

# Reasons and Course of War

## 1<sup>st</sup> Chapter: Arms race before the war

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the relations between Germany, England, France, and Russia had been dominated by an arms race. Particularly Germany was eager to emphasize its ambition to play a decisive military role within a politically unstable Europe by enacting the so-called Naval Laws in the years 1898 and 1900.

In the years before World War I, the diplomacy of the European nations was often limited to sabre-rattling.

The extension of the navy of the German Empire under Emperor Wilhelm II caused considerable distrust – first and foremost in England.

And not without reason: For the German Emperor and almost the complete German Empire aspired a powerful position not only in Europe but in the whole world.

Since the beginning of colonialism, German and European foreign policy had been characterized by nationalism and militarism.

Before the First World War, Europe was divided in two equal parties.

Already in 1882, the German Empire had been able to form an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy – the so-called Triple Alliance, which Italy, however, violated in 1902 by entering into a secret alliance with France.

An alliance with Russia, the so-called Reinsurance Treaty, was not renewed by Germany, and an alliance with England was prevented.

So Germany and Austria-Hungary were largely isolated within Europe.

This resulted in the development of a military axis between England and France.

In the year 1904, this “Entente Cordiale” came into being which, translated from the French, means as much as “Cordial Agreement”.

Then Russia joined the “Entente Cordiale” in 1907, being the third important ally in the then called Triple-Entente.

In the year 1911, Europe was for a short time on the verge of war caused by the Morocco Crisis when France and England felt threatened because Germany stationed its war vessel SMS Panther in front of the seaport Agadir.

Nationalism and the war euphoria in the German Empire, particularly in relation to the so-called hereditary enemy France, is reflected in a poem by Johann Gustav Fischer:

„Kommt der Störenfried Franzos,  
Meine Deutschen, auf ihn los!  
Diesmal hat ´s den rechten Schnitt,  
Alle, alle ziehen mit!

Auf den Lügner Knall und Hieb,  
An den Galgen mit dem Dieb.  
Draufgebrannt! Das waren wir,  
Durchgebrannt! Das waret ihr!

Bruderherz wie blutest du?  
Lass es bluten immerzu.  
Horch der Feldherr: Sieg und  
Gott sei Dank für solchen Krieg!

Seit der Deutsche so gesiegt,  
Weiß die Welt wo Deutschland liegt,  
Hoch die Brust und frei die Hand,  
Dir ans Herz, mein Vaterland!“

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter:

### The beginning of the war – The assassination in Sarajewo

With the so-called July Crisis in 1914, World War I began.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of June, 1914, a Serbian student assassinated the Austrian heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie in the Bosnian city Sarajewo.

Serbia was suspected to be responsible for the assassination, and this suspicion was enough for Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 1914. The declaration of war resulted in a chain reaction which was welcomed by many governments:

On July 30<sup>th</sup>, Serbia's ally Russia started its mobilization for war, in reply, Germany, being an ally of Austria-Hungary, declared war on Russia on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. Two days later, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, Germany declared war on the detested nation of France, too.

On August 6<sup>th</sup> Emperor Wilhelm II made an appeal "to the German people":

"... So the sword must decide. In the middle of peace, we are attacked by the enemy. Therefore we are forced to seize arms! We must not falter or hesitate because this would mean to betray our fatherland.

It is a point of existence or nonexistence of our empire, newly founded by our fathers, existence or nonexistence of German power and German nature.

We shall struggle with all our might, with every man and every horse.

And we shall win the battle even if the whole world is our enemy. As long as Germany stands together it can never be defeated.

Forward with God who will be on our side, the same way he was on the side of our forefathers."

Today's view on things makes it hard to understand how the population could be so enthusiastic about the war, but this was the very spirit which prevailed in Germany in 1914. Tens of thousands of young people volunteered for the military service. Full of pride, a cheering crowd saw "its" soldiers off.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, 1914, German soldiers marched in neutral Belgium according to the so-called Schlieffen plan, thus violating international law. This approach was a breach of the Hague Convention which had been introduced in 1907. As a result, England declared war on Germany.

Whenever German soldiers encountered resistance in Belgium, they committed massacres and mass violations on the civilian population. In Germany the people were convinced that the battle would be only short-lived. Germany's victory was taken for granted: victorious and glorious with God for Emperor and fatherland! But the so-called trip to Paris ended in the trenches.

The horror of this awful war hit the German population offhand and only after a few months when – among other grievances – a severe famine broke out. The people were then forced to confront reality and to cope with the results of the war.

But the first days of the war were dominated by euphoria and numerous declarations of war. Austria-Hungary declared war on Russia on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 1914.

Voilà – the battleground of Europe was prepared for the commanders and military strategists. The Grim Reaper could start to bring in his harvest.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Chapter: War objectives

Only after the outbreak of the war the warring parties formulated their objectives. Germany developed these war objectives in the so-called September Program of 1914.

The country strove for territorial claims toward France and in the East. One intention was to strongly and decisively weaken France in both military and economic respects. Besides Belgium should be territorially and economically utilized as a "vassal state" for the German Empire. Likewise the allies of the Triple Entente agreed on their aims.

As a main objective these countries aimed at reducing the strong position of Germany and its claim to military and political power.

Russia and France also enforced their territorial claims to the German Empire.

England was interested in a division of the German colonies. The fleet was to be destroyed and the foreign trade to be limited.

Germany and Austria should pay a so-called war contribution for the costs of war.

Even though the probability to win this war diminished, the German military objectives surprisingly became more and more fantastic.

Until shortly before the end of the war the German government aimed at a so-called "Siegfrieden".

This concept stood for a victorious end of the war in accordance with the German conditions and it prevented any peace negotiations with the other war parties for a long time.

## 4<sup>th</sup> Chapter: Battleground Europe

At the beginning of the war, Germany quickly advanced and so the aggression often referred to as a "Promenade to Paris" seemed to be realizable with the best chances of success. Not until the German soldiers stood only a few miles outside Paris, French and English troops succeeded in stopping the German advance at the end of 1914.

But in the four years to follow, the war in the west which cost so many lives stagnated in the emplacements and trenches reaching from the Belgian North Sea coast to the Swiss border. One symbol for the futile dying was the trench warfare near the French city of Verdun. From February until July 1916 hundreds of thousands of both allied and German soldiers died in the trenches and on the battlefield.

General Paul von Hindenburg – here we see his picture – and his chief of staff Ludendorff were more successful at the east front. Emperor Wilhelm II entrusted the General staff with Ludendorff and Hindenburg with the supreme army command (Oberste Heeresleitung) – shortly called OHL. From then on the military strategists were in factual authority in the German Empire and at the war front.

In February 1917, the OHL decided to intensify the "War at Sea".

The intention was to allow German submarines to sink both merchant vessels and passenger ships without prior warning. By this Germany hoped to force England into finally giving up.

But far from this: Instead of forcing England to make peace the United States of America entered the war against Germany. The aggression against neutral merchant vessels prompted the USA in April 1917 to enter into the war supporting the allies France, Russia, England, Serbia, Belgium, Italy, Romania, and Japan.

In spite of a ceasefire at the east front which had been agreed on with the new Bolshevik revolutionary government at the end of 1917, the war was militarily lost for Germany and its allies in summer 1918.

Almost every German family sustained losses, the people were starving, miserable and war-weary. The number of persons to oppose the war increased and they started to raise their voices and make themselves heard.

## 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter: Horrible war results

In 1918, Ludendorff and Hindenburg had to resign after the Sailors' Rebellions in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, and because of mass protests in the whole country. Also the Emperor abdicated the throne. Germany was going through a period of upheaval leading from Empire to Republic.

A delegation under the Imperial Chancellor Max von Baden signed the armistice with the victorious allied powers on the 11<sup>th</sup> November, 1918. The new weapons used in this war revealed a radical change in the character of warfare, caused by the proceeding technology and industrialization.

And for the first time people used the expression of the "total warfare" because this war had not only involved the military troupes but also severely affected the economy and the civilian population.

New weapons as machine guns, grenades, and bombs of ordnance and aircrafts, as well as the use of tanks and poison gas increased death and horror.

The First World War left a violent mark on wide parts of Europe, it involved much suffering, devastation and resulted in a tragic death toll.

And by and by, the number of soldiers killed in action became obvious. On the side of the German Empire the number of dead soldiers added up to more than 1.8 million.

Russia suffered losses of 1.7 million soldiers killed in action. Just under 1.4 million French soldiers died. Austria-Hungary payed dearly for the war with 1.2 million dead soldiers. In England the number of dead soldiers was short of one million. The death toll amounted to 460,000 in Italy, 360,000 in Serbia, 325,000 in Turkey, 250,000 In Romania and 115,000 in the United States of America.

Europe and the world realized the horrors of war in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At that time nobody could imagine that Germany would start a war only 20 years later, a war even more total and awful.

## 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter: Summary

Before World War I, the spirit in the European countries and in Germany was dominated by

- nationalism
- and militarism.

The so-called July Crisis in 1914

- began with the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajewo,
- was characterized by the failure of diplomacy,
- and resulted in the First World War.

The German war objectives were

- territorial expansion,
- and the development of its political and military power.

In the submarine war, the German navy sank

- passenger ships and merchant vessels.
- England should be forced into an armistice.
- Instead the USA declared war on Germany.

For the first time one spoke about a total war

- which affects economy and civilian population,
- and is waged with destructive and deadly weapons,
- involving heavy losses of millions of dead persons on all sides.