

World War I drastically altered the economic, social, and political order and left disillusionment in its wake. At the end of World War I, many problems remained unresolved, which led to extended conflict among the nations of Europe. Complicating matters was the fact that revolution in Russia had brought into power a Marxist government that western powers perceived as a major threat to European stability. Any shred of optimism disintegrated with the Great Depression, a global economic collapse. Fascist governments grew stronger in nations afflicted by great turmoil: Italy, Spain, and Germany. Civil war in Spain foreshadowed the full-scale conflict that would emerge at the end of the 1930s. Efforts by France and Great Britain to avoid another European war were thwarted by the aggressive intent of Nazi Germany. Only through the combined efforts of Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union was Germany defeated and peace restored to Europe, but by then, millions were dead and Europe was once again divided.

The Outbreak of War

In the summer of 1914, myriad factors came together to unleash one of the great tragedies in world history.

A byproduct of nineteenth-century liberalism, nationalism fed intense rivalries in Europe. National honor was a high priority of European leaders, most of whom were influenced by bombastic military leaders, and diplomacy was based on the principles of nationalism.

Many historians argue that European leaders used warfare to remedy domestic social problems, such as the push by minority groups – including the Serbs, Irish, and Poles – for political independence, and the socialist labor movement across Europe.

So dependent on the military, European powers created some of the largest armies known to mankind. Advances in transportation, communication, and public health allowed for armies of nearly one million troops. With such substantial forces, some European nations used conscription to force men to join, and governments depended on military leadership to make political decisions.

On June 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife, Sophia, were assassinated in Sarajevo by a Bosnian nationalist. The Austrian government wanted to use the act to punish all Serbian nationalists. Emperor William II gave Austria a “blank check” – Germany’s “full support” for any reprisal against Serbia. Austria then sent an ultimatum so extreme that Serbia had no choice but to reject it. Austria declared war on Serbia, trusting that the conflict would be limited in scope and duration.

Mobilization is complex, demanding detailed planning and precise execution.

Russia had the largest army in Europe and mobilization plans for war against both Germany and Austria. When Tsar Nicholas II called for a partial mobilization against Austria, he was told that would be impossible. The resulting full mobilization provoked Germany to declare war on Russia.

With the formation of the Triple Entente, Germany faced the probability of a two-front war. Its strategy for such a scenario was the Schlieffen Plan, which called for the German army to strike quickly against the French, taking Paris and forcing the French to surrender, and then turning quickly to the east and defeating the Russian army before it had a chance to fully mobilize. With the Schlieffen Plan, Germany was forced to declare war on France, which led Great Britain to declare war on Germany because Belgian neutrality had been violated by the German march toward Paris. In a matter of days, the great powers of Europe were at war. Across the continent, news of the war prompted enthusiasm. Nationalists welcomed it – even diehard socialists favored war.