

WW1, The Irrational Nations.

The cause of WW 1, rational self-interested nations?



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Publication Details:

Author of all chapters, © James Prentice, 2018, First published: 2018, 2nd edition 2021.

Capture Politics Publications, Hastings, St Leonards on Sea, TN38 0JN.

Any use of ideas or information from the book is required to be referenced when applied to other work. **Citation:** Prentice, James. 2021. 'WW1: The Irrational nations.' Hastings: Capture Politics. **This is a sample version.**

A selection of Other Works:

Books:

Prentice, James. 2017. *Still Alone: Social Capital in the UK 2005-2015*. 1st ed. Hastings: Capture Politics.

Prentice, James. 2018. *Give Me Liberty!* 1st ed. Hastings: Capture Politics.

Prentice, James. 2019. *Trendification or Gentrification? A Coastal Case Study*. 1st ed. Hastings: Capture Politics.

Acknowledgements:

This book thanks both my parents for their support throughout my studies that has enabled me to complete this book. It also thanks Chris Connelly for his ongoing encouragements and help in proof reading. This book also gives huge thanks to Emma Edmondson-Payne for her advice on the design, layout and presentation of this book and its front cover.

This book also tanks the academic staff at the University of Kent who helped improve my writing skills and helped develop ideas around the causes of World War One. This book also gives thanks to many contributors to this period of history who have published their research on the internet for free, which has enabled a non-funded researcher to complete this book.

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WW 1: The Irrational Nations

Chapter 1 – Introduction to my theory.

The cause of the war, nation's collective self-interest & existential domestic crises.

During the final year of my undergraduate History and Politics degree at the University of Kent, I decided to study a WW1 Module. It was here I realised that more modern-day political theories can be highly applicable to historical events. At the same time, I was also studying environmental politics, where I came across a theory called the tragedy of the commons (Hardin: 1968). This is a scenario where one geographical area is divided up into several parts and given to different actors, in this case, countries, who naturally all follow their rational-interest, consequently, this leads to a scenario where collectively everyone is worse off, with most actors achieving the opposite of their desired outcomes. Usually, this theory is applied to environmental problems, such as economic self-interest leading to pollution that leaves everyone worse off, however, this theory can be just as relevantly be applied to the outbreak of WW1. It is here where I shall first state my theory, that WW1's cause lies in the tragedy of the commons problem, where all the important decision-making actors were making policy based on their perceived self-interest, which led to many actions that produced unintended consequences that left everyone worse off by the end of the war. It was countries blindly pursuing their self-interest that led to a scenario that pulled many countries into thinking their best option was to enter the war, which turned a dispute in the Balkans into a European conflict, which would end up in a World War. I came to this conclusion during my final undergraduate year, 2014/15, and have developed this into this small book since. It was 100 years after the outbreak of WW1 I was in seminars discussing these ideas, and this is where the theory started to develop, which is what we turn to now.

When studying the armies of WW1 we started to investigate the 37 days leading up to the war and it taught me something quite remarkable. Most historians tend to agree that nearly all of the armies that were preparing for the outbreak of war did not appear to be preparing for the type of war that developed by the end of 1914. Germany was not preparing for a two-front war, Austria-Hungary was not thinking of being drawn into conflicts with Russia and Britain was

trying to avoid the entire thing through mediation between aggressing nations. This challenged my pre-conceptions that must have come from my primary school days, which states that the entire war was planned by the various alliances involved and that the war was always inevitable. The feeling that the arms race led to this inevitable conflict, that just happens to ignite during 1914, is quite a popular dominant theory that is often taught in our primary schools across the UK. Alternatively, the other popular theory held by many members of the public is the Blackadder theory, that the war was one big accident where foolish generals and leaders led their lemmings off the cliff.

However, if armies were planning for a smaller and different type of conflict, and by autumn 1914 was preparing for a much longer war, then this means that these popular theories can't be both right, and therefore this needs to be investigated. The first theory is shown to be wrong through the fact nations tried to avoid war with each other, most notably Germany wishing to avoid a large war, especially a two-front war, showing that leaders at the time were not thinking about the arms race and did not see a large-scale European conflict as inevitable, or desirable, and could have been avoided if different decisions were made. The second theory, which sort of mirrors chaos theory (which is when one tragic event leads to another that ends up in a catastrophe) also appears to be proven wrong as the detailed planning leading up to the war shows rational calculating actors. The Blackadder theory that suggests incompetent leaders, who were led by bumbling generals, accidentally started the war must be wrong as these people would not have tried to avoid the war or been able to produce such detailed preparation war plans in the outbreak of the war. Moreover, if our view of history is that it was inevitable or it just sort of happened by coincidence, or by accident, then our understanding of history becomes lazy and almost pointless. If we don't try to understand why historical events occurred the way they did then we will find it much harder to learn the lessons from history, prevent it from occurring again and understand our society today.

As a result, I began to read more into the various theories regarding individual nations on how they organised their armies, what type of nation-state they were and what possible motivations they had for going to war in 1914.

Looking at these nations' History, I feel that there are common themes regarding what defines their self-interest in terms of foreign policy. It can be hard to show what factors consistently cause war between these nations as there are many examples where war has been avoided by the larger nations over factors that can be argued to cause war. Most notably disputes regarding territory, trade, empire expansion, the sovereignty of smaller countries and spheres of influence in contentious regions within Europe are not certainties in causing warfare but do appear to make it more likely. The issue with this trend is that you can't show that these factors caused WW1 as there are plenty of examples where they did not cause war. The only consistent theme around nations going to war in this time period does not appear to regard foreign policy interests, but rather domestic self-interests. What matters most to nation-states, especially empires and monarchies, is defending their self-preservation and ensuring other nation-states do not undermine the ability for the nation to develop, secure competitive advantages and to adapt and survive in a rapidly changing new modern world. These issues are what I call fundamental issues for nation-states during time period and threats to self-preservation are seen as existential crises, crises that need to be tackled to ensure the nation-state's survival further into the 20th-century and ensure the current status quo. These issues are as followed:

- Succession crises (applicable to nation-states still ruled by old monarchies). This is where the survival of a dynasty is under threat and action must be taken to ensure the next generation can continue to rule over a nation, just like the old monarchies of Europe had done in previous centuries.
- Challenges towards the rule of monarchs. Rebellions and revolutionary movements against the rule and authority of the old monarchies that historically have governed Europe also

appears to be a common theme. Challenges can also come from nation-states that are republics, such as France for example, who want to expand their model of government across Europe. Crises like this can also regard the sovereignty of peoples that want to form new nation-states within old Empires, which is what we turn to now.

- Protection of Empire crises. (Applicable to nation-states with large empires, especially Britain and Austria). Threats to an Empire's stability generally focus around trade routes and key areas of control needed to protect the Empire and its trade. Revolutions and demand for new nation-states within the Empire also threaten stability and also appear to be a common theme for war policy.
- New nation-states, hegemony threats and new empires (particularly the case for the German nation-state). The threat of new nation-states wanting to gain their own empires, like Germany, wanting to expand their empire and gain access to trade-routes older empires had monopolies over appears to be a common trigger for war. The threat of new unified confederate/city-states becoming nation-states appears to trigger wars in this time period. The threat new rising nation's offer is challenging the consensus that no single European power should dominate the mainland continent, threatening settlements that have finalised agreed trade access and rules. Limitations to new nation-states in accessing trade, especially ones with growing industries, appear to also bring the war in this time period. But, the most important factor appears to be the protection against hegemony and threats against established Empires.

My theory can be summarised as these four factors of: succession crises, threats to the rule of monarchs, threats to established empires and the rise of new nation-states all appear to be key common factors in wars that create the 20th-century world, and later WW1. These four issues can be summarised as defending the status quo created in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and defending the status quo of the old historic powers that are finding it

increasingly harder to survive in a rapidly changing 20th-century world. The old monarchies and Empires are coming under increasing tensions in foreign policy with the rise of newer nation-states. It is these conflicting rational self-interests of older powers preserving the old global governance and trade systems and newer states seeking new economic and territory advantages the older empires had gained that would be a causal factor that would lead to WW1. Nations blindly pursuing their national self-interest led to the alliance system and poor foreign relations that would help WW1 occur in 1914. The endless pursuit to defend the status quo created in the 19th-century, thus protecting the advantageous position some had in territory, trade and economics, resulted in many nations going to war and everyone being left worse off.

The book states that it is these deeper reasons why WW1 occurred, with the official issues stated at the time not being the main reasons why so many nations decided to go to war. The official reasons, such as the protection of Serbia's independence in the Balkans and Belgium's rights to sovereignty were not the primary reasons to go to war. Instead, these were proxy issues stated at the time to justify warfare that would protect something much more deep-rooted that may have not got the support the nations needed to wage war. Many nations needed support from their public, notably their new democratic systems, for example, Germany with its increasing socialist influence that did not naturally favour war. Therefore, issues need to be created to gain these peoples' support, but in reality these were proxy issues and proxy-wars being fought. Instead, the key motivations behind these actions were about protecting old monarchies, expanding or defending empires, gaining access to trade and protecting the status quo. These reasons may have been crucial to those with power at the heart of these nation-states, but were not exactly an advertisement that could be made as a rallying cry to war that was capable of inciting mass mobilisation. Therefore, the official

reasons stated to gain initial support for war were smaller proxy issues, like Serbia and Belgium, but once the war had begun and greater recruitment of soldiers was needed the intended motivations were revealed, such as defending the empire, for King and country.

I think the main reason why I have come to this theory is through the struggle I have had in trying to answer a key question of; why does a crisis in the Balkans just one year before the first world war not culminate in WW1 occurring in 1913, but a smaller crisis in the Balkans within the Austro-Hungarian empire does culminate in the first world war in the summer of 1914? I think the best answer to this question is because 1913 was a conflict that involved nations' foreign policy interests, not the domestic rational self-interests of existential importance that existed in 1914. 1912-13 saw the Balkan wars and nearly all the nations involved had foreign policy interests that could lead to major powers becoming involved and the alliance system coming into force, resulting in a conflict very similar to WW1 in 1914. However, this does not happen, armies are not mobilised like in 1914 and the Austro-Hungarian Empire is seemingly allowed to protect its borders and nation's self-interest without Russia threatening war. Moreover, Russia also wishes to use the war as an opportunity to extend its sphere of influence in the Balkans region, a crucial interest in expanding its Empire and gaining trade access to the Adriatic coast, the Mediterranean and wider trade interests that would bring it into contact with the British Empire.

Here we see various common themes of Empire expansion, nationalism and trade interests having possibly started WW1, but none of the nations appears willing to spend the costs of war to gain these interests. Instead, when the war reaches decisive points diplomacy is called for and Britain acts as the major peace broker, showing its commitment for peace and the complete opposite to its war policy of July 1914 to November 1918. The treaty of London

is established with all the major foreign powers seemingly compromising on its foreign interests and spheres of influence in the Balkans region. The outcome would suggest that even when Russia loses out on its desired spheres of interest in 1913 and Austria does not get its Empire's ambitions no one sees this as a need to rush to war. All the major powers have decided the cost of war simply is not worth it. However, in 1914 the very same rational actors appear to state that the cost is completely worth it, why? Because domestic matters are simply considerably more valuable. Foreign policy objectives can help expand trade and produce domestic benefits, but all these benefits have a clear cost that rational actors can calculate. Domestic matters sometimes can be a matter of existential importance, a matter of the status quo continuing, which for monarchies at this time can be a matter of not just honour, but one of life and death. With regards to Brittan, protecting the interests of the Empire was deemed to be worth more than the estimated costs of the war. However, intervening in Europe to gain a preferred foreign policy outcome was comparatively not seen to be worth the cost, which Britain may have found out with Crimea in the 1850s. Therefore, I have developed the theory stated in this chapter largely because I feel it can help explain one of the biggest confusing questions regarding why WW1 broke out in 1914, but not during other similar crises during the same time period, like 1913. It explains the answer as actors who are making decisions, and think they are rational calculators who can judge costs of war, can decide if action is beneficial to them, or not. In 1913, the costs are simply not worth the foreign policy objectives various countries have. This is because there are not enough trade routes and other factors at stake to justify intervening in what is a separate Balkan war against a weakened Empire, the Ottoman Empire.

However, in 1914 the crisis is actually more deep-rooted and different. It is different as it threatened policy and power domestically, rather than in foreign countries. Therefore, the

cost willing to be spared to go to war and protect the nation's decided self-interest rapidly increases, and war becomes far more likely. The gunshot that Princip fires killing the Hapsburg successor is more than just a terrorist act for Europe at this time, it quickly becomes a symbolic act that is seen as a direct threat to the long-standing Empires and monarchies that find the rapidly changing 20th-century world they find themselves in. Austria wishes to act against Serbia not as foreign policy, but as domestic policy, which is designed to show its troublesome minorities who really is in charge and that the Empire is not going to go away because of nationalist cries for a united Slav nation. Not even terrorist acts will deter the monarchy from achieving its success, its survival and protection of the status quo within its Empire. This would then set a chain of events that would bring more domestic crises to several powers across Europe that would again increase motivations for going to war, which would result in enough nations getting involved for the conflict to become a world war.

It is the ability for this theory to answer this question as to why I have felt the need to write a small book on the subject. I feel it better explains WW1's creation compared to other theories which have been proposed, such as the alliance system, trade, nationalism and the arms race. It is not to say these factors did not play a part in helping to create the war, they did, but they simply may not have been the biggest factors at the time. For example, nationalism does help recruit soldiers and give support for war in 1914, but the theory does not see enough evidence for this to be a consistent theme to make it a direct cause for war during this time period. Therefore, I have written this book as I feel it better identifies common themes during this time period and can more widely explain why the First World War broke out in 1914.

In the summer of 1914, we clearly have nation-states that think they are all rational actors, justified in pursuing their own fundamental domestic objectives, with also the cost being justified. This theory will argue it was the high level of confidence in rational choice decisions leading up to 1914 that developed poor foreign relations, the arms race, ambitions for Empire and other issues that led to WW1 starting. This is because actors that do not cooperate with each other and instead decide to pursue narrow individual self-interests are not always as rational as they first appear. Sometimes acting like an individual in an increasingly interdependent world, which is the type of world being created at the turn of the 20th-century, leads to very poor outcomes for all concerned. Sometimes blindly pursuing rational interests and thinking costs can be calculated and justified leads to very poor outcomes indeed, which is what I think happens in events running up to WW1. It is this poor outcome that actually shows actors thinking they are rational to be quite irrational, which is why I call this book the *“Irrational Nations”* as it was their irrational actions that all contributed to WW1.

No one actor is to blame, and with hindsight (a luxury, and a curse all historians have) we can see all these nation-states losing out. Indeed, Britain did not yet realise the Empire was not going to last, or monarchies such as the German & Austro-Hungarian alliance did not see the changing world meant their monarchies' days were numbered. It is true the Tsar's monarchy was in trouble and likely would not last with several groups demanding reform, but we must realise they did not know this at the time. Yet, we must admit to ourselves that if this theory is correct and many nation-states were fighting to defend an ever irrelevant status quo that would not last the century, then the decision to go to war to defend the status quo was irrational for their nations and only rational for those in power seeking to protect the old order. It is here and in the conclusion, and only here, I will give my opinion on WW1,

it was a war that used millions of ordinary people to fight for causes that did not belong to them, but instead to a select ruling elite. The war was illogical, irrational and a new settlement should have been made to decide a peaceful transition to the new world that was emerging. Instead of the two World Wars created, and the horrors that went with it, it would have simply been best for humanity if the ruling nations just sat down as they did at the end of other wars and talked. Austro-Hungary could have given the freedom to a united Slav nation that had every right to be recognised, the monarchies could have faded into obscurity paving the way for democracies, potentially stopping the rise of fascism and communism and perhaps the British Empire could have been slowly modified into a trading bloc, something that occurred quite naturally post-WW2. If this had been slowly done, then possibly the horrors witnessed in the early part of the 20th-century could have been avoided, but this is counterfactual history and instead, it is best to just try and learn lessons from this so to hopefully to never again repeat them.

In this book I will seek to provide evidence for this theory by analysing historic events, primarily focusing on wars and foreign policy clashes between the major nations concerned in WW1. I will then look at common themes on what had caused these conflicts and seek to show why I have come to the conclusion of why protecting the status quo became important for many nations and why nations feared change. From this, I will then explain why this fear of change can explain the rationale for nations joining the conflict.

I will also seek to identify the common themes causing various wars in the same time period and show nation's most pressing objectives in these wars were often domestic and that protecting these objectives created perceptions that war was worth the large costs involved for most nations. I will do this by looking at 1800 – 1870, which is the time period that created the world we see in 1914. I will then look at 1871 – 1913, looking again to see if the

themes I identified in my theory appear to motivate the major nations in the years leading to WW1. Finally, I will look at the 37 days leading to the outbreak of WW1 and explain why I feel the theory holds up based on the events that took place in the vital days leading into WW1. I will conclude by saying the theory explains the outbreak of WW1 due to the evidence showing it was rational domestic self-interest and self-preservation that motivates nations throughout the entire time period this book discusses, and, therefore is most likely to be the decisive factor influencing the events that caused WW1.

WW 1: The Irrational Nations

Chapter 2 – The Nation-states
involved.

The History and attitudes of the
WW1 nation -states.

Before we go back in history and analyse how events of the past produced common themes in creating war, we should look at individual nations, their histories' and consequently how they governed themselves. Some nations' actions might be able to be explained based on their historical experiences and the way their governments had been structured through this. Nations' governments had different structures because of their different histories, which helped shape decision-making towards certain ideas that existed in Europe in 1914. Some nation-states based their actions around revolutionary ideas, some wishing to promote it and others going to great lengths to suppress it. Meanwhile, others were motivated by the expansion of trade and creating influence in the world for their nation.

On the other hand, some nations already had access to great trade routes across the globe through empire and were keen to promote their empire. They were especially keen to promote this as it would secure continued trade that was needed to maintain such large empires. Some nations were structured around preserving the status quo in global power and domestic power, whilst others were focused on promoting change in both these arenas. Consequently, nation-states organised their governments, and therefore their decision-making, around which view of the world they chose. These would be core domestic motivations that would be nation-states' most protected policy, and would therefore may have been a motivation to go to war. This potentially makes protection of these world views a possibility of why nations may have been prepared to create a large-scale conflict in 1914.

Serbia and Bosnia

The Serbian state by 1914 was still a fairly new modern state and only recently gained independence. It is important to remember Serbia took very long to be recognised as a legitimate independent nation-state by many of the European powers as there was deep suspicion against new nation-states like Serbia. This was particularly the case in the Balkan region which had witnessed violent revolutions against former monarchies and empires that historically had

controlled these peoples. It is important to remember that the Ottoman Empire was recently driven out by this aggressing nation only a couple of years prior to WW1. Moreover, Serbia saw other nations that surrounded her as aggressing nations that wanted to either conquer or dominate her, leading to much suspicion between nations and Serbia. The European nations simply saw Serbia as the land of the blood feud, where pistol fights would break out over tiny land disputes between families. You could say there was perhaps a superiority complex that European powers had over smaller nations, where they saw these nations as smaller, more violent, less civilised and outside the political importance of the major nation-states. Serbia also was the most extreme case in its revolutions, where the monarchy was attacked, thrown over the balcony and left in the street to die. It was an open display of regicide, done in broad daylight and designed to send a message that monarchies were not welcome in this part of the Balkans and revolutionaries were prepared to go to great lengths to ensure continued independence.

The Empires that surrounded the Balkan region, therefore, viewed Serbia in particular with caution, as many of them were still full monarchies and feared regicide more than anything else. Bosnia was part of the Austro – Hungarian Empire and had been since it was annexed from its former emperors, the Ottoman Empire that had dominated the region since the 16th-century. Austro – Hungary was well aware that there was a growing political movement that the independent state of Serbia openly pursued against Austria – Hungary. This policy was to secure a united Slav nation, a greater Serbia which would include Bosnian lands in the Austrian – Hungary Empire. Crucially, all this meant that when a Serb was found to be guilty of assassinating the heir to the Hapsburg Austro – Hungary throne many nations began to quickly assume the Serbian people, and government, was behind the act. Moreover, other nation-states viewed Serbia as a new nation-state to be feared, with perhaps prejudice and preconception against the Serbian state initially giving Austria free reign to pursue concessions and mobilise its army.

Germany may have pushed Austria into declaring war, seen through the Blank Cheque which might have been given to order Austria to war because it feared the spread of democracy free from monarchy that Serbia represented. Germany feared this because of increasingly powerful democratic forces at a domestic level. A monarchy crushing this anti-monarchy trend again could have been motivations for foreign states against WW1. The natural suspicion of Serbia led to an assumption it had broken international law and attacked a head of state of a neighbouring nation, creating a view that it had to be punished. Other nations were focused on other matters and this appeared to be just another dispute that could be quickly settled with demands by Austria, with reparations then agreed by Serbia. It was this thinking process of Serbia being a smaller state that should just accept it was guilty and appease Austria that perhaps helped lead to complacency and WW1 breaking out. Here we again see that Serbia pursuing its perceived rational policy to unite its Slavic people under one nation perhaps delivered deep suspicion and made it a target for foreign aggression, which would result in nations following their rational interests of security. Therefore, this pursuit of self-interest can be argued to bring the very thing Serbia was trying to avoid, foreign intervention to stop them from uniting. Therefore, Serbia's history and her policy aims can be said to show how constant pursuits of nation's self-interest against other nations resulted in a greater chance for war and calamity that WW1 would bring. Although WW1 is not all about a Balkan crisis its history is important to understanding how conflict could have initially sparked, and it is from here we must understand how it spread through looking at other nations' motivations, which is what we will do now.

Austria – Hungary

Austria was a long-standing nation-state and it had existed long before the time of the revolutionary wars in the late 18th-century. When it became a modern and industrialised nation it was heavily influenced by the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars that lasted from 1789 – 1815. This was a time based around deep fear and suspicion by many, but perhaps none more

so than the ruling classes. Many nations formed deep spying and police networks to gather information on people across empires surrounding their views on revolutionary attitudes. There was also detailed accounting of many different types of revolutionary groups that expressed any sort of view that diverged from views acceptable to the monarchy regimes that still ruled Europe. The Hapsburgs were clearly no exception to this feeling. This monarchy ruled over a large set of different peoples that was an empire formed around a combination of states in Eastern Europe and regions left after the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire. This diversity of people made understanding its population harder, and as a result, always saw some of its minorities as people to be treated with suspicion.

To make their suspicion worse, territory in the Empire was collected mostly through arrangements made. The monarchy being very powerful and having large territory in Europe meant that they could attract many smaller former Holy Roman Empire states with alliances as they could gain security through protection from its large army and benefits from its economic and political power. Therefore, these were alliances promoted through trade, economic, military and security benefits, and not through popular consent of the people. This, therefore meant that many people had never consented to being brought into the Empire and resented monarchs they viewed as having no legal rights over their lives and lands. Consequently, revolutionary feelings and nationalism for independence against the monarchy were often rife within the Empire. As with many nation-states' actions at the time, Austria-Hungary's policy was to suppress this newfound liberty, freedom and revolutionary feelings with large state control.

The Hapsburg monarchy having such a large and complicated empire, therefore, created one of the largest networks of state suppression out of all the states that chose to fight and suppress liberty (Zamoyski: 2014). The Austrian state and government were therefore based heavily around bureaucracy and large state control. In order to acquire information about these groups,

the Austrian – Hungary government would therefore consequently have large administrative control over people’s lives. It would even go to the extreme lengths of having large amounts of information on any group the state saw as suspicious, which could be any group that appeared to go against governmental rule and the status quo. It was here in the suppression of civil liberty that would fuel anger in some of the more remote areas with a large population of the empire’s ethnic minority. People would consequently see the state and its bureaucrats controlling their lives and would come to feel anger towards the symbol of the government, the monarchy. Consequently, it was in the way the Austria – Hungary government-operated that would ultimately help fuel its empire’s demise in WW1. The Austro – Hungary Empire would become so concerned with new ideas that any attack on the status quo would be considered an attack on the whole nation.

It is the formation of this state’s policy that is very important in understanding why the 1914 crisis was not just a foreign crisis, it was in fact a domestic crisis about the state and its existence. It was about internal security and terrorism being seen as an attack on the whole empire. The assassination of the Duke, therefore, was seen as a declaration of war on the empire by every minority, particularly the Serbian minorities, that had views against the status quo, the government and the empire. As many people in this area were viewed with suspicion and viewed as supporters of nationalism and revolutionary thoughts it was treated not just as a terrorist atrocity, but a wider declaration of war by these entire peoples. Therefore, the mobilisation of the army, the occupation of these lands and a show of force was required by any traditional monarchy, which Franz Joseph certainly described himself as. Therefore, this crisis that struck Austria – Hungary was one in which a peaceful settlement could not be made with honour, and war with these peoples became increasingly more likely. It was the rational self-interest decision of choosing to protect the status quo, the current governmental system

and the empire that helped provoke the first major nation to go to war, and would consequently provoke the outbreak of WW1.

It is also important to remember that Austro-Hungary was based on hierarchy, which also created traditions and norms that would be expected to be followed, according to where you were placed in the hierarchy. Franz Joseph stuck to this system of society so much that he even did not make exceptions to the heir of the throne. The royal family made it clear to Franz Ferdinand he had broken custom when he married a Czech for his wife and future queen. The two were always treated differently as punishment for breaking the strict hierarchy and the code that went with it. Therefore, another reason why Austria may have gone to war with Serbia after the shooting of Franz Ferdinand might have been because they wanted to establish the hierarchy system the way the monarchs thought it should be. A war would establish this by instilling fear of the Hapsburgs once again.

They would do this by crushing the Serbian army and sending a message to all the minorities within their empire that they had their place within the empire and should not dare rise up and challenge this place again. This would be one reason why the army initially was told to fully mobilise and prepare for a quick war that would crush key landmarks within the Serbian region. Therefore, such action was taken at a time when the Empire thought it could easily win an internal war so to discourage future insurrection occurring at a time when the empire might not be able to win. War was a policy to keep the status quo constant for the foreseeable future, therefore securing not just the monarchy, but the empire as well. Leading into WW1, the Hapsburgs were keen to be seen as strong as they were concerned about the perceived weakness of the monarchy and Empire, both within and outside its borders.

Although Austria was the original name of the empire it was forced to change to Austro-Hungary as traditional minorities within the empire began to acquire more economic and political power. The Austrian monarchy had to start marrying off its family members to other

royalty throughout the empire to keep its power as time went on, which other nations viewed as something that further weakened this once-mighty empire. The empire grew through marriage, but also so too did other parts of the empire's power. Hungary was one of the first beneficiaries of this policy, and as a result, the royal family became ever more filled with Hungarians, which would have rights to more lands, along with influence within the monarchy. Other members of the royal family demanded greater, and eventually equal, rights within the empire and the decisions taken within it. The monarchy would be forced to become a dual monarchy with Hungarian nobles and royalty, resulting in the empire changing to Austro-Hungary. For such a traditional monarchy as the Hapsburgs, this was seen as a weakening of the empire. As Franz Ferdinand would marry another minority within the Empire, a Czech, it would explain why they were treated very differently to other royalty, it was because monarchs such as Franz Joseph really feared the monarchy becoming more diverse and weaker from such changes. This different treatment was often very deliberately harsh and done publicly in front of other royals, to the extent it was common knowledge amongst important foreign diplomats. It was this level of protection of the empire's status quo, such as it stood in June 1914, that could have motivated the monarchy to treat its family members as lesser than others, and also go to war.

Minorities within the empire also had an important role to play in how other nations viewed it. Austro-Hungary had around thirteen different identified minorities within its borders, and consequently was seen as much more fragile than other empires because it was seen as harder to govern and maintain. The empire was seen as a fading power, one in which its own population was more likely to end its rule than an aggressing foreign power. Austro-Hungary was viewed as an empire crumbling within its own borders, and therefore was a nation that was a less relevant power in global politics. This was of course something that weighed heavily on leaders' minds at the time and likely influenced their decision-making. Along with this, nations

did not fear Austrian armies as they once did because they could see that Austria simply could not afford to fund its armies because of the large amounts of government spending that was wasted in its large bureaucracy, which was required to keep such an empire together.

Firstly, hierarchy meant that several jobs had to be created when one person could do the job because tasks were broken into one that only certain people within the hierarchy could do. A simple job of sending messages around government departments could involve a few different people when one person could easily do the job. Moreover, because of the diverse nature of its population there were many different nationalities and languages within it. Therefore, government messages needed to be tailored for many different people and translated frequently just to carry out simple government decisions. This increased costs of government further, all of which took ever greater spending capabilities away from investing in the economy and the army, of which it needed to compete with other empires, industrialising nations and new emerging nation-states, like Germany.

Austria had for a long time invested less in its armies after it recovered from the Napoleonic wars. Austria used 30% of government borrowing to just service their debts left from the war. Due to inefficiencies, Austria spent 40% of its income on the army but had less investment in technology and industry, which produced a worse army as a result. This made their army weaker than it should have been and the empire was worried that other empires and nations knew this and would later exploit it in the event of war. Moreover, the army was based around multiple ethnicities, but there was large ethnic unrest in the empire. For example, there was Slav and Bosnian Serbs with anti-Austrian sentiment and in 1905 nationalist demonstrations took place in Vienna. Later in 1912, there were demonstrations in Budapest, and by 1914 there was ethnic unrest in many parts of the empire, with some local parliaments suspended. It was the large ethnic unrest in the empire that may have created much paranoia in the ruling classes

within the empire by 1914, which may have been a motivation to go to war in 1914, which was an important point in starting WW1.

Russia

After Russia drove Napoleon's Grand army out of Russian lands in the winter of 1812/13, Russia was free to pursue its own trading relations, grow its economy and try to expand its lands. The Tsars of Russia following Napoleon sought to learn lessons from the invasion and tried to strengthen the army by placing the army under royal control, thus centralising its training, supplies and investments. As a result, by 1914 Russia would have an army with modern technology and could rapidly mobilise a million men come the summer crisis of 1914. Centralising this army meant creating a society based around the military and loyalty to the Tsar, which was also designed to strengthen the Tsar's power throughout the country.

As the Tsars gained greater control over the army, the monarchy also gained greater control over the country, which led to Russia becoming an increasingly repressive, authoritarian, secretive and isolated nation. Russian repression was based on a great fear of revolutionary change taking place elsewhere in Europe. Russia isolating itself not only created a sense of fear regarding the country, but it also created a barrier to revolutionary ideas spreading into Russia and threatening the monarchy's position. Russian society was monitored to extreme levels. This occurred to such the extent that throughout Russia all bookshops and libraries had to provide a list of all books that were banned, to ensure unapproved texts did not reach the population. This level of control over state and foreign affairs shows that the Russian government could very much direct policy how it wanted, and did so.

This centralised power led Russia into large-scale economic reforms, mechanisation, innovation of weaponry and mass armies that could match its European rivals. Russia's security was therefore protected through its isolation and it could plan in secret behind its borders to

expand its trade, influence and empire across both west and east. This again created much fear and suspicion of Russia, particularly by Germany and Britain, which may have been significant in Germany mobilising its army and provoking war in 1914. Russian isolation importantly was also based around fear of a rising German economy, rather than Austria which appeared to be in decline as it was servicing debts from past wars. Russia feared growing German nationalism and did not trust Prussian police to keep revolution and terrorists out from her lands. This again led to isolation and much suspicion of Russia and her intentions, which is why in 1914 Russian mobilisation might be seen as offensive action rather than defensive action. This may have escalated a regional conflict in 1914 into a global one by 1918.

As the Russian economy grew so did civil society, where all forms of academic and social groups formed, such as literacy appreciation societies. Even the heavily authoritarian government could not monitor everything. This meant the Russian government feared the population was becoming harder to control. As a result, Russian secret police, controlled by the government, started to shut down civil groups, which only created anger and frustration towards the monarchy. This would lead to more rebellions and greater demands for reform in the long-term, but in the short-term it allowed the Russian government to feel secure and continue with the planning of expanding its influence, trade-routes and empire.

Russia was a society that was not affected by 1820s revolutionary experiences that took place elsewhere on the European continent, so society remained quite hierarchical and loyal to king and country, which was very much expected from all peoples. Therefore, modernisation was top-down and populations had to embrace changes decided by government, providing little resistance to modernisation efforts. Serf societies would however be changed and cities would form, increasing demands for changes in the long run. As Russia was developing Germany felt the need to push Russian borders back to protect itself, and its common friend, Austria. Consequently, Russian monarchs portrayed their country as surrounded by those that wanted

to push it back and this only helped create Slavic nationalism that united behind the power of the monarch. The Russian monarchy relied on this image for its support and therefore needed to be seen to defend Slavic peoples against these aggressors to maintain their power, which might be partly behind Russian decisions to go to war in 1914. It is important to remember that to create such imagery all monarchies purposely misled their population about potential threats to their country, so to increase support for their governments, and their actions, especially ones which urged people to go and fight in wars. This is something that all monarchical societies seem to have in common in this time period and may provide an understanding on why WW1 occurred. Crucially, monarchies pursuing their own security and self-interest may have actually been part of the reason why WW1 occurred.

By 1850, Russian society had developed in isolation quite nicely and the former country based around serfdom was quickly becoming a new modern industrialised nation-state. With this newfound power came increased confidence, and Russia decided to test its power by aiming to expand its influence over trade routes along Eastern European rivers. Britain seeking to protect the 1815 settlement agreed after Napoleon's downfall went to war with Russia in the Crimean region to force a settlement over these disputed trade routes. It was designed to show Russia that it could not expand its borders westwards and warn them not to try and become a new empire that could threaten British dominance. The war would be concluded with Russia being decisively beaten with its navy in ruins, meaning the Russian government quickly found out that Russian technology was not as competitive as they thought it would be. It was true Russian industry had advanced quickly in this time period, but British industry had done so to, with new rifles being produced that defeated outdated Russian gun technology. The British navy asserted its dominance and forced the Russian navy to abandon expanding their trade routes in the Black Sea, which Britain needed control over in order to expand its trade routes further eastwards. Therefore, Russia knew that it would struggle to match other empires in both

land and sea. From here, Russia again isolated herself and sought to plan its expansion of power, trade and influence, but this time eastwards.

It would not be until the late 19th and early 20th-century that Russia would expand again, this time into the East. Russia had been slowly rebuilding its navy and it sought to use this to expand trade and influence into the Eastern region, towards China and Japan. Japan would fear Russian expansion over trade and ally itself with the British, who again had similar interests in the Eastern region. These trade disputes would lead to the Russo – Japanese war in 1905 and again would see a complete defeat of the Russian navy, again making it harder for Russia to expand its trade and empire further across its initial borders. This would yet again cause Russia to retreat inside her national borders and become ever more closed off and secretive. Russia would plan to expand towards the only avenue left for her, through the Balkan region which could connect Russia to the Adriatic coast and the Mediterranean. Here we should also urge a note of caution when trying to understand Russia. We should not see Russia as the sole aggressing nation or seek to blame the war on Russia completely.

Russia was mostly concerned with defensive security matters before forming alliances designed to expand its influence. This can be seen with the French Alliance and Russia not committing to military action until close to July 1914. Russia only signed this commitment to continue the agreement when French forces would aid them in a German attack against Russia. Clearly, this was a security rather than an aggressive, measure. Moreover, the Tsar had previously warned of ever-escalating armies provoking war and called for international peace in a conference in 1899, along with attempting a peace treaty with Germany, which unfortunately failed. Russia also had not mobilised its armies despite other nations mobilising theirs in 1909 and 1912, suggesting Russia did not always want war and that she was not necessarily the aggressing nation. Further, if at this time there were fears around Russia's ability to compete militarily they would not have had a policy of war as this risked exposing

their weaker position for other nations all to see. Moreover, Russia mostly secured empire expansion through alliances with other new nation-states in the Balkan region, making war less relevant to Russia's foreign policy aims.

Before Russia created an alliance in the Balkan region she had to deal with increasing turbulent domestic matters, and in 1905 there was a Russian rebellion that forced the monarchy to concede some power over political matters in the country. Russian monarchs still had total power over foreign policy, the army and wars to come, but it is important to note they felt less secure and may have chosen to use their war powers to try and instil power and faith back into the monarchy, which again may be a potential causal factor to WW1's outbreak. Russia also increased its security by signing alliances with France, to warn off any foreign aggressors that might attack her in a weakened state, again motivated by Russia's paranoia. Perhaps Russian paranoia, isolation and its inability to be granted expansion rights helped create the alliance system, and from this would increase the chances of a global conflict by 1914. After security had been secured, the Russian state turned its attention to expanding its sphere of influence in the Balkan region, through trade and alliances with the new Balkan nation-states. Russia would help establish the Balkan League, a series of different Balkan nation-states that would form an alliance to drive the Ottomans out. Russia had hoped it could create a united Slavic Empire and establish its influence in a legitimate way that would help her gain trade to the Adriatic coastline.

The Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 would see the Ottoman Empire driven out and Russia initially gain this influence, but the international powers would step in to ensure power would be shared in the region with other empires, like Austro-Hungary. Russia would again not be able to expand elsewhere as it had to sign an alliance with Britain committing to peace in return for sharing trade in the east, furthering deepening Russian regret over not getting the influence it felt it had rightfully won in the Balkan region. Yet again, Russia would feel that it had been

hindered from having influence in this region and would not let this occur again. This, and securing its influence in the Balkan region once and for all could have been huge motivational factors in Russia deciding to go to war in 1914.

Germany

Germany was a fairly new nation during Napoleonic times and large parts of Germany were still small states left over by the Holy Roman Empire. The Prussian state, eastern Germany, was where the capacity to form a united Germany came from. Prussia rose as a world power in fighting Napoleon in his march through Europe. Although they would lose against Napoleon they would be able to drive the French out after Napoleon's disastrous retreat from Moscow. Prussia would defeat Napoleon at the battle of Leipzig, in modern-day eastern Germany, and along with allied coalition forces would defeat the French Empire and force Napoleon to resign. Prussia would go on to provide vital reinforcements during the battle of Waterloo, where Napoleonic France would be defeated once and for all. This result strengthened Prussia in the 1815 treaty of Vienna, giving her international status, protection and rights to trade, allowing it to develop her economy and become a European power that could compete with the Austrian Empire. Britain and Prussia had good relations from Waterloo, as the war was won around trust in alliances, meaning this had created much trust between their leaders, and with Wellington becoming Prime Minister this only helped relations grow. This gave Prussia a powerful ally to assert its independence within the region, allowing her to pursue a united Germany as Britain did not yet fear the prospect of a united Germany dominating the mainland continent as they had with France. As a result, Prussia began to develop its economy and army quickly, meaning they soon could challenge Austria for control of the German states. During this time German common identities and nationalism had developed through its common experience of oppression from foreign empires and the desire to have autonomy and independence for German peoples. The logical idea to come from this was to unite the German states to form a

stronger army, and therefore have a greater ability to secure its goals of independence. The desire for a nation-state seemed a natural development for Prussia and this would mean the need to bring the German people into its nation, which was difficult as Austria also had a claim over some German states. As Prussia wanted to grow its culture, identity and economy over the 19th-century nationalism also grew and demands for a united German people also grew. Sensing support of its goals from the German people Prussia began planning a likely military clash between them and the Austrian Empire.

The peace settlement made in 1815 by the nation-states suited Britain very well and British diplomacy had helped resolve most disputes between European nations peacefully for fifty years. However, this was beginning to unravel as the growth of emerging nation-states started to bring them into confrontation with the older empires, such as Austria. In 1866, Prussia and Austria would clash over disputes regarding the German states left over by the remanence of the Holy Roman Empire. Some German states sided with Austria, whilst most German states sided with Prussia, forming two different coalition forces that would fight in a seven-week war. Prussia and her German state allies would be victorious and the German confederation of states would emerge. These states would soon merge with Prussia to form a common German people under the new German nation-state. So far Bismarck, the German chancellor, had moved Prussia into a position where she would no longer have to be dominated by Austria, through the 1866 peace treaty of Prague, which fully humiliated Austria and established Prussian dominance. Now Bismarck set his sights on unifying Germany through “Blood and Iron”, which meant through mechanised warfare, the army and the monarchy. There was one problem however, Prussia could not be seen as an aggressor by other nations as they would grow suspicious of her and lock her out of power, especially Britain who feared any sort of hegemony on the European continent. Bismarck, therefore attempted to provoke France into a war, knowing France had plans to invade German states and Prussia under Napoleon II’s reign.

Bismarck successfully did this by rejecting a French succession candidate regarding the Spanish throne and suggesting alternative candidates. Prussia would crush France in the Franco–Prussian war of 1870, and in the treaty of Frankfurt, Prussia gained French territory that made the link between Prussian territories and German state territories possible. This then led to the logical connection of Prussia and German states to form an untied German state under the German monarchy, as Bismarck had planned. So far, Bismarck had made Germany appear the appeaser and nation defending herself, thus not making other powers suspicious of her. However, this would not last forever and other nations would grow suspicious of Bismarck and German intentions the bigger Germany grew and the more disputes it would get involved with.

After 1870, the German economy grew rapidly despite its limited trade access as a new nation-state. German industry was becoming more competitive and successful than some economically powerful nations, even Britain after 1880 when it ran into some economic trouble. German science, chemical and automobile industries for example were being created sooner and quicker than even Britain could manage. Germany was becoming culturally more influential and its historic links with Britain made Britain realise just how advanced Germany was becoming, and how in some ways Germany was ahead of it. Indeed, historian Max Hastings notes that the German economy was ahead of its time and this provided Britain with much suspicion of Germany, especially as its industry grew towards serving its army needs. Germany felt excluded from trade and other benefits powerful nation-states had. It looked towards Britain and its empire with envy, not understanding why an equally powerful nation should not have the same benefits. Germany also grew suspicious of countries developing around her, especially Russia. Therefore, for security reasons Germany would grow its economy and industry to support its security needs for a larger defensive army.

Germany started to grow its military and navy, which provoked strong British sensitivities as the British worried a German economy would be able to produce more ships than Britain and

end British naval supremacy, which Britain relied upon to defend its empire, and wider interests. Therefore, the naval race with Britain began, resulting in growing suspicion and tension between the two nation-states. Importantly, we can see here again a larger more historically established empire was naturally fearful of a new rising power, despite the fact they had historically been allies, culturally close and had positive relationships. On top of this, we can see Britain again changing its relations with former allies on the grounds that it feared hegemony being created in Europe and wishing to defend its policy for a peaceful disunited Europe, suggesting issues surrounding security, empire and trade on the European continent motivated nations leading up to WW1. Perhaps the most important event was where Britain and Germany became rivals and opposing alliance systems formed, helping to create the grounds for an escalating war within Europe.

Although German industry was rapidly changing its system of governance, it remained tied to the traditional Prussian form of monarchical rule. When thinking about German decisions in terms of foreign policy it is also important to remember that the Kaiser, and his close advisors, are in control. The Kaiser ultimately had control over war and peace, along with his top military commander, Moltke. These traditional Prussian rulers had begun to fear the rise of socialism within their country and the rise of democratic forces threatening their rule and Prussian hierarchy. Therefore, the Kaiser had much interest to use war as a foreign policy to instil support around the monarchy. He would do this through the military and also personally being seen as strong, so he could crush any demands for reforms democrats may have in mind. Germany, like Austro-Hungary in 1914, may have preferred war because they were facing increasing domestic crises where traditional political and ruling powers were losing power and being undermined, which created fear of change. Therefore, war became a more attractive policy to solve their internal security problems. Consequently, WW1 may have been largely

motivated by a desire for traditional power to protect the status quo and crush forces that promoted a changing world.

The last thing any reader of WW1 must take into account is how much of a threat was Germany really to European peace? How much did it want to form a hegemony across Europe and dominate it? Germany was a new nation and it clearly felt repressed in terms of benefits it was allowed to access, like trade. However, this doesn't mean that Germany had any ambitions of dominance in Europe that would provoke a world war. British historians may have fallen for Britain's own story it told itself to justify such a costly war. Britain's justification for the large costs of the war mainly focused on the argument Britain had to stop a Germany that wanted to conquer Europe. It was Germany that wanted to destroy democracy across Europe and wanted to create its empire that would directly threaten Britain. This interpretation of history became stronger with Germany's Belgium atrocities in the first days of the war, when Belgium tried to stop Germany from getting into France quickly, along with the rise of Fascism in the 1930s leading to Germany trying to conquer Europe in WW2.

However, this book takes a rather different view and suggests no single nation was to blame, but instead argues it was all nations following their self-interest in protecting the status quo, which seemed rational at first, that led to a calamity come 1918. This book argues Germany cannot be totally to blame as there is not a large amount of evidence that Germany was the bogeyman of Europe Britain post-1914 would have us believe. From its formation in 1871 to 1914 Germany was only involved in two wars, the Franco-Prussian and one small colonial war in South Africa. Britain at the same time was involved in seven wars and had invented the concentration camp in the Boer wars. The British Empire in this period had expanded rapidly and much more significantly than the few German colonies that existed in comparison. Also, other nations that surrounded Germany had larger standing armies. Germany had 760,000 men,

whilst France had around 825,000 men and Russia just over one million men that could be rapidly mobilised come 1914.

Germany showed no signs of begin an anti-democratic nation as more people could vote in their democracy than compared to most other nations across Europe, which helped give the rise to democratically elected socialist forces other nations suppressed. Moreover, Britain, the so-called defenders of democracy, allied itself with Tsarist Russia, perhaps the least democratic nation across Europe at this time. Perhaps most importantly, Germany had already won a European war in the Franco-Prussian war and they only took Alsace-Lorraine off France, hardly a prelude to a nation-state that wanted to take over large parts of Europe, as they could have already done so if they had wished. Also, aggressing war plans, like the Schlieffen plan, had largely been dropped by German heads of state, other than Moltke who was an isolated figure who dreamt of winning a European war like his father. You could argue from this France was more up for a fight than Germany as it wanted to get back her former Alsace-Lorraine lands, of which was often cited as a reason for going to war and mobilising more men. It is also important to note that Germany had given up on the naval race come 1914 and British-German relations had been improving closer to 1914 when Britain and Germany began to open up friendlier trade and diplomacy terms between each other.

In the 37 days leading up to WW1 Germany did offer neutrality with Britain regarding the channel seas as the two nations realised war between the two became more likely. These events leading up to WW1 hardly seemed like a prelude to such a huge war. Perhaps Brittan again is trying to create a bogeyman of Europe, as it did with Napoleon a hundred years ago, to justify protecting its empire. After all, it might be the case Britain ends up fighting with former enemies, such as France and Russia, along with Germany who allied with former enemies like Austria, because they both had similar motives in going into WW1. They are motivated by access to trade and internal security (which means protecting the status quo), which usually

focused on protecting monarchy and empire. Therefore, Germany was acting in a way it thought to be rational and in its best self-interest, similar to other nations like Britain. This suggests when thinking about events that led to WW1 the reader should try not to hold Germany solely responsible and over-emphasise events that surround Germany in 1914 as it may produce misleading conclusions about the true origins of WW1.

Belgium

Belgium was a state-created to try and keep the peace in Western Europe. After Belgium broke from the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the treaty of London established the right of independence and neutrality for Belgium and separated the German-speaking parts of the country into Luxemburg, thus establishing its independence. The treaty would be very old come 1914 and Germany did not believe Britain would engage in such a large war based on this old scrap of paper. Although this was part of Britain's justification for going to war, it should not immediately be dismissed as Britain's only reason for going to war. It should also be noted that Germany did ask for access to go through Belgium, as required by the treaty, but Belgium refused and the monarch promised a glorious resistance to give the allies time to mobilise their armies and stop the German advance in Northern France. Therefore, the nations concerned might have had wider motives than honouring treaties in 1914.

Belgium was a small country, but one of the first to colonise Africa as Belgium did colonise much of the Congo region, consequently inviting more colonisation in the 1880s. There were many atrocities committed to the populations of this region by a King who was losing authority to suppress his subjects at home. This does not mean that German atrocities were any better or worse, but it does show that Germany was not a uniquely terrifying nation capable of committing atrocities at this time, something we should keep in mind not to discriminate against Germany and blame it for the outbreak of WW1. Therefore, overall the role of defending Belgium from atrocities might have been used as a justification for war to mask

wider motives nations around them had. Such wider motives included defending Empire and wishing to maintain and acquire more land in the aftermath of the conflict. With Belgium being attacked, this would gain sympathy for Belgium in peace settlements, and surely, if on the winning side, would help their colonial presence in Africa expand. This could have been a key motivating force behind Belgium's decision-making leading into WW1.

France

With the first French Empire destroyed, France had less say over European events than it once had for the next 50 years. Its army and economy were heavily crippled after Napoleon's march through Russia and defeat at Waterloo. France would not give up on re-establishing its Empire and would remain hostile to new nation-states, like Prussia, who pushed its interests towards French borders. France rebuilding after its very costly empire and wars would not be able to invest in its armies and industries as much. This would leave France's economy unable to develop as quickly as its competitors, whilst it would also leave its army with some outdated technology when war would come. Therefore, given France's weaker position it raises the question of why war became their policy. War became more of a French stance for political reasons as leaders like Napoleon II would use the idea of recreating the French Empire through new conquests. This idea had some popularity in France at the time and was used to increase his power over a state that became increasingly difficult to govern, due to conflicts arising from the fall out of the destruction of the First French Empire. Therefore, we can say that French elites, the people who were making key decisions in the decades leading into WW1, were motivated by protecting the status quo through pursuing war, nationalism and empire building. This again raises such themes were consistent in many nation's decision to go to war in this period of modern history.

France would fall for Bismarck's attempts to draw them into a war and France's war with Prussia in 1870 would provide an end to France's desire for a second empire in Europe. It would also make France realise that its army and industry was less developed than her German counterparts, which would only cause France to be even more suspicious towards Germany in the year approaching the outbreak of WW1. The Franco-Prussian war made France realise this as it would partly lose the war as its industry had not developed, and, as a result, developments in artillery, which was needed to fight modern warfare that required quick manoeuvring, could not match German developments. France would lose Alsace-Lorraine because of this and would continue to be committed to its recapture until 1918 when it regains it in the treaty of Versailles. From its defeat in 1871 until WW1, France avoids clashing with European powers and mostly stayed out of European affairs, committing itself to peace whilst it developed interests elsewhere. As it developed interests elsewhere this would gradually lead France into areas that would cause agreements and alliances with Britain and Russia to be in their rational interests, therefore making the alliance system that shaped WW1 increasingly likely to emerge.

France unable to expand its influence in Europe beyond Spain, which it would have limited influence over, meant that France looked elsewhere to expand its economy and influence. France developed trade links with Britain and this would lead to greater reliance between the two and the start of a French and British alliance. Moreover, France would strengthen her position by also creating an alliance with Russia, helping to create an alliance system that would drag western countries into the war, increasing the chance of a world war breaking out from a European crisis. France took full advantage of the 1884 Berlin conference, which agreed to terms on how European states could colonise Africa, so to avoid clashes between European armies in Africa. France expanded its colonies in Africa, gaining many new trade routes around the Mediterranean through North Africa. Therefore, France increasingly became motivated through the economic benefits they had gained from colonial expansion. This again brought

France into closer contact with the British Empire who long had interests in Egypt and its trading ports, which encouraged the two nations to make alliances together so that they would not fight each other when they could work together and deprive other nations of the competitive advantage they had over other emerging empires, such as Germany. Importantly, such rational motivations led to the alliance system that would help drag the British Empire into the European conflict, making 1914 into a world war.

In particular, protecting sea-based trade routes would provide France and Britain with a necessity to work together in security matters, making the two nations more interdependent, and therefore committed to each other's security. These nations could inflict pain upon each other if either were left to another foreign power's attacks, consequently committing each other to war if the other was attacked, with, or without an alliance. Come 1912 France and Britain would have this full commitment towards each other in terms of a naval agreement which would allow the channel and key trading ports in the Mediterranean to be protected with British and French naval cooperation. Therefore, by 1914 the Empire, its security and its trading routes, with the monopoly Britain had over them, relied upon French cooperation, especially in vital military tasks. Therefore, come 1914 Britain could not let France be defeated by Germany as it had to secure its trading ports and ensure the continued protection of its Empire by protecting France. Therefore, France becomes ever more important in the lead up to WW1 through its lack of ability to expand in Europe and its lack of ability to develop, which made it reliant on other foreign powers for its protection. It also became important in dragging other nations into the war as countries like Britain became interdependent on the freedom and power of France to protect its favourable position in the global political and economic system. This led to an alliance system that would help bring multiple nation-states into a Balkan dispute, which would bring the war to the Western front and create the muddy stalemate conflict that became symbolic of our collective memory of WW1.

France's recent history before WW1 also meant that its army was not as developed as it could have been. The Dreyfus affair was a scandal that hit the French army and state and it involved a French artillery officer, Dreyfus, who was sentenced to life imprisonment for allegedly having communicated French military secrets to the German embassy in Paris. Two years later it emerged that a French army major, named Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, as the real culprit. After this finding, it was revealed high-ranking military officials suppressed evidence of this and this led to a debate about Dreyfus' innocence. Eventually, 10 years later in 1906 Dreyfus was declared innocent and this led to an immense distrust between the public and the French army generals, who became seen as part of the establishment and the elite of French society. As the military replaced the old aristocrat elite, slowly eliminated since the revolutionary wars, distrust grew and this crisis only made this distrust and disdain stronger. It was this distrust of the army that led to a lack of support and investment for the army leading up to the First World War. Therefore, understanding why such distrust between French society and the army existed is key to understanding military decisions France took in the years approaching the outbreak of WW1.

Historian Alistair Horne agrees with the analysis and has noted that the social and political situation forced the downscaling of the army, for example in 1905 France cut numbers down from 615,000 to 504,000 and in 1907 to 1909 the number of desertions multiplied from 5,000 to 17,000. There was also no major attempts to reduce the number of desertions or carry out punishments for this growing problem. Further, the army would have recruitment problems and the old French guard would close ranks, like in the Dreyfus affair, and this would stop newer generals from coming in. France would be left with older Generals that would not understand modern military warfare come 1914 and France would dig in and create the trench warfare that became symbolic of WW1. As the affair also reduced investment in the army France feared attacks and its ability to defend its border. French forts were not fully maintained

and the border was not as effectively defended as it could be. For instance, this even stemmed to a lack of preparations in how the French army would deploy in the event of an attack by Germany. This led France to be increasingly distrustful of Germany and a German mobilisation would spook France into mobilising its army in the summer of 1914. France's internal societal developments made it want to avoid war and be incredibly defensive, another reason for the creation of the alliance system in the lead up to WW1, again showing how domestic affairs in France are important in thinking about how WW1 started.

Britain

The most important aspect of Britain to discuss is its foreign policy towards Europe, which perhaps does not change that much since the revolutionary wars started and the creation of the French Empire began. This policy was to ensure that no European nation-state could again form a hegemony on the European continent as France did. France from 1790–1813 stopped Britain from expanding its trade through Europe, which made it harder for it to expand its empire. Consequently, Britain was prepared at vast expense to go to war against France to try and bring down Napoleon's dominance across Europe. This would be a protectionist war that would mostly be fought off Franco-British lands and against other nations, so-called proxy wars. However, these two nations would fight across the world against other nations to undermine their opponents. France would for example fight in North Africa to undermine Britain's trade routes and Britain would fight in Portugal and Spain to undermine France.

Britain and France would clash at the Battle of Trafalgar and Waterloo, both settling the dispute in favour of Britain, allowing Britain being to emerge as the unrivalled superpower of its day in the 19th-century. Britain would establish its favoured position within Europe with the treaty of Vienna in 1815, which would give Britain good trade access across Europe, establish a European peace, prevent hegemony within mainland Europe and allow it to expand and protect

its Empire without serious challenges from rival European nation-states. Since this point in time, you could argue that Britain was increasingly being built around the desire to protect this position and keep the status quo. This would maintain a peaceful, but disunited Europe that would allow Britain to continue to have its privileged position in the world. A peaceful disunited Europe would stop hegemony from re-emerging and would keep trade routes open, allowing Britain to fund its large army, grow its industries and invest in the future, again helping it to protect and expand its Empire. This would also provide for a cheaper and longer-term strategy for maintaining British dominance.

As Britain's empire grows Britain becomes ever more defensive about her navy and her privileged position in global politics and ever seeks to defend the status quo established in 1815, which leads it to be very suspicious of the emergence of new powers in the continent, like Germany. Britain is suspicious of not just Germany, but also the expansion of Russia after 1815. Britain partly goes to war with Russia in the Crimean region to prevent its expansion and to undermine its ability to become a new power and possibly form a Russian hegemony. This really shows just how concerned Britain was with new powers and their ability to challenge Britain's Empire. This concern existed to such an extent they would be prepared to fight costly wars with foreign powers to maintain their empire. Further, it shows why Britain was keen to forge alliance systems with other countries leading up to WW1 as it was a less costly way of maintaining their favourable position within Europe.

Britain also seeks to protect its empire through greater protectionism which will dominate British politics for parts of the 19th-century. Liberalism and Conservatism, and their respective Prime-ministers, clashed in the debates surrounding protectionism. The Empire will be shaped around Prime ministers who increasingly favour protectionism as the British Empire expands. As British debts expand to finance the defence of its Empire, so too does political demands to reign in public spending and start paying off its debts. The election of Gladstone,

a proponent of traditional economic liberalism, will create governments that cut government spending and try to use industry to grow the British economy, rather than relying on the government to try and do this. The Conservative Party splits along views regarding free trade versus protectionism and spent several government terms out of office as a consequence, resulting in government spending cuts and ever greater protectionism regarding the British Empire and her trade. Consequently, global politics was increasingly shaped around disputes regarding British trade and trade routes the British could not yet dominate. As a result, economies would stall and economic activity would decline, causing economic problems for countries across the globe, threatening Britain's peace and position in the world. By 1884, Britain sought to solve this problem by engaging with the Berlin conference. This event agreed on rules surrounding the colonisation of Africa, which would allow the gathering of new resources and the creation of new trade routes that would allow for increased investment. This would help the UK to overcome the economic stagnation economies were facing by the 1880s. It was from here Britain could also use the navy she had invested in over generations to quickly secure the richest colonial lands along the coast of Africa. As natural resources increased so did Britain's wealth. As other nations began to gain from the colonial system their wealth increased to and this created an economic recovery for the European nation-states, resulting in the peaceful disunited Europe that Britain wanted.

Liberalism began to change in the late 19th-century as it began to lose support to Conservatives whose free-trade faction had won the argument. Consequently, newer liberals began to take over the party and they promoted free trade too. Free trade promotion also was designed to appease other powerful nations who were increasingly becoming resentful towards Britain's dominance over resources and trade routes other nations' expanding economies could not get access to. Again, to protect the peace and a lack of hegemony on the European continent Britain would adapt its position and open up their markets to more free trade. Britain, therefore,

began to open up to nations that it would go to war with in WW1, which perhaps begs the question of how on earth Britain ends up in the war it clearly does not want.

The answer this book has to this question is that its growing openness, yes has trade explanations, but also has political explanations too. Britain's empire had become richer with colonialization, but it also had become rapidly bigger. This rapid expansion made it more difficult for Britain to be able to defend all areas of its Empire from internal and external threats. Government spending on the army could not increase at the rapid speed the Empire expanded, and this left Britain, for the first time, unable to defend all sections of its Empire, leaving some places undefended. It was the seemingly invincible image of her navy and the Empire itself that sometimes could command loyalty from its populations and deter from foreign attacks. This gave Britain time to firm up its defences before people began to notice this frailty existed. This led Britain to get involved in defensive alliances that the new open liberals ideologically favoured. Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary leading up to WW1, would sign agreements with France and Russia that would commit Britain to the promotion of these countries' interests, and in return, the UK would gain greater security for its empire. This would lead Britain into the war not to just defend its policy of a peaceful disunited Europe, where no hegemony could form, but also to protect nations it relied upon for its internal security, trade and empire. When thinking about Britain's motivation, its history tells us that it bases policy around empire security, trade and no hegemony within Europe. Therefore, it is these factors that should be thought of in explaining Britain's actions, of which helped turn a Balkan dispute into WW1.

Finally, when trying to understand Britain's motivations and decisions leading up to WW1 we must be careful not to fall into British stereotypes. Britain feared the rise of Germany because of the competition she provided, such as with the naval race. This affected British views of Germany drastically, changing her from a common cultural and historical friend into Britain's

main rival. Britain, like with Napoleon, was frightened of this opponent and naturally saw her as a greedy ambitious potential tyrant, hungry for Empire. Britain, as a result, pursued defensive policies against Germany, in the form of alliances with France and also restricted her ability to expand trade. Like with Napoleon, the British created an image of Germany that portrayed it as the bogeyman of Europe, largely to justify her suspicion of Germany. This British stereotype was written into history by policy leaders claiming at the time war needed to be fought to stop a rampant Germany marching across Europe. It was Britain that yet again had to defend democracy, law, order and decency in Europe as it had done against Napoleon in the continental disputes that take took place in the early 19th-century. This not only helped in encouraging the population to fight for their empire, but also to justify the large costs of the war that started to unfold by 1915.

It, therefore, justified policy maker's decisions and perhaps freed them from guilt of such a costly war. If Britain was exporting its culture, democracy, decency, technology, trade, education and progress across the world they must be a force for good, and their opponents naturally a force for bad. It was perhaps this thinking that convinced Britain action was justified, and like a hundred years ago with Napoleon imagery of British heroics would be created. Their opponents would be labelled as the tyrants, such as Napoleon had been in 1815, and Germany would be in 1918 with the treaty of Versailles, which sadly would only help give rise to the true tyrants of European history. Therefore, this book suggests it is better to think of Britain as a nation motivated by similar concerns as other nations. These motivations concerned their security interests and its position in the world, and other stated reasons might be aimed at placing blame on Britain's opponents. Therefore, it is important to understand the common theme of what nations thought to be their political and economic self-interests are common motivating factors in this time period and therefore understanding nations' rational interests could be the key to understanding the cause of WW1.

Other Nations (Italy, Ottoman Empire and USA).

Italy:

Italy was a fairly new nation-state, similar to that of Germany. Italy had invested in aeroplane technology and in its colonial invasion of Libya, it would use this technology for the first time. However, outside such technology, the army's technology would fall behind its rivals before WW1. Italy is perhaps most important for what it did not do, meaning she chose not to go to war with her allies. Italy had chosen to go to war with the Ottoman Empire and had clear interests of trade in the Adriatic coast and Balkan region, but opted to stay out of the war until 1915 when Italy then allied herself on the opposing side to the alliances she had signed. This may have been because Italy could gain access to desired lands and trade routes in the settlement after the war had finished by siding with the winning powers. Ultimately, because Italy had not helped the allies cause that much Italy would be restricted in what she could gain. Although Italy did not gain the trade and empire land benefits it sought, it can still be said to have been motivated by the same self-interest other nations were when deciding to join the growing European conflict. This would be further demonstrated post-WW1 when Italy would pursue the same aims, which often were emboldened by a sense they had not gained what the nation had pursued throughout the conflict and peace treaties. For instance, such feelings motivated the fascist government's foreign policy in the 1930s.

Ottomans:

The Ottomans were an old empire but were in decline by this point. Slowly but surely their influence was declining in the Balkan region and North Africa, and come the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 the Ottoman Empire would be forced out of the region almost entirely. The monarchy was also weaker at home and had been forced into a constitutional monarchy, similar to many monarchs of this time period, which again might be a motivation to go to war in 1914.

The Ottomans may have also joined the war as well because they wanted to regain lost Balkan lands and strategic trading points. A victory of the allied nations of Germany and Austria over her rivals would clearly create a settlement where all could benefit from lands, influence and trade in the Balkan region. The Ottomans joined the war in the hope they could weaken their opponent's resources, armies and supply lines, resulting in reduced pressure from the Western front and possibly a German Austro-Hungary victory that would deliver their aims. Further, it also felt that securing a military victory could strengthen weakening regime forces within the nation, again providing a further incentive similar to other weakened Empires, like Austria-Hungary. Therefore, the Ottoman's motivations seem to be mostly about securing trade, lands, security of a weakening empire and the maintenance of the status quo in their region, which was not too dissimilar to other nations involved in WW1.

USA:

The United States did not get involved in the war until 1917, but the role it plays before it intervenes is important. It is a large supplier of armaments and financially does very well out of the war, resulting in perhaps the major change the war brings, a change in hegemony in global politics Britain was seeking to avoid. The USA becomes the world superpower by the 1920s, and other than a blip with the Great Depression will continue to become more dominant and mostly unchallenged to this present day. The USA senate would vote to go to war by a commanding majority after German U-boats had attacked supply ships with USA civilians on board who were travelling to Britain, a key trading partner. This would bring the USA into military intervention it mostly had wished to avoid and would change its isolationist policies for decades to come. As a result, although America felt it was in their interests to stay out of such affairs other factors, such as trade and their desire to have more of an influence in shaping global events would later bring them into the war. Therefore, the United States may have entered the war at a time they felt they could tip the balance of power as they felt it would put

them in a strong position diplomatically and economically to shape the aftermath of WW1 and shape wider foreign affairs in the decades to follow. Indeed, with rival powers already drained and unable to support their large empires this could have well been a motivating factor that caused America to enter the war.

The USA, therefore, shows us a common story of how different nations had different war aims, often even with their allies, but perhaps most importantly the move to war was partially motivated in a bid to avoid change. However, as history developed these self-interested actions actually brought the large changes these nations were hoping to avoid in the first place, making them in the end the irrational nations.

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Pictures

1 – Versailles - <http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/the-treaty-of-versailles/>

2 –Russia and German Armistice 1917. <https://www.britannica.com/event/treaties-of-Brest-Litovsk>

3 – Balkans - <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205285880> (imperial war museum website).

4 – 1815 Vienna - <http://www.saburchill.com/history/chapters/empires/0033f.html>

About the Author



James Prentice was born and raised in the English south east coastal town of Hastings. He attended Hastings College during his A-Level studies and attended the University of Kent during his History & politics undergraduate degree. After working a couple of years in local government, he went back to university and studied electoral behaviour at the University of Essex, gaining a distinction Masters degree in this field. He is currently close to completing his PhD at the University of Sussex in British electoral research. He has a keen interest in modern history and events leading up to the First World War. If you are interested in other research undertaken by this author you can use the following link to view other titles and blog posts.

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