Origins Of Ww1 And Demographic Change Essay, Research Paper

Demographic Change and the Origins of W.W.I

When asked to discuss the origins of the first world war, there is generally little debate. Most would site the growth of Germany as an economic, military and naval power, the rise in nationalism and an arms race throughout Europe. All of which was characterized by the growing occurrence of political disruptions, culminated by the assassination of Arch Duke Ferdinand in Serbia. This is, of course true, but many historians tend neglect the effect of demographic change on a society. During the late 1800 s and up to 1914, most European nations were undergoing fundamental changes in the makeup of their societies. Some countries experienced dramatic rises in population, while others were stagnating or even in decline. The changes in population in Europe greatly affected the balance of power. This had effects on nationalism, militarism and influenced the popular attitudes toward war across Europe. Demographic changes in Europe made The Great War inevitable.

Europe has always been politically tumultuous. Conquerors and revolutionaries have traded power with despots and dictators, back and forth, for centuries. Prior to the nineteenth century, Great Britain and France were the two major players. With the conquest of Napoleon, the First and later the Third, it seemed the rivalry was over in Europe. In the late nineteenth century Europe had a relatively stable, albeit precarious, balance of power. The empires could focus their attention toward colonies and trade. This peace lasted until the turn of the century when a new threat to the status-quo arose. This threat to the balance of power was the growth of Germany. In 1850 France s population was almost 36 million, the largest in Europe, with the exception of Russia who had 57 million. France was therefore the central power in Europe. Though Great Britain only had 27.6 million, it remained powerful due to its navy and colonies. In 1850, there was no Germany, only a group of individual states, the largest and most powerful being Prussia. Prussia s population at the time was only 16 million, hardly a threat. Even if you combine the Germanic States, the total population is only 35.9 million.1 If we skip ahead 1880 though, it is possible to see some trends starting to take shape in Europe. The contrast between the populations of Germany and France is startling. We see that France s population had only grown to 37 million, while aunited Germany s population had swelled to 45 million. Great Britain lay somewhere between the two with an increase of just over seven million people to a moderate 35 million people.2 In the thirty years that followed these trends only intensified. In 1910 Germany s population had almost doubled its population of sixty years prior. With a population 65 million strong, Germany was great force to be reckoned with in Europe. France on the other hand had hardly grown at all. Its population was only 39 million, the smallest in Europe next to Italy who was not far behind. Great Britain continued to grow steadily and moderately to 45 million in 1910.3 What became evident was a redistribution of potential power due to population growth. France s stagnant population growth meant that it s overall percentage of Europe s total population had declined. France s population went from fourteen percent of Europe s total population in 1850, to less than ten percent in 1910. Conversely, Germany in 1910 contributed fifteen percent of the total as compared to Prussia s five percent in 1850.4 Another key to the balance of power in Europe had always been Russia, due to its vast empire. For such a large nation, though, in 1910 Russia only had twenty million more citizens than France. Like Germany, Russia s population was also rising. In the years between 1850 and 1910 Russia s population doubled to 111 million people. The other major powers in Europe, Austria-Hungary and Italy both, like Great Britain, grew only moderately. Austria-Hungary s population grew from 30.7 million to 50 million in 1910. Italy s population grew from 24.3 million to 35 million in 1910.5 The trends were obvious. On one end, France s population was completely static. In the middle Great Britain, Austria-Hungary and Italy grew only moderately, yet steadily. At the other end of the spectrum, Russia and Germany s populations had doubled.

The population trends in Europe during the late 1800 s and early 1900 s had many effects on every nation, psychologically and in reality. The perception of the recent changes, had perhaps more effect on the attitudes toward war than the actual trends did. France s declining population had a tremendous effect on its citizens and policy makers. The French began to develop a sort of inferiority complex. No longer did they make up the lion share of Europe s inhabitants. Even Italy, it seemed, would soon overtake France. The sheer lack of citizenry meant that France could not compete with the military manpower of Germany, Austria-Hungary or Russia. Any alliances between those three countries would spell doom for France. France was very wary of Germany. Fearing an invasion, France began to forge alliances with Great Britain and Russia. Britain had also grown quite wary of Germany. Although the population of Great Britain had grown steadily, it was eclipsed by the rapid growth of German society. Britain soon found that its dominance as an all-around world power was being challenged. Great Britain viewed a healthy, growing population as key to being a major power. Since Britain s population had begun to decline slightly, they felt were losing stature in world politics. Germany was even challenging Britain for colonies. The result was a great animosity between the English and German cultures. The fact that Germany had the fastest rising population in Europe was a source of great pride to the Germans. It gave them status as a legitimate world power, with the rights associated with any great empire. Germany felt they deserved colonies and to be treated as at least an equal in world trading. Bu, just as Britain and France were warily watching the growth of Germany, the Germans kept a close eye upon their Cossack neighbors to the east. The Russians had always been a concern to Germany. There had been struggles for power and disputes over border territories for centuries. In the early 1900 s, though, Russia was rapidly growing into a superpower. It s population, like Germany s, had doubled in sixty years. A population of 111 million meant that Russia could raise a massive army. Some estimates put the number of troops in Russia around 1910 at close to one million. What Germans did not take into account was that, although Russia had a large army, it was spread out too far to be effective. The Russian troops had to be called up from across a huge country and mobilization could take months.

The varying demographic changes that were taking place all across Europe effected the war climate in many ways. The rapidly growing German population created a rise in German nationalism. The Germans felt, and rightly so, that with the largest and fastest growing population in western Europe, they were a major world power. The Germans demanded colonies and actively sought them. To compete with England, they increased spending in the navy greatly. To compete with Russia and France they also increased military spending intensely. The result was an arms build up in Europe. Each country was trying to compete with the rapidly growing Germans. Great Britain felt that the majesty of the British Empire was going to be eclipsed by the Germans. No longer did Britain have a growing population, as a great nation must have. Britain grew wary of the Germans and began to increase naval and military spending. During this time the French were the hardest hit, though. France s population had barley grown four million people in sixty years. France believed they could no longer compete with the nations that surrounded her militarily. France became fearful of another German invasion and sought refuge with the British and Russians. The Germans also sought alliances to defend against a combined Russian-French campaign into Germany. Germany signed treaties with Austria-Hungary and Italy. Europe was completely divided along two lines, the Alliance and the Entente. All of which, demographic changes played a large part.

Endnotes

A.J.P. Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918 (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

1957), xxv.

2A.J.P. Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918 (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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3A.J.P. Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918 (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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4A.J.P. Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918 (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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5A.J.P. Taylor, The Struggle for Mastery in Europe 1848-1918 (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

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