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## ***MAPPING THE CAUSES OF WORLD WAR I TO AVOID ARMAGEDDON TODAY***

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*Most Americans did not experience the tremendous upset that World War I caused in Europe. Korzybski had experienced the debacle of the Eastern Front, with its devastation of Poland and parts of Russia. He brought this memory with him when the Russian Army sent him to Canada and the United States in December, 1915, to oversee the acceptance of orders for military supplies. Throughout the chaotic years near the war’s end, he kept asking himself, “How could this be prevented?”*

— M. Kendig

*Alfred Korzybski: Collected Writings 1920-1950, p.xxi*

**T**HE DEVASTATION and social collapse caused by World War I (also called the Great War) led Alfred Korzybski to formulate general semantics, a system for more effective human evaluation. With this system, Korzybski hoped humankind would never again engage in such wanton and needless destruction. That destruction was brought about by nationalism, entangled alliances, narrow ethnic concerns, and desires for political gain — forces that are still with us today.

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Korzybski noted that human beings, using language and other symbols, have the ability to transmit information across time. As a result, each generation is able to benefit from the experience of previous generations. In order to contribute to this process, which Korzybski called time-binding, and with the hope that learning about the past can help avert large-scale conflicts in the future, I will map out some of the causes of World War I, and propose ten important cautionary general semantics lessons for the leaders of the world's nations. (Although World War I occurred nearly one hundred years ago, its legacy is more present than we may think. The volatile politics of the Middle East and of Balkan Europe stem directly from World War I and its immediate aftereffects. America's current preoccupation with championing democracy throughout the world is also a product of the Great War.)

### **The Start of World War I: An Orgy of Declarations**

The precipitating event for World War I was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on June 28, 1914. Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was killed by the Black Hand — a Serbian nationalist secret society. Austria-Hungary's reaction to the death was to issue an ultimatum to Serbia, which, to the extent that it demanded the assassins be brought to justice, effectively violated Serbian sovereignty. Austria-Hungary expected Serbia to reject the severe terms of the ultimatum, thereby providing an excuse to launch a limited war against Serbia.

Serbia had longstanding Slavic ties with Russia, but the Austro-Hungarian government did not think Russia would be drawn into the dispute, other than perhaps issuing a diplomatic protest. As a protection against the nearly-unimaginable possibility that Russia did declare war, Austria-Hungary sought assurances of support from Germany under a mutual alliance. Germany quickly agreed, and even encouraged Austro-Hungarian bellicosity.

On July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary rejected Serbia's reply to the ultimatum, which for the most part was quite placating, and declared war on Serbia. Bound by treaty to Serbia, the Russian army mobilized. Germany viewed the Russian mobilization as an act of war against Austria-Hungary, and declared war on Russia on August 1. France, bound by treaty to Russia, responded by declaring war against Germany, and by extension Austria-Hungary, on August 3. Germany quickly responded by invading neutral Belgium, so as to reach Paris by the shortest route. Britain, allied to France by a loosely worded treaty which implied a moral obligation to mutual defense, declared war on Germany on August 4. Britain was also obligated to defend Belgium by the terms of a

seventy-five-year old treaty. Like France, Britain by extension was also at war with Austria-Hungary.

As the war began, Britain's colonies and dominions abroad (e.g., Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa) offered assistance. The United States declared a policy of neutrality — an official stance that ended in 1917 when Germany's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare seriously threatened America's commercial shipping. Japan, honoring a military agreement with Britain, declared war on Germany on August 23. Two days later Austria-Hungary responded by declaring war on Japan. Italy, although allied to both Germany and Austria-Hungary, was able to avoid entering the war, by citing a clause permitting it to renege on its obligations to both.

### **Entangling Alliances**

What was intended to be a strictly limited war between accuser and accused, Austria-Hungary and Serbia, had rapidly escalated into global conflict. One main reason for that conflict was an alliance system that brought about a mindless mechanical reaction once hostilities began. Otto von Bismarck, first Prime Minister of Prussia and then Chancellor of the German Republic, was the prime mover in setting up this system.

Bismarck had constructed the German state through political machinations and war against Austria and France. In 1866 he engineered war with Austria over disputed territory. The resulting conflict, "the Seven Weeks War," ended with complete victory for Germany and a North German Federation. To achieve similar results in the south — and to unite all states under the Prussian banner — Bismarck went to war with France. As was the case with Austria, the Prussian army demolished French forces. France ceded Alsace and Lorraine to Prussia and was forced to pay about a billion dollars (using a modern exchange rate) in reparations. The southern German states agreed to an alliance with their northern counterparts, resulting in the creation of the German Republic.

Bismarck sought to protect the German Republic from potential threats. He was quite aware that the French wanted to avenge their defeat, particularly the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. Bismarck did not fear an alliance between Britain and France because Britain had a policy of "splendid isolation," choosing to opt out of European politics. He looked to Russia and to defeated foe Austria-Hungary for alliances.

In 1873 Bismarck negotiated the Three Emperors League, which tied Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia to each other's aid in time of war. Russia withdrew in 1878, leaving Bismarck to adopt a Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879. This treaty promised aid to each other in the event of an

attack by Russia, or if Russia aided another power at war with either Germany or Austria-Hungary. (Austria-Hungary used this agreement to command Germany's assistance against Russian support for Serbia — a nation that was protected by treaty with Russia.)

In 1881, Italy joined Austria-Hungary and Germany to form a Triple Alliance. It specifically promised that if France attacked one of the signatories, the other two would join the fight against the French. In addition, it declared that if any of the three Alliance members were to declare a preventive (preemptive) war, the other two would remain neutral. The Triple Alliance was essentially meaningless, because Italy entered into a secret treaty with France, under which Italy would remain neutral if Germany attacked France.

In 1892, to counter the potential threat of the Triple Alliance, Russia formed an alliance with France. The Franco-Russian Military Convention stated that if France or Russia was attacked, or even was threatened with attack, by a Triple Alliance member, the other power would provide military assistance.

Britain began to realize that Germany had expansionist designs and that a policy of "splendid isolation" would not offer sufficient security. Germany was also embarking on a massive shipbuilding program. In 1902, Britain agreed to a military alliance with Japan, aimed at limiting Germany's colonial gains in the east. Britain also entered into a shipbuilding competition with Germany. German ambitions resulted in pushing Britain into the European alliance system and, some have argued, made war more possible.

In 1904, Britain signed the Entente Cordiale with France. The agreement resolved certain colonial conflicts and called for greater diplomatic cooperation. Three years later Russia signed an agreement with Britain. Together, the two agreements formed a tri-part alliance that placed a "moral obligation" upon the signatories to aid each other in time of war. It was this provision that brought Britain into the war in defense of France, although Britain claimed to be honoring the 1839 Treaty of London that committed Britain to defend Belgium neutrality.

The nations of Europe had formed public alliances and secret treaties to advance their protection. But they had bound themselves together like chain-gang prisoners. When one gang member pulled hard on the chain the other gang members had little choice but to mindlessly respond.

### **Other Factors Leading to War**

In 1905, antagonism between Russia and Japan over Japanese interests in Manchuria and Korea culminated in a humiliating defeat of the Russian fleet. The scale of the defeat contributed, in part, to the attempted Russian Revolu-

tion of 1905 and led Tsar Nicholas II to look for ways to restore Russian dignity. Military conquest could offer that opportunity.

Meanwhile, in the Balkans, trouble was brewing. In 1912, Italy defeated Turkish forces and Turkey was forced to hand over Libya and other territory to Italy. Soon thereafter, Turkey was engulfed in war with four small nations over the possession of Balkan territories. Intervention by European powers brought an end to this First Balkan War. Later, in 1913, the Second Balkan War erupted with Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey fighting over territory. Peace finally emerged but grievances had not really been settled and tensions ran high. Many small nations under Turkish or Austro-Hungarian rule seethed with nationalistic fervor. These Balkan nations wanted a distinct voice and self-determination, but they were united in identifying themselves as pan-Slavic peoples, with Russia as their chief ally. Russia encouraged this belief, for aside from an emotional attachment, it provided a way to regain a degree of lost prestige.

Austria-Hungary, a decrepit empire that ruled over a collection of people with very little in common, was greatly affected by the troubles in the Balkans. Its aging Emperor, Franz Josef, worked hard at keeping together the various warring ethnic groups that fell under Austro-Hungarian control. The assassination of Franz Ferdinand by Serbian nationalists gave Austria-Hungary an excellent opportunity to flaunt its authority in the region.

Russia, an ally of the Slavs — and therefore Serbia — had been struggling to hold back internal revolution since their naval defeat in 1905. The Russian government saw war with Austria-Hungary as a means to restore social order.

France wanted revenge for the military defeat suffered in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. To this end France devised a strategy, Plan XVII, whose chief aims were the defeat of Germany and the restoration of Alsace and Lorraine. An unwritten part of this strategy relied on France's valuable "secret weapon" — the "élan" (vitality and warlike spirit) of the French army.

Germany was in flux. One hundred and ten socialist deputies had been elected to the Reichstag in 1912. This made Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg's task of negotiating between the Reichstag, an autocratic Kaiser Wilhelm II, and the right-wing military extremely difficult. He decided Germany's best hope of averting civil unrest would be war — preferably a short, decisive conflict, but European-wide hostilities could also do the job. On July 6, 1914, when Austria-Hungary was considering what to do about Serbia, Bethmann-Hollweg offered Austria-Hungary a "blank check" — an unconditional guarantee of support for any decision made by Austria-Hungary.

Wilhelm thought a war could get Germany more colonies and greater prominence on the world stage. To achieve this, his chief of staff implemented the Schlieffen Plan — a two-front war against France and Russia to be conducted

with lightning speed. (Wilhelm predicted, in the first week of August, that German troops would be back home “before the leaves have fallen from the trees.”) The German plan did not consider Britain’s entry into the war. It was thought Britain would stay aloof from the conflict and protect important British trading routes.

It has been suggested that if Britain had declared an intention to enter the war sooner, Germany would have backed away from a conflict that promised to be larger than originally anticipated. The British Foreign Minister attempted to mediate throughout July, reserving at all times Britain’s right to remain detached from the conflict. It was only as the war began that Britain’s position to enter the conflict became apparent.

### **Ten Cautionary General Semantics Lessons for the Nations of the World**

This section details ten cautionary GS lessons for our nations’ leaders using Great War examples. The format is as follows: a GS formulation and definition followed by a short exegesis with an example. The last lesson departs from this format.

1. ***Delayed Evaluating*** (a potential to stop immediate, automatic behavior long enough to sufficiently investigate the current situation before action). National leaders should think twice before deciding to take land from another country. That country may seek revenge (e.g., one reason France went to war with Germany was to get back Alsace and Lorraine).
2. ***Indexing*** (a reminder that no two things are identical). Not all allies are the same. So, a nation should not trust all of them to remain allies if a war starts (e.g., Italy reneged on its obligations to the Triple Alliance by cutting a secret deal with France).
3. ***Logical fate*** (from assumptions consequences follow). A nation may be able to head off war by sending clear signals to all parties in advance (e.g., Britain might have given Germany second thoughts about going to war by announcing in July of 1914 that an attack on Belgium would make participation obligatory).
4. ***Dating*** (attaching dates to our evaluations as a reminder that change occurs over time). Nations seeking to regain lost pride can be dangerous (e.g., one reason that Russia (1914) entered into the war was to wipe away the humiliation that Russia (1905) had suffered from naval defeat by Japan).

5. ***A map may not adequately describe the territory*** (with words, details can be left out). Governments may give incomplete explanations for why their nations are going to war (e.g., Germany and Russia entered World War I, largely, to divert attention from their problems at home).
6. ***Etc.*** (one cannot know all about anything). It's tough to predict what will happen when a nation starts a war (e.g. Austria-Hungary anticipated a very limited war against Serbia. Russia's entry into the war, on the Serbian side, came as a huge surprise).
7. ***Extensional orientation*** (search for the "facts" of a situation). Getting into entangling alliances with other nations can be risky (e.g., a key reason for World War I was an alliance system that brought about a mindless mechanical reaction once hostilities began).
8. ***Distinguish between inferences and facts*** (failure to do so can result in jumping to wrong conclusions). A nation should not overconfidently assume an easy victory in a war (e.g., France figured the "élan" of the French army would guarantee a quick conquest over Germany. Germany considered the Schlieffen Plan foolproof and victory inevitable in a matter of months).
9. ***Statistical Thinking*** (degrees of probability are involved in all our knowledge). Ethnic pride is tough to fight. It may be wiser for a nation to not waste time and resources battling groups who view such actions as oppression. (e.g., Austria-Hungary invaded Serbia to dominate an ethnic group that didn't want outside control. Russia entered the war against Austria-Hungary, in part, because of Serbian appeals to pan-Slavism).
10. ***To have a peaceful world, national leaders should learn and apply the formulations of general semantics.*** It's unfortunate these formulations weren't around at the beginning of World War I. If they had been available, and had nations used them, millions of human beings would have been spared pointless deaths. (More than eight million military personnel and six million civilians died in World War I.)

How can we make these general semantics tools known to world leaders, and persuade them to use them? Here are a few suggestions:

- If you are a government official engaged in foreign policy matters, and you are reading this article, share its contents with your colleagues.



- If you are not a government official engaged in foreign policy matters, but you know one, send this article on to them.
- Talk to your relatives, friends, and neighbors about the value of using GS tools to promote “rational” foreign policy. Such an endeavor can have a twofold benefit: it can sharpen your own thinking about foreign policy issues, and it may introduce the person you are speaking with to a system that, since its formal introduction in 1933, has been dedicated to advancing human harmony and progress.

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World War I was the first global war of the 20th century, taking place between July 28, 1914 and November 11, 1918. The causes of the war are complicated. Though Germany was blamed for the start of the war, some historians argue for collective responsibility between the warring parties. The long term causes of World War I can be remembered using a simple acronym: M.A.I.N. M: Militarism. The 20th century saw a great increase in army training and equipping. A map showing World War One alliances. I: Imperialism. Imperialism is the expansion of a government's power through the conquest of new territories. The European powers in the 19th century had occupied territories in Asia and Africa. The immediate cause of World War I that made the aforementioned items come into play (alliances, imperialism, militarism, nationalism) was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary. In June 1914, a Serbian-nationalist terrorist group called the Black Hand sent groups to assassinate the Archduke. Their first attempt failed when a driver avoided a grenade thrown at their car. Taken from About Education: The Top 5 Causes That Led to World War I. World war I summary of events. The start of the war. The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand (June 28, 1914) was the main catalyst for the start of the Great War (World War I). After the assassination, the following series of events took place: July 28 - Austria declared war on Serbia. Lists covering some of the major causes and effects of World War I, international conflict that in 1914-18 embroiled most of the nations of Europe along with Russia, the United States, the Middle East, and other regions. The war was one of the great watersheds of 20th-century history. Within a week most of Europe was at war. Effects. As many as 8.5 million soldiers and some 13 million civilians died during World War I. Four imperial dynasties collapsed as a result of the war: the Habsburgs of Austria-Hungary, the Hohenzollerns of Germany, the sultanate of the Ottoman Empire, and the Romanovs of Russia. The map of Europe changed forever as territories were divided among the victorious Allied powers. The Start of World War I: An Orgy of Declarations The precipitating event for World War I was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on June 28, 1914. Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was killed by the Black Hand - a Serbian nationalist secret society. Austria-Hungary's reaction to the death was to issue an ultimatum to Serbia, which, to the extent that it demanded the assassins be brought to justice, effectively violated Serbian sovereignty. Austria-Hungary expected Serbia to reject the severe terms of the ultimatum, thereby providing an excuse to launch a limited war ... Italy, although allied to both Germany and Austria-Hungary, was able to avoid entering the war, by citing a clause permitting it to renege on its obligations to both. The identification of the causes of World War I remains controversial. World War I began in the Balkans on July 28, 1914 and hostilities ended on November 11, 1918, leaving 17 million dead and 25 million wounded. Scholars looking at the long term seek to explain why two rival sets of powers (the German Empire and Austria-Hungary against the Russian Empire, France, the British Empire and later the United States) came into conflict by 1914. They look at such factors as political, territorial and