

The Causes of the First World War

Who or *what* caused the First World War is a hotly debated historical issue. Long-term diplomatic and political clashes building up for over a century were ignited by the assassination of the heir, to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand. As you review below, consider how long-term and short-term factors interacted to produce the conflict.

• SKILL SET

Historians have debated the question of causation (CAUS) for the First World War since it began, a common reaction to a devastating event brought about by a seemingly minor loss (the assassination of Franz Ferdinand). The issue makes for an ideal historiographical question (INTR) and one that requires you to make an argument (ARG) by considering the range of evidence (EVARG) from both long-and short-term factors. As you read this section, consider these interpretive questions: 1) Which causal factor played the most essential role?, 2) Could the conflict have been avoided? If so, how?, and 3) How would one apportion national responsibility for actions bringing about the conflict?

MAIMIN'

Students often find mnemonic devices helpful in recalling content. The standard for World War I's causes is MAIN. However, this formula tends to overlook the importance of internal and intellectual causes, which are harder to identify precisely but important nonetheless. Therefore, we use MAIMIN'. The following provides a bird's-eye view of these causes.

Militarism and Military Plans – After the wars of unification in the mid-19th century, armies exploded in size and firepower, driven by mass production and the dynamic Second Industrial Revolution. These technological and industrial advances rendered warfare even more efficient and deadly. Never before or since have greater percentages of populations served in their nations' military. Conscription (the draft) and regular military training militarized society by creating mass citizen armies. Government leaders associated national greatness with a strong military, and many adopted military dress in public ceremonies. In preparation for the upcoming conflict, nations expanded their armaments and navies.

Germany's desire to build a world-class fleet of battleships antagonized Great Britain and made an enemy out of a potential ally. Kaiser William II's (r. 1888-1918) reading of American Admiral A.T. Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890) convinced him that if Germany wanted a "place in the sun," it must develop a commercial empire akin to Britain's. Given the

AP ACHIEVER

Kaiser's erratic and bombastic personality, this threat to British naval dominance represented the first of many actions by Germany upsetting the balance of power after 1890. As often occurs in history, the Great War was preceded by arms and naval races. Upon the completion of the Franco-Russian alliance in 1894, Germany began work on the Schlieffen Plan, designed to fight a two-front war against Russia (to the east) and France (to the west). Germany's was only the most famous of such plans; each nation developed complex blueprints involving railroad timetables, troop movements, and battle strategies that often significantly affected *political* decisions. These plans often limited, or were perceived to limit, the options open to policy makers and, in most cases, escalated regional clashes into a world war.

For example, when Germany began mobilizing troops in 1914 in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan, all hopes of political negotiations to prevent war were lost.

Alliance System – After Germany's unification in 1871, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck worked to maintain the balance of power and prevent war through a complex system of interlocking alliances. As Bismarck put it, Germany was a "satisfied giant" that desired no additional territory. He believed a war among the great powers would be a disaster for Germany. Bismarck aimed to isolate a French nation bent on avenging the loss of Alsace-Lorraine and to stay allied with three of the five great powers. To achieve this purpose, Bismarck attempted to mediate the potential for dispute in the Balkans by forming the Three Emperors' League in 1873 between Germany, Austria, and Russia. This agreement proved difficult to maintain, so Bismarck formed a strong mutual defense treaty with Austria (Austro-German Alliance) in 1879 and the Triple Alliance with Italy and Austria in 1882. When Russia refused to revive the alliance with both Germany and Austria, Bismarck convinced the Russians to sign the Reinsurance Treaty in 1887 simply with Germany. Moreover, Bismarck maintained friendly relations with Great Britain and even avoided antagonizing France. Within the Bismarckian alliance structure, no great power could count on the support of any other should it initiate aggressive war, and might in fact trigger a hostile alliance against it.

Kaiser William dismissed Bismarck in 1890 and quickly undid his alliance system. William allowed the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia to lapse, counting on his personal relation with the Russian tsar (they were cousins),

which freed Russia to complete the Franco-Russian alliance in 1894. As it industrialized and pursued colonies more vigorously, Germany's potential military and economic might created concern among the other great powers. William's efforts to match Britain's navy, and his militant personal style, drove France and Britain together with the *Entente Cordiale* ("friendly. Understanding") in 1904. Soon after, in 1907, Russia, smarting from its military defeat to Japan, agreed with Britain to the Anglo-Russian Entente to compromise their contending interests in central Asia. These series of loose agreements among Britain, France, and Russia came to be known as the Triple Entente, which now opposed the Triple Alliance. Within a generation, William had destroyed Bismarck's alliance system and caused Germany's encirclement. As of 1907, two mutually antagonistic alliances faced off, with the potential of a minor conflict between Austria and Russia dragging the whole of Europe into War. The alliance system thus acted as a chain of causation leading to an all-out war once the first trap was sprung.

Imperialism – World War I did not begin over colonial issues; however, conflicts among imperial powers increased tension and hardened the emerging alliance structure. Italy's pursuit of colonies in North Africa brought it into conflict with France and led in 1882 to its joining the Triple Alliance. To test the new alliance between France and Britain (Triple Entente), William provoked the Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911, disputes over French control of the North African region. His aggressive actions produced the opposite of the intended effect, as the two Atlantic nations drew closer in their joint military plans. In addition, Britain's isolation during the Boer War (1899-1902) led it to approach Japan, France, and Russia in the next decade to ensure its security vis-à-vis an expansive Germany. Finally, Italy's attack on the crumbling Ottoman Empire in pursuit of the North African colony of Libya (1911) triggered a series of crises in the Balkans culminating in the First World War.

Mass Politics – By 1914, many European states faced significant internal problems – strikes, ethnic violence, extremist groups, and outsiders demanding rights. To promote unity, governments promoted imperialism and fanned nationalist sentiments. As leaders contemplated the momentous decision for war in July 1914, they may have viewed the crisis as an opportunity to solve domestic issues. When war broke out, citizens celebrated in European capitals, and political dissenters called for an end to internal disputes. Kaiser William announced a *Burgfrieden*, or civil peace, for the duration of the war, while in Britain, female suffrage and Irish home rule

AP ACHIEVER

were tabled. Socialist parties, which wished to unite workers of all nations, generally supported the call to arms, in spite of their Marxist ideology. Mass politics had worked only too well in promoting popular nationalist sentiment in favor of war.

Intellectual Context – Many observers of the European scene sensed that a major war loomed on the horizon. It had been 40 years since the Franco-Prussian War, and with the advent of Darwinism and irrationality in philosophy, some glorified war as a natural product of human advance—how it called upon patriotism and sacrifice and separated the weak from the strong nations. For example, German writer Friedrich von Bernhardi, in *The Next War* (1912), welcomed the prospect of demonstrating Germany’s national greatness and predicted that technological advances would render warfare brief and decisive. Europeans’ faith in technological and scientific solutions to problems and belief in the productivity of warfare seem naïve today only because of the results of the war they produced.

Nationalism – Nationalism caused the First World War in two ways: (1) by making it difficult for nations to compromise what they perceived as their national honor and (2) by feeding the ethnic tensions in the Balkans that drew Austria and Russia into conflict there.

European Diplomacy, 1871-1914

• THEME MUSIC

Much of this chapter addresses the SP theme, particularly the structure of diplomatic rivalries, balance of power, and the state’s power over the economy and society. In many ways, World War I formed a turning point. It laid the groundwork for totalitarian movements of subsequent decades, planted the seeds of the Second World War, and set the stage for the superpower rivalry between the U.S. and USSR.

By destroying the Concert of Europe, the Crimean War not only opened the way for the unification of Italy and Germany, it effectively destroyed an international mechanism for containing conflict. Germany’s defeat of France in the last of its unification wars established the perennial rivalry at the base of the First World War. With this unstable diplomatic situation and intense national rivalries, all that was needed was a *casus belli* (cause of war). This proved to be the volatile situation in the Balkan peninsula, involving Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire.

Like Russia, the Ottoman Empire realized its backwardness during the Crimean War. However, efforts by reformers, known as Young Turks, to introduce national citizenship, abolish religious hierarchies, and establish

legal equality only provoked a conservative backlash. The Sick Man of Europe seemed unable to stem the disintegration of its multiethnic realm, which drew in Russia as the protector of its brother Slavs and in its perennial drive to gain territory at the Ottomans' expense. The ensuing Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) resulted in Russia's clear victory but one that seemed to threaten the balance of power in the region and Britain's control of the Suez Canal. To prevent further conflict, Bismarck acted as an "honest broker" and called the Congress of Berlin (1878) to resolve the issue. The Congress reduced the territory Russia gained and allowed Austria to occupy (but not annex) Bosnia-Herzegovina, coveted by nationalistic Serbs. Most viewed the Congress of Berlin as a defeat for Russia. The subsequent anti-German feeling in Russia led Bismarck to conclude an Austro-German alliance in 1879; however, Germany and Russia eventually reestablished friendly diplomatic relations with the Reinsurance Treaty. Nonetheless, the conflict revealed the explosive potential of the Balkans.

During the first decade of the 20th century, the Balkans experienced a series of crises. In a rare sign of cooperation, Austria and Russia in 1908 concluded a secret agreement at the expense of an Ottoman Empire once again undergoing internal instability. In exchange for allowing Russia to take the strategic Dardanelles (straits from the Black to Mediterranean Seas), Austria was to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina, which it already occupied. Fearing the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the other great powers blocked Russia's advance into the Mediterranean. Meanwhile, Austria took Bosnia anyway, demonstrating the power of coercion over diplomacy. Russia was humiliated, while its smaller neighbor Serbia was incensed, viewing Bosnia's Slavic population as rightfully belonging to a future greater Serbia. Soon after, Serbian pan-Slavists formed the terrorist Black Hand, bent on expelling Austrian influence from the Balkans.

Like a flock of vultures, the smaller Balkan nations circled the carcass of the dying Ottoman Empire. After Italy's defeat of the Turks in 1911, the smaller nations formed the Balkan League (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Montenegro) and attacked the Ottomans in the First Balkan War (1912-1913). Following the Balkan League's victory, Serbia stood poised to gain access to the Adriatic Sea. At the London Conference, Austria, Italy, and Germany forced upon Serbia and its protector Russia the creation of an independent Albania, designed specifically to block Serbian access to the sea. Once again, Russia had been forced to back down in its own backyard. When the victors could not agree on how to divide the conquered territory of

AP ACHIEVER

Macedonia, Bulgaria (created in 1878 at the Congress of Berlin) faced off against the other Balkan nations and the Ottomans in the Second Balkan War (1913). Bulgaria was easily defeated. The two conflicts heightened the animosity between Serbia and Austria, convinced Russia of the need to save face in the next crisis, and set the stage for the ultimate conflict.

The July Crisis of 1914

Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863-1914), the heir to the Austrian throne, visited the capital of Bosnia (Sarajevo) with the intention of building support for his solution to the ethnic problems in the Balkans—a Triple Monarchy. Franz Ferdinand hoped to appease the Slavic minorities in the region by granting them autonomy *within* the Habsburg empire (like the Magyars); however, the Black Hand feared the plan would undermine its goal of establishing a unified independent Serbian kingdom. To stop Ferdinand's plan and punish Austria, the Black Hand trained a group of young assassins to kill the Archduke and his wife, Sophie. On June 28, 1914, the 23-year-old Gavrilo Princip fulfilled his mission, plunging Europe into crisis.

Austria believed the Serbian government was behind the assassination and a month later issued it an ultimatum. Kaiser William of Germany gave his only reliable ally a "blank check" to settle its ethnic issue permanently, emboldening Austria to take a hard line and risk war with Serbia's ally, Russia. Fearing Germany's military plans, France in turn stood firm behind its ally Russia. Meanwhile, Britain refused to signal its intentions clearly, trying in vain to mediate the dispute. When Serbia rejected one point of Austria's ultimatum, Austria declared war against it, an action that prompted Russia's declaration of war against Austria. Russia's war plan presumed a war against *both* Germany and Austria, forcing Tsar Nicholas to mobilize his army on both nations' borders. Despite a last-minute flurry of telegrams between cousins Willy and Nicky, Germany declared war on Russia, triggering the trap of the alliance system. France quickly joined the conflict, and because Germany's Schlieffen Plan had violated Belgian neutrality, Britain too declared war on Germany. Europe was now engulfed in the war for which many had planned but of a nature that few expected.