

World War I

Before WWI the Great Powers of Europe negotiated a system of alliances to maintain peace, but these alliances ultimately played a role in provoking war. Why were the Great Powers rivals to begin with?

Nationalism: A strong sense of loyalty to and pride in one's own nation-state. The Napoleonic Wars had done much to develop nationalism and cultural pride within Europe. Throughout the 19th century, nationalism became more defined and was used to unite the different social/economic groups behind a common cultural identity or historical narrative.

Militarism: A strong military was a symbol of national power and greatness. The military was a means to inspire loyalty to the nation, to increase political and economic power both within Europe and overseas, and to realize industrialization and technological advancement. Large militaries resulted in rivalry, jealousy, and mistrust.

Imperialism: A strong presence abroad demonstrated power at home. Colonial possessions were seen as a source of profit and pride. Aspects of industrialization were aided by imperialism, as well. Competition for colonies, however, was another source of rivalry and jealousy.

How did the system of alliances begin?

Otto von Bismarck, having unified Germany in 1871, sought peace throughout Europe during 1870s and 1880s in order to protect the new German Empire. Bismarck believed that France was Germany's greatest threat because France was bitter over the loss of Alsace-Lorraine (valuable territory). Bismarck's diplomatic goal was to isolate France in order to protect Germany.

1871: Conclusion of the **Franco-Prussian War** results in the creation of the German Empire and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine.

1873: **Three Emperor's League** of Germany, Austria, and Russia established by Bismarck to unite the three *conservative* empires of Europe. The pact is disbanded due to Russian and Austrian rivalry in the Balkans.

1882: **Triple Alliance** between Germany, Austria, and Italy created a defensive alliance against France due to the French occupation of Tunisia in North Africa.

1890: The new Kaiser William II dismisses Bismarck and ends alliance with Russia

1894: *Franco-Russian* defensive alliance against Germany is formed

1898: Germany begins significant naval build-up to challenge Great Britain

1907: **Triple Entente:** Russia, France, and Great Britain agree to not go to war against each other, creating a division between the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance.

Crisis in the Balkans

The Habsburgs of **Austria**, the Romanovs of **Russia**, and the **Ottomans** had dominated southeastern Europe for many years. Within each of these aging empires many different ethnic groups became inspired by nationalism. With the unification of Italy and Germany, Austria's power was in decline and the Ottoman Empire had been slowly diminishing for more than a century. Russia tried to take the Balkans from the Ottomans in the Crimean War, but was prevented by Great Britain, France, and Austria-Hungary.

Russia considered itself the natural leader of an emerging Pan-Slavism that sought to establish Slavic unity and independence in the Balkans. Slavic people lived in both the Ottoman Empire and the Austria-Hungary. Britain feared Russian influence in the Balkans due to its proximity to the Suez Canal in Egypt. Frequent small-scale wars broke out within the Balkans as various territories attempted to gain independence from the Ottoman Empire and Austrian influence. If Austria-Hungary and Russia were to go to war over the Balkans it would drag the other nations from the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance into the conflict, as well. In 1908, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. Serbia was angered because they had hoped to form a united Balkan Slavic state, and Russia opposed Austria's territorial expansion. Serbia, supported by Russia, threatened war against Austria-Hungary. Germany intervened by threatening war against Russia, which preserved the peace for a few more years. In 1912 – 1913, two separate wars took place within the Balkans between the Balkan states over who would control the region. Austria convened the London Conference to settle the territorial disputes, which resulted in Serbia not receiving the territory that it had desired. Austria-Hungary considered a powerful Serbia a threat to its own stability because many Slavs lived within the Habsburg Empire. Deep resentment against Austria-Hungary developed within Serbia and Russia supported Serbia's ambitions due to its own competition with Austria-Hungary and Germany.

Immediate Causes of World War I

In the summer of 1914, many Europeans felt that war was inevitable due to events in the Balkans. Meanwhile, military leaders were anxious to put their war plans into action and utilize new military technology. The Major Powers had experienced decades of military build-up without any major conflicts. Many citizens believed that war was the ideal expression of nationalism and eagerly awaited the opportunity to prove their nation's greatness.

June 28, 1914: Prince **Franz Ferdinand** (heir to the Austrian throne) goes to Sarajevo, Bosnia and Gavrilo Princip, a member of the Serbian Black Hand, assassinates him.

Austria responded to the Slavic nationalist threat to its rule by seeking the support of Germany before militarily responding to the assassination. On July 5, 1914 Kaiser William II declares German support for an Austrian attack against Serbia.

July 28, 1914: Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia (who is supported by Russia).
July 30, 1914: Russia begins moving troops to the Austrian and German borders.
August 1, 1914: Germany declares war on Russia for mobilizing its army.
August 3, 1914: Germany declares war on France in order to execute the **Schlieffen Plan** (invade France via Belgium, and then invade Russia).
August 4, 1914: Great Britain declares war on Germany for invading neutral Belgium.

Allied Powers: Great Britain, France, Russia (later joined by Italy)

Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary (later joined by Ottoman Empire)

The outbreak of the war was greeted by jubilation and patriotic resolve. There had been so much diplomatic anxiety for so many years that the war was experienced as a release of tension. The Allied Powers had superior manpower, naval power, and financial power.

August 1914: On the **Eastern Front**, the German army led by Paul von **Hindenburg** defeated and captured an entire Russian army at the **Battle of Tannenberg**. Over two million Russian soldiers died in one year, but the Eastern Front became a stalemate due to the size of the Russian army.

September 1914: On the **Western Front**, the German army reaches outskirts of Paris, and believing that the occupation of the city will be easy, begins to send troops to the Eastern Front to fight Russia. The French resistance proves more powerful than the Germans anticipated.

September 6, 1914: **Battle of the Marne** begins and the Germans are forced to withdraw 40 miles without invading or occupying Paris. Thus, the **Schlieffen Plan** is a failure because Germany must now fight a two-front war against France and Russia.

After the Battle of the Marne the war became one of *position* instead of *movement*. Both sides dug **trenches** and **machine guns** prevented assaults by the other side. Nonetheless, each side attempted assaults, resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives for territorial gains of a few hundred yards. The **tank** and **poison gas** were introduced, as well.

On the Western Front in 1916, the Germans embraced a **war of attrition** against the French at the **Battle of Verdun**. The plan was not to advance, but simply bombard the French line until they were all dead. 700,000 soldiers died at Verdun. The French defended the line and caused as many German casualties as they suffered. The French general at Verdun was Henri Philippe **Pétain**, who became a national hero.

The Allies led a major counter-offensive to relieve the French at Verdun in the **Battle of the Somme**, but both sides suffered enormous casualties with no significant territorial gains. The Western Front was a stalemate with no end in sight. The war was becoming a tragedy...

The **Ottoman Front** was disastrous for the Allies as they attempted, in the **Gallipoli** naval campaign, to control the Black Sea in order to bring supplies to the Russian army. The failed campaign led to an alternative strategy of organizing **Arab nationalist** movements, under the leadership of **Lawrence of Arabia**, to challenge the Ottoman Empire.

The **Italian Front** diverted Austrian troops to Italy and helped tip the war in favor of the Allies, who had promised Italy territory in Austria if the Allies were victorious.

The **Japanese Front** was essentially a land grab by Japan of Germany's colonial territory in Asia and the Pacific Islands. Nonetheless, the Allies appreciated another ally. The British sought to impose a blockade at sea that would starve the Central Powers of supplies and food, but the Germans responded with **submarine warfare**. The Germans attacked both British and neutral ships. In 1915, a German submarine attacked the British *Lusitania*, and among the 1,200 who drowned were 118 Americans. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson warned Germany about the consequences of future attacks.

In 1916 Woodrow Wilson attempted to negotiate a peace to end the war. In March 1917, the **Russian Revolution** overthrew the czar, which ultimately led to the end of Russian participation in the war. At the same time, Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, which brought the United States officially into the war in April 1917. The United States was also motivated to enter the war after the **Zimmerman Letter** indicated Germany's willingness to support Mexican territorial desires in the American southwest.

The conclusion of the war on the Eastern Front with the **Treaty of Brest Litovsk** allowed Germany to move its army to the Western Front, which may have been decisive if the United States had not entered the conflict. In July 1918, the Germans made one last major offensive at the **Second Battle of the Marne**, but the Germans were halted by the French under the leadership of General Ferdinand **Foch**. The arrival of ever-increasing soldiers from the United States indicated that the Central Powers would be defeated.

August 1918: The **Battle of Amiens** pushed the German army back into Germany and the Central Powers began to surrender.

November 1918: **Kaiser William II** abdicates and Germany becomes a **republic** with the signing of the **Armistice** presided over by General Foch. At 11:00 AM on November 11 all fighting ceased.

The new German government, dominated by the **Social Democrats**, asked for peace on the basis of **Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points**. The **Armistice** that ended the war by accepting German military defeat came as a surprise to many of the German people who were unaware that their army was being defeated. After the war, many would blame the Social Democrats for the post-war economic and social problems of Germany.

Along with the disintegration of the German Empire came the breakup of the **Austro-Hungarian Empire** into the independent states of **Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia**.

After the **Bolsheviks** toppled the Russian Empire, four new states emerged in the **Baltics: Finland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania**. Also, **Poland** was reconstituted.

More than 10 million on all sides died in battle alone, with the number of wounded soldiers and dead civilians increasing the human toll of the conflict. The economic and financial resources of the European states were destroyed and the Allied Powers became the debtors of the United States. The German Empire, Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russian Empire, and Ottoman Empire all collapsed politically. The Russian Revolution created a major communist state in Eastern Europe.

The 19th century intellectual and cultural assumptions of inevitable progress based on reason, science, technology, individualism, democracy, and free trade gave way in many places to cynicism, nihilism, dictatorship, statism, racism, and class warfare. Europe was no longer the center of the world, as its colonial empires were weakened and insecure, and the memory of the war undermined its self-confidence.

The main negotiators at the **Paris Peace Conference** were **Woodrow Wilson** of the United States, **David Lloyd George** of Great Britain, **Georges Clemenceau** of France, and **Vittorio Orlando** of Italy. The reality of nationalism made the realignment of the political territories of Europe difficult. The idealistic notion of constructing a “**peace without victors**” did not match the realities of the numerous secret treaties and agreements made during the war, the popular demands of the people, and the spread of Bolshevism. Significantly, France insisted that Germany be weakened. Germany and the Soviet Union were excluded from the peace talks.

Wilson proposed the creation of a **League of Nations** (Kant’s dream come true!) that would pursue common policies to ensure peace. France and Great Britain insisted that Germany pay **war reparations** for the war and assume sole responsibility for the war in the “**war guilt clause**.” Germany was forced to pay five \$5 billion annually. The **Weimar** government, dominated by the Social Democrats, would rule Germany until 1933.

The dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the Middle East becoming controlled by Great Britain and France. The British created the state of Iraq and ruled Palestine, as well. The French ruled Syria and Lebanon. Turkey became an independent, secular state under the leadership of **Mustafa Kemal**, or Ataturk. The Middle East was divided into artificial, European-created states that were ruled until after WWII. Other colonial territories would become increasingly influenced by nationalism and the process of **decolonization** would dominate the **post-WWII** world.

Results of the WWI and Treaty of Versailles

- The United States increased its economic standing and for the first time challenged Europe as a major force in international trade and finance.
- Native populations in European colonies began to support nationalism and desire independence.
- Four great empires of Europe and the Middle East perished.
- The first Marxist seizure of power took place in Russia.
- The European balance of power collapsed.
- Respect for the notion of aristocracy collapsed throughout Europe.
- New nations were established within which majority ethnic groups had the authority to oppress minority ethnic groups, which would lead to further conflicts.
- The League of Nations was created, but it remained weak and ineffective.
- The United States became a world power, but it embraced political and military isolationism.