

CAUSES OF WWI (THE GREAT WAR)*

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Abstract

This module will outline the 5 major causes of WWI. These include but are not limited to Militarism, Alliances, Nationalism, Imperialism, and Assassination. As an educator, I use the acronym M.A.N.I.A. for this lesson.

Introduction:

The major causes of “The Great War” or WWI (1914-1918) consist of four long-term causes and one short-term cause. I use the acronym M.A.N.I.A to help my students remember the 5 major causes of WWI; they are **M**ilitarism, **A**lliances, **N**ationalism, **I**mperialism, and **A**ssassination. Each of these topics played a significant role in the reasons why WWI would begin. Each cause will be defined, shown as a long or short-term cause, and specifics for why each term led to war.

Militarism:

Definition: The glorification of one’s military. Also the belief of a nation or its people to build and maintain a strong military, with the intention to use it whenever it is felt necessary.

Long/Short: Militarism was a long-term cause of the war; due to the length of time it takes a country to build its military to the strength necessary to wage a major war.

Specifics: Germany—Stemming from the invasion of German-speaking peoples lands near the Rhine River by Napoleon during the Napoleonic Wars and the Franco-Prussian War, Otto von Bismarck made it his goal to keep the unified German State prepared to defend itself against France. He felt that it was necessary to keep France isolated and weak at all cost. France—Understanding that Germany was building a large military, saw it as a necessity to in turn build a large military to protect themselves against the Germans. Thus, these two nations were building massive military strength to use against each other. The Germans were also threatening the British by building a large Navy, making the British feel insecure about their place amongst the world’s elite navies for the first time in nearly a hundred years. Thus, the British would have to respond to this growing threat as well, by building a larger navy. Though these were not the only countries building and perfecting their arsenal, they were the most significant prior to the outbreak of WWI. It does not take long for these countries to find a reason to use their militaries against each other in an attempt to prove who is superior.

Alliances:

Definition: An agreement between two or more countries to work together for the benefit of each country.

Long/Short: Alliances are seen as a long-term cause of WWI. Due to the secret alliances created by between nations, it is inevitable that a disagreement between two nations will lead to the involvement of many nations, who have secretly agreed to help one another. These alliances take time to develop; thus, they are a long-term cause.

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Specifics: The two major alliances that developed prior to WWI were the Triple Entente (Allies) and the Triple Alliance (Central Powers). The Triple Entente consisted of Great Britain, France and Russia. This alliance was created in an effort to counter the Triple Alliance, which consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. At the beginning of the war, the Triple Alliance will become known as the Central Powers and will not include Italy. Italy finds that it is in their best interest to wait and see what unfolds during the war; thus, allowing them to further their growth as a nation. The Central Powers will eventually consist of Austro-Hungary (1914), the German Empire (1914), the Ottoman Empire (1914), and the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1915). The Triple Entente would become known as the Allied Powers and grow considerably, consisting of the Kingdom of Belgium, Kingdom of Serbia, the French Third Republic, the Russian Empire, the British Empire, the Kingdom of Italy, the Empire of Japan, the United States, the Portuguese Republic, the Kingdom of Romania, the Kingdom of Greece and many others who lent military and financial aid.

Nationalism:

Definition: Extreme pride in one's nations or state. Often seen by the use of flags, national anthems, and other signature items.

Long/Short: Nationalism is a long-term cause of WWI. As many of the other causes, nationalism takes time to create. People are not born with the love of their country and land instilled within them; instead, they must learn to love it. This requires a longer period of time to complete; thus, it is a long-term cause.

Specifics: Germany was extremely proud of the military power that they had become after the Franco-Prussian War. As a new unified nation after January of 1871, the Germans felt nearly unstoppable as a world power. The French on the other hand had been embarrassed by the Germans and found it necessary to regain their pride. These feelings of resentment led to the massive militarism between these two nations. Also with the growth of Pan-Slavism or the unification of all Slavic peoples, protected by Russia, the areas around Serbia became very unstable. The Serbians were prepared to create their own independent Slavic state supported by the Russians. This will lead to what we call the "Balkan Powder Keg" or an area in the Balkans that would only take a minor issue to explode into full on war.

Imperialism:

Definition: Domination by one country over another in terms of the political, economic, or cultural life of the dominated country or region.

Long/Short: Imperialism also takes time to develop in terms of establishing the dominance needed to secure another nation/country. Therefore, imperialism is seen as a long-term cause of WWI.

Specifics: Many nations from around the globe were competing for control of colonies in order to gain land, resources, and influence. Specifically, Germany was attempting to control lands in Africa, a place that Britain and France were already established. In 1905 and 1911 Germany was attempting to keep France from imposing a protectorate on Morocco. As a result, Britain and France became closer allies in the conflict against Germany. Britain and France quickly found that keeping Germany out of Africa, the Germans would not be able to build themselves into a threatening power.

Assassination:

Definition: The deliberate murder of a high-ranking government official.

Long/Short: The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was a short-term cause of the war.

Specifics: Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia on June 28, 1914 by Gavrilo Princip. Gavrilo Princip was a member of the "Black Hand", a Serbian nationalist group. Archduke Ferdinand was next in line for the Austrian throne; it was a huge shock to his uncle Franz Joseph. Upon hearing of the assassination, Franz Joseph still did not want war; however, the government in Vienna did. Joseph was required to deliver the Serbians a harsh ultimatum in order to avoid war. The Serbians refused to meet all the demands; thus, Austria and Serbia would go to war. On July 28, 1914 Austria declared war, the Russians would quickly declared war on Germany after they agreed to help Austria with all of the supplies and soldiers that they needed. Thus, the tangle of alliances started to take hold, bringing many countries into a fight they otherwise would have avoided.