



Introduction to International Relations

Chapter Notes: Chapter 3

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Chapter Three:

World War I Through the Perspectives

Chapter Overview

Chapter 3 exposes students to the three perspectives through an historical case study of World War I. Employing all three levels of analysis, this chapter uses the perspectives to examine accounts of the war's outbreak. For realists, these causes can lie with issues of power conversion, the balance of power, and weak leaders; liberals stress the importance of international and domestic institutions, communicative failure, and diplomatic foibles; constructivists emphasize the emergence of various strains of nationalism and unstable leaders. By combining the three levels of analysis with the three perspectives, this chapter provides exposure to useful analytic tools in the study of international relations.

Realist explanations for World War I

- Rise of German power: Following German reunification in 1871, a disruption in the balance of power in one part of Europe was more likely to trigger a wider war.
- In addition to political unification, Germany was growing economically and had a strong power conversion.
- The Triple Entente and Triple Alliance offered a near-perfect offset of each other, but some believe it failed because it was so rigid.
- Although power was balanced for the time being, Germany feared future imbalances, particularly from the growing power of Russia.
- Britain, the previous hegemon, had seen its power decline at the turn of the twentieth century; thus it could no longer guarantee the security of Europe.
- A domestic-level realist explanation holds that German domestic politics were unduly aggressive, causing the country to go to war.

Liberal explanations for World War I

- Bismarck had been a master statesman, and after he left office in 1894, Kaiser Wilhelm II proved to be a diplomatic blunderer.
- The Kaiser congratulated President Paul Kruger of the Boer states on his victory against the British by telegram; this was a gratuitous slap at the British.

- Diplomacy had prevented war prior to 1914 but finally failed because of the Schlieffen Plan, because Germany expected Britain to remain neutral, and because civilian institutions broke down.
- Liberal themes—international law, trade, conflict resolution—were still too weak to head off war.

Identity explanations for World War I

- Militarist and racist forms of nationalism spread in Europe in the late nineteenth century.
- As a result of this new nationalism—and with the assistance of the Industrial Revolution—the arms races thrived.
- Social Darwinism: Twisting Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, societies applied the notion of “survival of the fittest” to nations and groups, with a nation’s strength approximated by its military.
- Following Immanuel Kant, many believed that the world was reaching an era of democracy and peace, leading to a pre-World War I complacency about war.
- The rise of socialist nationalism: Some conservatives within societies saw war as a way to stave off socialist forces.

Thought Questions

1. If you could use only one level of analysis to give an account of World War I, which would you use? Why?
2. Some realists argue that international instability is caused when one state or alliance amasses too much power (necessitating the balance of power), while others posit that instability is caused when great powers reach an equilibrium point (the power transition school). In the case of World War I, which do you think is the more convincing argument?
3. Using counterfactual analysis, do you think that World War I would have been prevented if Bismarck had retained his office? Why or why not?
4. Some liberals argue that World War I began because the involved actors assumed it was inevitable. What had helped to shorten the shadow of the future? How could it have been extended?
5. Recall the three primary forms of nationalism present in Europe before World War I. Which of these played the greatest role in causing World War I? Do you see this form of nationalism present in the world today?