



What Caused the First World War?

By Trevor Getz

The First World War feels almost like a murder mystery. There were many suspected reasons and complex motives. Millions of lives were lost in this confusing conflict that gripped the world.

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World War Why?

The First World War lasted more than four years and killed between 15 and 19 million people. The war also devastated the global economy. It contributed to outbreaks of disease that killed millions more people. So why did this war happen?

Historians have three explanations for what caused the First World War. The first is the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Sarajevo. The second reason is that global trends had been building over many years before the war. The third suggests that the war almost started by mistake. Leaders did not manage the consequences of Archduke Ferdinand's assassination well. Let's look at each of these ideas, and ask whether the causes of this deadly conflict were simple, complicated, or accidental.

One shot: The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

It may not be obvious why the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was important. Ferdinand was a member of the Habsburg family, who had ruled Europe's Austro-Hungarian Empire for nearly 400 years. This large empire was in the center of Europe and had a multi-ethnic population. Franz Ferdinand's uncle was the emperor. He struggled to rule the empire's different ethnic communities. Nationalism had pushed these communities to pursue independence from the empire. One such group was the Serbs. They had already created their own country of Serbia after gaining independence from the Ottoman Empire. However, many Serbs still lived in the Habsburg region of Bosnia. Serbian nationalists began plotting to get the Habsburgs out of Bosnia. It didn't help that the Habsburg's rival, Russia, supported the Serbs. The Serbs plan was to kill Franz Ferdinand in the hopes that the Austro-Hungarian Empire would declare war on them. Then, Russia would help them win the war and gain independence for the Bosnian Serbs.

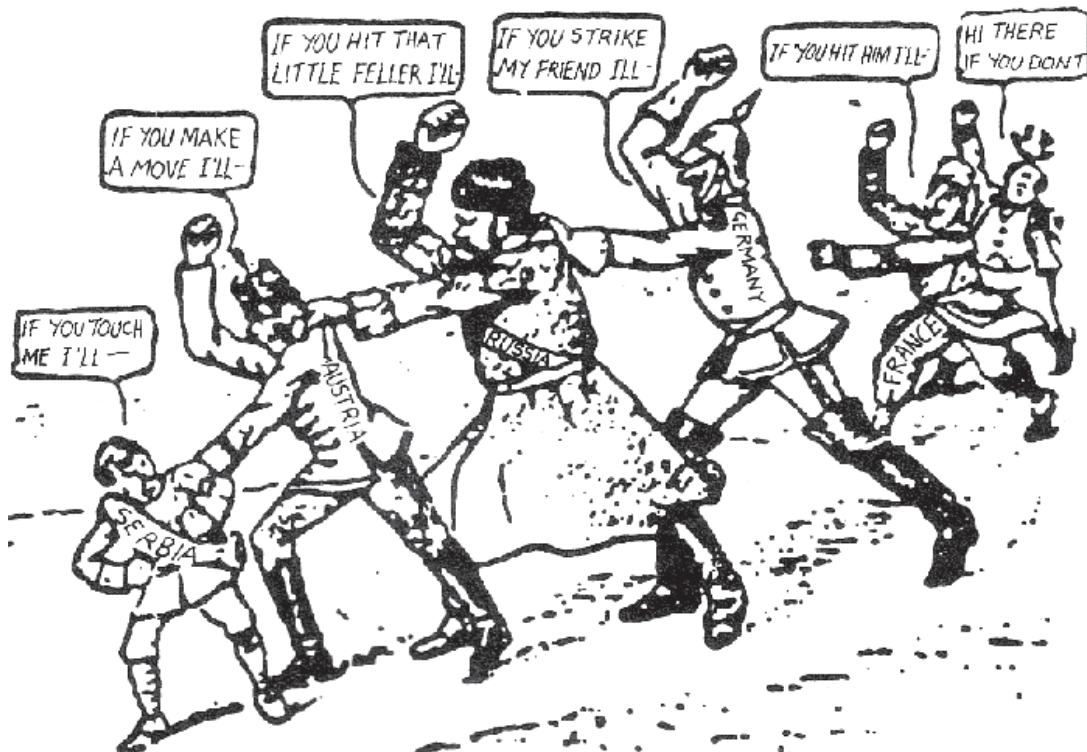
Archduke Franz Ferdinand was killed on June 28, 1914. Two days after the assassination, the Austro-Hungarian Empire gave the Serbs a list of demands called the July Ultimatum. The Serbs rejected the demands, which would have challenged their independence. They then turned to Russia for support. Within a month, much of the world was at war.

Deeper trends: Help me help you help me

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the immediate cause of a war between Russia and Austro-Hungarian Empire. But why and how did this conflict become a world war? Some historians argue that the answer lies in deeper trends. The good news is we have already introduced many of those trends in this course.

Let's start with the alliance system. These were "communities" of nations that supported each other. The Napoleonic wars in the early 1800s devastated Europe. Large European powers believed that alliances would create a balance of power in Europe. This would prevent future wars. Two great alliances were pitted against each other. Russia, France, and Great Britain made up the Triple Entente. Austro-Hungary, Germany, Italy and the Ottoman Empire formed the Triple Alliance, later called the Central Powers. These opposing alliances pretty much guaranteed that if Russia and Austro-Hungary went to war, their allies would join and make the conflict even bigger.

Growing nationalism also added fuel to the war. Nationalism promoted the idea that national pride was a good enough reason to go to war. For example, France joined the war in the hopes of regaining territory that it had lost to Germany.



A cartoon from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, illustrating the alliance system that helped lead to the First World War. Notice how most countries are offering to help, but very aggressively. Public domain.

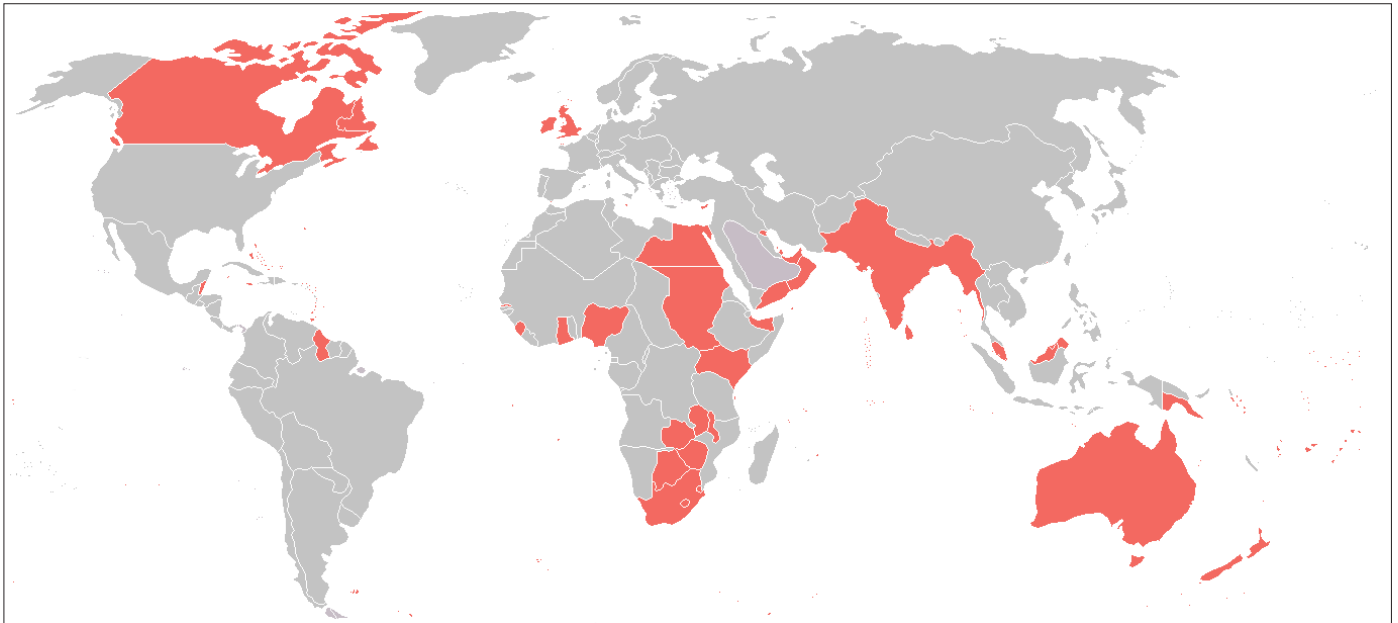
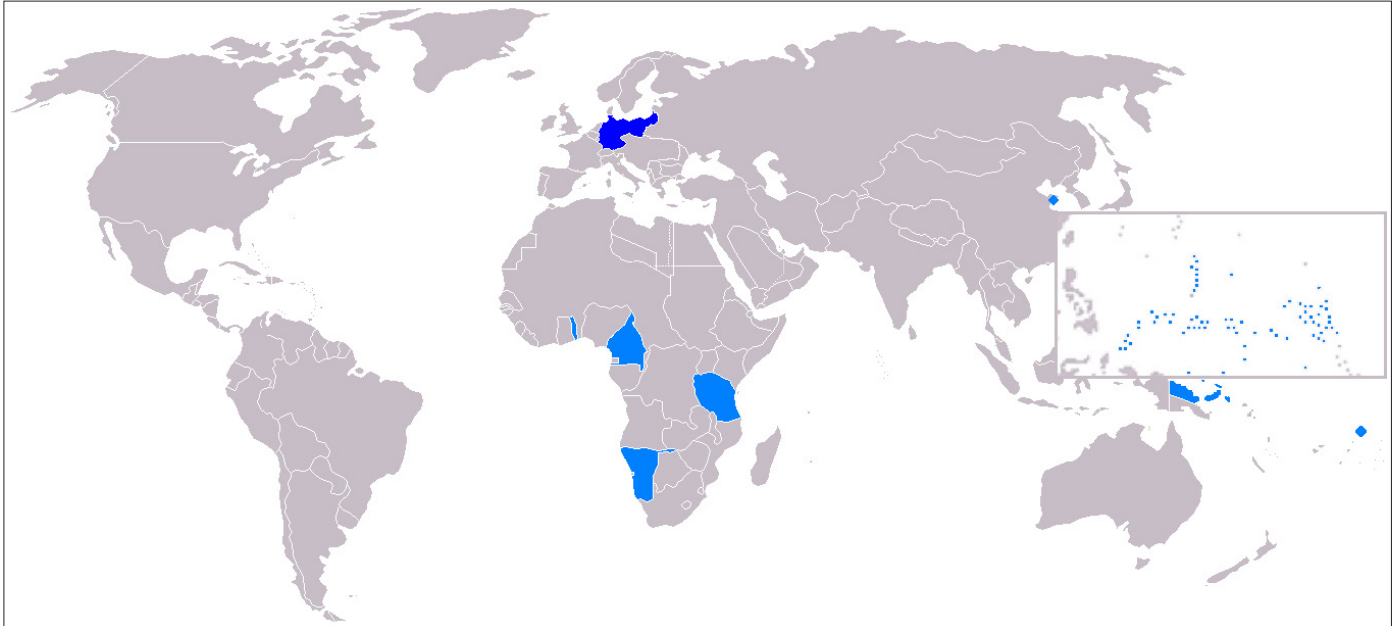
National sovereignty¹ also widened the war. Sovereignty refers to a nation's ability to rule itself. Britain is one example. They joined the war to protect Belgian sovereignty after German troops had invaded Belgium on their way to France.

Imperialism was another trend that helped expand the war. Many countries joined the war to gain territory. Britain and France wanted parts of the Ottoman Empire. Japan supported the Triple Entente and hoped to take German colonies in the Pacific Ocean. Imperialism had an economic motive as well. Empires were looking to seize important trade routes and raw materials from their opponents.

The big powers were convinced war would be short and easy. They had successfully used their military power in Africa and Asia, so why would Europe be any different? They considered themselves superior to people from Africa and Asia, too. It was easy to believe they were also superior to other Europeans.

Finally, industrialization brought new technologies, like weapons and transportation. Everybody believed that the first country to get their troops moving would have an advantage. Railroads could now quickly move large numbers of troops and materials. Once Austro-Hungary sent troops to Serbia, all the other powers had to start sending troops, too. They did not want other powers to have an advantage. Everyone thought that the war would be over very quickly. Unfortunately, everyone was wrong.

¹ Yes, these terms can get confusing. Nationalism was introduced as the idea that a state should govern itself, and not have some empire as its boss. But at some point, that feeling that you should get to govern yourself can turn into the idea that you are better than other nations. This becomes a form of extreme patriotism. We call that nationalism as well. As we will see, nationalism is a pretty changeable thing, and it can be used for different purposes.



Maps of the British and German Empires. If you look carefully at these maps, you can see how the British and German colonies were often neighbors, reflecting competition between the two empires. During the war, the British seized control of a number of German colonies, which they then held for several more decades.

[Top map \(Germany and its colonies\):](#) By Joe Mabel, CC BY-SA 3.0.

[Bottom map \(Great Britain and its colonies\):](#) By Andrew0921, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Accidental war: Missed the memo, hit the target

It may seem like many states saw the war coming, but did nothing to stop it. This leads us to another idea about why the First World War happened. Diplomats represent their country's interests in other nations. Communication between diplomats and governments was slow and limited back then. Technology quickly outpaced the way people thought about international relations. As troops began moving faster than before, diplomats could not keep up with the pace of events. They missed many opportunities to slow down the mobilization of troops. Some historians argue that this slow response was the real reason for the war. Other historians argue that other big trends would have led to war anyway. What do you think?

Trevor Getz

Trevor Getz is Professor of African and World History at San Francisco State University. He has written or edited eleven books, including the award-winning graphic history *Abina and the Important Men*, and co-produced several prize-winning documentaries. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

Image credits

Cover: Sport warlike 1914, Allegory of alliances at the beginning of the world war: strong athletes compete to a tug-of-war, Germany and Austria on one side with Belgium, Britain, France, Yugoslavia, Japan, Finland on the other, Italy makes the judge scrutinizing the contenders with the arms behind the back. Postcard of propaganda, Milan (Italy) 1914. © Fototeca Gilardi/Getty Images

A cartoon from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, illustrating the alliance system that helped lead to the First World War. Notice how most countries are offering to help, but very aggressively. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chain_of_Friendship_cartoon.gif

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