

Causes of World War One

Although it was the assassination of the Austrian archduke, Franz Ferdinand that led to the outbreak of world war one in August 1914, the actual causes of the war were more complicated and not confined to a single cause.

Alliances

An alliance is an agreement made between two or more countries to give each other help if it is needed. When an alliance is signed, those countries become known as Allies. A number of alliances had been signed by countries between the years 1879 and 1914. These were important because they meant that some countries had no option but to declare war if one of their allies declared war first. By 1914, Europe had come to be divided into two large alliances. On one side there was Germany and Austria-Hungary. Italy joined them in 1882, thus creating the Triple Alliance. The other side, known as the Triple Entente was Russia, France, and Great Britain. These alliances were formed to preserve the balance of power, but any dispute which arose between any two countries threatened to drag in all the countries in the alliance.

Imperialism

Imperialism is when a country takes over new lands or countries and makes them subject to their rule. By 1900 the British Empire extended over five continents and France had control of large areas of Africa. The amount of lands 'owned' by Britain and France increased the rivalry with Germany who had entered the scramble to acquire colonies late and only had small areas of Africa. German industrialization threatened the economic supremacy of Great Britain. Russian interests in the Balkans threatened both Austria-Hungary and Turkey.



Pink = British Blue = French
Red = German



Militarism

Militarism means that the army and military forces are given a high profile by the government. By the end of the nineteenth century, European societies had become increasingly militaristic. The growing European divide had led to an arms race between the main countries. The armies of both France and Germany had more than doubled between 1870 and 1914 and there was fierce competition between Britain and Germany for mastery of the seas. The British had introduced the 'Dreadnought', an effective battleship, in 1906. The Germans soon followed suit introducing their own battleships. Military planning played a key role in the outbreak of World War One. Because it took time to assemble and moves armies, leaders began to plan quick and highly mobile units, with plans to attack, even though there was no war going on yet. The German, Von Schlieffen also drew up a plan of action that involved attacking France through Belgium if Russia declared war on Germany.

Nationalism

Nationalism means being a strong supporter of the rights and interests of one's country. The Congress of Vienna, held after the Napoleonic wars left both Germany and Italy as divided states. It was nationalism the re-unification of Italy in 1861 and Germany in 1871. France was angry because the settlement at the end of the Franco-Prussian war had given Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. In this way, nationalism encourages rivalries between France, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia.

Nationalism also constitutes the belief that each ethnic group should have its own nation (also known as national self-determination). Large areas of both Austria-Hungary and Serbia were home to differing nationalist groups, all of whom wanted freedom from the states in which they lived.

Crises

The Moroccan Crisis - In 1904 Morocco had been given to France by Britain, but the Moroccans wanted independence and were supported by Germany. War was avoided, but in 1911, the Germans were again protesting against French possession of Morocco. Britain supported France and Germany was persuaded to back down for part of French Congo.

The Bosnian Crisis - In 1908, Austria-Hungary took over Bosnia. This angered Serbians who felt the province should be theirs. Serbia threatened Austria-Hungary with war, Russia, allied to Serbia, mobilised its forces. Germany, allied to Austria-Hungary mobilised its forces and prepared to threaten Russia. War was avoided when Russia backed down. In 1911 and 1912 there was war in the Balkans when the Balkan states drove Turkey out of the area. The states then fought each other over which area should belong to which state. Austria-Hungary intervened and forced Serbia to give up land. Tension between Serbia and Austria-Hungary was high.