**The Causes of World War I**

[Overview](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm#overview) | [The Players](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm#players) | [Act One](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm#act-one) | [Much Ado](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm#much-ado) | [Crises](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm#crises) | [Curtain](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm#powder-keg)

**Overview**

World War I seems to have come about almost inevitably from the complex politics of the Europe of the late 1800s and early 1900s. But how inevitable was it? As we review the events and causes of the struggle we see a common thread. There is a constant tension between forces of nationalism and forces of empire.

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Nationalism was a kind of bottom-up movement that sprang from the people and was an outgrowth of the [Age of Romanticism](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/romanticism.htm). Empires were the last vestige of feudalism, with emperors ruling over diverse groups of people. These people wished to rule themselves, while the bureaucracies naturally wished to expand or at least hold their grip on the reigns of power. It was a nationalist assassination of the heir to a throne that finally precipitated the war.

Another factor was the [competition in which these empires engaged](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/imperialism.htm). By the time World War I began most of the territory that could be colonized had been taken by one or another of the great powers of Europe. Although none of the powers had truly consolidated its gains there was a feeling that the land rush was over, so tensions began to arise over small, insignificant (in the grand scheme of things) areas where boundaries had not been settled. It is interesting that this rapid colonization and attempted domination of other cultures should have occurred just as national sentiment in Europe was beginning to force the disintegration of multi-national states and the subsequent [consolidation of national territories such as Germany](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/unification-of-germany.htm) and [Italy](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/unification-of-italy.htm).

**The Great Powers of Europe: The Players**

There were six great powers in Europe. These countries were constantly jockeying for position and territories, as well as aligning themselves with other powers to ensure their own security.

**Great Britain**, on her island fortress protected by the English Channel and the largest navy on the planet, tried to hold aloof from the squabbles occurring on the continent of Europe. She possessed the greatest over-seas empire the world had ever known, and it was her object to consolidate that empire. She had also long been the leading industrial nation of the world. Only toward the end of the 1800s were other nations beginning to catch up.

**France** in the 1870s had just lost the Franco-Prussian war and had been forced to give up Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. She was very bitter about this defeat, and it was her object to one day regain her lost provinces. She was also quite isolated on the continent due partly to the machinations of the Iron Chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismark. Her over-seas empire in Africa was bringing her into some conflict with Britain.

**Germany** had just been unified in 1871. After having been a disparate force in European affairs, she was now the strongest nation on the continent. In Bismark, she also possessed the greatest diplomat of the age. Her people were highly disciplined and quickly industrializing. Her military was second to none.

**Italy**, too, had just undergone a process of unification. But the great leaders who had unified the country had already passed from the scene. Cavour was dead, and Garibaldi retired to his island retreat. Also, Italy's industrial base was not as powerful as that of most of the other great powers, and her military was limited. She did, however, have the luxury of very defensible borders along the alps and plenty of access to the sea.

**Austria**, of all the great powers, was the one least based on national power. Austria herself was really just a small German state which had grown up to dominate vast areas of Eastern Europe to include Hungary, Bohemia, and parts of the Balkans. Much of the country had been patched together from pieces of the Ottoman empire in the 1600s and 1700s. She was having difficulty even holding herself together, especially with the rise of nationalist sentiments among her diverse populations. She was butting heads with Russia over areas of the Balkans.

**Russia** was a lumbering power that had proven its ability to project power in the Napoleonic Wars, but took considerable trouble to mobilize. She had a huge military and a large navy, but she also had a giant empire to administer and protect - also with diverse populations. Her interests collided with those of Austria in the Balkans and Britain in Afghanistan. Though a giant, the difficulty in wielding her power was clearly illustrated in her loss of the Russo-Japanese war with Japan (1905). Her imperial power was also being challenged from within by ideologues, liberals, and democrats.

**Act One: The Play Begins**

The Russo-Turkish (1877-78) was another of those wars of imperial expansion for a Russia seeking access to the Mediterranean for her merchants and naval fleet in the Black Sea. It was a brief struggle, as the Ottoman Empire, often referred to as the "Sick old man of Europe" was unable to resist Russian power. The war ended with the treaty of San Stefano which created an independent Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, and Bulgaria, largely to be under the influence of Russia, which also annexed some of the Caucasus for herself.

This Russian accretion of power much alarmed Bismark in Germany and especially the Hapsburgs in Austria. The British, too, saw problems with a vastly expanded Russia and were making rumblings about war. However, Bismark, who had unified Germany only a few years before, wished to avoid a continent-wide conflict. He believed peace was the best way to consolidate the German state. He called a conference in Berlin, which resulted in the *Treaty of Berlin*. This scaled back some of the gains of Russia. It also ended up giving Bosnia-Herzegovina to Austria, an event with long range repercussions eventually setting off the explosion which would rock Europe for four long years.

**Much Ado: Alliance and Entente**

In the wake of the Treaty of Berlin there was much jockeying for power. Alliances were forged, broken and reforged. It began with the **Dual Alliance** (1879) which was a defensive treaty between Germany and Austria. If either were attacked the other would come to her aid. This was mainly directed against the possibility of further Russian expansion into eastern Europe. Another state, Italy, was added into what now came to be called the **Triple Alliance**. The architect of this system of treaties was Bismark, whose aim now was to isolate France. He knew of the grumblings about Alsace and Lorraine. France also had a reputation for military adventurism earned during the [French Revolution](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/french-revolution.htm) and the Napoleonic Wars.

To further his ambition to isolate the French, Bismark concluded the **Reinsurance Treaty** (1887) between Germany and Russia. This treaty was yet another defensive alliance which stipulated that each country would come to the aid of the other unless Germany attacked France, or Russia attacked Austria. The French were now out in the cold.

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The German emperor, died in 1888 and his impetuous son took his place. Kaiser Wilhelm II, or William II, did not like Bismark's dominating the state. He wished to put his own mark on things. He dismissed Bismark and proceeded, in the course of the next decade and a half, to allow the position of Germany to deteriorate and the continent of Europe to slowly edge toward conflict. His first mistake was to allow the Reinsurance Treaty to lapse without renewal. The Germans believed that Russia could do nothing in the face of the Triple Alliance, and that she would not join with France because the French Republic was too far away both geographically and ideologically.

Kaiser Wilhelm and his foreign service proved mistaken. France and Russia sought each other out and concluded the **Franco-Russian Alliance** in a process called rapprochement (pronounced: *ra-prosh-ma*).

Until the 1890s Germany's relations with Britain had been good. This had partly been due to the fact that she had maintained the balance of power in central Europe, and had not sought to compete with Britain at sea or by expanding colonization. However, Wilhelm, reversed Bismark's policy of refraining from Imperial growth in Africa. In the 1890s she began to expand her colonial possessions, many on the border of English efforts. Wilhelm also did not shy away from using a bit of military force when he felt it was warranted. He began building up the German fleet and began to engage in what became known as *gunboat diplomacy*.

With Anglo-German relations deteriorating, the French government saw an opportunity. French diplomats made overtures to Britain. They made concessions to the British in Africa, ironing out rough details and coming to an amicable settlement that very much smoothed over relations between the hereditary enemies. This arrangement became known as the **Entente Cordiale** (1904). Near the same time, the French made a secret agreement to support Italian colonial claims in Eritrea if Italy would support France in Morocco. This move began the process of cutting Italy out of the Triple Alliance.

Since Wilhelm II had removed Bismark the diplomatic situation in Europe had completely reversed itself. Instead of Germany being at the center of an alliance with France in isolation. France now possessed the allies, and Germany retained only Austria.

**Second Act: Crises Arise**

With France's new diplomatic position, she felt bold enough to make moves to take over Morocco. Kaiser Wilhelm became highly irate. He actually went to Tangier itself to demand that Germany be allowed free trade in Morocco, bringing on the**First Moroccan Crisis**. A conference was called in Algiers where Germany intended to humiliate France and create friction between the French and English governments. The plan backfired. Although Germany was given the right to trade in Morocco, she had done it in such a way as to appear to be the bully-boy of Europe. Grey, the British prime minister began to work with France and made overtures to Russia to smooth out disagreements over colonies. Germany had become even more isolated, dangerously so.

The **Triple Entente** (1907) between Britain, France, and Russia was now in place as a powerful counter-weight to the Triple Alliance. In 1908 the Austrians decided it was time to fully annex Bosnia-Herzegovina into the Austrian state. The Russians and Serbians objected. The Russians even threatened war over the matter, but when they found out that Germany would come to Austria's aid in the event of a Russian attack, the Czar backed down. It had not helped Russian confidence that they had recently lost a war with Japan (1905) and suffered social upheaval at the hands of socialist movements within the country.

Yet another crisis struck in 1911 to bring tensions to an even greater height. This one again over Morocco. The French had been attempting to create a defacto protectorate of that country. Germany had her own designs on it, and sent in a gun-boat, the *Panther*, to the seaport of Agadir. Both France and Germany seethed. Germany was thought to be far stronger, but the French centered Triple Entente proved more powerful diplomatically. Britain strongly hinted that in case of war, she would come in on the side of France. The German stock exchange dropped and Germany felt compelled to allow the French to have control of Morocco. However, she demanded and received concessions from France in the Congo.

These three crises hardened the two sides. Germany was made to appear to be an aggressor. Her isolation made her cling even more strongly to her only faithful ally, Austria.

**The Balkan Powder Keg Blows: Play Over: Curtains for Europe**

The **First Balkan War** (1912-1913) was a direct result of an Italo-Turkish war whereby the Italians easily defeated the Turks and took Libya. The countries in the Balkans, including Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece banned together to form the Balkan league. They joined together to defeat Turkey and pushed her European possessions to a mere sliver of space near Istanbul. However, an easy victory by the league created jealousy among the league's members, and war broke out between Bulgaria and the other league members, now joined by Turkey (1913). Bulgaria lost the war and Macedonia was carved up among the victors.

This helped make Serbia more of a power in the region. However, she was still no match for Austria. Yet, she did have Russian support as she was a Slavic nation, and the Russians considered themselves protectors of Slavs everywhere.

The final spark to bring on the "Great War" would come in the Balkans. While on a visit to Sarajevo, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria and his wife were assassinated by a Slavic nationalist, Gavrilo Princip. The Austrians were certain that the Serbians were complicit. In fact, evidence indicates the Serbians may have known of the plot and neglected to warn the Austrian government. The Austrian government demanded a multitude of concessions from Serbia, including that the capital of Serbia itself, Belgrade, be occupied by Austrian forces. Though the Serbs were willing to make some concessions, the Austrians demanded too much, probably in order to make war inevitable. The Austrians thought that this would be a limited war. However, the fuse was primed and lit. The powder keg was set to blow.

Germany openly declared she would support her only ally come what may. The Russians insisted on supporting Serbia. The Germans then declared war on Russia. France declared support for Russia and Germany declared war on France. The German attack on France through Belgium then brought Britain into the war on the side of France. Italy remained aloof for a time, but finally came into the war on the side of the Entente. And so began the Great War we call World War I.

**The Great War: World War I**

[Schlieffen Plan](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#schlieffen-plan) | [Eastern Front](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#eastern-front) | [Trench War](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#trench-war) | [Italy](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#italy) | [Russia](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#russia) | [Sea War](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#sea-war) | [War's End](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/great-war.htm#war-end)

World War I was called the Great War. Never before had war been fought on such a massive scale. It had been 99 years since the end of the last general European war. Yet it was not truly a world war. Certainly there was some fighting on the oceans, in Africa and Asia, but most of the fighting was centered in Europe. It would be dwarfed by a true world war which occurred a mere generation later. Nevertheless, the case can be made that the first world war was *the* turning point in European history. It was the final demise of feudalism. At the war's end kings, emperors, and every other kind of nobility would finally lose their grip on power. For better or worse, nationalism would sweep away the idea that a single family could rule over multiple nations without the consent of the governed.

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The [roots of World War I](http://www.indepthinfo.com/history/causes-of-world-war-i.htm) show that much of the tension that caused the war was embedded in a competition for colonies overseas. Imperial expansion contained the notion that feudal power could be projected over the entire world. The war's beginning was also an unfortunate conjunction of diplomatic alliances and circumstances which came together at this point in history. The war was by no means inevitable. A more far-sighted foreign policy by Germany could easily have forestalled a general war.

**The Schlieffen Plan**

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The Great War kicked off with Austria's invasion of Serbia to avenge the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand. But this would become a mere side-show. The main show began when Germany executed the Schlieffen Plan. This was a military document, long in the making, constructed by head of the German general staff, Schlieffen. It stipulated that if Germany were confronted with a two front war with both France and Russia ([as indeed happened](javascript:createTextPopup('After%20Austria%20invaded%20Serbia,%20the%20Russians%20came%20to%20Serbia\'s%20aid%20and%20declared%20war%20on%20Austria.%20By%20terms%20of%20her%20treaty%20with%20Austria,%20Germany%20then%20declared%20war%20on%20Russia.%20France%20had%20a%20defensive%20alliance%20with%20Russia,%20so%20the%20German%20government%20pre-emptively%20declared%20war%20on%20France.%20Thus,%20the%20two%20front%20war%20for%20Germany.',%20'This%20is%20the%20title%20of%20Popup',%20600,170,10,50))) that Germany would mobilize her forces on the western front, and quickly invade France, knocking her out of the war first. In order to get around the major French defenses, the plan called for German troops to rush through Belgium.

With accustomed Prussian efficiency, the German army swept through Belgium, quickly over-running the Belgian Army. This move prompted Great Britain to declare war on Germany, quickly assembling a force, and sending it to France. The question is often asked whether the Schlieffen Plan was truly to Germany's advantage. The answer is had it been fully executed, it may have, indeed, quickly knocked France out of the war. But like most plans, it relied on assumptions that could not be fully tested before actual conflict. The German's withdrew troops from the right wing in an effort to shore up the left flank. The German's got within twelve miles of Paris. The French were largely defeated and what became known as the Battle of the Marne looked to an inevitable German victory. However, the deployment of the BEF (British Expeditionary Force), the determination of the French army (some transferred from the Maginot Line), and the petering out of German strength caused the Germans to be thrown back a short distance. Both sides began to dig in. Mobile war was over on the western front and the trench war begun.

**The Eastern Front**

War on the eastern front was slower to develop, mainly because the German's initially concentrated their force in the west. Also, the Russian Army was far less efficient and took considerable time to mobilize. The distances in the east were far greater. The Russians had a different gauge railway than the rest of Europe, this also made it difficult to transport troops across borders. Nevertheless, the Germans and Russians finally came to grips in two monumental battles, first at Tannenburg (1914) and second at the Massurian Lakes (1914). Though the Russians had far greater numbers, their forces were soundly beaten. Superior German training and technology played a large roll. The Russians also revealed their movements to the Germans because all of their radio [communications between units were sent not coded](http://www.indepthinfo.com/codes/) (in the clear).

The Russians had far greater success against the Austrians. But the pressures of war were beginning to create problems in Russian society. People began to tire of the massive losses of manpower at the front and the deprivations caused by having to allocate resources to the army, as well as dissatisfaction with the autocratic rule of the Czars.

The **Gallipoli Campaign** (1915) proved to be an important component of the war on the eastern front. The allies comprised of France, Britain, and Russia realized that Russia was geographically isolated, making it difficult to get aid from the west. With Turkey on the side of Germany and Austria the best warm water passage to Russia through the black sea was blocked. (The Baltic was already blocked by the German fleet.) Britain resolved to open the Black Sea to allied shipping. A fleet and invasion force was sent. The thinking among the entente powers was that Turkey would be easily defeated. However, she proved a tough nut to crack, and the Gallipoli Campaign became a disaster for the British. Anglo-allied forces were tied up on a small peninsula, which was only held at great expense in lives and treasure. Finally, the allies were forced to abandon the project.

**Trench War**

The war bogged down in the west and Gallipoli. This was due to the primacy of defensive tactics and weapons at this point in military history. Infantry weapons came to have a longer range, with more accurate fire. Machine guns were introduced which could mow down columns of charging infantry. Gas weapons, and massed artillery were used. Consequently, the infantry dug trenches. Soon the networks of trenches became hugely complex, and very effective in stifling attacks made in the old style. At Verdun a huge German attack made small gains but resulted in the loss of nearly a million men (dead, wounded, and missing) between the two sides. Subsequent battles on the western front resulted in similar losses for very modest gains.

In an effort to break the dead-lock various strategies and tactics were employed, including tanks, which were used in the 1916 Battle of the Somme. The tanks made little headway due to the lack of understanding regarding the role of the new weapon platform, as well as the initial deficiencies of the weapon itself. Nevertheless, the fearsomeness of tanks boded well for their future employment. Airplanes had been invented barely ten years before the start of the war. Initially, they were used for observation, but soon the projection of air power was undertaken and used to make attacks behind enemy lines. Toward the end of the war the German's began to develop new tactics that returned mobility to the battlefield. However, it was too late for it to make any difference in this war and would not be effectively deployed until World War II.

**Italy Comes into the War**

Italy was induced to come into the war on the side of the entente in 1915 by promises of territorial concessions from the Austrians should they be defeated. Italy's war with Austria proved disastrous. Italian forces were soundly defeated at Caporetto, the retreat from which is depicted in "Farewell to Arms", by Ernest Hemingway. Nevertheless, the entrance of Italy proved an additional drain on Austrian and German resources.

**The Fall of Russia**

Russia worked hard to win the war. However, internal problems took their toll. Czar Nicholas II lost power after a series of strikes and demonstrations (some of them within the army itself). A Provisional government under Karensky tried to continue prosecution of the war. But Germany made a "deal with the devil". They loaded the Russian Bolshevik revolutionary and theorist, Vladimir Lenin in a sealed train and sent him into Russia. The German government was in no way sympathetic with communist movements. However, Lenin promised to take Russia out of the war should he gain control. Lenin took power in a bloody civil war and kept his promise to the Germans. His government signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk which not only took Russia out of the war but gave up large portions of formerly Imperial Russia, including parts of Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania. Lenin agreed because he needed peace with the Germans in order to clamp down violently on political opposition within Russia.

The Germans were then able to transfer the forces which were being consumed on the eastern front to the west. However, these additional forces would be countered by a new entrant into the war, the United States.

**The War at Sea**

Britain had traditionally controlled the sea lanes around Europe and even the world for more than one-hundred years. This had proved to be a great advantage in many wars. Britain could prevent over-seas supplies going to her enemies, and could project land forces to any coast in the world. Britain's strategy was to take away the colonies of her enemies and blockade their ports. Germany had been building her sea power prior to the war. Her fleet was mainly tied up in the Baltic Sea. As the war carried on, a breakout of the surface fleet was attempted. The British countered and there was a naval battle at Jutland which proved to be indecisive, but was damaging enough that the German surface fleet decided not to venture again from the Baltic.

A relatively new innovation, the submarine, was used extensively in this war. The Germans and even the Austrians built a significant number of "U-boats". These quiet running craft had diesel engines, which ran while they were on the surface. They also contained an extensive array of batteries, which - when charged, could sustain the craft underwater for several days. Subs were a way for the Germans to avoid Britain's powerful surface fleet and travel the oceans seeking out merchant vessels and vulnerable enemy naval units. Submarines were highly effective, but also controversial. It was the sinking of several passenger vessels by German subs that brought America into the war.

**The End of the War**

Besides German submarine warfare, the Zimmerman Telegram incensed Americans enough to provoke an outcry that led to American entry. This telegram was an attempt to get Mexico to enter the war on the side of Germany. The Germans promised Mexico they could have much of the Southwest United States if they helped Germany. Around two million U.S. troops flooded into France. Even though the German's drew troops from the Eastern front they were insufficient to stop combined forces of France, Britain, and the U.S. Finally, a British offensive at Amiens broke the German defensive lines. The German's surrendered before enemy troops could flood over Germany. This would largely preserve Germany's infrastructure, making them more able to prepare for the next conflict.

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Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to leave the country. He bought an estate in Holland. Germany was forced to pay extensive reparations, and admit guilt for the war. She also lost control of some vital industrial areas near France. Of course, she was compelled to give Alsace and Lorraine back to France. All of this was determined at the Treaty of Versailles.

Perhaps of greater significance was the complete dismemberment of Austria. What had once been an empire was split into Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, and other assorted countries. Poland was partly reconstituted from a piece of Austria. It was the end of empire. The great despots of the previous century had all gone away. Russia had succumbed to revolution. Wilhelm had skipped off to Holland, and now the Hapsburgs were deposed and the hard won gains of several centuries taken away in a moment. The rationale for the redrawing of the map of Europe was largely the inspiration of the American president, Woodrow Wilson, who insisted that countries reflect their national constituencies. He had also wanted to form a "League of Nations", this was part of the treaty, but never ratified by the U.S. Senate.

The Great War was a watershed event. It was the final end of old Europe. The new Europe, at least in the short term, would be no less violent, perhaps less just. But even as World War I ended empire in Europe, the coming age would see the demise of Imperialism altogether. Britain would voluntarily free her subject nations. Africa would see liberation in the 1960s, and even the pseudo-empire of the Soviet Union would crumble in 1989. World War I, was thought to be a war to end all wars, but it was not the end of history, merely a new beginning.