1914: WHY A WAR? WHY A WORLD WAR?

Notes on the Proud Tower the roots of the Great War:

In the four decades prior to August 1914, the western world and the countries in its sphere of influence were undergoing unprecedented changes in every area of society: Industrial expansion and wealth, both personal and national, had a profound impact on economic conditions, political power and government policies. These changes led to conflicts, jealousies and differences that were not easily reconcilable. Industrialization and expanded economic activity led to clashes between tradition and the need for changes, especially since there was little agreement on what changes were needed. Monarchies and democracies alike sought to cope with the changes and to protect their authority, while pressures from the people erupted in civil unrest, both in Europe and the US. Meanwhile, as the major European nations sought to expand their wealth and territories, they also looked for partners they could turn to in case of war.

Because of the increased productivity of the factories, the new inventions and the continuing expansion of European economies, the majority of Europeans were optimistic about the future in early June 1914. A small number of people, however, sensed a coming apocalypse. The Great War did not begin like World War II, with the leaders of one or two great nations preparing over a period of years to invade other nations in order to expand their territories and gain access to needed resources. While all had plans in the event of a war, none had deliberately prepared to initiate a war.

In the weeks after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand (the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne), none of the critical leaders had the power or will to slow down the decisions, actions, reactions, and attitude shifts of key government and military leaders. By August, millions of Europeans—especially the military and diplomatic leaders of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia—saw war as the way to save their honor, as well as to solve the internal and international problems that needed to be solved. Three monarchs who could have averted the war—Kaiser Wilhelm II, Tsar Nicholas II and Emperor Franz Joseph—either made decisions to go to war, felt helpless in the face of pressure from the generals, or did not have the strength and determination to prevent their military’s mobilization. The leaders of France, Great Britain and Belgium responded to Germany’s mobilization by mobilizing their own armies and preparing to protect their nations and fulfill their treaty obligations.

Why did the war begin? What kept this war going? Who was to blame? There are no easy answers to these questions. No one event or person caused the Great War. Rather, the events that led up to the fighting took place in the context of a three hundred year history of Europeans struggling to manage conflict and control war among themselves at the same time that this politically, socially and economically dynamic region spread its influence and control around the globe. And, the events that led up to the actual fighting took place in rapid succession (see Barbara Tuchman, Gun’s of August) and with the widespread support, even celebration, of the people in the major combatant countries. Many factors contributed to the decisions that led to mobilization and to the declarations of war.
The capitalist world system seemed secure in the early 20th Century, and the core societies appeared to be in firm control of the system. These very successes were creating destabilizing pressures however:

1. An intense expansionist rivalry within the core and semi-periphery. Because the world was, in a sense, “filled up” by 1910, further territorial expansion pitted core powers and semi-peripheral powers against one another and generally required war.

2. Soon after a peripheral society was brought into the world system, natives who were Western-educated would begin to formulate nationalist, anti-core ideologies and to use their skills in order to organize classes that had serious grievances against the world system. The more a peripheral area was developed, the more likely it became that some kind of reaction would take place there against the obvious disadvantages of peripherality.

3. By 1910, several semi-peripheral societies, notably Russia and Japan, were partially successful in developing economies and state machineries that could challenge the core’s domination of the world.

4. The number of participants in the world system was expanding as societies with plentiful resources and populations made the transition from peripheral to semi-peripheral status.

5. Class structures in the core were changing—working classes were becoming better organized and middle classes were growing. Elites were pressured to find methods of responding to these groups—symbolically, with nationalistic rhetoric and materially by redistributing wealth inside or finding more wealth outside in the world system.

In the end, the major destabilizing element in the capitalist world system involved the nature of industrial capitalism itself. The pressures for growth and expansion could not stop in 1910. The competition became greater than ever.