Allies and Enemies World War I

What Events Led to Conflict on the World Stage in the Late 1800s and Early 1900s?

Do you have a sports team that you root for? If you do, have you ever attended one of their games? When you were in the stadium, cheering for your team, were you attacked by mobs of fans of the other team?

In most of the world outside the United States, soccer is the most popular sport. In recent years, "soccer hooligans" have become a major problem. A hooligan is someone who is noisy, aggressive, and violent. Many soccer matches involve teams from two different countries, and fans often travel to a different country to watch their team play. All sports fans think their team is better than the other team, but many soccer hooligans view their team through a national lens. They also believe they are entitled, or even expected, to beat up fans of the other team. Sometimes this violence escalates into riots that engulf the entire area around the stadium and even resulted in death.

You might be scratching your head wondering how soccer relates to world war; however, similar motivations led the major nations of Europe to war in 1914. Called the Great War, this armed conflict involved most of the nations on the planet and lasted until 1918. The devastation during this war was so terrible and complete that many believed it would actually deter future wars. For this reason, it was referred to as "The War to End All Wars." Sadly, this did not prove to be the case. For only a generation later, Europe would descend once again into a terrible, brutish war on the continent and around the world.

In this lesson, you will learn about major events that led up to World War I, as well as the conditions that existed at the time in Europe and the rest of the world. You will see how those events and conditions didn’t just make it possible for the war to begin, they made the war almost inevitable. At the end of the lesson, you will answer a series of multiple-choice questions to show what you have learned.

Why Did War Ignite in the 1900s?

Initially, the German unification and victory in the Franco-Prussian War ushered in a period of unstable peace in Europe. By the early 1900s, European nations were struggling to find a new balance of power:

- Germany and Great Britain were competing to build their navies.
- France was determined to somehow regain territories lost to Germany.

In this setting, four large movements swept through Europe at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century: Militarism, Alliances, Nationalism, and Imperialism.

Watch this video to learn more about these four movements and one major event that led to World War I.

Why World War?

In the early 1900s, Europe was ripe for war. There were a few major factors that contributed. The easiest way to remember them is—MANIA.

No, there wasn’t literal mania, but the acronym MANIA can help you keep it straight. You see, there were four large movements that swept through Europe and one key event that finally sparked war. Let’s take a closer look.

The M is for militarism. In the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, Europe was struggling to find a new balance of power. The nations of Europe built up weapons and military forces in an effort to “one up” neighboring nations. At this point in history, Europe had a tendency to settle disputes through a good old-fashioned war, rather than diplomacy.
In Germany, a relatively young nation at the time, leaders Kaiser Wilhelm the First and Count Otto von Bismarck were determined to make their country a major power.

That leads us to A, for alliances. The Germans realized that no matter how mighty their military, they would never be strong enough to withstand the forces of several European powers at once. So Bismarck arranged a series of alliances with several other countries to reduce the threat of war against Germany and to protect themselves in the event that war did occur. They also wanted to isolate France, who the Germans were convinced would try to recapture the disputed territories of Alsace and Lorraine.

Here’s how these alliances broke down. First, in 1879, Germany and Austria-Hungary formed the Dual Alliance.

Fast forward a few years to 1882. The Dual Alliance added Italy to the mix and became the Triple Alliance.

In 1888, Kaiser Wilhelm the First died and was succeeded by his grandson, Wilhelm the Second. When he allowed Germany’s treaty with Russia to lapse, France saw an opportunity and formed the Dual Entente with Russia.

Up until this point, Great Britain had maintained a policy of isolation from the rest of Europe. But seeing the alliances forming on the continent, the British decided going it alone probably wasn’t smart any longer. They joined France and Russia, forming the Triple Entente.

All these alliances resulted in a Europe where conflict between two nations could easily result in conflict between many (heavily armed) nations.

Next up is nationalism, another powerful source of tension in Europe. National and ethnic pride has a way of stirring up strong emotions. In existing countries, nationalism took the form of extreme national pride. For ethnic groups like the Slavs, many of whom were living in lands ruled by Austria-Hungary, it took the form of a political movement calling for their own country. The movement was concentrated in the Balkans region, so nationalist tension there was especially high.

Russia added to the tension, making it known they were protectors of their fellow Slavs in Europe. Many Russians called for all Slavs to be united in a federation…that would be controlled by Russia, of course. Then you throw competing imperialist interests in the mix. As nations sought to expand their global empires, rivalries and competition developed. Germany was late to the empire building game, putting them in conflict with the established imperial powers.

Finally, an assassination—the event that sparked war.

In 1911, a secret nationalist organization called the Black Hand formed with the goal of joining all Southern Slavs (called Serbs) in a united, independent Serbia. The leaders of the Black Hand believed that they could move closer to this goal by killing Austria-Hungary’s Archduke Franz Ferdinand. They saw his policies as a threat to their plans for Serbia. The group sent seven agents to Bosnia, where Ferdinand was inspecting troops, to carry out the assassination. Their initial attempt to bomb the archduke’s car failed.

Later that day, the archduke and his wife made their way to the hospital to visit an officer who had been wounded during the earlier assassination attempt. When the archduke’s driver made a wrong turn, by a mere accident of history, they encountered one of the assassins. The archduke and his wife were shot and both died within minutes.

If Germany still held its alliance with Russia, the assassination might have remained a localized issue between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. In the Europe that existed in 1914, it triggered a series of events, igniting a powder keg that eventually exploded in global war.

How Did Nations Gear Up for War?

Think of each of the events you have read about in this lesson so far as air being pumped into a balloon. Every treaty, every conflict, every government policy, and every nationalist dream caused the balloon to grow bigger and bigger. The final puff of air, the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, caused the balloon to burst.
Preparation of a nation for war is a complex operation. Soldiers have to be supplied and transported to the front lines, while new soldiers have to be drafted and given uniforms, weapons, and supplies. Food has to be delivered to the soldiers and support personnel wherever they may be. If navies are involved, ships have to sail to their areas of operations. This entire process is called mobilization.

### Mobilization

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Central Powers</th>
<th>Allied Powers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (in millions)</td>
<td>115.2</td>
<td>265.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel Production (in millions of metric tons)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army Divisions Available for Mobilization in August 1914</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Battleships</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Industrial Revolution added a new layer of complexity. Before, soldiers walked or rode horses, and everything else traveled in horse-drawn wagons. By the 20th century, everything moved by train. Trains can only travel where there are tracks, and their schedules have to be coordinated so as to avoid bottlenecks and collisions. This meant mobilizations had to be planned even more carefully.

### The Schlieffen Plan

In 1905, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, the German chief of staff, devised a mobilization plan for his nation. Germany knew that France wanted Alsace and Lorraine back and expected a French attack would come sooner or later. The Germans also knew that, because of the Dual Entente, Russia would probably support France in its attack. Schlieffen knew Germany could not fight a war on two fronts, against France in the west and Russia in the east. So, he developed what came to be called the Schlieffen Plan.

The German general staff estimated it would take Russia six weeks to get its troops in place, armed and supplied, along the German border. That meant Germany had six weeks to defeat France and bring its forces back home to face the Russians. Schlieffen knew the French-German border was heavily protected, and that it would not be possible to break through French fortifications, capture Paris, and return to the Russian border in six weeks. Instead, his plan called for German troops to march through Luxembourg and into Belgium. Schlieffen assumed that crossing the border from Belgium into France would not pose much of a problem.

The Schlieffen Plan was detailed and intricate, involving two million soldiers and thousands of trains. It was so intricate, in fact, that once it was put into effect, it could not be stopped or even altered in any way.

Incredibly, Germany had no plan for attacking or even defending itself against Russia directly. The only way it could mobilize its troops along the Russian border was to go through Luxembourg, Belgium, and France.
How Did an Assassination Lead to a Total War?

Recall that when the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand occurred in June of 1914, the European nations were entangled in a series of alliances. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy were members of the Triple Alliance. The Triple Entente nations included Great Britain, Russia, and France. Montenegro and Serbia were allied with Russia. The remaining nations of Europe remained neutral.

Timeline: From Assassination to War

Read through the following timeline to learn how assassination led to war and when each country got involved.

**July 5:** Austria-Hungary had wanted to attack Serbia for some time, counting on a small, quick war to crush Serbia and Serbian nationalism with one brutal blow. The assassination in Sarajevo gives it the excuse it needs to start such a war. The empire realizes, however, that Russia might come to Serbia's aid. Austria-Hungary asks Germany if it would honor the Triple Alliance and come to their aid if needed. Germany sends word that it would defend Austria-Hungary if Russia attacks.

**Image Description:** This is a map of Europe. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy are colored brown to show they are all in the Triple Alliance. Russia, France, and Britain are also labeled.

**July 24:** Austria-Hungary issues a series of ultimatums to Serbia, giving Serbia 48 hours to agree to all demands or face attack. Austria-Hungary wants war, so it makes sure to demand things that no sovereign nation would agree to.

**Image Description:** In an elaborately furnished room, a representative for Austria-Hungary delivers a 48-hour ultimatum to a representative of Serbia.

**July 25:** Serbia agrees to all but one of Austria-Hungary's demands. Germany sends word to Emperor Franz Joseph that war was no longer justified and that he should find a peaceful solution. But by the time the message arrives, Austro-Hungarian troops are already shelling Belgrade, the capital of Serbia.

**Image Description:** A color illustration of soldiers fighting near a bridge.

**July 28:** Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.
Image Description: Black and white photo of the Serbian army with their artillery. The leader of the army is giving a speech from a higher location than the rest of the army. They have built bunkers and are repairing and cleaning their cannons and other weapons.

July 30: Russia mobilizes its forces along both borders.

Image Description: Black and white photo of Russian soldiers. They are in an underground bunker readying for an attack. They are all holding weapons, and their location is camouflaged by the forest around them.

July 31: Germany issues two ultimatums, one to Russia and one to France. These ultimatums give Russia 12 hours to demobilize its forces and France 18 hours to agree to remain neutral if Germany and Russia go to war.

Image Description: A handwritten paper in German script.

August 1: Russia and France have no intention of agreeing to Germany’s demands. Russia is bound by treaty to defend Serbia, and France is bound by the Dual Entente to defend Russia. The two deadlines pass, Germany declares war on Russia, and the Kaiser orders the Schlieffen Plan into effect. Italy decides to stay neutral but later joins the Allied forces.

Image Description: Black and white photo of the Russian army heading into battle. One man is on a horse and the rest of the army is on foot holding weapons and helping to transport cannons. It seems to be early in the morning in the photo because of the amount of fog.

August 2

Germany invades Luxembourg, demands the right to pass through Belgium.

Image Description: A black and white image of troops wearing uniforms and carrying guns and supplies. They are in a straight line and marching over a floating bridge.

August 3: Observing the Treaty of London, which guaranteed Belgium’s independence and neutrality, Britain sends its own ultimatum giving Germany five hours to call off the invasion. Germany ignores this ultimatum.

Image Description: Black and white photo of the German army. All of the men are running across a field and holding guns.

August 4: Britain declares war on Germany.

Image Description: A black and white image of several middle aged and young men wearing jackets and hats are looking at a posted notice on Whitehall Street in London.

August 5: Austria-Hungary declares war on Russia.

Image Description: Black and white photo of Austrian soldiers. They are pointing guns at Serbian citizens who are on their knees with their hands tied at their backs. Serbs are blindfolded and wearing dark robes. Austrian soldiers are standing on a railroad track, and Serbs are kneeling with a hill behind them.

August 6: Serbia declares war on Germany.

Image Description: Black-and-white photo of dozens of German soldiers on a train.

August 7: Montenegro declares war on Austria-Hungary.

Image Description: A black-and-white image of several Montenegrin soldiers wearing uniforms, lying behind rocks, and shooting rifles.

August 10: France declares war on Austria-Hungary.

Image Description: Black and white photo of a French army. The French are holding guns and marching toward battle. They are also carrying bags across their bodies.

August 12: Great Britain declares war on Austria-Hungary; Montenegro declares war on Germany.

Image Description: A black and white painting of a large ship on fire and sinking.
The battle lines had been drawn. From 1914 to 1918, the Central Powers and Allied Powers would wage a devastating war across Europe and beyond. Examine the tables to determine the major players on each side.

**Allied Powers**
- Great Britain
- France
- Russia
- Italy (joined in 1915)
- United States (joined in 1917)

**Central Powers**
- Germany
- Austria-Hungary
- Ottoman Empire
- Bulgaria (joined in 1915)

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**World War I Self-Check Questions—Text Version**

Read the following causes and match each cause to the correct effect. Then select **Check Your Answers** below to see if you are correct.

**Causes**
1. Germany wanted to isolate France.
2. France wanted to end its isolation.
3. Britain has colonies all around the globe.
4. Britain increases the size and strength of its navy.
5. Pan-Slavic nationalism
6. Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.
7. Russia orders its troops to mobilize along the German border.
8. Germany invades Belgium

**Effects**
- Germany declares war on France
- The Triple Alliance
- Serbs want Bosnia to leave Austria-Hungary and unite with Serbia
- Great Britain enters the war
- The Dual Entente
- Britain increases the size and strength of its navy
- Germany increases the size and strength of its navy
- Russia orders its troops to mobilize along the German border

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**CHECK YOUR ANSWERS**