

## What Were the Underlying Causes of World War I?

### Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century Europe was feeling pretty darned good! True, it was the smallest continent in the world, but it controlled vast empires that circled the globe. The standard of living for the average person was high. European technology was unsurpassed. Even its culture of art and music were the envy of the rest of the world. In 1900 Europeans believed the world was their oyster.

But this feeling was not to last. By the end of 1918, after four long years of war, European confidence was badly shaken. Ten million soldiers had died on the battle fields and in the military hospitals; another twenty million soldiers had been wounded. Empires that had lasted for centuries lay in tatters. Writers wrote of broken dreams. Europe had entered the Great War riding on a song. Now, in November of 1918, no one was singing. What had gone wrong?

### Creating a Balance of Power

In the late 19th century European leaders believed that by creating a balance of power they could prevent large-scale war. The idea was that if the major powers of Europe — countries like England, France, Russia, and Germany — were balanced in strength, no one country could dominate the rest.

Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, had a special stake in peace because Germany was sandwiched between Russia and France. The last thing Bismarck wanted was to fight a war on two fronts. His solution was to make an alliance with at least one of these

nations. This proved to be difficult to do. When negotiations failed, he developed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, which became known as the Triple Alliance. In response, France and Russia and Great Britain formed an alliance known as the Triple Entente.

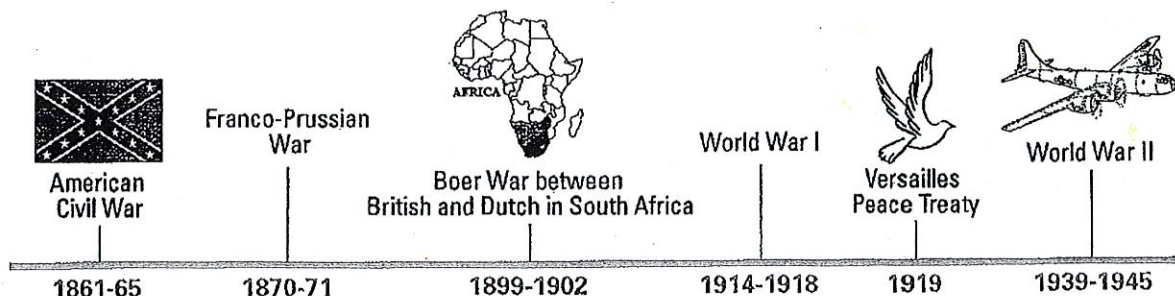
### Tensions Build

On the surface, these alliances could be seen as a way to maintain the balance of power and thereby preserve peace. But suspicions ran high. Political and military leaders spent countless hours developing plans in case a war might break out. Countries built up their arms adding ships, guns, and men to their arsenals.

The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. Especially in south-eastern Europe, in an area known as the Balkans, the spirit of nationalism and independence ran high. Some ethnic groups revolted. Two large powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia, stood by to collect the pieces. The region was a powder keg. All it lacked was a spark to set it off.

### The Spark

Otto von Bismarck had predicted in the late 1800s that "some damned foolish thing in the Balkans" would ignite the next big war. In June, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, visited Sarajevo. At that time, Sarajevo belonged to Austria-Hungary. Seven assassins had been sent to Sarajevo to kill the Archduke by the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand. The Black Hand wanted all the Serb people to be in one nation. And it wanted Austria-Hungary out.



On the morning of <sup>2</sup> June 28, the Archduke's car was instructed to take an unannounced route, but the driver of the car got confused and drove down a main road where <sup>3</sup> Gavrilo Princip, one of



the Serbian assassins, happened to be walking.

<sup>3</sup> Princip was unmarried, unemployed and afflicted with tuberculosis; he expected to die in a year or two. As the car stopped to turn around, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed the Archduke and his wife.

### Chain Reaction

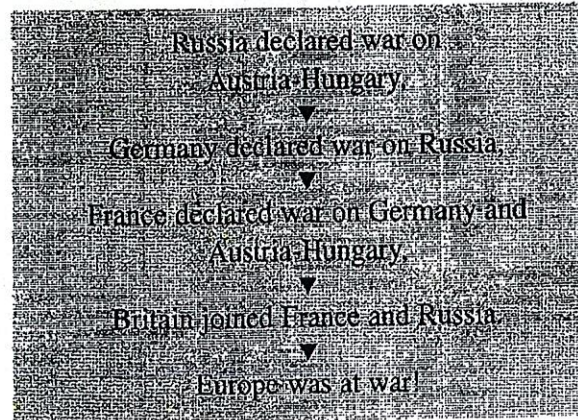
<sup>1</sup> The Black Hand assassins hoped to use the killing to trigger a rebellion that would lead to a larger Serbian nation. But they triggered a lot more than that. The Austrian government was furious at the assassination. They blamed the Serbian government for not controlling groups like the Black Hand. <sup>2</sup> On July 5, an Austrian ambassador met with the Kaiser of Germany. The ambassador got what he hoped for – a promise of full support.

One thing quickly led to another.

- <sup>3</sup> On July 23 Austrian leaders demanded apologies from Serbia.
- <sup>3</sup> On July 24 an angry Serbia sought help from Russia, and received a promise of support if Austria were to attack.

<sup>3</sup> On July 28 with no further response from the Serbian leaders, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

• In the next several days:



Four long years and ten million lives later, Europe looked for answers. What should be blamed? Who should be punished? What had been the cause of this catastrophe?

### About Causes and the Question

A useful way to think about causes in history is to see the difference between **immediate** and **underlying causes**. Take, for example, the causes of the American Civil War. Historians generally agree that the immediate cause of the Civil War was the decision by South Carolina soldiers to start firing on federal troops at Fort Sumter. However, historians do not believe that Fort Sumter explains why the Civil War was fought. For that one has to look for deeper, underlying causes like slavery, or the South's right to secede from the Union.

This DBQ is concerned with identifying deeper causes. Examine the eleven documents that follow and answer the analytical question before us: *What were the underlying causes of World War I?*

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