Causes of WWI: A Breakdown

**Nationalism** and extreme patriotism were significant contributing factors to the outbreak of World War I. Every one of Europe’s Great Powers developed a firm but excessive belief in its own cultural, economic and military supremacy. This over-confidence gave birth to a fatal misconception: that in the event of war in Europe, one’s own country would be victorious inside a few months. This arrogance was fuelled by the jingoistic press in every country. The pages of newspapers, even usually sedate broadsheets, were often packed with stories and editorials filled with nationalist rhetoric and ‘sabre-rattling’. Heightened nationalism could also be found in other cultural expressions, like literature, music and theatre. European populations became convinced of two things: that their nations and governments were right and that their military would win any conflict. As these attitudes hardened, the likelihood of war increased. Royals, politicians and diplomats did little to defuse the public appetite for war, and some actively contributed to it with provocative commentary or belligerent policy.

This lack of awareness about a European war and its incipient dangers is at least partly explainable. Leaving aside the distant Crimean War (1853-56) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the 19th century was a period of comparative peace for the people of Europe. In England, France and Germany, the people had been slow-fed on a diet of brief and victorious colonial wars, fought against under-equipped opponents in faraway places. With the exception of France, beaten by the Prussians in 1871, no major European nation had tasted military defeat for more than half a century. The arms race and the development of new military technology furthered this mood of invincibility. Britons thought their naval power, backed with the economic might of the empire, would secure victory in any conflict. The Germans placed great store in their policy of armament, their growing fleet of dreadnoughts (battleships) and Prussian military training and efficiency; the German high command’s confidence was predicated upon its bold but decisive Schlieffen Plan. The Russian tsar believed his empire to be protected by God – and his massive peacetime army of 1.5 million men. The French believed a string of concrete fortresses and defences, running the length of their eastern border, made them impervious to German attack.

**Stories and stereotypes**

Along with these practical considerations existed a near-spiritual belief in the strength and viability of each nation. By the late 1800s, England was almost drunk with patriotism and nationalism. She had enjoyed two centuries of imperial, commercial and naval dominance: the lyrics of a popular song, Rule, Britannia!, trumpeted that “Britons never never will be slaves”. London spent most of the 19th century purposefully avoiding wars – however the unification of Germany, the pace of German armament and the bellicose remarks of Kaiser Wilhelm II gave much cause for concern. Britain’s ‘penny press’ (serialised novels and short stories) fueled rivalry with Russia and Germany by publishing incredulous fiction about foreign intrigue, espionage and future war. The Battle of Dorking (1871) was a wild cautionary tale about a successful invasion of England by German forces. By 1910 one could buy dozens of tawdry examples of ‘invasion literature’; each told of German, Russian or French aggression or under-handedness against England and her interests. These stories often featured racist stereotyping or innuendo: the German was painted as cold, cruel and calculating, the Russian was an uncultured barbarian, the Chinese a race of murderous savages. Penny novelists and cartoonists mocked the rulers of these countries – the German kaiser and the Russian tsar chiefly – for their ambition, arrogance or megalomania.

German attitudes were just as intense but sprang from different origins. Germany as a nation-state was comparatively new, forming from the unification of 26 German-speaking states or territories in 1871. As a consequence, German nationalism had a political purpose: it was the glue that bound together these disparate states: Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, Hesse, Baden, Brunswick and others. The leaders of post-1871 Germany relied on nationalism to maintain and strengthen the country. German culture was promoted and celebrated: from the poetry of Goethe, to the music of Richard Wagner. National strength was continuously associated with military strength: if the army was weak or incapable of fighting, so too was the nation. The new kaiser, Wilhelm II, was in many respects the personification of late 1800s Germany: both were young, intensely patriotic, obsessed with militarism and expansion, nervous about the future and desperate for national success. The main obstacle to the latter was Britain, which became a popular target for the German press. The British and their leaders were greedy and hypocritical: they maintained the world’s largest empire, while denying Germany any colonial gains. There was much criticism of Britain’s heavy-handed war against white South African farmers (the Second Boer War of 1899-1902); Berlin went as far as secretly supplying the Boers with weapons and munitions.

**The quest for independence**

As the Great Powers thumped their chests and revelled in their own superiority, another dangerous form of nationalism was emerging in Europe. This was not about supremacy or military power, but about self-determination, self-government and independence. With the world largely divided into empires and spheres of influence, there were a host of regions, races and religions who sought freedom from their imperial masters. In Russia, for example, more than 80 ethnic groups were forced to speak Russian and practice the Russian Orthodox religion. China, a nation with more than 400 million people, had been ‘carved up’ and economically ravaged by several European powers; this instigated the formation of secret and exiled nationalist groups who wanted to free China from foreign influence. Nationalist groups had contributed to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in eastern Europe. The formation of revolutionary and separatist groups in the Balkans also threatened the fragile Austro-Hungarian Empire. The nationalism of young Serbs, seeking to restore the status of their country, prompted them to assassinate the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand, an event which lit the touchpaper of World War I.

1. Nationalism was an intense form of patriotism that celebrated one’s own country and demonised other nations.

2. Pre-war nationalism was fueled by wars but also by political rhetoric, the press and popular culture, such as novelists.

3. Anti-German literature in Britain focused on a future war with Germany and even a future German invasion.

4. German nationalism was predicated on the belief that Britain sought to deprive Germany of her ‘place in the sun’.

5. Rising nationalism was also a factor in the Balkans, where Serbians and others sought independence and autonomy from the political domination of Austria-Hungary.

**Imperialism** is the practice of maintaining an empire, or a collection of colonies. An imperialist nation – sometimes benignly called the ‘mother country’ – acquires new territories through exploration, infiltration or military conquest. Sometimes this can be done with minimal conflict, by intimidating weaker rulers and governments with ‘gunboat diplomacy’ (a form of intimidation using military assets). Sometimes colonies are acquired after a fully-fledged invasion or a war against the local population. British control of South Africa, for example, was established after a series of campaigns against hostile native tribes like the Zulus, followed by two significant wars with the Boers (white farmers of Dutch extraction). Once imperial control was established, the primary purpose of a colony was to benefit the mother country. Usually this involved the supply of precious metals, other raw materials, cheap labour or agricultural land. Britain’s empire was largely based on trade, particularly the importation of raw materials and the commercial sale of manufactured goods. A colony might also offer military advantages, such as a strategic location for naval bases or troops. By 1914 imperial conquest had almost run its course: there were relatively few parts of the world still available for colonisation. The ‘scramble for Africa’ in the late 1800s saw European powers Britain, France, Germany and Belgium snap up what was left of the continent. Imperial rivalry existed alongside intense nationalism and contributed to pre-war tensions in Europe.

**German designs**

From the mid-1800s European nations engaged in another ‘rush for empire’. This was fuelled by nationalism, by increasing needs for land and raw materials, and by a perception that potential colonies were becoming more scarce. The two relative newcomers to empire-building, the newly-formed nations of Germany and Italy, were keen to snatch whatever colonial possessions were available. The British and French, which boasted the world’s two largest global empires, realised that unclaimed parts of Africa were quickly running out. The most powerful of Germany’s late-19th century politicians, Otto von Bismarck, had little interest in colonial acquisitions – but his view was not shared by other Germans. A Berlin group calling itself the Colonial League formed in 1882 and whipped up support for German imperial expansion. The Wilhelmine government formulated its own imperial designs, most of which centred on Africa. In 1884 Germany acquired Togoland, the Cameroons and South West Africa (now Namibia). Six years later, considerable areas of East Africa were under German control and renamed Tanganyika (now Tanzania). These acquisitions proved popular with the German population – but they also injected the German empire into the realm of the British and French empires. German activity in Africa was not received well in London, where it contributed to nationalist sentiment and anti-German hysteria in the late 1800s.

The scramble for empire also produced some diplomatic crises between France and Germany in the early 1900s. Most centered on Morocco in north-western Africa. Morocco was not yet a French colony, however its location in northern Africa placed it well within France’s sphere of influence. As Paris sought to expand its influence in Morocco, the Germans were angling to prevent this. In 1905 Kaiser Wilhelm II traveled to Tangier, where he delivered a speech supporting the idea of Moroccan independence; this antagonised the French government and precipitated a series of angry diplomatic responses and febrile press reports. In 1911, as the French were attempting to suppress a rebellion in Morocco, the Germans landed an armed vessel, the Panther, at the Moroccan port of Agadir – without permission, prior warning or any obvious purpose. It was a provocative move which brought France and Germany to the brink of war. Germany’s interference in Morocco was not designed to expand its empire, but rather to drive a wedge between France and Britain. It in fact had the opposite effect, contributing to the strengthening of the Anglo-French alliance and inviting British criticisms about German weltpolitik and ‘gunboat diplomacy’.

**The world shared**

*By the start of the 20th century, a number of nations possessed empires of some description:*

* The British Empire took in India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Hong Kong, parts of north Africa, islands in the Pacific and Caribbean and concessions in China.
* Russia ruled modern-day Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Ukraine, Georgia and several regions in central Asia, such as Kazakhstan.
* France was the imperial power in modern-day Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, areas of West Africa and India, small colonies in South America, islands in the Pacific and Caribbean.
* Germany had seized control of modern-day Tanzania, Namibia and the Cameroon in Africa, German New Guinea and concessions in China.
* Spain was left with tiny colonial territories in South America and north-west Africa.
* America was a relative newcomer to imperialism, but nevertheless controlled the Philippines, Guam, American Samoa and Puerto Rico.
* The Ottomans clung to the heart of their centuries-old empire: modern-day Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Armenia and Macedonia.
* Portugal was the imperial ruler of modern-day Angola and Mozambique in Africa, Goa in India and East Timor.
* Belgium had one notable colony: the Belgian Congo in central Africa.
* Holland had small possessions in Dutch Guyana (South America) and modern-day Indonesia.
* Italy had moved into northern Africa, taking modern-day Libya, Somalia and Eritrea.

1. Imperialism is the practice of seizing territories outside one’s borders and governing them as colonies.

2. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, colonies were both a sign of prestige and a source of great wealth.

3. The late 1800s saw European nations race to ‘snap up’ the few unclaimed regions in Africa and Asia.

4. Much of this occurred in Africa, where Britain, France and Germany all competed for new colonial possessions.

5. The scramble for empire led to several diplomatic incidents, such as two ‘Moroccan crises’ that were largely precipitated by Germany and its kaiser.

**Militarism** and the European arms race were contributing factors to the outbreak of World War I. The decades before 1914 saw the development and production of frightful new weapons, capable of killing on an industrial scale. Utilising new mass-production techniques, Western nations churned out these weapons and munitions in large quantities and at a rapid pace. But the descent into war was not just driven by new weapons and the arms race: it was also fuelled by the pervasive culture of militarism that reigned in many parts of Europe. The governments and aristocracies of the Great Powers were strongly influenced and in some cases dominated by military elites. Rather than working as servants of civilian governments, generals and admirals became de facto government ministers. These men fuelled the arms race by demanding increases in defence spending; they also contributed to the mood for war by drawing up war plans and promoting military solutions to political and diplomatic problems. As the former German army officer Alfred Vagts would later write, militarism was “a domination of the military man over the civilian, an undue preponderance of military demands [and] an emphasis on military considerations.”

This militaristic culture was strongest in Germany. The German army was formed from the old Prussian army and was therefore dominated by the Junkers, a small but powerful group of Prussian aristocrats. Prussia had been the most powerful of the Germanic states prior to unification, both in political and military terms. The Prussian army had been reformed and modernised by Field Marshal von Moltke in the 1850s. Under von Moltke’s command the Prussians developed a rigorous training regime for officers; they also incorporated new weaponry and communication technologies into their military strategy. After 1871 the Prussian army formed the core of the new German imperial army. The kaiser was the supreme commander of the army; he relied on a military council and chief of general staff, made up of Junker aristocrats and career officers. The Reichstag, Germany’s elected civilian parliament, exercised very little say in military matters. In many respects the Germany military existed as a part of the government, rather than being a servant of the government.

**The arms race**

It is natural for military leaders to be obsessed with modernising their forces and equipping them with new technology, and the decades prior to 1914 saw no shortage of this. One of the most significant developments were marked improvements in the calibre, range, accuracy and portability of heavy artillery. This would allow artillery shelling and bombardments to become standard practice, particularly after the emergence of trench warfare. Machine-guns, first developed in 1881, became smaller, lighter, more accurate, more reliable and much faster (some were capable of firing up to 600 rounds per minute). Millions of metres of barbed wire, an invention of the 1860s, would be mass produced and installed around trenches to halt charging infantry. Various types of poison gas – chlorine, phosgene and mustard – were developed. On the oceans, the development of the dreadnought – a large battleship, the first of which was launched in 1906 – prompted a flurry of ship-building and naval rearmament.

European military expenditure skyrocketed between 1900 and 1914. In 1870 the combined military spending of the six great powers (Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia and Italy) totalled 94 million pounds. By 1914 this had quadrupled to 398 million pounds. German defence spending during this period increased by a massive 73 per cent, dwarfing the increases in France (10 per cent) and Britain (13 per cent). Russian defence spending also grew by more than one-third. Its embarrassing defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) prompted the tsar to order a massive rearmament program. By the 1910s, 45 per cent of Russian government spending was allocated to the armed forces, while just five per cent went on education. Every European power but Britain increased conscription levels to bolster the size of their armies. Germany alone added 170,000 full-time soldiers to its army in 1913-14. Germany also dramatically increased its navy: in 1898 the German government, largely at the kaiser’s behest, ordered the construction of 17 new vessels. The Germans also pioneered the construction of military submarines: by 1914 the Kaiser’s navy had 29 operational U-boats. These developments caused alarm in Britain, and London responded by commissioning 29 new ships for the Royal Navy.

1. Militarism was the dominant idea that a nation’s power was largely based on its ability to wage war.

2. It was strongest in Germany, where its generals were also accustomed to exercising political influence.

3. Emerging technologies in the late 1800s gave rise to new types of weapon and military machinery.

4. Governments responded by increasing military spending, fueling an escalating tit-for-tat arms race.

5. By the early 1900s the European powers, driven by nationalist rivalry and militarism, had modernised and equipped their armies and navies, bringing the continent closer to war.

**Alliance System** Perhaps the best known cause of World War I was the alliance system that developed in Europe in the half-century before World War I. An alliance is a formal political, military or economic agreement signed by two or more nations. Alliances are binding under international law, though they are frequently annulled or broken. Many alliances require signatory nations to provide support to other signatory nations in the event of war with an enemy power. This support may range from financial or logistic backing, such as the supply of materials or weapons, to military support or even a full declaration of war. Alliances may also contain economic conditions, such as trade agreements or investment. Alliances were hardly new in Europe. The continent had for centuries been a melting pot of old rivalries, political intrigue, competing territorial ambitions, military threats, nationalistic suspicion and paranoia. France and England were antagonists for centuries; several times this rivalry had erupted into open warfare. Bilateral relations between the French and Germans, the French and Russians and the British and Russians had also been strained. European leaders responded to these tensions by negotiating and signing alliances, both as a deterrent to war and to better protect their country should one break out.

The 18th century had been a time of shifting alliances, brokered by kings, princes and ministers. Many of these alliances and alliance systems were fragile or temporary; they often collapsed or were revised as new leaders emerged and political situations changed. Only rarely did alliances drag nations into an unwanted war. The early 1800s saw several European ‘super alliances’, chiefly to deal with French dictator and rampant imperialist Napoleon Bonaparte. The nations of Europe lined up either in support of Bonaparate, or to defeat him. Between 1797 and 1815 they formed seven anti-Napoleon coalitions, which at various times included Britain, Russia, Holland, Austria, Prussia, Sweden, Spain and Portugal. The defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815 restored the continent to its normal state. In the 1870s, however, the chess pieces of Europe once again began to align into power blocs. Nationalist paranoia, imperial rivalry, military spending and intrigue all created a mood conducive to alliance-building. By 1914 many European governments had shuffled their nations into two opposing blocs, held together with stringent military alliances. In theory, any war between two opposing nations could mean war between them all. Some of the individual agreements that contributed to this situation were:

**The Treaty of London (1839).** Though not an alliance as such, this treaty was a commitment by Europe’s great powers – including Great Britain and Prussia – to acknowledge, respect and defend the neutrality of Belgium. When German troops invaded Belgium in August 1914 they did so in defiance of this treaty, which was still in effect.

**The Three Emperors League (1873).** A three-way alliance between the ruling monarchs of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. It was engineered and led, to a large degree, by Bismarck, as a means of securing the balance of power in Europe. Disorder in the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire undermined Russia’s commitment to the league, which proved very unstable.

**The Dual Alliance (1879).** A binding military alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary, requiring both nations to support the other if it was attacked by Russia. This agreement was welcomed by nationalists in Germany, who considered that German-speaking Austria should actually be a part of greater Germany.

**The Triple Alliance (1882).** A complex three-way alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, containing anti-French undertones. Each signatory was committed to provide military support to the others, if they were attacked by two other powers – or if Germany and Italy were attacked by France. Italy was viewed as the weaker partner in this alliance (see main picture, above).

**The Franco-Russian Alliance (1894).** A military alliance between France and Russia that restored cordial relations between the two. This agreement also undermined the increasing power of Germany and allowed French capitalists to invest in Russian mining and industry, providing economic benefits to both nations.

**The Entente Cordiale (1904).** Meaning ‘friendly agreement’, this series of agreements between Britain and France ended a century of hostility between the cross-channel neighbours. It also resolved some colonial disagreements and other petty but lingering disputes. It was not a military alliance so neither nation was obliged to provide military support for the other.

**The Anglo-Russian Entente (1907).** An agreement between Britain and Russia which, like the Entente Cordiale, eased long-standing tensions between the two. It also resolved disagreements over colonial possessions in the Middle East and Asia. It did not involve any military commitment or support.

**The Triple Entente (1907).** This treaty consolidated the Entente Cordiale and the Anglo-Russian Entente into a three-way agreement, securing amicable relations between Britain, France and Russia.

**Secrecy and hidden agendas**

In most cases these alliances and ententes were formulated in secret, behind closed doors; they were only revealed to the public later. Some nations even entered into negotiations without consulting their other alliance partners. Germany chancellor Otto von Bismarck, for example, entered into alliance negotiations with the Russians in 1887 without informing Germany’s major ally, Austria-Hungary. Some alliances also contained ‘secret annexes’ that were concealed from the public and known only to signatory governments; many of these secret clauses were only revealed after the end of World War I. The clandestine nature of alliance formulation, along with the content of these agreements, only heightened suspicion and continental tensions. In the decade before 1914, the composition of some of these alliances was revised. Signatories agreed to small but important alterations, often to strengthen military obligations or commitments. The Dual Alliance, for instance, was modified in 1910 with the insertion of a clause requiring Germany to directly intervene if Austro-Hungary was ever attacked by Russia. These amendments further militarised existing alliances and increased the chances of war. The true impact of the alliance system, however, is often over-stated. Alliances may have facilitated a sense of duty or obligation – but they did not make war automatic or inevitable. The ultimate authority to threaten, mobilise for or declare war still rested with national leaders; it was their moral commitment to these alliances that proved the telling factor. As historian Hew Strachan put it, the real problem was that by 1914, “nobody was prepared to fight wholeheartedly for peace as an end in itself.”

1. The alliance system was a network of treaties, agreements and ententes that existed in pre-war Europe.

2. Modern Europe has always been a jigsaw of alliances, however the mid-1800s saw these harden into two blocs.

3. The Central Powers was Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, though the latter was an uncertain member.

4. Despite their historical difficulties, Britain, France and Russia formed a three-way alliance in 1907.

5. Many of these alliances were negotiated in secret and/or contained secret clauses, adding to the suspicion and tension that existed in Europe prior to 1914.