The Start to World War I
Guest: Hunt Tooley
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WOODS: I think a lot of people, if you ask them about the origins of World War II, could give you at least a reasonable overview of what contributed to that, but I bet the origins of World War I are a lot more obscure for a lot of people. So I thought we would begin World War I week on the show talking about exactly what led to the war. And my sense is that in 1914 there was a general sense that you could imagine a European war breaking out given a variety of factors at work, and the conclusion seemed to be: here's that war, so let's get this thing out of the way. We'll get it out of our system and move on. The idea that it would have world historic significance that we would still be feeling 100 years later I don't think was in the minds of many statesmen at that time.

TOOLEY: Yeah, I think you're exactly right. There was a sense that the war would be a short war. There's a good book by Lancelot Farrar on this called *The Short War Illusion*, and there was a sense that with all the new weaponry and so forth that even if it were a full-fledged war, that it wouldn't last very long, as you say. That it would be over by Christmas, or by the spring, or something. They didn't calculate that everybody would—that all these parts and pieces of the alliance system would kick in and create these two big sides. So I think that's true. I think that Gordon Craig mentions in one of his books a woman who says, well, the war has broken out; what is going to happen to my vacation now? People just didn't have the sense that it was going to big this big deal.

WOODS: Let's look one at a time what some of the factors were that led to it. For instance, leading up to the war, you see a number of confrontations between European powers in non-European parts of the world. Give us an example of that.

TOOLEY: There were conflicts in the 19th century over, for example, the Sudan. The British wanted it and the French wanted it, and actually the later Entente allies, Britain and France, almost went to the war in the '90s over the Sudan. And they just went to the brink of war. There were all kinds of conflicts in the sphere of the northern India/Pakistan area, where the

British and the Russians faced off in roughly the area of Afghanistan. Frankly, as we go through the roll call here, Tom, it's surprising the extent to which the hot spots on the earth today were also the hot spots in that period leading up to World War I.

WOODS: Well, what were the Moroccan crises all about in the early 20th century?

TOOLEY: Well, all the powers wanted to dominate North Africa. Of course, Africa, from, say, 1850 to 1860 had a very little bit of European control just around the edge, just the fringes of Africa, and then it was all in the so-called scramble for Africa, especially after the West Africa conference of 1883. The European powers just gobbled it up. So every place in Africa was thought to be kind of fair game, and at the end of it, by 1900, only one African country remained independent. That was Ethiopia. But North Africa was the object of European desires partly because those mountains that separate the coastal regions across the north from the Sahara itself contained a lot of natural nitrates, and they wanted to mine those nitrates and use them for explosives in any potential coming war. So there was a kind of a strategic factor. There was a factor of pride—getting your piece of Africa and so forth and so on. So that's the background to the Moroccan crisis. The French had already taken over some pieces, the British had taken some pieces, the Spaniards held some. When a number of European powers zeroed in there, then the German Kaiser weighed in and gave the saber-rattling speech. But we don't often remember the saber-rattling speech was a speech to tell the other European powers to back off and not take over Morocco in the way that they had done other places. Although, of course, the Germans has their—the German state was as acquisitive as anybody else, just not quite as successful in the colonial game. It had gotten started later.

WOODS: All right, so did the Germans walk away from that crisis feeling—well, how did the Germans walk away from that crisis?

TOOLEY: Well, it was a diplomatic defeat, and there were two different crises, and in the end the German Foreign Office really disliked the fact that the Kaiser had made some threat to the other powers, but they decided to use it to their advantage—the people really running German foreign policy, and that was really not the Kaiser, but the German Foreign Office, thought that it could, by condemning colonization in north Africa, sow discord among the ever-tightening Entente powers. Remember that the British and French had created an Entente in 1903, 1904, and that means an understanding, and that Russia was added to that in 1907. And so it's an increasingly tight alliance. The Germans thought that they could kind of bust it up by sowing discord and making them ashamed and having one Entente power fight against another, but in fact that didn't work, so the Germans came away from this saying, well, this is another diplomatic defeat in spite of the fact that we were, in a sense, on the side of the angels here. We were trying to get them not to take over Morocco. Again, Germany was just as acquisitive as any of the other states. I mean, the state—you and I could discourse on this at length—is an institution that almost lives by imperialism in some form or fashion. Germany was no different from the others. But in this case the Germans actually were speaking up for their own strategy. They were speaking up for not taking over Morocco.

WOODS: Right, right, and of course my intention is not to make them out to be angels but just to try to lay out some of the contributing factors. So there is some imperial rivalry. Then Bismarck, who was, of course, a great diplomat in advancing the interests of Germany, had managed to avoid so-called encirclement of Germany. There had been a presumption that there's no way that revolutionary, republican France could ever have some sort of alliance with autocratic Russia. But he made sure that that didn't happen, and then as the 19th century wore on, eventually there was a rapprochement between France and Russia, and you do get Germany being encircled. Can you talk about that?

TOOLEY: Yeah, I think that's a very interesting question, and Tom, I often like to tell my students that in a sense it wasn't the alliance system that Bismarck set up that led to the war. It was the failure of the alliance system he set up, after he was no longer a German chancellor. But, yeah, Bismarck said in a world of five, you should always try to be on the side of the three. He meant in a world of five powers, always stay on the strong side. That was one of his rules. And another one of his rules in the period where he was the dominant statesman in Europe, was always keep France isolated. Because he knew that France, after their defeat at the hands of the German states in 1871—the Franco-Prussian War. He knew that revenge would be a major motive. In fact, Bismarck thought that the new Germany took a little too much. He didn't like the fact that they took Alsace-Lorraine, and he thought the defeat was too thorough. But in any case he said we've got to keep France isolated, and so his policies were in some ways just shaped to keep France from joining up with anybody. And they thought, well, at least with all the Russians, as you say, who would think that the republican French would ever get together with the most autocratic of the great powers? But of course, this happened, and it happened when the Russians came as the suitors to France. Bismarck had been fired by the new Kaiser Wilhelm II. And when the Russians came back to renegotiate a treaty that had been in effect for some time, Bismarck's successor says, well, we don't need to keep Russia [inaudible] because we're so powerful, and we should make friends with the West, and old Bismarck was crazy. But in fact, this led the Russians immediately to the French. The Russians made concessions. They they tied up a kind of alliance, and this is now 1893-94. They tied up their alliance with a really nice financial deal in which Russia, which needed economic development but didn't have really an investing class, a middle class, asked the French for loans, and that would be then in exchange for the manufactured goods, and of course, repayment of the loan. So Russia borrowed massively through the French bond market, and that meant that middle-class French investors became the investors in Russian industrialization in the 1890s and the early 1900s. So in a way, France was tied very closely to Russia as a result of this Franco-Russian alliance that was the first real building block of the Triple Entente later on. So, yeah, it's a very complicated issue, and it also shows you why during World War I that the French citizens felt so committed to being in the alliance with Russia, with fighting the Germans to make sure that Russia didn't lose, because a losing country is just going to default on its loans, and those loans are actually owed to French citizens on the French bond market.

WOODS: Now, when people look at this war, especially textbook authors, or let's say junior high school teachers, they will often say here are the factors that led to the war: there was this alliance system, there was a naval arms race because the British policy apparently was to have a navy that was at least twice as large as that of its closest competitor, and now with the Germans building a navy, that means that the British are going to have to keep on building if they are going to stay twice as large. But why should it be that the mere existence of an arms race, or the mere existence of an alliance system, leads to war? These things don't have to lead to war.

TOOLEY: Yeah, I think, and I think that's been oversimplified and overdrawn, and you know, at different times as I've lived my life, as you say, from junior high until now I have seen different emphases on these interpretations, but it is certainly true that no matter what group you get, they tend to be simplified. You're right. Just because countries build up strong defensive establishments, they don't necessarily go to war. And the same way with the alliance system. I have already said I think it was the failure of the system rather than the successful working of the system that led to the war. But I will say this. There is an undertone of aggression in the background here that I frequently emphasize, and that was in the background of imperialism. It was in the background of diplomacy as it sort of altered in the 1860s, 70s, 80s. In the great book *A Generation of Materialism* by Carlton J. H. Hayes, the great American historian of Europe, he recounts an episode in the 1860s, the Russians came to the British Foreign Secretary, a Russian diplomat, and said, look, there's this treaty of 1856 after the Crimean War, and we agreed at the time that Russia would follow this condition and this condition, but we're just not going to do it anymore because we think that now in the 1860s things have changed. We're no longer dealing with principles so much, but power. We think that power really counts, and so we had the power to abrogate these pieces of the treaty, and we're just going to do it, but we'll tell you that we're going to do that. And the British foreign secretary said, well, you know, you're right. It is power, and you can do that. So there's a kind of underlying shift to issues of power and aggression. The state grows by leaps and bounds in size and scope, and all the plans hatched out to finance this growing state also put pressures that would tend toward and push Europe toward war, in the form of income taxes introduced in Germany and other places just before the war, and so you have a whole system of the kind of, I don't know, the best description is the warfare/welfare state, where we kind of build up this huge state, and in that sense, then you can go to war. You have the kind of system where your country is moving toward war, and it seems inexorable because that state is so massive, and huge, and all-encompassing. So I think that's a deep background behind many of these factors that we talk about typically.

WOODS: Lay out for us who the principal powers in the war are in 1914, and what it is that each one of them seeks to gain, or I suppose, conversely, seeks to prevent from happening?

TOOLEY: Yeah, it's a, and of course, the war starts out when Austria—we're now looking at 100 years ago, Austria right at this time. We've just gone through the July crisis. I am sure anyone listening remembers that June 28th was the day the archduke and the heir to the Austrian

throne was assassinated. Then there's this month-long sleepless crisis in which European diplomats negotiated like crazy, but there were factors behind it that would lead to war. The most important issue here, of course, had to do with Serbia and Austria. In other words, the Austrians, in exactly the same way as the United States pressured Afghanistan after 9/11, the Austrians pressured Serbia because Serbia had secretly backed the assassins. So when the Austrians handed the Serbians finally at the end of this July crisis an ultimatum, even with some of the same terms on it as our ultimatum to Afghanistan just before we attacked, the Serbians turned it down. One reason they could turn it down was that they had Russian backing. So this is the key to the war, to get the Austrians, who are firmly allied with the Germans, in a conflict with the Russians. This is where the earth moves here because those countries had managed to stay at peace pretty handily over a long period of time, but Russia, the nationalist statist Russia, backed the Serbians, and so when Austria put this pressure on Serbia just gave them the ultimatum then, that puts Russia on the other side.

So your first conflict, and the way to remember it, I think, is Austria and Russia at odds, and Germany comes in backing its ally, thinking that that's the honorable thing to do, I think, backing the ally, and then Germans also thought they could make gains out of a war, too, but they also thought, well, this is our ally, and we should back Austria. So the Germans and the Austrians then are in a way together. The Russians are already mobilizing partly, and the Russians are, of course, in this Triple Entente. And so it comes to be the Central Powers versus the Entente. Russia with its ready-built partnership, and they have been talking about war for some years—Britain, and France, and Russia—and then on the other side Germany and Austria/Hungary. The Turks came in later on, but only after the war had been going for a few months. And there was a bit of a bidding war on the Turks, on the Ottoman Empire, but the Germans had very close relations with them by this time, and so the Ottoman Empire came in in the fall of 1914. And Italy, who had been originally an ally with the Central Powers, decided to switch sides. That was after a very intense bidding war, both sides trying to get Italy into the war by promising pieces of territory here and concessions there, and whatnot, and in the end the Entente just won that bidding war, and Italy came in in 1915 on the side of the Entente Powers, Britain and France and Russia.

WOODS: Now, the British and the French had entered into a secret agreement that even the British public had not been aware of, years before the outbreak of the war. What were the terms of that agreement? And what would Britain stand to gain by backing France in any European war?

TOOLEY: Well, there's a broad answer to that, and I won't take too long to say that, but an immediate answer, yes, indeed there was this secret alliance, and there had been all kinds of surrounding issues like the military talks that were taking place among general staff officers of Britain and France in those years. In the long run, you go back to a kind of traditional British policy that's existed actually since the Hundred Years War or something like that. When the continent is in balance, and nobody threatens to be very strong, then the British like to sit in

their splendid isolation. But in European history, when somebody gets out of control and dominates what the British regard as sort of the English in the older days regard as too powerful, then they intervene. And this was all enunciated, I think it was practiced long before Pitt in the late 18th century, but it was enunciated and spelled out by Pitt. So in this sense, the British were deciding that the Germans had just gotten too strong as a result of becoming this huge, dynamic industrially advanced country in the center of Europe, big booming culture, a super-fine educational system, and all of these things. So the British thought, well, they are too strong, and so there is this urge then in a traditional way for them to intervene. So that's the broad issue.

I think in the near term—I think the British feared that the Germans would threaten their naval dominance in the Atlantic because the British, as you mentioned a few minutes ago, Tom, had felt threatened when the Germans started building their navy, which they did in 1898. The Germans had actually overhauled their whole financial system, you know, there was a huge financial reform where they added elements of the income tax, and so forth, early in the century just to pay for that navy—which if you want to build a navy from scratch, that's an enormous cost. But the Germans had threatened the British in that way, and in other areas in the imperial areas, the Germans seemed to be more on the go, more successful, especially at those kinds of financial and investment manipulations in places where the British were really interested, especially in the Middle East. So Germany was—it was threat in a long-term sense, and then in its immediate-term, and I think that was—those causes pretty much cover it. Otherwise, it's also true that Germany and Britain were very closely connected culturally and educationally, and in many other ways. In a way, the German people tended to admire the British, and I think the British tended to admire the Germans. There are these big state factors and these strategic factors that supply the reasoning.

WOODS: And then for France, they've got an alliance with Russia, so if Russia goes into war, presumably this leads France into war, but is there more to it than that? Do they want to get Alsace-Lorraine back that they lost in the Franco-Prussian War? What are the motivations of the French?

TOOLEY: Oh, yeah, the French just could not get over Alsace-Lorraine. Now, let me in one sentence explain. Alsace-Lorraine was an area where people for the most part spoke German, or a German dialect. And it had belonged to one of the German states in the Holy Roman Empire until the 17th century, and then the French took it in one of those many wars of Louis XIV. So it had belonged to France, and therefore, was sacred French soil from the 17th to the early 20th century, about 250 years, something like that. So the people there had become more Francophone. That is, there were more French speakers because it was part of the French state. But at home, a lot of the Alsatians—they still spoke a German dialect. It's not quite a black and white thing, but with the colossal defeat of France in 1871, the Germans, the gung-ho Germans took that area, and against Bismarck's recommendation, he thought it was a bad idea because it would just make France bitter later on and certainly it did. So the Germans made Alsace-

Lorraine a German kind of a state. It was ruled from Berlin. It wasn't its own state, and the French just simmered looking for revenge. There are stories that French recruits were taken as a part of their boot camp training up to the hills overlooking German Alsace-Lorraine, and in midnight little missions you get the effect of look down there, soldiers, that's what we want to take back. So there really was this sense of, in European history we use this French term "revanche," they wanted revenge for this, and they wanted Alsace back, so that's pretty important to the French, and numerous other frictions I would classify as smaller. I would say that Alsace was a real bone of contention to the French, and so that made them say, well, okay, it's not so bad to go to war with the most populated country in Europe against the Germans because surely the Russians will grind the Germans down, and we'll end up with a nice victory, and we'll take back Alsace-Lorraine.

WOODS: Hunt, I'd like to have you back later this week. As I told you we're doing the whole week on World War I. This will give people time, by the way, to use Amazon Prime and order your book *The Western Front*, which they should have. Everyone's talking about World War I right now, and you want to know what's a book that's of reasonable length that's written by a historian who is sympathetic in the sense that, Hunt, you've given numerous papers at the Mises Institute, at the Austrian Scholars Conference, you cite Rothbard in your footnotes, and yet, this book is published by Palgrave Macmillan, a major publisher, and it's great and fascinating to read. So the book is called *The Western Front*: *Battleground and Home Front in the First World War.* I'd like to have you back to talk about the issue of war guilt, and then also to talk about, because it has such important consequences for us today, the effects on the Middle East of World War I and the aftermath. Can we have you back on?

TOOLEY: Certainly, Tom, I would be delighted to be back on, and thank you for your kind words, and thanks for this fun conversation. It's such an important topic. I am so glad you're doing this whole week devoted to World War I and its origins and its dynamics and so forth. That's great.

WOODS: And as the next several years go on, there will be 100-year commemorations of so many aspects of the war all the way up to the peace. So there will be so much to talk about even then, but certainly this we've we want to get you back. Thanks for your time again, Hunt, everybody should rush out and get *The Western Front*. We'll talk to you again soon.