



1958

1. International Anarchy (1900-1918)

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Bloom, Robert L. et al. "1. International Anarchy (1900-1918). Pt. XVIII: The Western World in the Twentieth Century: The Historical Setting." Ideas and Institutions of Western Man (Gettysburg College, 1958), 1-4.

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1. International Anarchy (1900-1918)

Abstract

It is probable that most people, if asked to list the characteristics of the Western World in this century, would place at or near the top of their list something about international rivalries. Curiously enough, a similar poll conducted in Europe and North America in 1900 would likely have given equal prominence to the idea that the world had entered a period of increasing international amity. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Anarchy, Communication, Western Powers, International Economy, International Capitalism, International Socialism, International Red Cross, Universal Postal Union, International Amity

Disciplines

European History | History | International Relations | Political History | Political Science | United States History

Comments

This is a part of [Section XVIII: The Western World in the Twentieth Century: The Historical Setting](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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XVIII. THE WESTERN WORLD IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:
THE HISTORICAL SETTING

1. International Anarchy (1900-1918)

It is probable that most people, if asked to list the characteristics of the Western World in this century, would place at or near the top of their list something about international rivalries. Curiously enough, a similar poll conducted in Europe and North America in 1900 would likely have given equal prominence to the idea that the world had entered a period of increasing international amity.

This idea was certainly plausible. No major war had involved two or more of the great powers since 1871. There had been no general war since Napoleon's defeat in 1815. The partition of Asia and Africa had been largely completed, without provoking war. Improved communications were bringing people closer together, and it was widely held that the more the peoples of the world knew of each other, the more they would like each other. Improved communications also hastened the growth of an international economy, in which the various parts were mutually dependent. International capitalism, and its opponent, international socialism, were accustomed to transcending national boundaries. The convening of disarmament conferences seemed to suggest that statesmen realized that improved weapons made war so disastrously destructive that there were no longer victors and vanquished, only fellow sufferers. The foundation of organizations like the International Red Cross (1863) showed that humanitarians too knew no national boundaries. Already governments were learning to cooperate with each other in bodies like the Universal Postal Union (1875). Nevertheless, despite these and other impressive indications of international amity, the fact remains that in 1914 the planet was plunged into what we call World War I.

How did such a catastrophe happen? The first factor to note is the independent state system within which international affairs operated. The world was divided into sovereign states, each a law unto itself, and none owing allegiance to any such larger concept as Europe, Christendom, or mankind. Here was the basic element of international anarchy. Many of these political units were nation-states, while those nations not independent ardently desired that status. Owing to the way in which nations were intermingled, rare indeed was the European state which did not have some of its fellow nationals living outside its frontiers or, within its frontiers, some foreign nationality

clamoring for national self-determination. The problem was particularly acute for the multinational Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish empires and for the small states of the Balkan peninsula. By 1914, many nations were fatalistically convinced that they could achieve the fruition of their desires only at the expense of others.

National rivalries were intensified by colonial and economic rivalries. In the scramble for colonies, some powers were latecomers or weak contestants, and even the most successful failed to achieve all that they wanted. The resultant legacy of humiliation and frustration was hardly calculated to smooth international relations. Although the livelihood of many now depended directly on the free international movement of goods, capital, and labor, all states contained groups whose prosperity was injured or threatened by foreign competition. Even though minorities, such groups were often able to exert pressure quite disproportionate to their size. The high tariff walls which were a tribute to their power further increased friction.

To cope with the economic and other aspects of international relations was no mean task for public opinion, nourished by inadequate education and a press which was often sensational. Yet with the spread of democratic institutions public opinion was able, and indeed required, to influence governmental decisions. Unfortunately, all too often the public was swayed by selfish, ambitious, or ill-informed leaders. The man in the street, faced with successive diplomatic crises which he understood only poorly, was apt to greet war with positive relief. The long years of peace had erased the memory of what war was really like. On the battlefield, at any rate, the issues seemed clear and one could distinguish between friend and foe. Fear psychosis in the public mind was in part the product of the armaments race. As more and more terrible armaments were produced by powers in search of security, a premium was placed on declaring war at a favorable time. Whoever got in the first blow had an immense advantage. Consequently, purely military considerations assumed an increasing role in diplomacy, reversing the dictum that "war is merely diplomacy carried on by other means." In the crisis which precipitated war in 1914, military authorities must bear some of the blame for frustrating attempts at pacification.

The immediate cause of this crisis was the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne by a Serb nationalist who wanted to liberate fellow Serbs living under Austrian rule. Austrian military leaders, always fearful that nationalism would destroy their multinational state, pressed for a preventive war against Serbia. Germany announced that she would stand by Austria, her only dependable ally. Russia, afraid that if Serbia was destroyed her own influence in the Balkans would disappear, came to the aid of Serbia. France stuck to her ally, Russia. Thus, the alliance system, which had divided the European great powers into two armed camps, helped spread a local conflict across the continent.

Germany's military leaders endeavored to knock out their enemies by methods which created more enemies. In so doing they were taking a calculated risk, hoping to win the war before the potential of the new enemies could be effectively mobilized. They aimed a massive offensive against France through neutral Belgium, thereby bringing Britain into the conflict. The knock-out failed and the contestants settled down to prolonged and bloody trench warfare in northern France. Germany tried next to starve out Britain with a submarine blockade. Her sinking of neutral shipping was the occasion for the United States' declaration of war in 1917. The techniques of modern warfare made the role of a neutral a difficult one indeed. Some powers, for example Italy and Japan, deserted this role when offered booty by Britain and France. Eventually a total of twenty-four states were arrayed as the Allies against the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey).

That the war lasted as long as it did is a tribute to the ability of the modern state to mobilize its resources, material, human, and ideological. However, by 1918, despite intensive regulation of what in modern total war is called the home front, the European belligerents on both sides were approaching exhaustion. The first power to crack under internal and external pressures was Russia. In 1917 the tsarist government was overthrown by a liberal and radical coalition, which was in turn supplanted by the Bolsheviks who accepted humiliating peace terms from the Central Powers. Nevertheless, the Allies proved to have superior resources and in the autumn of 1918 the Central Powers collapsed.

For the next two years representatives of the victors were busily engaged in imposing on the vanquished a series of treaties, known collectively as the Paris Peace Settlement (1919-20). President Woodrow Wilson, who for a time headed the American delegation to the conferences, hoped to establish a lasting peace based on national self-determination and international cooperation. Thanks to widespread disgust with prewar diplomacy, which was popularly blamed for the recent holocaust, he was able to carry his point on a number of issues. The Turkish and Austro-Hungarian empires were broken up, and their territories divided among a number of nation-states (for example, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia), some newly created. Never before had the political map of Europe been drawn more nearly in accord with national groupings. A League of Nations was established to provide a forum where international disputes could be settled, amicably it was hoped. However, old and new fears, ambitions, and hatreds were not to be denied and on many issues the treaties were much harsher than Wilson had envisaged. The vanquished were required to accept the blame for causing the war, shoulder a heavy burden of debts to the Allies, disarm unilaterally, and surrender all overseas colonies and even European territory containing fellow nationals. In short, they were treated as second-class citizens. Thus, the settlement after one war helped foment the next.

In spite of all this, the years from 1921 to 1929 brought some relaxation of international tensions, thanks largely to relative prosperity, the pressure of purely domestic issues, and fear of another war. League membership was granted the defeated powers. Their financial obligations were lightened somewhat. Preliminary steps were taken toward general disarmament. Probably the best symbol of the new spirit -- and of its precarious nature -- was the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) in which ultimately sixty-two states renounced aggressive war as an instrument of national policy. Peace was to be achieved in a new Holy Alliance at the stroke of a pen.