

What Was the Underlying Cause of World War I?

At the turn of the 20th century Europe was feeling pretty darned good. It controlled empires that circled the globe. Its technology was unsurpassed. Its art and music were the envy 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; another 20 million 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?

In the late 19th century European leaders believed that by creating a **balance of power** they could prevent such a horror. 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. War could be avoided.

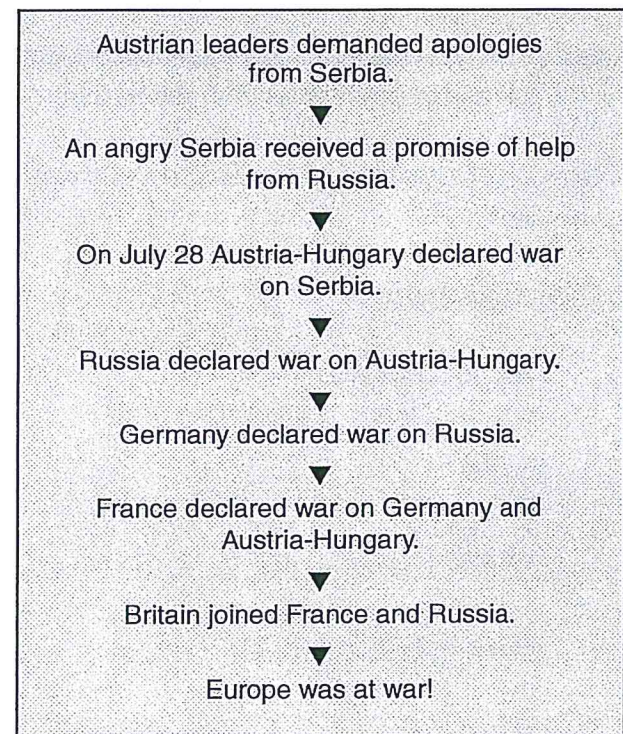
But Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, did not like the fact that Germany was sandwiched between Russia and France. To counter this uncomfortable situation, Bismarck created an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy. He did try to reassure Russia and England, but after 1890, France, Russia, and Great Britain formed their own **entente**. The great players were picking sides.

The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. Especially in southeastern Europe, in an area known as the **Balkans**, the spirit of **nationalism** and independence ran high. Some **ethnic** groups revolted. The region was a powder keg. All it lacked was a **spark** to set it off. That spark was provided by a Serbian nationalist group called the Black Hand. They wanted independence from their mother country, Austria-Hungary. Their solution? Assassinate the Archduke of Austria when he came to visit.

On the morning of June 28, 1914, the Archduke's car was fired upon by one of the Serbian assassins. Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife were killed. The Black Hand hoped the assassination would trigger a rebellion in the region against Austria. But this spark in the Balkans soon flamed out of control. One thing led to another and soon all of Europe was at war.

Four long years and 10 million lives later,

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Europe looked for answers. What had gone wrong?

This Mini-Q contains six documents. It does not pretend to cover all the underlying causes of World War I. (Nationalism, for example, is not included.) Using the documents, your task is to identify and describe each of three important causes of the war and then answer the question before us: *What was the underlying cause of World War I?*

Background Essay Questions

1. What is meant by the phrase “In 1900 Europeans believed the world was their oyster”?
2. World War I lasted four years. What were the war years?
3. The population of Chicago is about 3,000,000. How does that compare to the total number of dead and wounded in World War I? (Give your answer as a fraction.)
4. Why might a balance of power prevent war?
5. Otto von Bismarck once said that a great war might someday be caused by “some damned foolish thing in the Balkans.” Was he right? Explain.
6. How did the assassination of the Archduke of Austria-Hungary lead to war between Russia and Germany?
7. Define these terms:

balance of power

entente

Balkans

nationalism

ethnic

spark

Timeline

- 1858 – Full British rule of India begins.
- 1865 – End of American Civil War
- 1871 – Franco-Prussian War (France v. Germany)
- 1912 - 1913 – The Balkan Wars
- 1914 – Beginning of World War I (also known as the Great War)
- 1918 – End of World War I
- 1919 – Versailles Peace Treaty
- 1939 – Beginning of World War II