

Road to War

The causes of the First World War are not simple or easy to describe. Ever since the war began countries and historians have argued over who was to blame and what really caused it to start. The following sections, however, highlight some of the key factors often pointed to as causes for the outbreak of war: the alliance system, nationalism, the push for power and the crisis of July 1914. There will then be an overview of the historical debate on the topic.

The Long Road

The background of the countries involved in the outbreak of war is very important. In particular their *foreign policies* – their government’s plans on how to deal with other countries.

The key nations to consider are Germany, Austria-Hungary, Britain, France and Russia.

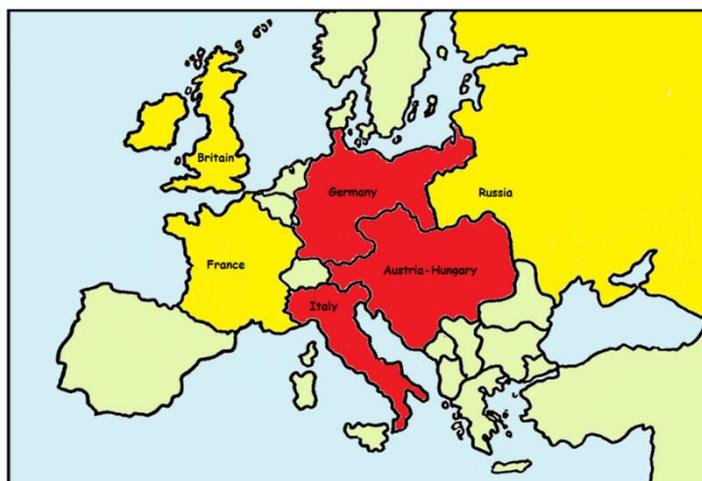
Germany at the start of the twentieth century was a fairly new country. It had been created from a group of smaller German-speaking nations that joined together in the 1860’s.

Germany formed an Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1882 called the Triple Alliance. This Alliance would support and protect the interests of each country. Germany and Austria-Hungary were close neighbours. Germany was a new powerful friend for the fading Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Italy joined the Alliance to get Germany’s protection from France. Italy also hoped to get control of some land.

But Italy did not trust Austria-Hungary and later signed a secret Treaty with France saying they would not fight for their supposed allies.

This Triple Alliance worried the other big powers around Europe. In 1894 France and Russia formed their own alliance to protect each other against the Triple Alliance.

Britain at this time was one of the greatest powers in the world. The British Empire ruled around 1/5 of the world’s countries. But they had begun to notice Germany too. In 1904 they decided to come out of their ‘splendid isolation’ and formed an alliance called the Entente Cordial with Russia. By 1907 this alliance included France and was called the Triple Entente. Their agreement was not as formal as the Triple Alliance. They made offers of help and support to each other that were ‘moral obligations’ rather than definite promises.



The Triple Alliance shown in Red.
The Triple Entente shown in Yellow.

These three countries had been enemies in the past but each felt threatened by the Triple Alliance. –



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- France had lost land to Germany in the Franco-Prussian war
- Russia was arguing over land in the Balkans with Austria-Hungary and was feeling vulnerable because of civil unrest at home
- Britain was feeling its Empire threatened by the growing German nation. Especially because Germany's foreign policy included increasing its Navy to challenge British rule of the oceans.

Each country had made plans for the event of European war, Germany in particular. In 1905 the Schlieffen Plan was created in Germany to deal with the problem of fighting a war on two fronts – with France and Russia. The plan depended on the Russians not being able to mobilise quickly. This would allow the Germans to take out France in 6 weeks by marching through Belgium. Then they would turn around just in time to fight off the Russians instead of having to divide their army.

This system of alliances and aggressive foreign policies by some nations left Europe unstable – but did it have to lead to war?

The Short Road

There were a series of problems between these great European powers in the years leading up to war that are seen by many as leading to the conflict. Although recent historical arguments do debate the 'inevitability' of war.

The problems included arguments over colonial interests in North Africa and a series of crises in the Balkans.



Archduke Franz
Ferdinand

The Balkans were a troubled region. In 1912 and 1913 there were two conflicts which divided up the Balkan states under new rulers. The whole area was very unstable. Whilst there were lots of different states in this region many were under foreign rule. Some groups wanted these states to unite and rule themselves. In particular tension was high between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. Groups in Serbia felt that people in countries like Bosnia and Serbia were all Slavic people with the same background so should want to be independent. A group of Serbs who wanted this independent state formed into rebel group, the Black Hand. They used violence to support their cause. In June 1914 several members of the Black Hand travelled to Sarajevo, Bosnia to assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The Archduke was the heir the Austrian-Hungarian throne. On 28th June 1914 their plan went ahead but their first try was unsuccessful. But later that same day a Bosnian, Gavrillo Princep got another chance and shot dead the Archduke and his wife.

The final steps

Austria-Hungary was outraged especially when it discovered the Serbian Black Hand had been involved. But before making a move they talked to Triple Alliance member Germany because any actions against Serbia could lead to a wider War. This was because Russia supported Serbia. However Germany and Austria-Hungary felt they would win anyway so it was worth the risk.

So in July 1914 Austria-Hungary sent a series of demands to Serbia.

- They wanted the Serbs to take full responsibility for the assassination even though Princep was Bosnian because they blamed the Black Hand for supplying the weapons.



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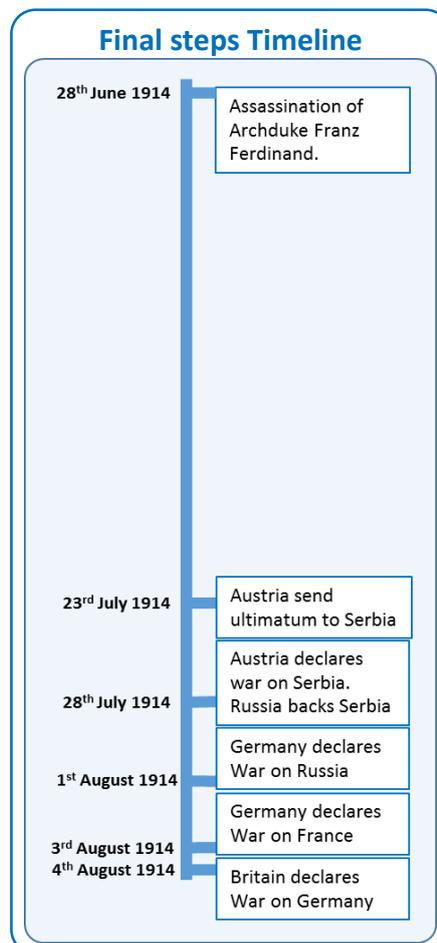
- They wanted to prosecute the anti-Austrian group in Austrian court.
- They wanted to be allowed to send police/troops into Serbia to investigate these anti-Austrian groups.

Serbia only had two days to decide. They talked to their allies Russia then agreed to all the demands except allowing police/troops into Serbia. They also called for other countries to help sort out the argument to prevent conflict. Britain did make some effort towards mediation but Austrian-Hungary refused to accept their reply and declared war on 28th July 1914.

At the same time Triple Alliance member Italy broke away and declared itself neutral as they had secretly promised France. They would later join the war in 1915 on the side of France and Britain in return for promises of land.

Russia quickly mobilised in support of Serbia knowing that France would support them. Germany knew this too so set their Schlieffen plan in motion declaring war on both Russia and France (1st and 3rd August 1914). Following this plan they demanded that Belgium let their troops march in. But Belgium was neutral. In fact Germany, France and Britain had all agreed to respect the independence of Belgium in the 1839 Treaty of London. Britain had been debating entering the war. Germany's betrayal of Belgium's independence provided supporters of war with the final push they needed. On 4th August 1914 Britain declares war.

Now all the big players were involved and as the war continued more and more countries joined in from all around the world.



Historical debate

As the war started to come to an end in 1918 and armistice was declared the question of who to blame began. Each country involved claimed self-defence. But when the Treaty of Versailles was signed officially ending the war in June 1919 the Germans were blamed. In fact Germany accepting full blame for the war was one of the terms of the Treaty.

In the 1920's opinion changed and each country produced pre-war documents from their archives trying to settle the question of who was really to blame.

In the 1930's there was a consensus reached by historians called 'revisionists'. Their consensus was that due to the alliances and series of troubles just before 1914 war became inevitable. As Lloyd George said, Europe just 'slithered into war'. Everyone held some of the blame. This theory held through World War Two and beyond.

In the 1960's however Fritz Fischer and others argued that Germany had plotted with Austria-Hungary to start a war against Serbia. They claimed that Germany had deliberately accepted the risk of European War because it had an aggressive foreign policy.



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20 years of debate on this argument led to another general agreement that Germany should accept a significant amount, but not total, blame for the War.

Most recently there has been a tip back towards the shared responsibility theory of the inter-war years. But questions are still being asked:

- Should Austria-Hungary be more responsible as they were the first to declare war?
- Did the series of crises before the war really make it 'inevitable'? At each crisis war had been avoided, why was it not avoided again in 1914?
- Was the Alliance system solely to blame? Or should the role of key individuals in these Alliances also be considered?

It is a topic that will no doubt continue to be debated especially during the centenary years 2014-2019.

Glossary

Alliance	- A group of countries who share certain goals and agree to work together to support each other
Splendid isolation	- A phrase used to describe Britain's foreign policy of keeping out of European troubles
Moral obligations	- Things someone should do because it is right or fair.
Vulnerable	- Open to attack or danger
Civil unrest	- Unhappiness and protest by the public against political or social issues.
Mobilise	- assemble and prepare troops for battle.
Inevitably	- certain to happen, cannot be avoided
Colonial	- to do with the colonies (e.g. British colonies are countries around the world where British people have gone to live and are ruled over by Britain.)
Crises	- more than one 'crisis' – situation that is unstable and uncertain.
Balkans	- a group of countries in South East Europe on the Balkan peninsula, including Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia and Bulgarians.
Slavic	- Slavs are an Eastern European ethnic group who share similar language, cultural traits and historical backgrounds.
Mediation	- The act of intervening in arguments and trying to bring about an agreement.
Neutral	- Stays out of arguments and will not support either side in a conflict.
Consensus	- General agreement
Centenary	- The hundredth anniversary of a significant event.



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Find out more

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- **British Library**, 2014. *World War One Articles*. www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles
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