

Causes of World War I  
AP World History  
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*"The Great War was without precedent ... never had so many nations taken up arms at a single time. Never had the battlefield been so vast... never had the fighting been so gruesome..."*

The World War of 1914-18 - The Great War, as contemporaries called it -- was the first man-made catastrophe of the 20th century. Historians can easily identify the literal "smoking gun" that set the War in motion: a revolver used by a Balkan nationalist to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand (heir apparent to the Austro-Hungarian throne) in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914.

But scholars are still debating the underlying causes. Was it the desire for greater empire, wealth and territory? A massive arms race? The series of treaties which ensured that once one power went to war, all of Europe would quickly follow? Was it social turmoil and changing artistic sensibilities brought about by the Industrial Revolution? Or was it simply a miscalculation by rulers and generals in power? The answer is that all of these volatile elements combined to set off a gigantic explosion we now know as World War I.

Most of the leaders in 1914 had no real idea of the war machine they were putting into motion. Many believed the War would be over by Christmas 1914. But by the end of the first year, a new kind of war emerged on the battlefield that had never been seen before -- or repeated since: total war-producing stalemate, the result of a war that went on for 1,500 days. Before the official armistice was declared on November 11, 1918, nine million people had died on the battlefield, another seven million civilians died. The world was forever changed.

So, for the sake of simplicity, what were the four main factors that led to World War I? Nationalistic movements in several countries upset other countries. Nationalism means being a strong supporter of the rights and interests of one's country, essentially nationalistic pride. Strong nationalist elements led to the re-unification of Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871. The settlement at the end of the Franco-Prussian war left France angry at the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany and keen to regain their lost territory. Large areas of both Austria-Hungary and Serbia were home to differing nationalist groups, all of whom wanted freedom from the states in which they lived. Nationalism was also strong in Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans were worried about their country because they were in the midst of a contraction of their empire due to anti-imperialist sentiments. They lost Greece and the Balkans (Serbia and Albania) in the late 1800's and wanted to assert themselves to get territories back. Therefore, the conflicting nationalistic goals of several countries became intertwined. Germany's land expansion angered France and its desire for overseas colonies scared Britain. Slavic people were trying to win independence from their Germanic rulers in Austria while receiving help from another Slavic country that supported their nationalism, Russia.

Nationalism was also used as a political tool. Britain and France both used nationalistic pride to keep their empire strong. The country feared that any loss of territory would be seen as a sign of weakness and might lead to additional losses. Germany used nationalistic pride to unite their

country together. As a newly-formed country, Germany didn't have much of a past beyond the formation of the Holy Roman Empire, which never really unified the German states. They were trying to create nationalistic pride by defeating the established powers of Europe, as seen in the taking of Alsace and Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian War. Germany would use World War I to further their unification through pride. Russia and Austria were simply trying to avoid further decline of their empires. They both figured that fighting and winning during World War I would unite their populations. Russia lost two disastrous wars during the years 1850-1914: the Crimean War, and the Russo-Japanese War. Winning during World War I would restore pride that was lost during these wars. Austria was trying desperately to hold onto their empire, which consisted of various ethnic and religious groups. Francis Joseph believed that the only way these people could be united is by nationalistic pride. He believed that winning the war might unite his people. Japan also entered the war for reasons of nationalistic pride. They joined the allies in order to gain respect from foreign powers, and to make their country even stronger in order to fend off those same Western powers.

Imperialism was also a factor that led to the Great War. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, countries believed that having overseas colonies led to power and wealth. The problem was that Germany was newly formed country and the world was divided up by the major Western powers by the time they formed as a nation. So, what was Germany's solution? They decided to take colonies from countries that already had them. This especially pitted Germany against Britain because Britain had so many valuable colonies.

In order to achieve their goals, many countries built up massive military forces. Germany, who already had a massive army, built a huge navy in order to challenge Britain for colonies. Britain responded by increasing the size of their navy. France responded to German aggression by building their own enormous army. Russia and Serbia built large military forces in preparation for a possible war against Austria. The problem with the process of building up huge military forces, often called "militarism", is that militarism is proven to increase the chances of war. Leaders who spend large amounts of money on the military often feel compelled to justify their spending by using the military at some point. The buildup of military forces in Europe greatly increased the chances that force would be used to solve problems.

Due to the increased likelihood of war, most of the countries in Europe formed alliances with countries of similar interests. Austria, Germany and Italy formed an alliance called the Triple Alliance with one another in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to protect themselves against Britain, France and Russia. Britain, France and Russia formed an alliance called the Triple Entente to protect themselves from German aggression. The Russians then formed an alliance with Serbia due to their strong Orthodox religious and Slavic ethnic ties.

A strong argument can be made for nationalism as the most important cause of the war because nationalism is what led to the event that set the war in motion. Nationalism in the Balkans was the catalyst. Bosnia and Serbia wanted the Balkans ruled by Slavs and Russia supported the Bosnian and Serbian efforts due to the strong cultural ties. Russians had the cultural connection of being Slavic and Orthodox, like the majority of the Bosnians and Serbs. Secret assassination societies developed in Serbia to kill Austrian diplomats in Bosnia. These groups were funded by

Serbia and often trained in Serbia. While normally content with local Austrian officials, Bosnian rebels were offered an opportunity that they could not pass up in June of 1914. Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to throne of Austria, planned a visit to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. He was scheduled to inspect troops in Sarajevo, and give his wife, Sophie, a vacation away from the stress and strain of Vienna. While Sarajevo was a dangerous place for Austrians, it was also a beautiful city, and before the tensions was a city frequented by Austrians for tourism. Franz Ferdinand was not worried about assassination, thinking that no one would dare target a person of his status. One June 28, 1914, during a drive through Sarajevo, Franz Ferdinand and his wife were killed by a nineteen year-old assassin named Gavrilo Princip. Princip was a member of the "Black Hand", a Bosnian assassination group that trained in, and was funded by, Serbia. The Austrians held Serbs responsible for training Princip and demanded two things after the assassination: to allow Austria to send troops to Serbia in order to crush terrorist groups and to allow Austrian officials (intelligence agents/spies) to investigate the assassination in Serbia. Serbia agreed to close the training camps and investigate the assassination, but by using their own military and intelligence officers. This compromise was not acceptable to Austria, and war was declared exactly one month after the assassination, July 28, 1914.

In rapid succession, Germany declared war on Serbia and Russia declared war on Germany and Austria. Italy remained neutral, claiming Austria and Germany were too aggressive. Knowing that France would declare war eventually, Germany declared war on France August 3, 1914. They invaded the neutral country of Belgium en route to France, which angered Britain. Britain declared war on Germany on August 4. The tragedy of all of this is that only Austria and Serbia should have been fighting.