

POLI 212

Introduction to International Politics

Session 8 – GREAT POWERS AND INTERNATIONAL
CONFLICTS 1

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Session Overview

– Overview

- This session looks at some of the major conflicts that have taken place in the international system. We will specifically be discussing World War 1. But before this discussion we will look at the general explanations for the causes of war. There are three broad explanations for why wars occur between countries.
- These explanations are associated with Kenneth Waltz (in a seminal book titled *Man, the State and War – a Theoretical Analysis, 1959*), a prominent scholar in International Relations. Waltz wrote about three explanations, which are the individual level of analysis, the state level of analysis and the global level of analysis. Under World War 1, we will discuss the background, the causes and the effects.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One: General Explanations for the Causes of war
- Topic Two: World War 1

Reading List

- Bossman E. Asare, 2016. *International Politics: The Beginner's Guide*- Updated and Expanded, Digibooks, Ghana.
- Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Shannon L. Blanton, 2010. *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.

Topic One

GENERAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CAUSES OF WAR



Introduction

- International conflict or interstate war is the kind of conflict between different countries. This is where countries, which are independent of each other or one another, settle their differences or misunderstandings on the battlefield or through the use of weapons. It is called international conflict because the belligerents or combatants are countries.
- Though a number of these conflicts have occurred in the world, scholars have paid particular attention to the two world wars and the Cold War. International conflicts have shown that, at times, countries that have ambitions of dominating others end up engaging in self-defeating behaviors.



General explanations for the causes of war

- Three broad explanations have been cited for the causes of interstate wars. These explanations are rooted in the levels of analysis. The levels of analysis imply the three analytical levels used in political science to understand problems that are widely considered to be complex in international or world politics. These are the individual level of analysis, the state level of analysis, and the international level of analysis. These explanations originated with the work of Kenneth Waltz (1959) in *Man, the State, and War*.
- The Individual level of analysis centers on the psychological variables that influence and motivate those who make foreign policy decisions for countries and other international institutions. These are basically the characteristics of the human beings who shape the policies. Personal characteristics certainly vary from one person to another due to several factors. As a cause of interstate war, individual level of analysis suggests that due to personal characteristics, some of the leaders of countries may provoke war. For instance, would the United States have invaded Iraq in 2003 if Al Gore was the president?
- The significance of the question is that personal characteristics do influence what some, if not all, leaders of countries and intergovernmental organizations do in the international system. Some will like to know whether the characteristics of Adolf Hitler were partly, if not wholly, responsible for the outbreak of World War II.

General explanations for the causes of war (contd.)

- The state level of analysis focuses on how the internal characteristics of states influence what they do in the global system. The internal attributes of states are several, and notable among them are ideology, type of government (democracy, autocracy, etc), centrally-planned economy or capitalism, the political culture, perceptions towards other countries, the size of the military, natural resource endowment, and the level of economic development.
- The most important thing here is that because of the internal characteristics of certain countries they are more likely to wage war on other countries than others. This somewhat explains why some countries will not go to war under certain circumstances but other countries will go to war under those same circumstances.

General explanations for the causes of war(contd.)

- Finally, the international or global level of analysis examines how worldwide conditions impact the foreign policy of countries. This level of analysis is especially concerned with how political, economic, and social developments outside the state will influence what states do. For example, countries that are members of the UN and other intergovernmental organizations are at times required by these organizations to commit a certain number of their troops (military) into peacekeeping and peace building in other countries.
- In the same way, the foreign policy of one country can influence what policymakers in other countries will do in terms of their foreign policy. For instance, if the government of Ghana decides that Nigerians in Ghana should go back to their country, this will shape the foreign policy of Nigeria towards Ghana. The world has experienced situations where some countries have had to increase the budgetary allocations for defense following similar actions by other countries.
- However, these explanations do not necessarily suggest that all interstate wars are caused by the three levels of analysis. There could probably be other reasons why international conflicts occur. As a student of international relations, the onus lies on you to find out the causes of interstate conflicts.

Sample questions

- What is an interstate conflict?
- Describe the three levels of analysis.
- How are the personal characteristics of leaders relevant in causing conflicts?

Topic Two

WORLD WAR 1



World War 1

- World War 1 (1914-1918) broke out in 1914 in Europe. The war killed millions of people in a little over four years. Shimko (2005) has observed that one of the key characteristics of World War 1 is that it was not uncommon for more than 500,000 people to die in one battle. More specifically, at the Battle of Verdun (1916), more than 400,000 people were killed; and the British lost more than 20,000 men on the very first day of the Battle of Somme in 1916 (Shimko 2005:27).
- Pevehouse and Goldstein (2007) have noted that the war fascinates scholars in international relations due to its disastrous features and irrelevance. They have put forward that it was perhaps accidental. In the process of trying to get the populations of either side to submit, the main actors of the war, Germany and Britain, ended up losing thousands of their citizens and residents. The war was largely fought between Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and their allies on one hand and Britain, France, Russia (the triple entente), and Italy on the other hand.



World war 1 (Contd.)

- The United States of America joined the triple entente in April 1917. The US entrance strengthened the side of the triple entente and this ended any hope of a German victory. In November 1918 the Germans and their allies were soundly defeated. The burden at this point in time lied on statesmen of the warring countries to design an international system that would promote peaceful coexistence among countries.
- Although scholars generally agree that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand (1863-1914), in Sarajevo in 1914 by Serbian nationalists precipitated the war, various explanations have been offered for the causes of the war. This suggests that there is no single, wide-embracing explanation for why World War 1 occurred in the first place. These explanations are rooted in the three levels of analysis we discussed in the beginning of the chapter.

Causes of world war 1

- At the structural or global level of analysis, changes in the distribution of power (military power) of the major actors in the international system heightened the prospects of war. By the 1890s Germany had surpassed Britain in terms of the value of GDP and heavy industries. For instance, in the 1860s Britain had 25% share of the world's industrial production but this had reduced to 10% in 1913. However, Germany's share of industrial production had reached 15% in 1913, and some of these gains were used to strengthen their military in several spheres (Nye 2007:71).
- At this time it became clear to other major countries in Europe (especially Britain) that Germany was aiming to become a leading, if not the most militarily powerful, actor in the world. Similarly, exactly a decade before the outbreak of the war, the world witnessed Great Britain forming alliance (military alliance) with France and, in 1907, another alliance with Russia which had already aligned with France (they then became the triple entente).

Causes of world war 1 (contd.)

- At this period state actors in Germany had become concerned about the military posture of the triple entente. This compelled Germany to strengthen her relations with Austria-Hungary (called the triple alliance) and the Ottoman Empire.
- The formation of military alliances at this period meant that either of the alliances would want to become the most militarily powerful country in Europe and the world. Moreover, these alliances meant that there was no diplomatic flexibility; with either side committed to taking entrenched positions and seeing the other alliance as an enemy to their ambition to become the dominant actor in the world. All these global level events ultimately made the prospects of war probable.
- The state level of analysis explanation for the cause of the war argues that nationalism (when groups or people dignify their country above all others) in the domestic environment of certain countries and domestic politics in Germany caused the war. For nationalism, the multinational empires of Ottoman Turkey and Austria-Hungary faced a number of dissidents who wanted independence in their jurisdictions.

Causes of world war 1 (contd.)

- According to Nye (2007:75), the Balkan states under the control of the Ottoman Empire succeeded in pushing the Turks out in 1912 and this encouraged other Balkans under the Austria-Hungary Empire to fight for their independence. The Serbians were the first among the Balkan states to throw the punch which led to the assassination of the Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, in 1914.
- Although Austria-Hungary did not take the assassination calmly, they responded to Serbian nationalism or attempts at independence swiftly by indicating that they were not fighting back because of the assassination of the archduke, rather to nib in the bud Serbia nationalism. For instance, the chief of staff of Austria in 1914, General Conrad, noted that *“For this reason, and not as vengeance for the assassination, Austria-Hungary must draw the sword against Serbia . . . The monarchy had been seized by the throat and had to choose between allowing itself to be strangled, and making a last effort to prevent its destruction.”*

Causes of world war 1 (contd.)

- Finally, the individual level of analysis for the cause of the war is rooted in the preferences and mistakes made by certain key leaders. For instance, Kaiser (1990) attributes the occurrence of the war to German elites' predisposition for a war with France and Russia in order to strengthen German's position on the European continent, confirm its position as a world power, and divert domestic attention from its internal troubles. The German leader during the war, Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859-1941), had a sense of lowliness, was emotional, always complaining, and weak as a national leader. His war plans or strategy fell short of what one should expect from a leader of a country that aspired to be a world power (Nye , 2007).
- In the same manner, the Austria-Hungary Empire was led by a tired old leader, Franz Josef (1830-1926), who was manipulated by his chief of staff and a deceitful foreign minister (Count Berchtold). Likewise, the Czar of Russia, apart from the incompetent foreign and defense ministers that served under him, was also influenced by a disturbed and sickly wife. As an autocrat, the Czar had to spend a lot of time dealing with domestic unrests and reforms in his country (Nye , 2007: 75-76).

Effects of world war 1

- World War 1 produced a number of thoughtful effects and some of them continue to influence international relations. The war led to the collapse of some empires and governments. In Russia, it led to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks (the communists); and both Ottoman Turkey and Austria-Hungary collapsed. Amid these collapses, the new independent states of Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania emerged. The communists that took over the reins of government under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin introduced reforms that shaped international relations till the end of the Cold War.
- Also, due to the devastation in terms of properties and the millions of lives that were lost, many countries in Europe felt the necessity to establish an international system that would promote peace among countries. This eventually led to the Treaty of Versailles (a city outside Paris) in 1919. This treaty stipulated that Germany was responsible for the war that killed millions of people and that the country was authorized to pay financial reparations. Additionally, Germany was stripped of any ambition to become a superpower. The country was told to dramatically reduce the size of its military, prevented from possessing heavy artillery, military aircraft and submarines (Kegley 2009; Nye 2007; Shimko 2005; Mearsheimer 2001). As if this was not enough, Germany also lost territories.

Effects of world war 1 (contd.)

- All these were interpreted by German elites to mean that the countries that won the war just wanted to punish them. The German foreign minister from 1924 to 1929, Gustav Stresemann, signed two agreements on behalf of his country. These agreements-the Locarno Pact on 1st December 1925 and the Kellogg-Briand Pact on 27th August 1928-were attempts to promote peaceful coexistence among countries and avoid war as a tool of foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2001: 189; Kegley 2009).
- Perhaps a final effect of the war had to do with the effort to promote liberalism in international relations. The pointer here was the recommendation by the then US president, Woodrow Wilson, for the establishment of the League of Nations- an intergovernmental organization to promote peace among member countries to avoid war through such programs as the promotion of democracy. Wilson envisioned through the League how the adoption of international law would constrain the actions of member countries.

Effects of world war 1 (contd.)

- Although the League chalked some successes, the absence of United States' active participation denied it the most powerful and hegemonic support. We need to bear in mind that, at the end of the war, the US was the most powerful country in the world; indicating her support would have ensured that an international regime such as the League of Nations would be in a position to promote global peace and collective security.

Sample questions

- Discuss any three effects of world war 1.
- How did the individual level of analysis account for the outbreak of world War 1?
- Did the global level play any role in the outbreak of world war 1?
- Why did the League of Nations fail to promote collective security?

Conclusion of Session 8

- This session has examined the three explanations for the causes of interstate wars. These three are the individual level, the state level and the global level of analyses.
- The session has also discussed the emergence, the causes and the effects of world war 1.
- The next session will look at world war 2 and the cold war.



References

- Bossman E. Asare, 2016. *International Politics: The Beginner's Guide*- Updated and Expanded, Digibooks, Ghana.
- Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Shannon L. Blanton, 2010. *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.
- Nye, Joseph Jr. (2007) *Understanding International Conflicts: An Introduction to Theory and History*, Pearson Longman, New York.

