



# THE CAUSES OF WAR

*Posted on May 1, 2023 by Lord Arthur Ponsonby*



This excerpt is from Arthur Ponsonby's important summary of war, its causes and its results, from his book, *War & Treaties. 1815-1914*, which was published in 1918.

Lord Ponsonby (1871—1946) was a politician and writer. He opposed Britain's involvement in the First World War and worked actively for peace.

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A growing number of people are devoting their attention to a closer study of foreign affairs. Many of them may not have the opportunity to read the larger volumes of histories; and, indeed, even if they had, they would find their choice of books very much restricted when they came to the more recent period of European and world history, although in the last year or so the gap has to some extent been filled up by several interesting studies of international politics in the nineteenth century. Some knowledge of this period is essential if we are to understand the full significance of the events of to-day, and if we are to form any helpful opinion of the course to be pursued in future.

Historians often take for granted that their readers already have some general knowledge of the groundwork of events and they build up their structure of criticism, their delineation of policy and tendencies, and their survey of international problems on the assumption that the scaffolding has been erected. But often it has not, and then history, more especially the complex tangle of international history, becomes difficult to grasp. It may therefore serve some useful purpose if a few poles of scaffolding representing the dates and outline of conflicts and agreements between nations can be supplied in a very brief and easily intelligible form, a presentment of the bare record of facts which may be useful for reference.

During the last hundred years war has been a more common occurrence in international intercourse than most people realize. The forty-two records of wars tabled in these pages do not cover the whole ground. They are the chief conflicts, or the conflicts fraught with the most serious consequences, but they are by no means the only occasions on which there was fighting in the world. Revolutions, unless they led to international war, are not mentioned, neither are expeditions such as the advance on Llassa, the Chitral expedition, the Indian frontier wars, the Kaffir wars, the Somaliland expeditions, the revolt of the Herreroes in German West Africa or the French expeditions in Morocco: the wars between the states of South America, with two exceptions, have also been omitted. But the list as it stands, is striking

enough and may suffice to make the student inquire further into the circumstances which produced this almost unceasing strife.

The causes are epitomized in the fewest possible words and the occasion is separated from the cause. Causes of wars are very seldom remembered and are not very easily discovered in the perusal of histories. The occasion is sometimes mistaken for the cause, whereas it may often be merely a pretext. The occasion of a war has not infrequently been a comparatively trivial incident, whereas the cause can be traced to the gradual development of friction for which divergence of policies or conflict of ambitions may have been responsible. The trivial incident, or even an incident of a more serious nature, may pass off without fatal consequences if no friction exists between the nations and there is a general atmosphere of amicable understanding. Where, on the contrary, relations are strained it requires but a very small spark to light up a conflagration. It is important therefore to detach the occasion from the cause.

Causes of war in the nineteenth century differ to some extent from those of previous centuries. The elemental combative passion of man expressing itself in fierce racial animosities is far less noticeable. Religious differences do not figure so positively as a reason for conflict. Dynastic ambitions linger on and still play a formidable part, even after 1815, but not with the same unashamed and aggressive arrogance as in bygone centuries. Nationalist aspirations begin to assert themselves, and the waves of revolutionary exasperation with outworn systems of despotic government have made those very governments combat that spirit by force of arms. As the century proceeds, and the wonderful inventions for rapid transit and communication develop, the most noticeable element in war-making is the commercial or colonial ambition of governments fostered largely by the pressure of financial interests and declaring itself under the name of Empire. This policy of competitive imperial expansion in the newly accessible regions of the globe will be found to constitute the most frequent cause of dispute, of jealousy, and of suspicion between nations. The pretext will vary, the excuse will be presented under plausible guises for popular consumption, but the ultimate cause, the fundamental origin will be the same. Imperialism economic in its origin is fostered largely by an exaggerated spirit of nationalism.

The remarkable extent of Empire expansion in the latter part of the nineteenth century is best illustrated by the following figures:

### **Acquisitions of Territory**

- To the British Empire 1870–1900: 4,754,000 square miles; 88,000,000 population.
- To France 1884–1900: 3,583,580 square miles; 36,553,000 population.
- To Germany 1884–1900: 1,026,220 square miles; 16,687,100 population.

But perhaps the chief and most frequent cause of war is war itself. In the Balkan Peninsula—where, whenever the fighting has ceased, nothing approaching a satisfactory settlement has ever been concluded—this is specially true. Eight or nine of the wars recorded concern the Balkans. Or take the Crimean War. Sir Spencer Walpole says:

“From 1856 to 1878 the Continent of Europe was afflicted with five great wars—the Franco-Austrian War of 1859; the Danish of 1864; the Austro-Prussian of 1866; the Franco-German of 1870 and the Russo-Turkish of 1877: all of which can be lineally traced to the war of 1854,” and one at least of those wars, as we know, sowed the seeds of future war. The war that is concluded by a dictated peace, the war that leaves a sense of grievance and unsatisfied though legitimate claims, the war that inspires a lasting desire for revenge inevitably leads to future war. Wars are never aggressive but always defensive on the part of those who are responsible for waging them. Wars are never defensive but always aggressive on the part of those against whom they are waged. The Ministers and monarchs do the quarrelling, the people believe the version they are told and obey. The people do the fighting and make the sacrifice, the Ministers and monarchs do the treaty-making without consulting them. The people's part is one of valiance, endurance, and suffering; the part of the Ministers and monarchs is one too often marred by failure and frequently disfigured by intrigue and deception.

Cast your eye through these forty-two very brief records of wars. Think of the valour, the determination, and the heroism of the people, be they soldiers or civilians. Consider the noble part played by those who without question obeyed what they were led to believe was their country's call. And then look on the other side at the results—the ineptitude of the statesmen, the patched-up treaties, the worthless agreements, the wars that led to further wars, the failure to secure a settlement after the soldier had done his part, and the unnecessary prolongation of conflicts when agreement might have been reached by the exercise of a little wisdom and foresight. The contrast is remarkable between the actions on the battlefield and the intrigue in the council chamber. Blood has been spilt, lives lost, and victories won often without any positive advantage being gained in the final result.

The wars are arranged according to date. Some were long-drawn-out struggles, others sharp conflicts of a few months. The number of men engaged in any battle and the casualties if they could be

tabulated would no doubt seem comparatively small to our modern eyes. The total loss of life in the Crimean War amounted to about 600,000 men.<sup>1</sup> An estimate of the loss in killed and wounded in some of the other great battles may be given as follows: Solferino (1859), 31,500; Chickamauga (1863), 35,100; Gettysburg (1863), 37,000; Königrätz (1866), 26,894; Vionville (1870), 32,800; Gravelotte (1870), 30,000; Plevna (1877), 19,000;<sup>2</sup> The Boer War (1899–1902): British losses, 28,603; Boers killed, 4,000, prisoners 40,000;<sup>3</sup> Mukden (1905), 131,000.

Wars to the generation that experiences them are unmixed evils engendering hatred and evil passions and bringing in their train loss, suffering, destruction, and impoverishment, all of which are acutely felt. The succeeding generation inherit their consequences in the shape of high taxation and the attempts to mend and reconstruct the dislocated national life. The horror has gone but the memory remains. To the succeeding generation they become episodes read of in the cold pages of history, and then at last they fade into mere names—a battle with a vaguely remembered date.

Each war is terminated by a treaty. The main provisions of a few additional treaties which were not concluded after wars are also given. In but few instances have war treaties been observed, and in several cases they were not worth the paper they were written on. Treaties are signed and ratified by statesmen without the sanction or approval, and sometimes without the knowledge, of their people. The statesmen enter the council chamber as individuals bent on securing advantages at other people's expense, and ready by bargain and intrigue to attain their ends. These instruments therefore are expressions of temporary expediency sometimes exacted after defeat, sometimes the result of compromise and generally inconclusive. If treaties are to become sacred obligations founded on international justice and respected not merely by changing governments but by whole nations, the spirit in which they are drawn up and the method by which they are concluded must be radically altered. The existence of secret treaties and engagements has proved to be one of the gravest dangers to European peace.

<sup>12</sup>There are a large number of conventions which have been concluded between nations, by which social intercourse with regard to such matters as post and telegraph is facilitated, and of late years arbitration treaties between one Power and another have multiplied very rapidly. This is the one advance in which the efforts of diplomacy have borne fruit. The important treaty of Arbitration between Great Britain and the United States is the only one of these treaties mentioned in the list. Agreements with regard to the conduct of war have been made, such as the Geneva Convention of 1864 and 1906, and the Hague Declarations of 1899 and 1907, but they have proved to a large extent futile.

Treaties are generally concluded for an undefined period, and lapse owing to deliberate breach or altered circumstances. But no people, and it may safely be said no government, was precisely aware which of the innumerable treaties were still in force, and what actually in given circumstances its obligations were.

There may be many instances in which a nation may look back with pride at the victory of its arms and the achievements of its generals. There are but few instances in which a nation can look back with pride at the advantages gained by treaties of peace and at the achievements of its diplomatists. From the Treaty of Vienna, 1815, to the Treaty of Bukarest, 1913, the record of so-called settlements is not one to inspire confidence in the efficacy of warfare or in the methods of diplomacy.

After the termination of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 there were great hopes of an era of peace. But two antagonistic elements existed in Europe which were bound sooner or later to come into open conflict. On the one hand the French Revolution had engendered in the peoples a spirit of unrest, of discontent, of impatience with the unfettered monarchical system, and at the same time confidence in their power and hope of success in the destruction of tyranny and arbitrary government. It was in fact the rise of democracy. On the other side the despotic governments were ready to co-operate, and, under the guidance of Metternich, endeavour to repress and exterminate the<sup>13</sup> movement for the establishment of constitutional government, and for the expression of nationalist and democratic aspirations. Two waves of revolution passed over Europe in 1830 and 1848, and by the middle of the century the reactionaries could no longer hold their own, and many states had been freed from despotism and oppression.

In the latter part of the century, however, as has already been pointed out, fresh causes for war arose in the competitive ambition of governments for imperial expansion. Wars became more frequent and extended into remote regions of the world which had become accessible. There are forty-seven wars mentioned in these records; of these thirteen took place before the Crimean War, which is about the middle of the period, and thirty-three after. In twenty-one out of the forty-five wars Great Britain was either directly or indirectly concerned as a belligerent. There were only two wars in which Christian nations were not primarily involved.

It must be remembered that in no country had the peoples any voice in the determination of policy so far as international affairs were concerned. While for brevity's sake the usual phraseology is adopted, and such expressions used as "France decided," "Russia refused," "Italy intended," etc., etc., in no case

does the name of the country mean the people or indeed anything more than a monarch and a few statesmen. Although constitutional monarchy became established during the period in many countries, and with it, parliamentary government, the idea of diplomacy, foreign policy, international engagements, and treaties being under parliamentary supervision and control, had not yet been suggested.

The solution of the vast problem of the avoidance of war in the future, if it rests alone on the wisdom of sovereigns and statesmen, is not likely, judging by the experience of the past, to be reached very rapidly. In the meanwhile a careful examination of the events of recent history is a necessary preparation for all who want to dispel the strange but prevalent delusion that force of arms settles international disputes, and this record may be useful as a manual for reference.

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**Featured:** *Vive l'Empereur! (Long Live the Emperor)*, by Édouard Detaille; painted in 1891.

