The Outbreak of World War I: Misunderstandings and Miscalculations

Emily Schulz
IR 1003 Introduction to International Relations: History and Concepts
12 November 2009
Many students, when first embarking on their studies of world history, are often told that World War I was caused by the Serbian assassination of Austria’s Archduke and his wife in June 1914. However, scholars generally agree that the war actually had its origins in the nineteenth century and that the assassination was merely the catalyst which set off the war. The question scholars now ask is not how the war began; rather, one question is how much the war was based on misunderstandings and miscalculations. Did World War I happen entirely or partly because of misunderstandings and miscalculations? Before answering the question, definitions for *misunderstanding* and *miscalculation* must first be established. They must then be put into context: what were the misunderstandings and miscalculations of the nineteenth century onward that led to the outbreak of war? Once definitions and context are determined, there can be a discussion of how far misunderstandings and miscalculations led to World War I.

In order to know what is meant by *misunderstanding* and *miscalculation*, a dictionary must be consulted for their respective definitions. *Misunderstanding* is a “failure to understand correctly; mistake as to meaning or intent” (“Misunderstanding,” Dictionary.com def. 1). Expanding on the given definition, this can be taken to mean that one party does not have enough knowledge of a situation or even ignores past examples and therefore fails to fully comprehend the implications and consequences of the situation. *Miscalculation, or miscalculate*, means “to calculate or judge incorrectly” (“Miscalculate,” Dictionary.com def. 1). As with *misunderstanding*, a party may not be aware of every aspect in a given situation, or perhaps blind to history, and cannot then make sound decisions about the situation. One could say that misunderstandings and miscalculations are due in part to assumptions being made. The question, then, is what assumptions, leading to misunderstandings and miscalculations, contributed to the outbreak of war.
One does not need to go very far back in history to find the thought processes and assumptions which had an effect on international relations leading up to the Great War. They fall under several major categories: political, social, and imperial. The imperial aspect mainly involves the idea of territorial gains. Many Europeans, especially in Germany, feared that Russia would continue trying to take over the Balkans. On the other hand, Europeans also feared a German takeover: Germany was building up her navy, and she had already taken Alsace-Lorraine and other land around Europe to unite the Germanic peoples. The claim has been made by one Dr. Charles W. Eliot that during the war, the Germans justified their occupation of Belgium by stating the need for ports for their navy (Eliot 1915, p.473). Clearly, imperialism had not yet died in Europe, and countries like Britain and France still held onto their colonies elsewhere in the world while fearing takeovers by the growing powers of Germany and Russia.

Though Europeans feared such takeovers, they were in favor of – and even expecting – a war. This public approval was caused by several factors, the biggest one being nationalism. Children spent years being educated in patriotism, being told how superior their country was to others (Joll 1984, p.18-20). The citizens were encouraged to believe that their country was so great it was guaranteed to win any conflict. People were also becoming bored with the routine of daily life; they had a thirst for adventure and excitement which war was sure to bring (Joll 1984, p.18-20). It has also been said that people had very romantic ideas about war (Howard 1988, p.34). Naturally they had no idea that adventure and romanticism are very far from the realities of war, and they could not know that the war coming upon them would be more horrifying for them than any war of the past. Another, very different social factor was that of a changing economy in countries such as Germany. Agriculture was beginning to give way to urban industry, and the government was quite unable to keep up with the changes going on (Mommsen
These changes and the tenuous political structure caused the countries to be on the verge of revolution (Mayer 1967, p.45-47). The best way anyone could think of to fix their various internal problems was to go to war, which left their respective governments with a serious decision to make.

Besides their social issues, European governments had many political considerations before making the decision for war. For years they had been trying diplomatic ways of solving international problems. However, diplomacy was getting them nowhere, as no one wanted to come out the worse in negotiations (Farrar 1973, p.35). There was also the issue of a balance of power. One source claims that Britain seemed to be the only one who cared about there being a balance in the European powers, while the continental countries cared more for their own security (Bridge & Bullen 1980, p.15). This claim makes a point about national security in nineteenth-century Europe: it would seem that people tend to prefer short-term security over long-term benefits which no one wanted to wait for. Germany especially felt that a preemptive or preventative war was the best way to remove threats on security (Fischer 1969, p.71, 74). War would be a quick solution to preserving security, which is the thought process reflected all over Europe. Most, if not all, countries felt that they had a good chance of winning the war. They also felt that their political and economical structures could not survive a long war and so believed that the war would be short (Farrar 1973, p.36).

The final political aspect of international relations leading to World War I revolves around alliances. It is perhaps best to begin with a brief overview of the alliances that were in place when the war began. Germany agreed to back up Austria-Hungary against Serbia, which gave them a reason to prepare to fight Russia (Fischer 1969, p.74). Russia, meanwhile, agreed to back up Serbia in the event of an Austrian attack. Russia also feared German power gains, and
found in France another country in need of allies against Germany (Kennan 1984, p.34). France, besides allying with Russia, made an alliance with Britain who had also promised help to Belgium in case of German attack (Duffy 2009). This alliance system brought countries all over Europe to the point where if fighting broke out between Austria and Serbia, the whole continent would become involved in a world war. As L. L. Farrar states, “The war occurred because the alliance system continued” (1973, p.41).

These alliances invited the countries involved, specifically Germany, to make yet more assumptions regarding the coming war. Germany was not expecting Britain to enter the war at all because of their previous isolationist policies (Duffy 2009). They did expect that when war finally broke out, Russia would not be ready or able to mobilize quickly enough and that France would fall within several weeks because it was too focused on internal problems (Fischer 1969, p.72-73). Germany’s assumptions were risky and proved to be a difficulty when the fighting started in 1914.

It is clear that making assumptions, whether correct or incorrect, had an effect on the outbreak of World War I. The imperial assumptions about territorial expansion had a direct effect on European thought processes. Social assumptions of national superiority and of needing a war to solve problems also had a direct effect. As for political assumptions, the alliance system certainly produced various effects, especially the assumptions Germany was making regarding the other countries. Desire for national security and the lack of power balancing also had an effect on decision-making leading up to the war. What, then, led to misunderstandings and miscalculations, and which of those led to the outbreak of war?

Imperial assumptions can be ruled out as miscalculations because they turned out to be correct. The social and political assumptions, on the other hand, can be counted as
misunderstandings and miscalculations. Training citizens to believe such a high level of national superiority was a miscalculation because it caused a high level of public approval and excitement for war. Solving internal problems with an external war, though it seemed a good idea at the time, was also a miscalculation; the governments could have looked for other ways to resolve their conflicts. The alliance system and Germany’s assumptions within it were both misunderstandings and miscalculations because it seemed no one was bothering to look at historical examples of political intrigues and intricacies gone wrong and because it is never safe to assume what one’s opponents might or might not do when confronted with a certain situation, in this case war.

Looking at the various assumptions that were made, and the decisions based on those assumptions, has led me to conclude that World War I was almost entirely based on misunderstandings and miscalculations. The only bit that was not miscalculated was the fear of hostile territorial expansion. Perhaps war would have been avoided, had the Europeans been able to look at other alternatives besides their convoluted alliances and overblown nationalism, and had they studied previous wars. Perhaps war would have been avoided if the Europeans had not made so many risky assumptions of their situations. All speculation aside, it is clear to me that World War I’s origins can be found in the nineteenth century and are much more broad and complicated than a world war caused because of an assassination.
References


Duffy, M., 2009. *The causes of world war one*. [Online] (Updated 22 August 2009) Available at:  


http://www.dictionary.com

http://www.dictionary.com