

The First World War accelerated the path to modernity. It was the 'primordial catastrophe' of the 20th century, a century of war, violence and displacement. It cost the lives of around 17 million soldiers and civilians, destroyed large parts of Europe and left behind unresolved problems that led to further violent conflicts - not least the Second World War with its monstrous acts of violence. Without the First World War, the 20th century, the rise of fascism and communism and the transition to systemic competition between West and East cannot be understood.

The assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 by a nationalist Serb is regarded as the trigger for the First World War. In Vienna, the military pressed for a swift retaliatory strike against Serbia. The German Empire assured Austria-Hungary of its unrestricted allegiance to the Danube Monarchy. On 28 July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and Russia also made a partial mobilisation. On 30 July, both Russia and Austria-Hungary were in a state of war. On 1 August 1914, the German Empire declared war on the Russian Empire. The invasion of German troops on 2 August in Luxembourg and on 3 August in Belgium marked the beginning of the First World War for the Germans.

Long before June 1914, preparations for war in Europe were in full swing. Many countries had concluded alliances with each other. In these alliances, they pledged to help each other in the event of war.

By 1914, Europe was divided into two blocs: The Central Powers with Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, Bulgaria and Italy were on one side, and the Entente with France, Russia, Great Britain, Portugal and many other countries on the other. Austria formed the Triple Alliance with Italy and Germany. Italy later joined the Allies, as they promised the country South Tyrol.

The political tensions immediately before the First World War had their roots in the late 19th century, when the age of imperialism began. The major European powers were intent on conquest and all but Austria-Hungary waged war to extend their possessions to other continents. The nations began to arm themselves. They developed ever larger and more dangerous weapons.

German foreign policy under Kaiser Wilhelm II finally alarmed the European states. The German Emperor snubbed the neighbouring powers several times and openly advocated the establishment of a 'strong German fleet'.

The assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo is considered the trigger for the First World War. The events following the assassination are also known as the July Crisis. Gavrilo Princip, a nineteen-year-old Serbian student, opened fire on the Austro-Hungarian heir to the throne, who were visiting Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914. With this assassination, the Serbian Pan-Slavists, who were supported by Russia, wanted to emphasise their demand for a Serbian nation state independent of Austria-Hungary. In Vienna, the military pressed for a swift retaliatory strike against Serbia. The German Reich assured Austria-Hungary of its unrestricted loyalty to the alliance ('blank cheque') with the Danube Monarchy.

A swift and energetic military strike against Serbia was intended to create a *fait accompli* and prevent Russia from intervening. On the one hand, the imperial government wanted to limit the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia locally. On the other hand, the timing was considered suitable for a war against Russia, as Russia was threatening to overwhelm Germany with its military strength.

Austria-Hungary now relied on targeted provocations against Serbia: in a 48-hour ultimatum of 23 July 1914, the country was called upon to arrest the members of the assassin group who were still

free and to dissolve all radical associations. These and other demands were formulated in such a way that they were unacceptable to Serbia. As a result, Russia unequivocally sided with Serbia in the event of military aggression by Austria-Hungary.

On 24 July, England called on the governments of Russia, France, Germany and Italy to negotiate. On 25 July, Serbia responded to the ultimatum, but did not fulfil all the conditions set by Austria. Serbia began a partial mobilisation of the military.

On 28 July, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia during the negotiations and Russia also partially mobilised. On 30 July, both Russia and Austria-Hungary were in a state of war.

On 1 August, the German Reich declared war on Russia, and on 4 August on France. German troops attacked France from the north-east, violating the neutrality of Belgium and Luxembourg. This led to Britain, the Belgian guarantor power, entering the war.

On 6 September, the French offensive against the German army began with the Battle of the Marne. After weeks of defeats and retreats, the British and French troops managed to hold off the onslaught of the German army. The Battle of the Marne marked the end of the war of movement and the beginning of the murderous war of position on the Western Front.

The First World War ended on 11 November 1918. How did this come about?

After Russia's withdrawal from the war, Germany tried to bring about a decision on the Western Front before the American troops had fully arrived in Europe. However, the German attack failed after a promising start. In July 1918, the Allies, France, Great Britain and the USA, launched a counter-attack. On 8 August 1918, they finally succeeded in breaking through the German front. This day went down in history as the 'Black Day of the German Army'. This sealed the defeat of the Central Powers.

Just as in Russia the year before, war weariness was now also increasing in starving Germany. There were repeated strikes and mutinies. There was also growing domestic resistance. In order to save the honour of the army, the generals finally shifted the responsibility to the politicians and left it to them to seek peace. They suggested that the Kaiser should either die a hero's death or abdicate. But Wilhelm II fled into exile in Holland.

Kaiser Wilhelm's Chancellor Prince Max von Baden announced the end of the monarchy on 9 November 1918 and appointed the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert as the new Chancellor. Two days later, on 11 November 1918, the new German government, represented by State Secretary Matthias Erzberger, signed an armistice in the forest of Compiègne (north of Paris). This treaty was tantamount to an unconditional surrender, i.e. the German Reich recognised its defeat and surrendered without imposing any conditions.

The balance sheet

- In the four years of war since 1914, almost ten million soldiers had lost their lives and 20 million had been wounded. The number of civilian casualties is estimated at a further seven million.
- At the end of the war, 25 countries with around 1.4 billion people were at war, which was around three quarters of the world's population at the time.