexus between the state, financial capital and industrial capital. This process was most advanced in Germany and the US, which overtook Britain as the leading industrial powers by 1914. A key feature of the new capitalism was protectionism: all governments other than the British slapped high tariffs on imports as a way of encouraging their infant industries.

The second trend was colonialism. In pursuit of cheap raw materials, captive markets and new investment outlets, the great powers raced to grab colonies for

themselves in the "underdeveloped" world – China, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. In 1876 only 10 percent of Africa was under European rule; by 1900, the figure was 90 percent.

Protectionism and colonialism were competitive, which explains the third aspect of capitalist restructuring during and after the long depression – an arms race between the established and emerging Western powers. British military spending more than doubled between 1887 and 1914, while German naval spending, aimed at eliminating Britain's lead in battleships, more than quadrupled. The result was that governments, generals and arms manufacturers became inextricably linked.

While Germany, the US and Britain were the leading world powers, every European country began to respond in kind. Even backward Russia began to borrow extensively from France to build heavy industry to boost its military capacity and the tsarist state became heavily dependent on foreign capital.

World capitalism was now entering its imperialist phase. Competition between individual companies was no longer fought on the basis of "free competition" over prices but in monopoly battles for domination over entire markets. In this new era, state assistance, both economic and military,

played an increasingly important role in determining the success of these monopolies. Without such assistance even quite large companies were incapable of breaking open new markets or forcing rivals out of old ones. More and more, success in the marketplace depended on the accumulation of military force.

Capitalist restructuring in the last quarter of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century therefore created the conditions in which the smallest spark – the revolver shot that rang out in Sarajevo in June 1914 – would ignite the powder keg which exploded five weeks later.

Germany entered the chase for colonies in the late 19th century, only to find much of the world locked up by Britain, France and even Holland, Belgium and Portugal. It took what it could – in South West Africa (now Namibia), East Africa (now Tanzania) and German New Guinea – but these were far too small to satisfy the demands of German capitalism. Germany had to look within Europe and the near east for its opportunity. It tightened relations with the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. The Berlin to Baghdad railway, linking Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Balkans and the Ottoman empire, was a vital element in Germany's strategy for capitalist expansion. It was a direct challenge to British

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PHOTOS: Left - Australian soldiers walking on a makeshift track through a battlefield in Belgium in 1917 (Source: John Warwick Brooke/ State Library of NSW); Above - British troops going "over the top" amid the bursting of German shells (Source: James Francis Hurley/ National Library of Scotland).



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and French interests in the increasingly important Middle East – the discovery of oil in Persia (now Iran) in 1908 made clear the prize at stake.

Germany's rise in central Europe alarmed Britain. British strategy throughout the 19th century had been to play off the European powers against each other to ensure that no single state was able to dominate the continent. With Germany beginning to flex its muscles, Britain feared that Europe would fall under its sway. That would threaten British naval dominance, so important to the maintenance of its enormous empire.

Britain forged the Triple Entente, an alliance with France and Russia. France had extensive colonies but economically was far weaker than either Britain or Germany. Russia hoped to grab pieces of the splintering Ottoman empire, including Istanbul and a sea route to the Mediterranean. Britain was keen to protect its Channel ports on the French coast and saw its alliance with Russia as a means to keep the latter out of Afghanistan and India. Old rivalries between the three were put aside to confront Germany.

The stage was set for war. When Germany gave the Austrian government a blank cheque to attack Serbia following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

by a Serbian nationalist, Russia mobilised against Austria in defence of Serbia and to protect its interests in the Balkans. France saw an opportunity to settle scores with Germany over Alsace Lorraine, which it had lost to its eastern neighbour in 1871, and Britain declared war on Germany as the Kaiser's army marched through Belgium to avoid France's fortified frontier. Many European governments also saw war as an antidote to what had become a growing revolutionary mood among their own working classes.

The build-up of heavy industry in the decades prior to 1914 meant that the conflict was waged on an industrial scale. In the early weeks, all sides believed that rapid advances would end the war in a few short months. By early 1915, however, when the list of casualties had already reached 3.5 million, belief in a quick victory had given way to an understanding that progress towards the enemy's capital would be measured in metres rather than kilometres.

The new war was a mix of the old, with its mud, filth and gore; and the new, with its long-range shelling, poison gas, machine guns and tanks. The cost in human life escalated as the destructive power of weaponry multiplied. In a matter of hours, tens of thousands of soldiers could perish. By the end of the war Germany and Russia each

suffered up to 2 million dead, Austria-Hungary and France more than 1 million each, and Britain 800,000. Life in the trenches on the western front alternated between mind-numbing boredom and frantic terror.

World War I was the first total war. Until 1914, war had been something remote for most European populations. Armies generally were small, numbering in the tens of thousands at most. This new war involved the mobilisation of entire societies and economies, not just in Europe but across North America, the Middle East, India, Australia and New Zealand. Conscript armies of hundreds of thousands or millions took to the field.

The cost of mobilising such huge armies – with their associated military hardware, transport, food, clothing and the wherewithal to keep soldiers in the field – was enormous. The burden of taxation grew sharply and inflation ravaged working class living standards. Hunger and even malnutrition set in. By war's end, 750,000 Germans had died of starvation.

While the working class and peasants in and out of uniform paid a heavy price, the capitalists prospered. Huge contracts to supply the army offered every big capitalist, every senior officer and every high-up bureaucrat the chance to line their pockets. Popular hatred of these war profiteers grew





enormously.

At the front, the average infantryman could easily see the gross inequality between the conditions of the generals, comfortably ensconced in mansions well behind the lines, and their own lot in the trenches. Even if they were not hostile to the war, the blatant injustice rankled.

The outbreak of war was greeted with rapture among the middle class and capitalists. The working class and peasantry were not so easily swayed. Some went along with the war hysteria. A minority were resolutely opposed. As for the majority, only the support for the war by the social democratic and trade union leaders was able to win their consent – for the first couple of years at least.

From very early on there were episodic outbreaks of resistance to the war among the soldiers. The 1914 Christmas truce between German and British soldiers is the best known. Less dramatic was the practice of “live and let live” by which soldiers in opposing trenches would do their best to avoid actual engagement.

By 1916, support for the war was eroding. The Easter Uprising in Ireland, a country that supplied 200,000 soldiers for the British empire, was the first sign that imperial jingoism was breaking down. The successful battle against conscription in

Australia in 1916 was another. But it was the February revolution of 1917 in Russia, followed quickly by massive mutinies in the French and Italian armies, that signalled that the masses were beginning to turn against the war. In April 1917, 200,000 German engineering workers struck against reductions in the bread ration.

Although the French and Italian mutinies were quashed by concessions and repression, mass desertions and voluntary surrenders became more and more frequent. The generals were beginning to run out of soldiers, such was the rate of battle loss and desertion.

In October 1917, the Russian workers overthrew a provisional government and pulled their country out of the war. The Russian revolution inspired rebellious workers and soldiers across the world. In the short term, the effect of the revolution was to allow the German generals to mount a fresh offensive on the western front in the spring of 1918. However, this quickly petered out because of desertions, which grew during the summer and autumn – in the Austro-Hungarian forces as well.

In Berlin and Vienna, the mood had turned distinctly anti-war. A big strike wave in both cities in January 1918 had been crushed, but the continuing high rates of casualties and the ever worsening

conditions of life ensured that bitterness continued to rise.

The Kaiser was desperate to reverse the tide of war which had begun to flow towards Britain and France following the entry of the US on the side of the Entente armies in 1917. In late October 1918, the Kaiser ordered the German fleet on a suicide mission to confront the British navy in the North Sea. Sailors at the Kiel naval base refused to sail and took over the town, sparking off the German revolution. All the institutions of imperial Germany crumbled in a matter of days.

The German revolt quickly spread. By war’s end three major empires – the Russian, the Austro-Hungarian and the Turkish empires – had collapsed. The conflict, which had started with high hopes among European rulers that it might cauterise revolutionary fever among their working populations, led instead towards the overthrow of entrenched political regimes. As the German anti-war writer Erich Maria Remarque makes his lead character say on the western front:

“Everyone talks of peace and armistice. Everyone is waiting. If it just leads to another disappointment, they will collapse; the hopes are too strong, they can’t be cleared away without exploding. If there is no peace, then there will be revolution.”

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PHOTOS (clockwise from top left): Newspaper report on the Christmas truce; British victims of a gas attack; The 1916 Easter uprising in Dublin; 1917 rally of revolutionary soldiers in Russia; German soldiers flee a gas attack (Source: National Archive/Official German Photograph of WWI).

