



Research Paper

Downfall of Monarchy and the Gradual Perpetuation of a Democratic State: A Seismic Change in the Context of World War-I.

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The previous century was marked by many epoch-making events which altered the course of history. Two global wars which affected every nation of the world and changed our notions about violence and loss stand out strikingly amongst them. World War I broke out in July, 1914 allowing human beings to witness a colossal clash involving multiple nations and evolved into carnage, unthinkable and terrible in its proportions. Almost more than a century into the Age of Enlightenment, this bloodbath brought about the requisite changes thereby giving a finite shape to the modern era. One of the most important consequences of WWI irrespective of its pros and cons was the complete disintegration of monarchical system of governance which has been prevalent in most places since the inception of early human civilizations. This vacuum was filled by popular democracy and different covert forms of absolutism which are to be explicitly discussed in my article. Since the beginning of early human societies there had been an inherent tendency amongst humans to perpetuate absolutist rule and bestow huge power in the hands of a single person. There were republics and oligarchies too where people together governed the state and the chain of succession was not hereditary. Ancient Roman republic and Greek city states are the finest example of these. However the republic in Rome disintegrated to give rise to a hereditary empire and all around the world in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and other cradles of civilization, great dynasties sprung up. Till the late medieval era this practice dominated the global political scenario but the 'Age of Reason' brought in winds of change. A great tussle continued between the age-old monarchical system and new democracy for centuries which found a decisive conclusion in the World War I after which most countries around the world shifted to popularly elected governance. However popular democracy didn't turn out to be as just as everyone expected. An inherent need to resort to autocracy saw the rise of new age dictatorships, covert aggressions and even dynastic rule in parliamentary politics. This article centres around the final stages of a decaying monarchical facade mostly in Europe and a steady growth of popular democracy in lieu of that. The economic devastation suffered by the participating states and other nations directly or indirectly brought about a great transition in statecraft. It is pertinent to find the underlying causes behind the aforementioned shift and seek to uncover the newly emergent power structure accompanied by a struggle for global hegemony.

Decaying European Monarchies on the Eve of the World War I

Europe since the ancient times has witnessed the conflict between republican and monarchical forms of governments. Mostly autocracy held its sway and swallowed the flag bearers of popularly elected government by sheer strength. Just like the Greek polis falling prey to the mighty Alexander of Macedon or Xerxes of Persia, states managed by its inhabitants democratically have been the primary targets of power hungry despots. Despite the vast majority of absolutist kingdoms, republican strongholds like Florence in Italy or several German principalities have managed to coexist alongside ever-expanding empires till late medieval era. Cultural Renaissance fuelled by the fall of Constantinople and dissipation of classical knowledge throughout Europe acted as the harbinger of a new age. It was followed by religious reformation and a great Scientific revolution helping the mankind advance in leaps and bounds. These planted the seeds of individual and collective liberty in the heart of Europe and culminated into a massive challenge to tyranny in the modern era. The major dynasties which held sway over most of its mainland on the eve of World War I were the Romanov Tsars in Russia, Hohenzollern Kings in Germany, House of Savoy in Italy, Bourbons in Spain, Ottomans in Turkey and Habsburgs in Austria.

England had already transformed into a constitutional monarchy where the royal authority was no longer arbitrary and absolute. Rest of Europe were either divided into small kingdoms governed by decaying, warring royal houses or the satellite nations who were de-facto controlled by the major powers. To review how the stream of history arrived at such a turbulent juncture, it is pertinent to examine the significant events which had acted as catalysts scattered across the previous few centuries.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 curbed the powers of its monarch immensely and ushered in the era of parliamentary statecraft which started out as a form of oligarchy but slowly shifted towards democracy. This revolution did not have an instant impact on the European power structure but started the little push which eventually shook very bases of Divine right to Kingship. The American Revolution which started in 1776 and ended victoriously seven years later furthermore established the growing inability of monarchies to hold on to their scattered dominions. Thirteen colonies together cut off their ties with the British Crown to establish a modern democratic, federal state. Then came the French Revolution like a tidal wave with the message of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity and overthrew age old rule of Valois and Bourbons to establish the First French Republic. Peter Kropotkin perfectly described it as an event that set all Europe astir and overthrew everything conventional.¹ Although Napoleon's empire soon followed and the Vienna Settlement of 1815 spearheaded by Metternich tried to restore the entire political fabric to its earlier autocratic form but the mass had already acquired a taste of individual liberty by then. The entire nineteenth century saw great upheavals in France where the continuous transition from monarchy to republic signified a strenuous change of guard. Finally the rule of Kings over the country ended with the removal of Napoleon III from the throne. Italy and Germany were unified under Kings of old lineages but the likes of Mazzini, Garibaldi, Cavour and Bismarck who acted as the real agents of unification were modern statesmen who now possessed much of the executive power. Thus by the end of the 19th Century the earlier custom of power being reserved for landed elites definitively came to an end and educated common men rose to high positions in the state machinery.

While the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by the Serbian Gavrilo Princip on 28th June, 1914 certainly acted as the final catalyst for the First World War, there were numerous other causes aggregating for decades before its outbreak. Hence in this context, the eve of World War I not only refers to the immediate yesteryears but also the latter half of 1800's when European politics took a deadly turn. The monarchies were in a volatile socio-political milieu but they remained the majority power holders in mainland Europe. Each major dynasty heading the most influential states fared differently under myriad conditions which warrant critical analysis for an objective evaluation. England in 1880's was going through the last years of Victorian reign. The Queen herself enjoyed considerable political influence but limited jurisdiction over the internal affairs of the state. The British Empire reached its zenith during these years after acquiring all controls of India from the hands of English East India Company. There was a prevailing political tension with Russia regarding the Crimean issue and the Irish clamour for self-rule affected domestic politics in the long run. Boer Wars in Africa, especially the long and costly Second Boer War (1899-1902) undeniably exposed the crude and inhumane colonial approach of the Empire but did little to jeopardise the stability of the state. When Victoria breathed her last, her son and heir Edward VII and grandson Kaiser Wilhelm II were present.² Ironically while Edward would work relentlessly to consolidate Britain's vast holdings and usher in a period of relative peace in the colonies which would ensure Britain's survival throughout the World War I, the Kaiser with his aggressive and reckless foreign policy would hasten the great conflict thereby bringing Germany on the doorstep of destruction. His father, Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia, with the aid of Otto Von Bismarck had unified the scattered provinces into one sovereign state in 1871. Bismarck devised a constitution that interestingly attempted to strike a balance between autocracy and autonomy. While the Emperor enjoyed absolute liberty to choose his own government, the other executive duties were invested in the hands of the government headed by a chancellor. For more than a decade Bismarck competently served Germany in that capacity, making its diplomatic position formidable with wily moves. Owing to military tensions all around, he forged alliances with Austria and Russia thus forming the "Three Emperors' League". However this did not last due to Russia's continuous suspicion of Bismarck's ulterior motives. Thereafter he formed the ill fated "Triple Alliance" with Austria and Italy which was considered by the critics to be one of the earliest steps towards the World War I.³ One of the cardinal features of German statecraft during Bismarck's age was the rise of multi-party politics in Germany and the steady decline of totalitarianism. This helped the country progress leaps and bounds both economically and socially. However after Kaiser Wilhelm II's ascension, the equation changed and the Iron Chancellor was forced to resign in 1890.⁴ Post-Bismarck Germany undertook a

¹ Peter Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution 1789-1793*, trans. Nora Dryhurst (Independently Published, 2020), I.

² "Queen Victoria: The woman who redefined Britain's monarchy", BBC Teach, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/ks3-gcse-history-queen-victoria-monarchy/z73rnrnd>

³ V.D Mahajan, *History of Modern Europe Since 1789*, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Pvt. Ltd, 2013), 218.

⁴ V.D Mahajan, *History of Modern Europe Since 1789*, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Pvt. Ltd, 2013), 224.

fierce imperialist policy which saw them capturing Samoa and turn their aim towards Morocco which led to a major clash with France. The likes of Caprivi, Bullow and Hollweg who succeeded Bismarck as the Chancellor were politically inexperienced and they couldn't prevent the headstrong Kaiser from carrying out major diplomatic errors. Wilhelm II's spectacular failure at making Germany a world leader proved how obsolete totalitarian monarchy has become and proper parliamentary governance was the only way forward. France's fate in the pre-war years was directly tied to that of Germany. The defeat of Napoleon III at the Battle of Sedan in front of Bismarck's wily military manoeuvres officially ended monarchical era in France. The Third French Republic was hastily formed and it faced great internal and external threats. Continuous clash between the Republicans, Socialists and Monarchists went on for almost twenty years. Many efforts were made to bring back monarchy but the Third Republic, aided by a Constitution ratifying a democratic election persisted through this crisis. After Bismarck's removal from the seat of power in 1890, France's political isolation in Europe ended and under the leadership of Foreign minister Déclassé it formed a bond with its old arch-enemy England to counter Germany's expansionist drive. Italy too did not get exempted from the whirlpool of a new age. Despite being unified under the House of Savoy, Italians weren't satisfied with the monarchical administration. While a parliamentary system was adapted and improved in 1882, the crown still enjoyed arbitrary power. Joining the Triple and Alliance and undertaking military expansions into Somaliland and Abyssinia was not welcomed kindly by the mass, especially after a great failure in the Abyssinian campaign. This encouraged the socialists to rally people greatly against the King and riots broke out in the provinces. King Humbert was assassinated in 1900 and Victor Emmanuel III succeeded him.⁵ Under his reign, the government adapted many progressive education and healthcare reforms and also diplomatically put Italy's foot in both warring European Camps. Apart from the armed clash with Turkey on the eve of World War II, Italy maintained a careful neutral stance between the Allied and Entente powers. Perhaps the most affected empire at precipice of the First World War was the stronghold of Romanovs in Russia. Despite the iron-clad autocratic rule of Tsar Nicholas I till 1855, the Russian intelligentsia raised its voice to bring forth the much needed social change. Pushkin, Dostoyevsky and other prominent writers propagated the new liberal ideas whistling around in rest of the Europe amongst the Russian population. Tsar Alexander II earned the people's admiration by emancipating the serfs in 1861 but his thoughtless foreign policies and a collapsing treasury led to the rise of youth political factions like the Nihilists. The Tsar was assassinated by the nihilist members of 'Narodnya Volya' or 'People's Will' in 1881 after several failed assassination attempts.⁶ He was succeeded by Alexander III whose vigorous campaign of "Russification" earned him the hatred of many nationalities living within the folds of Russia, including the Poles. Reckless despotism by the Romanovs planted the seeds for the rise of central-left and socialist organisations who quickly gained popularity. The next Tsar Nicholas II engaged in a war with Japan regarding the annexation of Manchuria in 1904-1905.⁷ With a debt-ridden treasury, lack of social order and continuous haemorrhage from meaningless wars, the workers and trade unions rebelled thereby starting the Revolution of 1905. Although after much bloodshed, the Russian forces led by Prime-minister Witte put an end to the unrest, it ignited a spark that couldn't be extinguished and would erupt into a great fire after twelve years, consuming the entire Romanov clan. Portugal, though a shadow of its past self in European politics witnessed the transformation of a monarchy endorsed multi-party system into a full-fledged Republican government in an around the same time. Dom Carlos I, the King and Luis Filipe, the crown prince were assassinated in 1908 followed by a coup d'état by the Portuguese Republican Party that ended monarchy for once and all in 1910. The Ottomans had adapted a form of constitutional monarchy led by the Grand Vizier to keep popular unrest at bay and were virtually powerless in the 20th Century. In sharp contrast to these declining crowns, the great Austro-Hungarian Empire was fairly stable and its ruler Franz Joseph governed the territories through a de-facto constitutional monarchy. His nephew and heir apparent Franz Ferdinand was a liberal man unabashedly supporting parliamentary governance over absolutism. His assassination added flames to the great inflammable mess Europe was with Austria declaring the World War I.

Rise of Democracy and New Forms of Absolutism in Post World War I Europe

Between 1871 and 1914, most of Europe following the footsteps of Great Britain adapted parliamentary institutions to various degrees of effectiveness. However these were still in the shadow of a looming monarchical edifice. Only Switzerland, Portugal and France were completely republican after throwing of the regal shackles in the years leading to the World War I.⁸ Thus a great epoch-making event was needed to bring in the change of guard knocking at the door for a while and it came in the form of a global war. On one side was the Triple Entente

⁵ V.D Mahajan, *History of Modern Europe Since 1789*, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Pvt. Ltd, 2013), 246.

⁶ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present*, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2010), 715.

⁷ John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe: From the Renaissance to the Present*, (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2010), 720.

⁸ David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 351.

of Britain, France and Russia joined by Serbia, Portugal, Italy and the U.S.A (in 1917) faced by the alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottomans and Bulgaria. Considered as the bloodiest war in all history until then the WWI led to the loss of around twenty million lives according to the official accounts. Another twenty million ended up being severely injured and impaired. Apart from these the unfathomable economic loss crippled the entire continent thereby effectively striking the death blow to the moribund Empires. Lasting for five long years, the war formally ended on 28th June, 1919 with the Treaty of Versailles signed between the allied powers and Germany. The aftermath saw a huge, unforeseen socio-political change across Eurasia and birth of a new world from the ashes of the old. Great European Empires fell like dead trees thereby clearing the path to rise of popular democracy. Romanovs of Russia were the first to be wiped out even before the end of the War. In October, 1917 the communists of Russia led by the Bolshevik faction insurrected with arms against the Tsarist government. It was successful and soon the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic emerged as the world's first socialist state with Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov Lenin as its leader. The new government executed Nicholas Romanov, Empress Alexandra and their entire family a year later. In Germany Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated after the humiliating defeat thereby ending the Hohenzollern rule and the Weimar Republic was formed to govern the country democratically. A cadet branch of the Hohenzollerns nominally ruled in Romania till 1947 but the dynasty's power and prestige was effectively erased. Habsburgs who've been the masters of many European nations since medieval era were exiled from their lands and Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated into the individual nations of Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The Ottomans who were on the losing side of the conflict couldn't prevent the allied invasion of Constantinople in 1919. They lost all power and in their stead a Turkish National resistance sprung up under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha who established the modern Turkish Republic. Italy despite being an original member of the Triple Alliance deserted camp and joined the Entente powers in 1915. It suffered great financial loss and was not duly replenished by the Treaty of Versailles. This enraged the mass severely and curbed the powers of Victor Emmanuel's crown significantly. Hence a vacuum was created and soon filled by the charismatic and jingoistic fascist leader Benito Mussolini. Apart from the fall of dynasties the war induced significant political changes in the weakened victors and losers alike. Near-Universal suffrage for example U.K General Election of 1918, German Federal Election of 1919 and Turkish General Election of 1923 was adapted by the new electorate democracies for the first time in history. However the immeasurable financial damage caused by the war led to a dislocation of economic life and disruption of world trade.⁹ Gradually it fed on the anger of public and led to the rise of Fascist leaders like Mussolini (Italy), Adolf Hitler (Germany) and General Franco (Spain) who ushered in an era of neo-monarchy or dictatorship.

Post World War I Europe was truly unique from a socio-political viewpoint as for the first time in the continental civilizations long millennia old history monarchies were no longer the majority shareholders in the arena of power. Even those that remained were substantially weakened and entered a transformation to nominal figureheads kept as mere ornaments over popular democratic governments. This fact was furthermore aided by the formation of the League of Nations, the main global institution intended to bring peace, stability and resolve the post-war disputes.¹⁰ Although it didn't fulfil the expectations and failed to prevent the World War II, it was the beginning of a great metamorphosis. In place of Alexander's empire encompassing half the globe or Temujin's mighty Mongol stronghold of Eurasia, there was an international democratic body to settle the matters of international dispute. Before the League, it was held both in theory and in practice that every state (kingdom) was the sole and sovereign judge of its own acts, owing no allegiance to any higher authority, but this confederation of different nations was handed collectively the moral and legal right to judge actions of any member state judiciously keeping in mind the larger goal of global peace.¹¹ Following a similar line, the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 outlawed war as a method of settling international disputes. Although proved to be completely utopian, this was the first time a law had been made to prevent humans from engaging in organised violent exchanges since the inception of human civilisation. Many would argue that Woodrow Wilson's vision failed, the League of Nations collapsed and the World experienced a bloodier war during 1939-1945 that left behind an appalling carnage. But it did not halt the overall rise of commoners to collective governance over themselves replacing the age old Divine-origin theory of Kingship. The entire situation was called a 'Great Experiment' by R. Cecil, one which despite failing bore fruits in the long run.¹² Even now in the twenty-first century there are absolute monarchies in middle-east, there are military dictatorships in North Korea and Myanmar, there is single party absolutism in China but these totalitarian facades are no more the majority in Global geo-political arena. Most nations are democratic in spirit and practice which has indeed led to global liberalisation. Thus, it is necessary to remember and critically evaluate the First World War and its effects as it definitely acted as the great harbinger

⁹ David Thomson, *Europe Since Napoleon*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 601.

¹⁰ Allan Todd, *The Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 52-58.

¹¹ F.P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*, (California: Praeger Publishers, 1986), 2.

¹² V.D Mahajan, *History of Modern Europe Since 1789*, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Pvt. Ltd, 2013), 425.

of change. There are positive sides to every catastrophic incidents and the W.W I was no exception. In lieu of unimaginable atrocity and loss, it facilitated the downfall of Monarchy and started the perpetuation of a predominantly democratic world.

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