

Causes of World War I

The next great European war will probably come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans.

—German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1888)

Essential Question: What were the causes and consequences of World War I?

In the years before World War I, social and political developments, including shifting powers, contributed to the escalation of tensions that resulted in global conflict. European nations, expanding their empires, competed for raw material resources in Africa and Asia. A series of mutual alliances created entanglements that committed nations to defense systems that would draw them into war. Arms races involving Germany, Great Britain, and Russia gave military establishments great influence.

The immediate cause of the war's outbreak had its roots in yet another cause of conflict—a rising wave of nationalism. As Bismarck predicted, this clash erupted in the Balkans when Serbian nationalists, protesting Austria-Hungary's control over the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, assassinated Austro-Hungarian **Archduke Franz Ferdinand**. Thus World War I began.

Immediate Causes of the Great War

World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918, was known as the **Great War**—not because of its positive nature, but because of the immense scale of the fighting. No previous war had involved as many nations from different parts of the world or killed as many soldiers *and* civilians. However, World War I did more than create an enormous body count. It fundamentally weakened the Western European powers, thus encouraging the growth of nationalism and appeals for self-rule within European colonies in Asia and Africa. Treaties signed at the end of this war helped set the stage for World War II. World War I was one of the most significant events of the 20th century.

A long series of events led up to World War I. The immediate cause was the assassination by **Gavrilo Princip** of **Archduke Franz Ferdinand**, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife, Sophie, on June 28, 1914. Princip, a Serbian, was a member of the **Black Hand**, a nationalist



Source: Wikimedia Commons

The arrest of Gavrilo Princip after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, Bosnia, June 28, 1914.

organization devoted to ending Austro-Hungarian presence in the Balkans. From the Austro-Hungarian perspective, however, the Black Hand was a terrorist group.

Immediately after the assassinations, Austria-Hungary sent an ultimatum to the Serbian government, demanding that it end all anti-Austrian agitation in Serbia. When the Serbian government rejected the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia on July 28, 1914. Austria-Hungary looked to its ally Germany, a stronger nation with more firepower, for military assistance to punish Serbia. Serbia, populated by ethnic Slavs, looked to other Slavic countries, particularly Russia, for help. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia, and two days later on France. The following day, Britain declared war on Germany, and on August 6 Austria declared war on Russia. By the end of August 1914, Japan's entrance into the conflict changed a relatively minor incident into a true world war.

Long-Term Causes of the Great War

Princip's actions were not the sole cause of World War I. Tensions in Europe had been simmering for decades. One way to remember the sources of these tensions is with the acronym MAIN: Militarism, Alliances, Imperialism, and Nationalism.

Militarism Defined as aggressive military preparedness, **militarism** celebrates war and the armed forces. European powers had been competing for dominance; one way to prove their strength was to invest in the military. Great



Britain and Germany in particular spent a great deal of money on building up their armies and navies, heavily recruiting young men to join their armed forces and building more ships and amassing other military hardware. Because of the Industrial Revolution, it was possible to mass-produce weapons and supplies. A nation’s militaristic attitude influenced its public to view war as a festive competition, more like a game than a gravely serious matter. “Everybody said, ‘It’ll be over by Christmas,’” a British soldier named Bill Haine recalled.

Alliances In their quest for power, European nations also formed **secret alliances**—groups whose members secretly agree to protect and help one another when attacked. When one member of an alliance was attacked in any way, the other members were expected to stand up for that particular member. This system explains why Russia and Germany were ready to jump into the conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary.

Furthermore, countries that were allied with other countries were also sworn enemies of members of other alliances. For example, Britain and France were allies with Russia in the alliance called the **Triple Entente**, and all three viewed Germany as a rival—for different reasons. France was bitter about its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and the loss to Germany of Alsace-Lorraine, a major industrial region with rich deposits of iron ore. Both Britain and France competed with Germany for colonies in Africa. After the war began, the Triple Entente became known as the **Allies** as they were joined by Italy, Japan, China, the United States, and other countries. By the end of the war, there were a total of 27 Allies and “Associated Powers.”

The Allies’ rival alliance before the war was known as the **Triple Alliance**, composed of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. However, when the war began, Italy remained neutral until 1915, when it switched its allegiance and joined the Allies. At the outbreak of the war, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria joined the former Triple Alliance, which was now called the **Central Powers**.

World War I Alliances		
Allied Powers	Central Powers	Neutral States
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • France • Great Britain • Russia • Italy • Portugal • Romania • Serbia • Greece 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Germany • Austria-Hungary • Ottoman Empire • Bulgaria 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spain • Norway • Sweden • Denmark • Netherlands • Switzerland • Albania

Imperialism The alliance system developed largely because Western European countries became bitter rivals for global domination. One of the most important ways these nations could assert their power and generate wealth was to own overseas colonies. During the latter half of the 19th century, for example, Western European countries scrambled for any available land in Africa to add to the colonies they already owned in Asia, the Americas, and the Pacific. Once European powers had claimed nearly all the land in Africa, they began fighting with one another over colonies. Thus, imperialism was a driving force behind tensions in Europe leading up to the archduke's assassination. (Connect: Describe the development of imperialism and how it could have led to the tensions of the early 20th century. See Topic 6.2.)

Nationalism The assassination of the archduke in June 1914, the immediate cause of war, illustrates the growth of nationalism, the final long-term cause of the Great War. On a basic level, nationalism originates from a feeling of pride in one's national identity. Multinational empires such as the Ottoman Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had to contend with different nationalist movements among their subject peoples. Serbs like Princip wanted to rid their land of Austro-Hungarian domination, and Arabs were tired of the limitations the Ottoman Empire imposed on them. Both groups sought **self-determination**—the idea that peoples of the same ethnicity, language, culture, and political ideals should be united and should have the right to form an independent nation-state. Militant nationalists among Serbs and Arabs fought for the Allies, thus extending the boundaries of the Great War.

Consequences of the Great War

As the 20th century began, most Europeans looked forward to a bright future. They expected a century of peace guaranteed by alliances, prosperity as a result of their colonial empires, and continued progress. All of that optimism was shattered on one fateful day in 1914.

Virtually every major event during the remainder of the 20th century was a direct or indirect result of World War I. The war led to the downfalls of four monarchies: Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire. It redrew the maps of Europe and the Middle East with the disintegration of Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Germany lost all its overseas colonies to various Allied nations, and the former Ottoman provinces of Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon came under the control of Britain and France. But the war also led to the beginning of the end of colonialism.

New technologies made World War I the deadliest and most destructive war in human history. It disrupted European economies and had profound social consequences, including the rise of communism and fascism, colonial revolts, and genocide. There was a massive shift of power from Europe to the United States.



Source: National Library of New Zealand

New Zealand Rifle Brigade, fighting with the Allies, near the front during World War I. Helmeted soldiers prepare meals in cramped conditions. Much of World War I was fought in trenches, where soldiers could take cover from enemy fire. Photo taken near Gommecourt, France, July 25, 1918.

Germany was furious about the terms of the peace treaty. Germany was forced to take full blame for the war—although Austria-Hungary started it—and forced to agree to make reparations, impossibly large payments to its opponents to make up for their losses. The war that was to make the world safe for democracy instead gave rise to authoritarian regimes and an even greater world war.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

GOVERNMENT: Wars and Rebellions

Great War
Gavrilo Princip

GOVERNMENT: Leaders
Archduke Franz Ferdinand

GOVERNMENT: Alliances

Triple Entente
Allies
Triple Alliance
Central Powers

SOCIETY: Ideologies and Organizations

Black Hand
militarism
secret alliances
self-determination