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European History

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Causes of the First World War

This document was written by [Stephen Tonge](#). I am most grateful to have his kind permission to include it on the web site.

Europe Before 1914: the Main Powers

Triple Entente

Name	Head of State	Allies	Disputes
Britain	King George V (1910 - 1936) Constitutional Monarchy	France, Russia	Naval arms race economic rivalry with Germany
France	President Raymond Poincare Parliamentary Democracy	Britain, Russia	Wanted the return of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from Germany
Russia	Tsar Nicholas II (1894-1917) Monarchy	Britain, France	Rivals with Austria for control of the Balkans Strained relations with Britain.

Triple Alliance

Germany	Kaiser Wilhelm [William] II (1888-1918) Constitutional Monarchy	Italy, Austria-Hungary.	Rivals with France over Alsace, Britain over her navy.
Austria-Hungary	Kaiser Franz Joseph (1848-1916) Constitutional Monarchy	Italy, Germany	Rivalry with Russia over the Balkans, Territorial disputes with her ally, Italy
Italy	King Victor Emmanuel III (1900-1946) Constitutional Monarchy	Austria, Germany	Disputes with France in North Africa large Italian communities lived in the Austrian Empire.

The direct cause of WWI was the **assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand** at Sarajevo on **28 June 1914**. However historians feel that a number of factors contributed to the rivalry between the Great powers that allowed war on such a wide-scale to break out.

A major historical debate still rages about who has the ultimate responsibility for the outbreak of war. Germany and Austria are usually regarded as the main culprits. **However unlike World War Two there is no one easily identifiable bad guy!**

Below are some of the main long-term causes that are identified by historians:-

- [The System of Alliances](#) / rivalry between the powers
- [Militarism](#)
- [Nationalism](#)
- [Crises before 1914](#)
- [The Eastern Question / The Balkans](#)
- [Domestic political factors](#)

The System of Alliances

Before 1914 Europe's main powers were divided into two armed camps by a series of alliances. These were

- The Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy (1882)
- The Triple Entente of Britain, Russia and France (1907)

Although these alliances were defensive in nature, they meant that any conflict between one country from each alliance was bound to involve the other countries. **The fact that Germany faced a war on two fronts greatly influenced her actions during the July Crisis.**



By 1914 Italy was only a **nominal** member of the **Triple Alliance**. She had concluded a secret treaty with

France by which she promised to stay neutral if Germany attacked France and when war broke out she stayed out. This meant that Germany had only one dependable ally, Austria-Hungary.

The main rivalries between the powers were:

- Germany and France over Alsace. This division made an alliance between both countries impossible.
- Russia and Austria over the Balkans.
- Britain and Germany over their navies and economic power.

“The alliances created an excessively rigid diplomatic framework, within which relatively small detonators could produce huge explosions” (A.J.P. Taylor)

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Militarism

In all of the Great powers, military spending increased greatly in the years prior to the war. All except Britain had conscription. Over 85% of men of military age in France and 50% in Germany had served in the army or navy. France had the highest proportion of its population in the army.

Percentage Increase in Military Spending	1890-1913	Size of Peacetime Army 1914
Britain	117	430,000
France	92	970,000
Russia	19	1,500,000
Germany	158	760,000
Austria Hungary	160	480,000

The armies of both France and Germany had more than doubled between 1870 and 1914. The rivalry between the powers led to a building up of weapons and an increase in distrust.



Colonial rivalry had led to a **naval arms race** between Britain and Germany. This had seriously worsened relations between both countries. The British-German dispute also led to greater naval co-operation between Britain and France.

In 1880 Germany had 88,000 tonnes of military shipping, Britain 650,000; by 1910 the figures were 964,000 and 2,174,000 respectively.

The launch of **HMS Dreadnought** in 1906 made matters worse. This ship was fast, heavily armoured with powerful guns and it made all previous battleships obsolete.

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Nationalism

Allied to this growing militarism was an intense nationalism in most of the Great powers. **Weltpolitik** or the desire for world power status was very popular in Germany. The French desire for revenge over Alsace and Lorraine was very strong. In Britain Imperialism and support for the Empire was very evident. This nationalism meant that there was little resistance to war in these countries. Many welcomed what they thought would be a short, victorious war. **For example the outbreak of war was greeted by cheering crowds in Berlin, Vienna and Paris. As A P J Taylor wrote “the people of Europe leapt willingly into war.”**

War Plans

Because of the nature of the Alliances most countries had war plans that involved rapid movement of troops when war broke out. **This made it very difficult to stop mobilisation of troops once it had begun and gave the military in each country a very important role in any decision-making.** For example the Kaiser lost control of events and said to his generals when they made the decision to mobilise "Gentlemen, you will regret this."

The Schlieffen Plan

The famous German war plan, the **Schlieffen Plan**, relied on the quick movement of troops and the assumption that once Germany found itself at war with Russia, it would also be at war with France.

It involved:

- Concentrating German forces on an attempt to take Paris and so defeat France.
- When that was achieved troops would be transferred to attack Russia. This is the most famous plan as it came very close to success.

It also meant that once Germany declared war on Russia in August 1914, she would also have to attack France. However in invading France, **Belgium's** neutrality was violated and this brought Britain into the war.



France had her own plan called **Plan XVII** (which **Niall Ferguson** described as “mad strategy”) and so also did Russia (**Plan G**) and Austria-Hungary (**Plans R and B**).

All of these plans assumed the co-operation of their respective allies.

Once the first steps towards mobilisation were taken, everyone assumed that it would be fatal to stand still while their potential enemies moved forward.

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The Crises before 1914

Between 1900 and 1914 there had been three major crises between the great powers. These crises exposed the

differences between the powers and reinforced the hostility between them.

Two were over **Morocco** (1905, 1911) and the other was over the Austrian annexation of **Bosnia** (1908).

1. **First Moroccan Crisis**

In 1905 **Kaiser Wilhelm II** visited the Moroccan port of **Tangier** and denounced French influence in **Morocco**. The move was designed to test the strength of the recent Anglo-French entente. The visit provoked an international crisis, which was resolved in France's favour at the **Algeciras Conference**, 1906.

The result was to bring France and Britain closer together. **Edward VII** called the German actions "*the most mischievous and uncalled for event which the German Emperor has been engaged in since he came to the throne.*"

2. **Second Moroccan Crisis**

This crisis erupted when the Germans sent the gunboat "**Panther**" to the Moroccan port of **Agadir**, to protect German citizens there. Germany claimed that the French had ignored the terms of the Algeciras Conference. This provoked a major war scare in Britain until the Germans agreed to leave Morocco to the French in return for rights in the **Congo**. **Many Germans felt that they had been humiliated and that their government had backed down.**

3. **The Annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina**

The two Turkish provinces had been administered by Austria since the [Congress of Berlin](#). Austria **annexed** Bosnia after tricking Russia during negotiations between their respective foreign ministers. The action outraged Serbia as there was a large Serbian population in Bosnia. There was a crisis among the Great powers and it brought Europe to the brink of war. Russia bowed to German pressure when they supported Austria and they agreed to the annexation. However she was determined not to be humiliated again.

The effects of these crises had been a hardening of attitudes and an increase in distrust between the different European powers. It led to a strengthening of the different alliances:

- Britain and France during the Moroccan Crises
- Austria and Germany during the Bosnian crisis.

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The Eastern Question and The Balkans

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century the Ottoman Empire had lost land in the Balkans to the peoples who lived there. The great powers were also interested in extending their influence in the region. Austrian and Russian relations were poor over their rivalry in the Balkans.

Both hoped to expand there at the expense of the Ottoman Empire. Another important factor was the growth of Slav nationalism among the people who lived there, especially Serbia.

Russia encouraged Slav nationalism while Austria worried that this nationalism could undermine her empire. Russia supported Serbia which was very bitter at the annexation of Bosnia and saw herself as Serbia's protector.



As a result of the **Balkan Wars (1912 - 1913)** Serbia had doubled in size and there was growing demands for the union of south Slavs (**Yugoslavism**) under the leadership of Serbia. Austria had a large south Slav population in the provinces of **Slovenia, Croatia, the Banat and Bosnia**. Austria was very alarmed at the growing power of **Serbia**. She felt Serbia could weaken her own Empire.

The Austrians decided that they would have to wage a **preventative** war against Serbia in order to destroy her growing power. They were waiting for the correct pretext (excuse). When Franz Ferdinand was shot the Austrians saw this as the perfect opportunity to destroy Serbia. But when she attacked Serbia, Russia came to her aid and the war spread.

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Domestic issues

Modern historians have drawn attention to the influence of internal politics on the actions of the Great Powers. Socialism had become a very popular political creed in Germany, Austria, Russia Italy and France.

The ruling class in some of these countries hoped that a short victorious war would put an end to class differences and reduce the support for socialism that threatened the existing order.

Other domestic issues that the war drew attention from were:

- It defused the near civil war situation in Ireland "*The one bright spot in this hateful war*" (Asquith).
- The crisis over income tax and the length of military service (France)
- The unpopularity of the Tsar (Russia).

Underlying the assumptions of all the Great Powers during the July Crisis was the belief that if war did break out it would be a short one. Many in Britain felt that the war would be over by Christmas.

Few predicted the bloodiest war so far seen in history that would lead to:

- [The abdication of the Tsar](#) and a Communist revolution in Russia
- The fall of the Kaiser's regime in [Germany](#)

- The collapse of Austria-Hungary
- The end of the Turkish Empire.

Main Events of "The July Crisis"

Mobilisation: preparing the army for war.

- 28 June** Assassination of **Archduke Franz Ferdinand**, the heir to the Austrian throne in **Sarajevo**. He was shot by a Serb nationalist, **Gavrilo Princip**. The Austrians saw the murder as a perfect pretext to crush Serbia.
- 5 July** **Kaiser Wilhelm [William] II** assured Austria of Germany's support in whatever measures she took against Serbia, the so-called "**Blank Cheque**".
- 23 July** Austria presented Serbia with an **ultimatum** and she was given 48 hours to reply. Although the text was approved on the July 19 it was decided to delay its presentation until the state visit of the French President and Prime Minister to Russia was finished. This was done to prevent the French and Russians from co-ordinating their response. It was presented when the French delegation had left Russia and was at sea.
- The Serbs agreed to all of the Austrian demands bar one. The Austrians were so surprised by the humility of the Serbian reply that the foreign minister hid it for 2 days from the Germans. The Kaiser commented that the reply was "*a great moral victory for Vienna, but with it, every reason for war disappears.*"
- 28 July** Austria rejected the Serbian reply and declared war. The Russians ordered a **partial mobilisation** of their troops against Austria in defence of Serbia.
- 29 July** The Austrians shelled Belgrade.
- 30 July** Russia ordered **general mobilisation**. Crisis escalated. British attempts at mediation failed.
- 31 July** The Germans presented an ultimatum to Russia to halt her mobilisation within 12 hours. She also presented one to France in which she was asked to promise to stay neutral and to hand over border fortresses as guarantee. (the Germans knew the French would never agree!)



It must be remembered that once the military machine mobilised the generals took over from the diplomats. James Joll wrote "once the Russians had mobilised the military machine took over from the diplomats.

In German military thinking, once she was at war with Russia, war with France was unavoidable. The Schlieffen plan now came into operation. This involved a concentration of German forces on an attack on France. Delay could be fatal.

- 1 August** Germany declared war on Russia. France ordered general mobilisation.
- 2 August** Germany demanded from the **Belgians** the right to send troops through their country. The Belgians refused.
- 3 August** Germany declared war on France and its troops entered Belgium. The British sent an ultimatum to the Germans calling for the evacuation of Belgium.

4 August Britain declared war on Germany.

World War One had begun.

Lloyd George later remarked that at this time Europe “stumbled and staggered into war”

Leaving Cert Questions: The Causes of World War One

2003 / 1993 “The Causes of World War I were many and complex” Discuss

Yes!!

- The system of Alliances
- Militarism / War Plans
- The Balkans
- The influence of the different crises prior to 1914 on Great Power relations
- Domestic Issues (e.g. [Home Rule Crisis](#) in Ireland)
- The July Crisis

1998 Treat as the causes of World War I 1914-1918

Websites

[Excellent website](#) dedicated to the First World War.

[Article from the BBC](#) history website about the causes of the War. Excellent links to other articles about the war.

[Student oriented website](#) from the National Archives in Britain.

[Very informative micro site](#) from Channel 4.

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