

Causes of World War I

Each of the following were conditions that were growing in Europe that set the stage for WWI to begin. Think about how these together created a situation where a single isolated event (the assassination of the heir to Austria-Hungary) was able to trigger a domino effect that would eventually pull in many of the major world countries into a war.

Imperialism

- European nations had been building an “empire” by taking over territories around the world.
- Colonies supplied the European imperial powers with raw materials and provided markets for manufactured goods.
- As countries industrialized, they competed with each other for colonies (raw materials).

Nationalism

- Nationalism is a feeling of strong devotion to the interest and culture of one’s nation.
- Also, this includes the feelings of wanting an independent nation for one’s own “ethnic” group. Various ethnic groups resented domination by others and longed for their nation to become independent. Many ethnic groups looked to larger nations for protection.

Militarism

- With the growth of nationalism and imperialism, there was an increase in military spending. Each wanted a stronger armed force than those of any potential enemy.
- By 1890, Germany was the strongest nation on the European continent. Britain, being an island, had always relied on its navy for defense and the British navy was the strongest in the world.

Alliances

- Europe was splitting into “armed” alliances between countries.
- Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy formed the Triple Alliance. In 1882, they signed a document that promised they would give each other military support in case of a war. Conflict involving any one of the Triple Alliance countries could, according to the agreement, bring in the other two.
- Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (an empire of mostly Middle Eastern lands controlled by the Turks) later became known as the **Central Powers**.
- The Triple Entente, later known as the **Allies**, consisted of France, Britain and Russia.

Why did a dead archduke in Sarajevo start a World War?

- On June 28, 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, was in the city of Sarajevo (in modern Yugoslavia), then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.
- A group of young student nationalists (called Black Hand) wanted the area of Bosnia (under the control of Austro-Hungary) to join the independent country of Serbia.
- This group plotted to kill the Archduke. One of them, Gavrilo Princip (a Serbian), shot the Archduke and his wife Sophie in their automobile.
- Ferdinand's death was known as "the powder keg of Europe."
- **On July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia.**

The Conflict Spreads through Alliances:

Domino Effect:

- July 28, 1914 -- Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia
- Russia mobilizes army along border to protect Serbia
- August 1, 1914 -- Germany backs ally Austria-Hungary (they see Russia's mobilization as an act of war against Austria-Hungary)
- August 3, 1914 -- Germany declares war on Russia & France (a Russian ally)
- Austria-Hungary is at war with France by alliance
- German troops swiftly march through neutral Belgium to get to Paris by the shortest possible route.
- August 4, 1914 -- Britain (honoring a pledge to defend Belgium's neutrality) declared war on Germany – Britain also had a "loosely worded" treaty to defend France.
- Britain was also now at war with Austria-Hungary by alliance
- Britain's colonies and dominions abroad offered military and financial assistance (Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa)
- President Woodrow Wilson declared a U.S. Policy of absolute neutrality (this would last until 1917)
- August 23, 1914 -- Japan had a military agreement with Britain and declared war on Germany, and two days later Austria-Hungary declared war on Japan
- Italy had been in a treaty with Germany and Austria-Hungary but had stayed out of the conflict because of a clause in the treaty to help with a "defensive" war and Italy argued that Germany's actions were "offensive". Italy declared neutrality.
- May 1915 – Italy enters the war and sides with the Allies against the former allies of Germany & Austria-Hungary.
- November 5, 1914 – Turkey had joined the Central Powers and Britain & France declare war with Turkey. (Russia had declared war with Turkey 3 days prior.)
- April 6, 1917 – The United States declares war with Germany and joins the Allies.