**How WWI Changed America**

**Podcast Series**

**Dr. Jennifer Keene – American Goes To War Pt.2** (19m 29s)

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**3 speakers** (Speaker 1, Dr. Libby, 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 host, Dr. Libby O'Connell.

**[0:00:26]**

**Dr. Libby**: Welcome, everyone. I'm Libby O'Connell. My guest today is professor Jennifer Keene, Dean of Wilkinson College and professor of history at Chapman University. Today our topic is world goes to war part two. Welcome, Jennifer. I'm so glad you could join us.

**[0:00:44]**

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

**[0:00:45]**

**Dr. Libby**: I'm going to jump right in and take a look at the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. We were talking about it previously, and I know you have some pretty interesting insights about what impact the assassination of the Archduke had on the outbreak of World War I. Was it inevitable at that moment in June, 1914 the Archduke was assassinated in Sarajevo that World War I would break out?

**[0:01:11]**

**Jennifer Keene**: That is a great question and it is really important to understanding how we get from the assassination of a relatively minor Austro-Hungarian official to a world war in basically two months. The trick here is not to get overwhelmed by the chronology and all the events as they unfold and not throw your hands up and just say it's impossible to understand. What I want to emphasize is four key moments and where we could see moments where if decisions had changed, the course of history might have been altered. But what we also see is that each set of decisions, in a sense, raises the stakes and makes the next decision even more consequential and important. And I think that this idea of one decision makes the next decision even more important, makes the next decision even more important and then finally we end up with a world war is a way of really appreciating how this was a process of decisions made, not an inevitable war that had to be fought. So the first really important decision was made by Austria-Hungary because Austria-Hungary decided to hold Serbia responsible for the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Now, the Black Hand, the terrorist organization had traveled to Sarajevo, which was in Bosnia, and committed the assassination. The Serbian government had not ordered this, had not been directly involved, but nonetheless, because the Black Hand survived and was organized within Serbia, that's where that organization lived, Austria-Hungary decides to hold Sarajevo responsible. And it decides to send Serbia a list of demands, conditions that it must adhere to, so humiliating that Serbia would reject them and that would give Austria the pretext for invading Serbia and absorbing that nation into its empire. And as we spoke about in part one, fulfilling its ambitions in the Balkans. And in doing so, Austria-Hungary believed that it had the backing of Germany, which is the so called blank check. It had consulted with its ally, Germany, before sending this list of ultimatums, and Germany had given them the green light to go ahead and act basically to end this troublespot and it would benefit Germany because they would have an ally with a lot of control over the Balkans. So this is the first set of decisions. And this actually led to something quite unexpected because when Serbia came back Austria-Hungary, it actually offered a quite conciliatory response. It took Austria-Hungary by surprise, how conciliatory Serbia was. And they only questioned one of the ultimatums, and that was enough for Austria-Hungary to argue that Serbia had disregarded its demands, pull the trigger and decides to invade the country. At this point, what do we have? We have a small regional war in a conflict ridden zone. We do not have World War One.

**[0:04:23]**

**Dr. Libby**: All right, so what was decision two?

**[0:04:26]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So decision two is once Austria-Hungary invades, the reaction of Russia becomes key. So remember again in part one I had spoken about how both Austria-Hungary and Russia both have territorial ambitions in the Balkans and now Russia elects not to ignore this and just accept it as a [inaudible 00:04:45], "I guess Austria-Hungary is going to be the predominant power in this region," but instead they decide to stand by Serbia. And the offer of support that they give to Serbia causes the Tsar to order a partial mobilization of the Russian army. And the partial mobilization is sort of meant to alarm Austria-Hungary and maybe cause them to reconsider and pull back, but at the same time not unduly antagonize Germany by seeing, "Oh, maybe Russia is mobilizing against us as well."

**[0:05:17]**

**Dr. Libby**: [inaudible] meddling, right?

**[0:05:18]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Exactly. That's a great way to put it. The problem is that the Russian army... The Tsar orders something that the Russian army does not have the capacity to do, they don't have any plans for a partial mobilization, and it's a complex process to mobilize this massive army that the Russian army has access to the reserves and to all the components that go into even to where their railroad lines are. So they don't have the capacity to do what the Tsar has ordered, which he quickly realizes and then falls back to a general mobilization. The problem with ordering a full mobilization is that it does antagonize Germany because Germany knows that France and Russia have an alliance, and within Germany there has been a total preoccupation with the sense of feeling encircled by enemies, that you have friends on one side and Russia on the other side, they're allied against you and you feel like this is a vice that is squeezing the country. And so when Russia fully mobilizes army and tries to reassure the Germans or the German Kaiser, that this is only intended as you sort of put it to [inaudible] against Austria-Hungary, Germany now feels that the stakes have been raised. Now instead of just simply backing an ally and their desire to control the Balkans, suddenly one of their main enemies, who they perceive as their enemies, has mobilized, has ordered a full mobilization right along the German border.

**[0:06:46]**

**Dr. Libby**: So as we escalate, what happens next? What's the third decision?

**[0:06:50]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So the third big decision is what's going on within Germany because now Germany has to decide what to do. And the mindset within Germany here is very important. Again, the sense of encircling. And there were many German officials who believed that war was inevitable. I'm arguing that it's not, but they believed that it was, that a war was going to have to be fought at one point because of this encirclement, because of this way that Germany felt that these important forces in Europe were aligned against them. And the key, I guess, decision that was being made was, when are we going to fight this war? Are we going to fight it now or are we going to fight it later? And Russia had just begun this modernization of its military. There were those within the German government and military circles who argued Russia is still relatively weak, the moment to strike is now, let's break out of this encirclement, let's establish our preeminent position as the dominant power in Europe once and for all, and in a sense get rid of a problem that is staring us down the barrel of a gun. And so the decision to begin the war was made by Germany as well, and the sense that if war has to be fought, let's fight it now, war will benefit us and the vantage goes to the aggressor, to the first person on the field. Now, when I'm saying all of this, I want to make 100% clear that people are influenced always by what has occurred in the past in terms of projecting what will happen in the future. And in making a decision, Germany did not envision four years of trench warfare and a massive war on the eastern front that would cover hundreds of miles. They envisioned a short war of movement where they would gain an advantageous battlefield position, that they would defeat their enemies who would sue for peace and they would come to the negotiating table and they would trade territory and they would therefore benefit.

**[0:08:45]**

**Dr. Libby**: They were imagining another version of the Franco-Prussian war where it's all over very quickly, they hit hard, hit fast and it's not a world war. It's just getting everybody to the table so they can stake their claims.

**[0:08:58]**

**Jennifer Keene**: That's right. Exactly. That's what they think they're doing. So nobody has a crystal ball to sort of see what's going to happen. So then we have Germany pulling the trigger and their plan is first knockout France and then turn to Russia, which they expect to be the harder war to fight. And so you see Germany invading France, going through Luxembourg and Belgium, coming down through northern France, and then obviously attacking on the eastern front as well. So that's the third important decision.

**[0:09:27]**

**Dr. Libby**: And the fourth one?

**[0:09:28]**

**Jennifer Keene**: And the fourth position is Britain, what Britain decides to do, because this was the wild card in the room. There was true belief within the German government and within German military circles that Britain would accept what Germany had done because it would be over before Britain could really do anything. Again, if you have the Franco-Prussian war model in your head, the idea is, well, you swing through Belgium to get to Paris faster, you get to Paris, the French government capitulates, you negotiated out, it really doesn't affect Britain at all, and Germany makes amends for any damage that it may have caused in Belgium as it swings through. And this is important because Britain had pledged in the 19th century to secure Belgian independence, and so that violation of that independence and of that treaty would be something that Germany expected Britain to object to but just did not perceive it as something that Britain was so committed to that it would actually enter a European war to preserve. And so this is where you see some miscalculations because first miscalculation, the Belgians fights and don't just let the army walkthrough, they actually put up a big fight, and the German army is committing atrocities as they conquer Belgium, becomes a great propaganda for the French to circulate Britain to show the wrongs that are being committed. And the second miscalculation is that Britain does elect to stand by Belgium and it started to preserve Belgium independence as both symbolic and geopolitical. Symbolic in the sense that if nations can just uniformly disregard treaties, then how can the international order actually work? And secondly, geopolitical, because if Germany controls Belgium and controls those important seaports, what is that going to do to British control of the English channel? How could that possibly really affect great Britain? And so great Britain elects to enter the war. And this is so important, not just because it adds another European power to the allied side, but Britain controls the seas and Britain controls a huge imperial empire, and that immediately puts all of those resources at the disposal of the allies and turns a European war into a world war.

**[0:11:48]**

**Dr. Libby**: So this happens relatively quickly, the whole war, can you give us a little setting of dates so that we know... The assassinations [inaudible] June, when is Britain entering World War I?

**[0:12:00]**

**Jennifer Keene**: So all of this is by the beginning of August. So essentially, you have the assassination and then you have the July crisis where there's a lot of diplomatic maneuvering and then the ultimatums come back from Serbia at the end of July, and then by the beginning of August, all of these decisions are being set in motion. And the idea that there was sort of a long delay and then a quick acceleration of decision making, this would be something that really had a strong impact on the mindset of Europe in the post-World World I period where the notion that if there had been an opportunity to have a conference or for people to meet face-to-face or for them to be able to discuss their fears and their apprehensions and to be reassured and for Britain to say very clearly to Germany, "If you invade Belgium, we will fight you." Would that have been enough to deter Germany from pulling the trigger in that case? That notion that the lack of conversation was what really triggered the war, this is what creates so much interest in the league of nations that we need to create an organizational structure in which countries can come together and discuss and mediators can come in at critical junctures to head off possible conflict, because that had been lacking in this process by which Europe sort of stumbled or sleepwalked. That's the [inaudible] Christopher Clark says, sleepwalked into war.

**[0:13:27]**

**Dr. Libby**: Once war is declared by these different groups, different nation states, do you start seeing the sort of gung ho, "Oh this war will be over soon, we can all join in" and everyone thinking we're going to be back in a few months from the front? Or is it really more complicated than that?

**[0:13:44]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Oh, it's always more complicated, isn't it? [crosstalk] it's more complicated. Kidding aside, it definitely was more complicated. What we see, it really depends on where you are and how much the war is personally affecting you. So in Germany there was a lot of enthusiasm for war, especially in the middle class who had probably been the most accepting of the notion that Germany had to fight, it had to fight to secure its legitimate place in Europe, that there were enemies that wanted to destroy it or certainly limit its growth. And also that war was something to be valued. We have this notion that war should be avoided at all costs, but in the 19th century wars were not avoided at all costs and they've seemed to bring benefits and they brought personal benefits. I mean, this whole idea of chivalry and honor and masculinity and duty and all of the sort of value that we have, we instill in the warrior image that... Especially for middle class men. I mean this was something that was seen as sort of their generation's proving grounds. There were though working class, socialist groups in trade unions in Germany that were very pacifist, very antiwar, and certainly apprehensive. But see, this isn't a country that is starting the war. If you're in an invaded country in France or Belgium, well, I mean you have to fight this war. You've just been invaded, it's not really a question open for debate. I don't know that you're enthusiastic about it, but you're certainly convinced that it's necessary and you have to expel these invaders from your nation. And then in a place like Britain, again, there are some pacifist demonstrations before Germany invades Belgium, but then it becomes very much framed as a question of national honor and [inaudible] the same idea of notions of chivalry being associated with military service. Because again, for Britain it seems more of a choice than it is if you're invaded, the war comes to you. It seems like not much of a choice to fight it. In countries where it seems more like a choice you see, I think, more public ambiguity. But for the vast majority of people, they understand that the war means sacrifice. I think there's a lot of resignation about it too. So really, in other words, it is complex and probably that's reassuring. The notion that everybody cheered and "Yes, we can't wait to fight a war" is definitely a gross oversimplification.

**[0:16:07]**

**Dr. Libby**: These great powers lined against each other, controlled colonies in Africa and Asia, how does World War I affect those colonies?

**[0:16:17]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Yes. So this is very important because the fact that the war quickly spreads and that especially Britain and France are going to be able to call upon the resources in their colonial empires and essentially transport those resources, whether they're men, materials, money to Europe in order to fight the conflict, that definitely becomes a key factor in creating a global conflict. And how people reacted in those colonial possessions or the dominions, in the case of great Britain, again, it sort of depended on what benefit they saw fighting on the side of their motherland and also what kind of choices that they had to fight. So in dominions like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, you see a lot of enthusiasm in parts of those countries, but also as the war goes on, great controversy. Australia, Canada have big controversies over whether or not to enact conscription at a certain point in the war. In Canada, the Franco Canadian population is very disinterested in fighting in the conflict. In the French case, you have French West Africa in which there is a long tradition of having a force of indigenous soldiers who are helping France maintain that colonial empire. But then also the question of transporting these troops to Europe also introduces controversial questions around conscription. So you'd see that the war, in the beginning, it seems that having an empire is a benefit, but then the destabilizing role that the war plays within these colonial possessions begins to also then create new sources of problems for the empire and, many people feel, sort of plant the seeds of eventual independence later on in the 20th century. So a war fought on behalf of preserving an empire becomes, in a way, one of the destabilizing agents in its survival, not immediately, but certainly in the long term. So it's not just a question of, "Oh we have resources we can pull on them," but then also thinking about what that process does to the power dynamics between the mother nation and the so-called colonies.

**[0:18:29]**

**Dr. Libby**: Right, so it has a dual impact and this is happening all over the world.

**[0:18:34]**

**Jennifer Keene**: Exactly.

**[0:18:35]**

**Dr. Libby**: Truly, a global war. Truly, a global war. This has been great. I'm really so excited about some of the information you've been giving us today. I want to say thank you to you for setting the scene and really filling in the details on the World goes to war in our podcast on World War One. Professor Keene, thank you so much for joining us.

**[0:18:57]**

**Jennifer Keene**: It was a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**[0:19:02]**

**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.

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