**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. Jennifer Keene – America Goes to War Pt. 1** (12m 45s)

<https://jotengine.com/transcriptions/iJJyo4kehlrMZ0xUCJMlEA>

**3 speakers** (Speaker 1, Libby O'Connell, Jennifer Keene)

**[0:00:11]**

**Speaker 1**: Welcome to the How World War I Changed America podcast series sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation with host Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: I'm Libby O'Connell, and my guest the day is Jennifer Keene. Jennifer is the Dean of Wilkinson College and professor of history at Chapman University. Welcome, Jennifer. I'm so glad you can join us.

**[0:00:39]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Thank you so much for having me.

**[0:00:41]**

**Libby O'Connell**: All right. For today we have the first part of some questions about the world going to war. We need to have you setup the beginning of World War I and do it in under 15 minutes.

**[0:00:54]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Oh my goodness.

**[0:00:57]**

**Libby O'Connell**: [inaudible] your challenge by throwing down the gauntlet. We're so lucky to have you. Your knowledge is so deep on this topic. Let's start with setting it up. Can you briefly discuss the world before 1914? I want you to talk a little bit about the European rivalries, imperialism, all those factors.

**[0:01:14]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Absolutely. So Europe before 1914 is divided by sets of rivalries that exist around trade, colonies, and have resulted in some important defensive alliances. So it's a complex situation. I'm going to sort of just hit the highlights here. First, it's important to understand who is set against whom, who are the rivals in another sense, and the key rivals here are first rivalries between Austria-Hungary and Russia, and basically this rivalry is over who's going to control the Balkans as the Ottoman Empire loses influence in Europe and is basically being pushed out of the Balkan Peninsula. So that's one key set of rivalries. The next one is between France and Germany, and this really goes back to the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, which Germany had won and France had lost some important territories, and was really also a sense of who was going to be the dominant power in continental Europe. And then there was an important rivalry between Germany and Britain. Germany was recently unified in 1870 it was kind of a newcomer in Europe, and it had embarked on a Naval building program that seemed to threaten British control of the seas and also was ambitious to create a colonial empire, and this was threatening to both France and to Britain. And so which power would dominate Europe and the seas? These are really the questions that are the heart of these rivalries that we see. And then next there was a series of alliances that sort of reflected a kind of upping the ante, if you will, of some of these rivalries. And these alliances are often misunderstood. These were really defensive alliances, but they're often interpreted as almost requiring Europe to go to war after the Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated. There's an alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary, and then there's another formal alliance between France and Russia. And Britain is a sort of loose partner here to that alliance whose commitment is open to interpretation, and that also becomes an important factor in the series of events that lead toward 1914.

**[0:03:21]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Long ago, when I was in school, there's just sort of another old [saw] about how we can remember a mnemonic device for the origins of World War I about militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism. Those four topics spell the word main. Is that still the best explanation or a great way of understanding the coming of the war?

**[0:03:43]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So most World War I historians hate that. Only because of what it implies about what causes events to happen or how history happens. These four things, militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism are obviously important in terms of understanding the geopolitical environment, and what the mindset is of Europe in 1914, but it's a big jump to go from describing an environment to explaining why something happens, and really most historians now accept the interpretation which focuses on the decision making of small groups of men in powerful positions. That this was not inevitable, that these leaders really sort of very consciously made a decision to go to war, because they believed that war was in their nation's best interest and that the potential gains from war outweighed the risks. I'm not saying they made the decision lightly, but they made it consciously, that the idea that dominoes begin to fall and everybody's just caught up in the sweep of events, and so there was no way to stop this tsunami from happening is just not true. There's many places along the way where you could have seen a different decision had been made, there may have been some fighting, but would that fighting have meant World War I? Probably not. So what ifs are always problematic, but I think the important thing is that focusing on this main idea as an element of inevitability to the whole war, but in fact it was not inevitable.

**[0:05:24]**

**Libby O'Connell**: Great. Thank you for clarifying that, because I know people are still teaching in [crosstalk 00:05:28].

**[0:05:28]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Oh it's still there. It's still there.

**[0:05:31]**

**Libby O'Connell**: We even use a noun Balkanization. We say something has been Balkanized. Can you remind our audience of what that means?

**[0:05:39]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So the Balkans basically had been under the control of the Ottoman Empire for much of the 19th century and then beginning of the late 19th century, early 20th century began to break up into small countries or small provinces. And so the idea of Balkanization, that something's being broken apart and sort the pieces are lesser than the whole, yeah, this is where that concept comes from. Now what's important, in sort of thinking about the first World War, is that prior to 1914 there were two Balkan Wars that occurred over 1912 and 1913, and these wars really created a lot of instability in the region, and I'll just sort of briefly summarize them. So the first war was a loose alliance of independent Balkan States who wanted to push the Ottoman Empire out of its last remaining territories in Europe, and this first war was pretty successful at doing that, the Ottoman Empire lost a lot of its territorial presence, what it had left in that region, but these allies soon sort of turned on each other, the Balkan allies, and were unhappy with how the spoils of victory had been divided. And that leads to a second Balkan War. And just for an example, so in the first Bulgaria fights with the other Balkan nations, but in the second Balkan war, Bulgaria fights against Serbia and France. So you can see that even in the sense of being unified against the Ottomans, that's not a for sure thing in this region. So there's a lot of instability in this region. Now why should we care about this? Because, okay, there's regional conflict, and if we can look now and say, "Oh these conflicts have been going on there forever", you know, it's still had Serbia, Bosnia at each other. The reason that it's important is because of the interest that Austria-Hungary and Russia also had in this region. And so these territorial ambitions of the Balkan States to become independent, strong states in their own rights in some ways bumped up against the interest of Austria-Hungary and Russia for each kind of filling the power vacuum that the Ottoman Empire had left, and they picked different sides or so Russia really wanted to back a strong Serbia because they felt as fellow Slavs. They could develop a kind of pan-Slavic union that they could kind of use Serbia as almost a client state and Austria-Hungary, who I just recently annexed Bosnia Herzegovina saw a strong Serbia as a threat to their control of that region. And so actually really had ambitions to, if not annex Serbia outright, definitely curtail its growth as an independent power. So these Balkan Wars which create this instability and kind of create the sense that there's an opportunity for another great empire to move in and absorb these territories, creates this tension between Austria-Hungary and Russia and all sort of focused on what role Serbia is going to play in the area, and as we know that's going to be very important.

**[0:08:29]**

**Libby O'Connell**: In 1914 who's the strongest power looking at Serbia in the Balkans? Who has the most dominion?

**[0:08:37]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Well, in terms of sort of proximity, I would say Austria-Hungary, because Austria-Hungary has just annexed Bosnia Herzegovina. There's a sense from the other European nations that okay, Austria-Hungary that's enough. Like we don't want you to get too powerful either, but of course they have the ability to greatly influence the region through their proximity with their army through trade relationships. I mean for Russia, they can aspire to have a control there, but it's more of a jump. Certainly given the state of their military, in terms of the geographical locations of the countries, I think that that's really the country that has the greatest influence at this moment. The question is, is it going to grow or is it going to sort of remain at the status quo?

**[0:09:22]**

**Libby O'Connell**: In 1914, June, the Archduke, the Habsburg Empire, Franz Ferdinand, who in fact was heir to the throne, visits Bosnia with his wife Sophie, and they go to Sarajevo. Why was he going there and what was the response to his visit?

**[0:09:39]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So Bosnia was a recently annexed territory by the Austria-Hungarian Empire, and he was going there ostensibly to observe military maneuvers. It's a state visit. It's as a way to reinforce the impression that Austria-Hungary in fact controls this area, and this was, in a nutshell, the controversy that it created. This seems to be, in a sense sort of unnecessarily rubbing salt in the wound of people in the region who did not agree with this annexation. And he also decided to visit on a Serbian national religious holiday, which was perceived as a deliberate affront to Serbian independence and to Serbian ambitions. And so there was a lot of disgruntlement about this, and it obviously backfired, because that sense of outrage was not the only, but one of the things that provoked members of the Black Hands to travel to Sarajevo and carry out their mission, which was to assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. It's kind of ironic that he's the one that was killed, because he was not a particularly well known or loved figure. He, in and of himself, did not have such a huge following of admirers in Austria-Hungary, who were grief stricken when he was assassinated, and he was also somebody who was a bit of a reformer. And many scholars feel that if he had lived, he would have been one of the voices within the Austria-Hungarian government forcefully arguing against invading, attacking Serbia. So there is a little irony there that he becomes the symbol and his assassination is a catalyst for the war.

**[0:11:26]**

**Libby O'Connell**: So we're going to leave it there, the arrival of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia June 1914. Professor Keene mentioned that there's a group of people who think World War I is inevitable, that once the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand happens, it all just becomes a cycle of the declaration of war leading right up to World War I just in a couple of months, like sleepwalkers, people just blindly going into war. But she argues that in fact, there were several decisions that had to be made before war was declared, and in fact, it was not an inevitable process. So stay tuned for our part two of World Goes to War. This is Libby O'Connell signing off for the World War I Centennial Commission's podcasts on World War I.

**[0:12:18]**

**Speaker 1**: Thank you for listening to this episode of How World War I Changed America. The podcast series is made possible by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon foundation and the collaboration of the US World War I Centennial Commission, the Doughboy Foundation, the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, National History Day, and the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History.

**[0:12:41]**