**Causes of the First World War**



**Revision mnemonics for this topic:**

* First World War caused by [MANIA](http://www.johndclare.net/causes_WWI2.htm) **M**ilitarism - **A**lliances - **N**ationalism - **I**mperialism - **A**wful governments (i.e. bad diplomacy in the July crisis).
* July crisis best explained by the four steps of [ARSE](http://www.johndclare.net/causes_WWI4.htm) **A**ustria declares war (28 July) - **R**ussia mobilises (31 July) - **S**chlieffen Plan (1,3 August) - **E**ngland declares war (4 August).

**Key dates:**

1871 - End of Franco- Prussian war; Germany united into single state under Bismarck's chancellorship.
1882 - Triple Alliance.
1887 - Re-insurance Treaty (Germany, Russia).
1890 - Bismarck resigns; Re-insurance Treaty lapses.
1894 - Franco-Russian agreement.
1900 - Second German Naval Law.
1904 - Russo-Japanese War; Entente Cordiale (Britain, France).
1905 - First Moroccan Crisis.
1906 - Algeciras conference.
1907 - Triple Entente (Britain, France, Russia).
1908 - Austria-Hungary annexes Bosnia.
1911 - Second Moroccan Crisis.
1912 - First Balkan War.
1913 - Second Balkan War.
1914 - 28th June: Archduke Franz Ferdinand assassinated by Gavril Princip.
5th July: German 'blank cheque' to Austria-Hungary.
23rd July: Austria- Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia.
30th July: Russia orders mobilisation of her troops.
1st August: Germany declares war on Russia.
3rd August: Germany invades Belgium and declares war on France.
4th August: Britain declares war on Germany in defence of Belgian neutrality.

**Militarism - how important was this as a cause of the war? How did it make war more likely? Did it make the outbreak of war inevitable?**



* After 1871, the war atmosphere engendered by the secret alliances led to an armaments race among the powers. The race was particularly serious between 1900 and 1914, as the international situation became much worse than before. There was a significant rise in the army and naval estimates of the European powers in these years.

* All the Continental European powers had adopted the conscription system since 1870. France had conscription since the Revolutionary Wars, Austria-Hungary since 1868, Germany since 1870, Italy since 1873 and Russia since 1874. Only Britain did not have conscription. After 1890, the deteriorating diplomatic relations among the powers accelerated their military expansion programme.
From 1913 to July 1914, Germany increased her standing forces by 170,000 men. France lengthened her period of military service from two to three years. Russia lengthened her term of service from three to three and a half years. Britain did not introduce conscription but had prepared her armed forces for both European expedition and for home defence. In general, all the powers increased their stocks of arms, produced more modern weapons of war and built more strategic railways.

* Britain and Germany were the chief rivals at sea. Under Admiral Tirpitz, State Secretary of the Imperial Naval Office from 1897, a long-term shipbuilding programme began. The German Navy Law of 1898 increased the German battleships from nine cruisers to twelve. In 1900 Germany passed a Navy Law which doubled the German battle fleet.

* In the meantime, Britain produced her first Dreadnought (literally, the word means fear nothing). Dreadnoughts were large, fast and heavily armed battleships with 12inch guns. They set a new standard in naval armaments and rendered all previous battleships obsolete. The naval race became intense. Between 1909 and 1911 Germany built nine Dreadnoughts while Britain completed 18 Dreadnoughts. In 1913, Germany widened the Kiel Canal to allow the easy passage of her Dreadnoughts from the Baltic to the North Sea while Britain built new naval bases for the Dreadnoughts in northern Scotland.

* For centuries the powers of Europe had clashed over their competing interests around the globe. During the nineteenth century, they usually reverted to diplomacy to sort through their differences, but in the early twentieth century, the network of alliances emboldened both sides and diplomatic responses soon gave way to militaristic ones. To adjust to aggressive new order of international relations each of the powers began rapidly building up their arsenals, for it had become clear that the brawniest power would get its way.

* Increased military and naval rivalry led not only to the belief that war was coming (The German ruling group felt that only through a war could Germany become a world power. Military preparations strengthened this belief) and increase in military control of the civilian government (particularly in Germany and Russia) also increased cooperation among the military staff of the countries of the same camp. For example, all the three Entente powers held secret military talks. The British and the French naval authorities agreed that the French navy should be concentrated in the Mediterranean and the British in the North Sea. Germany and Austria also had military agreements. When the First World War was fought, it was to be fought by all powers because they had made the military plan cooperatively.

* As a result of the armaments race, all the European powers were prepared for a war by 1914.

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**Alliances - how important was this as a cause of the war? How did it make war more likely? Did it make the outbreak of war inevitable?**

 

**Background:**

Triple alliance: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy
The countries had promised to aid each other militarily in the event war.

Triple entente: UK, France and Russia
Settled colonial disputes
Recognized Germany as the common enemy
No military agreements!

**Alliances - how important was this as a cause of the war?**

**On the one hand, yes**
-The alliance systems in Europe escalated the Balkan affair (instability and disputes between A-H and Serbia) to a European war. Firstly, Germany gave the blank cheque to A-H, which gave A-H the confidence to invade Serbia. This would never had happen if they were not allied. Secondly, Germany mobilizes as a result of its military pact with Serbia. Then Germany goes to war because it has to honour its alliance with A-H. Then France and UK go to war because they have to honour the triple entente.
-Created tension between the 5 great powers in Europe and spread feeling of fatalism in European political world
-Alliances promoted arms races

**On the other hand, no**
-The alliances were "loose" military pacts, it was far from certain that for example Germany would back Austria-Hungary when war broke out between Serbia and A-H or that the countries of the triple entente would stick together. There were even internal stresses in the triple entente that had arisen from colonial disputes in Persia between UK and Russia. As late as in 1911 AJP Taylor considered the triple entente to be virtually "in the process of disintegration".
-Anther important point that disproves the argument that alliances were not a cause of the WW1 is the fact that there were no military obligations in the triple entente, F, R and UK did not have to support one another.
-Yet another point to consider is the fact that the alliances were created in defensive purposes, this should have led to greater restraint.

**Nationalism - how important was this as a cause of the war? How did it make war more likely? Did it make the outbreak of war inevitable?**

Background:

* Austria-Hungary fearing Russian expansion, the Empire saw its future in the economic penetration of the Balkans. Important railways were constructed and the rise of Slav nationalism became an increasing concern to a state with such as large Slav population.
* In 1903, King Alexander of Serbia was assassinated and the accession to the throne was pro-Russian Peter I.
* The new government made it very clear that they favoured a policy of "South Slavism" and the customs union concluded in 1904 between Serbia and Bulgaria encouraged the view that Serbia was "the Piedmont of the South Slavs".
* By 1908 the Balkans had been free of major political crises for a little more than a decade, despite the emergence of the expansionist government in Serbia. However, in July that year the revolution by the "Young Turk" movement overthrew the corrupt rule of Sultan Abdul Hamid and offered the prospect to other powers to easy gain in the Balkans while Turkey was occupied with domestic problems.
* In September 1908, A-H annexed the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina and after this success, both Germany and A-H felt strong enough to demand from Russia and Serbia formal acknowledgements of Habsburg authority.
* In March 1909 both gave their acknowledgements but Russia suffered huge humiliation and the result in Serbia was the growth of nationalist terrorist organisations.
* Historian Immanuel Geiss argues that "the Bosnian crisis was a kind of dress rehearsal for the First World War".


The Balkan Crisis 1912-1913
The Agadir crisis brought European politics to a pitch of tension and the implications spread eastwards down the Mediterranean. Italy's attempt in 1911 to improve its own standing in North Africa led to an unprovoked attack upon the Turkish possession of Tripoli. This stretching of Turkish resources led to even more temptation in the Balkan states to free themselves from the influence of Turkey, for good. From this emerged, in the early months of 1912, the **Balkan League of Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Montenegro.**

* The first Balkan war between the Balkan league and Turkey began in October 1912 and by the end of that month, Turkey had suffered huge defeats and been driven out of their European possessions apart from a few cities.
* Tension arose from the division of spoils- A-H attempted to secure its control by insisting upon the establishment of an independent Albanian state and the exclusion of Serbia from the Adriatic coastline.
* More immediate tensions arose amongst the victors- Bulgaria's attempts to clear Macedonia of Serbian and Greek forces in June 1913 led to the Second Balkan war.

Effects:

* There is certainly evidence of heightened tension at political levels in France and Germany and of increased military preparations.
* France sought closer military ties with Russia and showed less interest in restraining her, and although agreements only committed France to support Russia if attacked by Germany, Russia could also expect France's aid in the event of a clash with Germany triggered by the confrontation of A-H.
* In Germany, the government was more reluctant to become involved in the Balkan crisis but showed clear signs of political unease and military preparations in case of a future crisis.
* By October 1913, at the time of Vienna's ultimatum to Serbia over Albania's independence, the Kaiser was urging his ally to take a firm stand and that they had unswerving German support.
* France-Russian and Austro-German commitments were tighter than ever, the confidence of Serbia was at its peak and the prestige of A-H and Russia was so low that they would be unable to tolerate any further blow.

German nationalism- "A Place in the Sun":

* German desire to increase colonial influence eventually resulted in the two Moroccan crises in 1905 and 1911 which increased tensions and military preparations of the major European states.
* The Kaiser, in the course of a Mediterranean cruise took land at Tangier in Morocco and through public speeches and behaviour implied that the recognized the Sultan of Morocco as an independent monarch and called into question Anglo-French agreements over the colonial status of these territories.
* One view is that the Kaiser was keen to demonstrate that no international question could be solved without reference to Germany or possibly by forcing France to give ground on the issue, weaken Anglo-French relations.
* Outcome however was humiliating for Germany as it had to accept confirmation of French predominance in the sultanate after the Algeciras conference in January-March 1906.
* In the first crisis, no military preparations were made by any power but the defeat was seen to confirm German fears of "policy of encirclement" and according to historian Immanuel Geiss, Germany turned its back upon international conferences as a means of settling international disputes.

The Agadir crisis in 1911 however had even force effects:

* It was unlikely to have led to a general war due to Russia lack of interest in the affair but it contributed to the likelihood of a future breakdown in international relations.
* It worsened relations between Britain and Germany and weakened support for reduction in naval building programmes.
* Germany's attempt to spread its influence also destroyed the administration of Joseph Caillaux whose main aim had been to achieve some measure of reconciliation with Germany.

**Imperialism and colonial rivalries - how important was this as a cause of the war? How did it make war more likely? Did it make the outbreak of war inevitable?**




* After 1870, the European nations began to acquire colonies in Asia, Africa and the Pacific. Their imperialistic activities accelerated from 1880 onwards. Between 1895 and 1905 imperialistic expansion reached its climax. Colonial rivalry was a cause of the First World War. First of all, colonial rivalry led to strained relations among the European powers. In Africa, all the European powers except Austria and Russia had colonies there. Thus there were many clashes among France, Britain, Germany and Italy. For example, France rivalled with Italy over Tunis and with Germany over Morocco.

* Secondly, colonial rivalry led indirectly to the formation and strengthening of alliances and ententes. Italy turned to Germany and Austria when she lost Tunis to France in 1881. Russia and Britain could patch up their differences and form an entente in 1907 as a result of their mutual fear of Germany's expansionist activities in the Balkans. Russia, Britain and France could become firm friends after 1907 partly because of aggressive attitude of Germany in both the first and the second Moroccan crises.

* Thirdly, colonial rivalry led to an intensification of the arms race. As mentioned earlier, in 1896 Dr Jameson made a raid into the Dutch Republic of Transvaal in South Africa. Germany found that, without a navy, she could not send much military help to the Dutch. Shortly after the event, Admiral von Tirpitz, the German Minister of Marine, proclaimed the need of a strong navy. From 1898 onwards, Germany built more battleships.

* Fourthly, colonial rivalry led to much hostility among the powers. In the first and the second Moroccan crises, war nearly resulted. France and Britain nearly came to war over their rivalry in the Sudan in 1898.

**The Moroccan Crisis**

* Europe was presented with four major crises between 1905 and 1913, two between France and Germany over the North African sultanate of Morocco and two between Austria-Hungary and Russia over the Balkan states that emerged from the wreckage of the Turkish Empire.

* In Tangier, Morocco the German Kaiser’s speeches and behaviour implied that he recognized the Sultan of Morocco as an independent monarch, and called into question the recent Anglo-French agreements over the colonial status of these territories.

* The Kaiser’s coup was followed by the formal demand that the status of Morocco should be referred to an international conference of the major powers. The outcome of the conference convened at the Algeciras in Spain 1906 was, however, very different from that anticipated by Germany. Isolated but for the faithful support of Austria-Hungary, Germany had to accept confirmation of French predominance in the sultanate, now strengthened by its control over the Moroccan police.

* The Algeciras Conference played only a limited role in preparing the ground for international conflict. No military preparations were made by any power, British public opinion showed a marked lack of concern over Morocco, and subsequent Anglo-French military conversations come to nothing.

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* Lastly, it should be noted that diplomatic co-operation between the French, the British and the Russians at Algeciras also had a number of side effects. The discussions between the General Staffs, the group of senior officers responsible for the planning, organization and overall command of their national armies, of Britain and France were inconclusive
* Colonial discussions between Britain and Russia ended, however, with an agreement in August 1907 that solved many of the outstanding disagreements over rival spheres of influence in Persia. British control over south-eastern Persia kept Russia at a safe distance from Afghanistan, and thus India, and thus did much to remove the Asian tensions that had dogged Anglo-Russian relations at the time of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905
* But after 1905 colonial issues became less important as the powers turned back to Europe and Europe remained their centre of rivalry. As stated earlier, from 1904 to 1907, Britain, France and Russia were able to settle their colonial disputes by the Anglo-French Entente and the Anglo-Russian Entente. By 1914 colonial disputes had greatly diminished. Thus colonial rivalry had little to do with the outbreak of the First World War.

**Awful governments (i.e. the July crisis and diplomatic failures) - how important was this as a cause of the war? How did it make war more likely? Did it make the outbreak of war inevitable?**

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**The July Crisis of 1914:

Sarajevo and the response of A-H:**

* "Fifty years were spent on the process of making Europe explosive. Five days were enough to detonate it"- Basil Hart.
* On 28th of June 1914, the final crisis was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand - heir to the A-H throne by a Serbian terrorist group called the Black Hand.
* The Dual Monarchy was backed by Germany in sending an ultimatum to Serbia on 23rd of July in such extreme terms that it was almost impossible for Serbia to accept (for example Serbian govt had to suppress all anti-Austrian organisations and propaganda and dismiss any officials to whom the Vienna govt might object).
* Some historians have argued that this was partly the fault of the Kaiser himself, as A-H might not have acted as they did if they had not been assured of German support (especially as Serbia was in an alliance with Russia).

**The spread of the Balkan Crisis:**

* Within a week Europe was at war and this was mostly due to the reaction of Russia- although Serbia did not have much of a choice in rejecting the ultimatum, A-H declared war on Serbia 28 July.
* For Russia to remain inactive it would have stripped her of any influence in the Balkans as well as be devaluated as an ally in the eyes of France.
* Russia started to mobilize its forces on the southern borders and from here on, due to the military plan of Germany- the Schlieffen plan- the war was set into motion.
* 1 August Germany declared war on Russia.
* One could argue that Russia mobilization was not necessarily for war purposes, instead merely defensive, however the Schlieffen plan made it impossible for Germany to wait due to the fear of a "two front war".
* A.J.P Taylor argues that all participants misjudged the nature of the conflict in which they were committing themselves - no great strains upon society.

The July Crisis did not necessarily make the war inevitable as had the crisis been contained only to the Balkan area, it would not have involved a total war where all major powers in Europe were dragged in. However, the German Schlieffen plan and the misjudgement of Europe's leaders ultimately resulted in the First World War.

**Historiography: the Fischer thesis and a question of blame?**

The German historian Fritz Fischer argues that the German ruling elite is to blame for the WW1. Fischer uses a document called "September programme" that was issued by Bethman Holloweg (German chancellor) in 1914 to support his thesis. The document outlines Germany's aim for world domination. Fischer claims that the document proved that the ruling elite in Germany had extreme expansionist aims, which a war would allow them to fulfil. War would also consolidate their power in Germany and deal with the threat of socialism.

This argument is persuasive as he links long-term German policies to how German government acted in the July crisis (Germany gave blank cheque to A-H to trigger a European war).

Criticism of the Fischer thesis:
-There is limited evidence to prove that Germany had expansionist aims before 1914
-Too much focus is on Germany, which led Fischer to neglect other factors, making his argument unbalanced.

However, many other historians have completely different opinions of the causes of the First World War and who was to blame for it.

**John Keegan**
Focuses on events in the July crisis. Although there were long-term causes, war was never inevitable. Keegan says war broke out because of the lack of communication between the great powers during the July crisis. None of them had communicated their objectives clearly during the crisis. As a result, Russia's mobilization and German ultimatum to Russia to stop mobilize led to a general European war.

**James Joll**
Attributes the outbreak of the war to disastrous decision made by politicians in the July crisis in 1914.

**Niall Ferguson**
Germany is not to blame because there is evidence that the social democrat party influenced the German Kaiser so much that he abandoned his expansionist aims. Ferguson sees UK as the country that contributed to the war the most as Sir Edward Grey completely misinterpreted ambitions and decided to go into the war to stop German expansionism.

**Did Germany cause the war? Quotes on this question of *who* or *what* caused the war:**

* Otto von Bismarck, nineteenth-century statesman: "***the next war will start from some damn fool thing in the Balkans****”*
* German head of army, von Moltke, 1912: *“****I hold war to be inevitable and the sooner the better****"*
* German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, when asked about how WW1 came about, 1914: ***"Oh - if only I knew!”***
* *V*on der Goltz, a German writer: ***"a long and bitter war was necessary for the sake of Germany's 'health"***
* Lord Grey, British Foreign Secretary on the arms race: **“*The moral is obvious: it is that greater armaments lead to war … The enormous growth of armaments in Europe, the sense of insecurity and fear caused by them - it was these that made war inevitable.”***
* US ambassador in London, 1914: ***"German militarism, which is the crime of the last fifty years, had been working for this for twenty-five years. It is the logical result of their doctrine. It had to come."***
* Frank McDonough, British historian (1997): "***Power lies at the heart of nearly every explanation of why nations go to war. The influence of powerful leaders, their aims, policies and decisions are crucial to any understanding of why nations go to war. [...] However, the most crucial factor in promoting war or peace is the prevailing balance of power. It is clear that an ineffective balance of power promotes war"***.

**"*The First World War was really the culmination of a long drawn-out crisis within the European system".***

"***The rise of Germany was a primary factor which produced tensions among the major European powers."***

* David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs* (1934): "***The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay ... The nations backed their machines over the precipice .... not one of them wanted war; certainly not on this scale."***
* American Historical Journal, book review (2003): "***There was no "slide" to war, no war caused by "inadvertence"*, *but instead a world war caused by a fearful set of elite statesmen and rulers making deliberate choices.***

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