

## The World Scene/Build Up To War

### Introduction

**World War I ( WW1)**, also known as the **First World War**, was a global war centred in Europe that began on 28 July 1914 and lasted until 11 November 1918. Until the approach of World War II in 1939, it was called simply the **World War** or the **Great War**, and thereafter the First World War or World War I. In America it was initially called the **European War**. More than 9 million combatants were killed; a casualty rate exacerbated by the belligerents' technological and industrial sophistication, and tactical stalemate. It paved the way for major political changes, including revolutions in many of the nations involved.

The war drew in all the world's economic great powers, which were assembled in two opposing alliances: the Allies (based on the Triple Entente of the United Kingdom, France and the Russian Empire) and the Central Powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Although Italy had also been a member of the Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary, it did not join the Central Powers. These alliances were both reorganised and expanded as more nations entered the war: Italy, Japan and the United States joined the Allies, and the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria the Central Powers. Ultimately, more than 70 million military personnel, including 60 million Europeans, were mobilised.

### Background

Although a resurgence of imperialism was an underlying cause, the immediate trigger for war was the 28 June 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, by a Yugoslav nationalist in Sarajevo. This set off a diplomatic crisis when Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum to the Kingdom of Serbia, and international alliances formed over the previous decades were invoked. Within weeks, the major powers were at war and the conflict soon spread around the world.

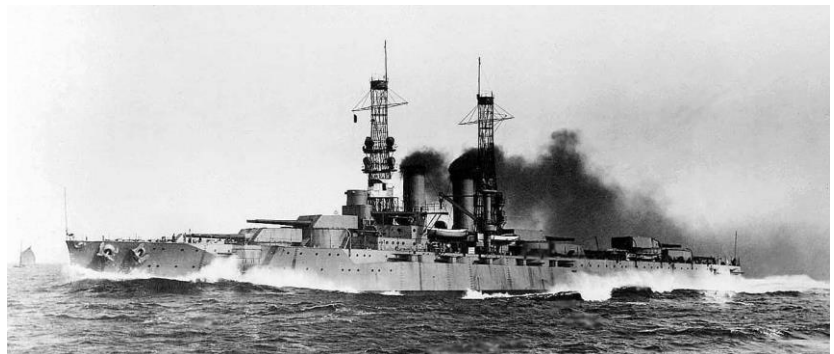
**National Interests and Influences** The Royal and Ruling families of Europe and their governments were in 'peaceful' competition to exert influence and control throughout the world. Technology and ease of travel had opened up hitherto unknown areas to be added to the Empires of the ablest. Many of the ruling families were related and conscious of their status and guarded of their positions - this had led to petty jealousies and a degree of paranoia and intrigue.

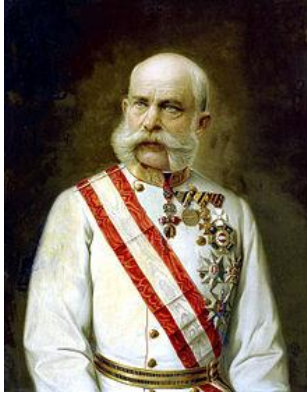
**Political and Military Alliances** The major European powers had gone to great lengths to maintain a balance of power throughout Europe, resulting in the existence of a complex network of political and military alliances throughout the continent by 1900. These had started in 1815, with the Holy Alliance between Prussia, Russia, and Austria. In 1873, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck negotiated the League of the Three Emperors between Austria-Hungary, Russia and Germany. This agreement failed because Austria-Hungary and Russia could not agree over Balkan policy, leaving Germany and Austria-Hungary in an alliance formed in 1879, called the Dual Alliance.

This was seen as a method of countering Russian influence in the Balkans as the Ottoman Empire continued to weaken. In 1882, this alliance was expanded to include Italy in what became the Triple Alliance. Bismarck had especially worked to hold Russia at Germany's side to avoid a two-front war with France and Russia. When Wilhelm II ascended to the throne as German Emperor (*Kaiser*), Bismarck was compelled to retire and his system of alliances was gradually de-emphasised. For example, the Kaiser refused to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1890. Two years later, the Franco-Russian Alliance was signed to counteract the force of the Triple Alliance. In 1904, Britain signed a series of agreements with France, the Entente Cordiale, and in 1907, Britain and Russia signed the Anglo-Russian Convention. While these agreements did not formally ally Britain with France or Russia, they made British entry into any future conflict involving France or Russia a possibility, and the system of interlocking bilateral agreements became known as the Triple Entente.



**Arms Race** German industrial and economic power had grown greatly after unification and the foundation of the Empire in 1871. From the mid-1890s on, the government of Wilhelm II used this base to devote significant economic resources for building up the *Kaiserliche Marine* (Imperial German Navy), established by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, in rivalry with the British Royal Navy for world naval supremacy. As a result, each nation strove to out-build the other in terms of capital ships. With the launch of HMS *Dreadnought* in 1906, the British Empire expanded on its significant advantage over its German rival. The arms race between Britain and Germany eventually extended to the rest of Europe, with all the major powers devoting their industrial base to producing the equipment and weapons necessary for a pan-European conflict. Between 1908 and 1913, the military spending of the European powers increased by 50%.





**Conflicts in The Balkans** European instability and tensions was encapsulated by and focused on the Balkans, the web of alliances tied in directly or indirectly the major European countries to this volatile region. Austria-Hungary precipitated the Bosnian crisis of 1908–1909 by officially annexing the former Ottoman territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which it had occupied since 1878. This angered the Kingdom of Serbia and its patron, the Pan-Slavic and Orthodox Russian Empire. Russian political manoeuvring in the region destabilised peace accords, which were already fracturing in what was known as "the powder keg of Europe". In 1912 and 1913, the First Balkan War was fought between the Balkan League and the fracturing Ottoman Empire. The resulting Treaty of London further shrank the Ottoman Empire, creating an independent Albanian State while enlarging the territorial holdings of Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece. When Bulgaria attacked both Serbia and Greece on 16 June 1913, it lost most of Macedonia to Serbia and Greece and Southern Dobruja to Romania in the 33-day Second Balkan War, further destabilising the region.

#### June & July 1914

**Sarajevo Assassination** On 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand visited the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo. A group of six Nationalist assassins, had gathered on the street where the Archduke's motorcade would pass. A grenade was thrown at the car, but missed. It injured some people nearby, and Franz Ferdinand's convoy carried on. The other assassins failed to act as the cars drove past them quickly. About an hour later, when Franz Ferdinand was returning from a visit at the Sarajevo Hospital, the convoy took a wrong turn into a street where by coincidence one of the assassins stood, Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie were shot and killed. The reaction among the people in Austria was mild, almost indifferent.





**Escalation of Violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina** However, in Sarajevo itself, Austrian authorities encouraged violence against the Serb residents, which resulted in the Anti-Serb pogrom of Sarajevo, in which Croats and Bosnian Muslims killed two and damaged numerous Serb-owned buildings. Anti-Serb demonstrations and pogroms were organized in many other larger Austro-Hungarian cities in modern-day Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Austro-Hungarian authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina imprisoned and extradited approximately 5,500 prominent Serbs, 700 to 2,200 of whom died in prison. 460 Serbs were sentenced to death and a predominantly Muslim special militia was established and carried out the persecution of Serbs.

**July Crisis** The assassination led to a month of diplomatic manoeuvring, between Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain, the complex threads of the treaties and alliances were starting to tighten - this was called the July Crisis. Believing correctly that Serbian officials were involved in the plot, and wanting to finally end Serbian interference in Bosnia, Austria-Hungary delivered to Serbia the July Ultimatum, a series of ten demands intentionally made unacceptable, intending to provoke a war with Serbia. Serbia agreed to only eight of the ten demands and on 28 July, Austro-Hungary declared war and fired the first shots in preparation for the invasion of Serbia.

**Mobilisation** Each of the European powers has complex plans to mobilise their forces. The triggers for mobilisation were complex (as were the alliances and treaties!), but once mobilisation was started there was a cumbersome but planned and steady build up of forces in readiness for conflict with its presumed opponents. Once started mobilisation could not easily be stopped from a bureaucratic practical angle as well as a 'face saving' position. The Russian Empire, unwilling to allow Austria-Hungary to eliminate its influence in the Balkans, and in support of its longtime Serb protégé, ordered a partial mobilisation one day after the declaration of war on the 29 July. Germany mobilised on 30 July, and Russia responded by declaring a full mobilisation that same day. Germany imposed an ultimatum on Russia, through its ambassador in Berlin, to demobilise within 12 hours or face war. Russia responded by offering to negotiate the terms of a demobilisation. However, Germany refused to negotiate, declaring war against Russia on 1 August 1914.



**Confusion Among the Central Powers** The strategy of the Central Powers suffered from miscommunication. Germany had promised to support Austria-Hungary's invasion of Serbia, but interpretations of what this meant differed. Previously tested deployment plans had been replaced early in 1914, but the replacements had never been tested in exercises. Austro-Hungarian leaders believed Germany would cover its northern flank against Russia. Germany, however, envisioned Austria-

Hungary directing most of its troops against Russia, while Germany dealt with France. This confusion forced the Austro-Hungarian Army to divide its forces between the Russian and Serbian fronts.

**German Mobilisation** Germany's war plan, the Schlieffen Plan, to avoid fighting a war on two fronts, relied on a quick, massive invasion of France to eliminate the threat on the West, before turning East against Russia. Simultaneously with its mobilisation against Russia, therefore, the German government issued demands that France remain neutral. The French cabinet resisted military pressure to commence immediate mobilisation, and ordered its troops to withdraw 10 km (6 mi) from the border to avoid any incident. Germany attacked Luxembourg on 2 August, and on 3 August declared war on France. On 4 August, after Belgium refused to permit German troops to cross its borders into France, Germany declared war on Belgium as well. Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, following an "unsatisfactory reply" to the British ultimatum that Belgium must be kept neutral.



The various plans had been put in place and were now being executed; but they were not generally proceeding as intended, misinterpretation and suspicion abounded; no-one had been prepared to concede standing or ground and the scene had been set, by a complex series of interconnected but disjointed moves for war across the mainland of Europe