

International Rivalries

Before 1914, European powers had not been involved in a major war with one another for almost fifty years. However, a series of crises occurred that did not lead to general war, primarily because Otto von Bismarck of Germany orchestrated the balance of power. One action he took in 1879 was to form an alliance with Austria to ward off a possible anti-German alliance between France and Russia. In 1882, Italy joined Germany and Austria-Hungary to form the Triple Alliance. The three countries vowed to support the existing political order. At the same time, Bismarck signed a separate treaty with Russia, hoping to prevent a French-Russian alliance against him. This delicate balancing act was designed to preserve peace and the status quo, but all was upset when Emperor Wilhelm II dismissed Bismarck and began to direct Germany's foreign policy himself.

Bismarck's Demise

Until 1890 Bismarck continued to guide German policy. His actions generally supported his assertion that Germany wanted no further territorial gains, and was satisfied with the position in European politics that it held after German unification. He certainly wanted to avoid a new war that might undo his achievement, as was reflected in his attempt to settle the "Scramble for Africa" at the Berlin Conference in 1884. The alliances and other treaties that he signed with other nations resulted from his use of the full range of diplomatic weapons: appeasement and deterrence, threats and promises, secrecy and openness. When he was forced into retirement by Wilhelm II in 1890, relationships among the great powers became increasingly tense.

Wilhelm II came to the German throne in 1888 at the age of 29, a young man with a very different perspective of Germany's role in international affairs. Like many Germans of his generation, he believed that Germany was destined to be the leading power of Europe, and he saw Britain as the greatest threat to his ambition. His grandmother was Queen Victoria, and some historians believe that part of his motivation was based on family rivalries. Whatever the reason, he argued for a navy as a defense against a British landing in North Germany, and so began to build what he hoped would be a navy superior to Britain's.

Once Bismarck resigned, Wilhelm took control of policymaking in Germany, and one of his changes was to drop Bismarck's treaty with Russia. From Wilhelm's view, this treaty was contradictory to Germany's alliance

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with Austria, but once the treaty ended, Russia turned to France for support, just as Bismarck had feared. In 1894, Russia and France formed a military alliance. Britain was ever wary of German aggression – especially in building its navy – and drifted closer to France as a result. Soon two opposing camps were formed: the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy) and the Triple Entente (France, Russia, and Britain).

Crises in the Balkans, 1908-1913

As tensions among the great powers increased, European politics grew more unsettled, as was evidenced in disputes that erupted in the Balkans between 1908 and 1913. Since the late 1870s, Bosnia and Herzegovina had been protectorates of Austria, but in 1908, Austria tried to annex them. Both territories were heavily populated with Slavs, and feelings of Pan-Slavism sparked neighboring Serbia to protest. Part of Austria's motivation in seizing these lands was to prevent their possible union with Serbia, and so Serbia called on Russia for aid. Russia was not only a fellow-Slavic nation, but also had its own ambitions to seize territories in the Balkans. Serbia then – with Russia's backing – prepared to go to war with Austria. At this point, Germany intervened and insisted that Russia recognize Austria's annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Russia, fresh from its humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, backed down, but resentments still simmered.

The Balkans in 1913

The area again erupted in 1912 when Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro organized the Balkan League to defeat the Ottomans and drive them out of their lands. However, the countries could not agree about how to split up the lands they won, and so went to war with one another in the Second Balkan War in 1913. As a result, Bulgaria lost most of its claims, and Greece and Serbia gained land. Still, Serbia had ambitions that were left unfulfilled by these wars. One Serbian goal was to gain territory from Albania so the country could have access to the Adriatic Sea, an ambition blocked by the creation of an independent Albania at the London Conference, with the support of Austria and Germany. As a result of all this conflict, Austria-Hungary and Serbia greatly mistrusted one another, and France and Russia did not want to back down from their alliances.

The crisis in the Balkans almost certainly would have been contained to the region in an earlier era. However, massive political and economic changes in Europe that first transformed societies there increasingly impacted other

areas of the world as the 19th century progressed. Political ideas, such as liberalism and nationalism, spread throughout the world as Europeans came to dominate other areas as a result of their new industrial might, and the economic world order changed as non-European people and lands came to supply the labor and natural resources needed by industrialized countries. The United States and Japan emerged as new industrial powers, but as the era drew to a close, competition among European powers increased, and their conflicts would draw others into a world war that impacted virtually all areas of the world in 1914.

Underlying Causes of the War

European countries have had a long history of conflict, dating back to the days when they were competing kingdoms and principalities with feudal loyalties that were often at cross-purposes. In more recent times, the continent was engulfed by the Napoleonic Wars, which were intensified by fierce feelings of nationalism. Although the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15 struck a balance of power among nations to achieve peace, that balance was upset during the late 19th century by the creation of new empires, particularly Germany. Otto von Bismarck's armies humiliated older powers such as France, and a united Germany challenged even Britain, despite the latter's control of a vast worldwide empire. The economic and military competition extended to the world stage, as Germany joined the quest for new colonies in Africa and Asia.

Some factors that contributed to the outbreak of the war include:

- 1) **Rivalries intensified by nationalism** – By the late 19th century, all the industrialized nations of Europe were aggressively competing for foreign markets, but the rivalry between Britain and Germany had become the most intense by 1914. The rapid industrialization of Germany had brought its share of the world's total industrial output to about 14%, roughly equal to Britain's. In 1870 Britain's share had been about 32% and Germany 13%, a comfortably wide margin. Whereas the increase in production in the United States was largely responsible for Britain's drop, British production was beginning to slow, increasing Germany's threat. An expensive naval race increased tensions between the two nations, and Germany was playing catch-up to Britain's lead in sea power. Their intense competition led both countries to develop huge navies.

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- 2) **Colonial disputes** – The scramble for empire was spurred by nationalist rivalries among European countries, and it spread their historic rivalries to virtually every corner of the globe. In their haste to grab land, they often came into conflict with one another. For example, Britain and Russia disputed land claims in Persia and Afghanistan, and Britain and Germany argued over east and southwest Africa. Since Germany had only been a unified country since 1871, its leaders had a late start, but they aggressively challenged the French and English in many parts of the globe. England and France argued so intensely in Southeast Asia that they allowed Siam to remain independent as a buffer zone between British-owned Burma and French Indochina. In 1905 France and Germany almost went to war over Morocco in northern Africa, and war among the Balkan states in 1912-1913 created hostilities among European states that wished to exploit the unrest.
- 3) **Self determination** – The spirit of nationalism that spread throughout Europe and many other parts of the world during the 19th century supported the notion that people with common national identities have the right to form their own sovereign states. This belief was formalized into the doctrine of self determination that inspired many people in eastern Europe to fight for their independence. Many of them were encompassed by the multinational empires of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian dynasties, and they hoped to follow the examples of Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria, which had gained their independence from the weakening Ottoman Empire. In Austria-Hungary, many Slavic people – such as Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes – had nationalist aspirations that spawned resistance to Habsburg rule. Russia, always hoping to gain lands that accessed the Black Sea, encouraged Pan-Slavism, a feeling of cultural and ethnic kinship among the Slavic people that the empire hoped would weaken Austria-Hungary's hold in the Balkans.
- 4) **Entangling alliances** – The Great War was sparked in 1914 by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary by a Serb nationalist, an incident that would never have led to widespread war had it not been for the system of alliances that had been building up in Europe over the previous decades. As countries competed, they

looked for backing from others in order to challenge their enemies. For example, as Germany moved to become stronger than Britain and France, it formed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy in 1902 called the Triple Alliance. France and England responded with an Entente (“understanding”) in 1904, with Russia joining in 1907. These alliances combined with a build-up of each country’s military to divide Europe into two hostile armed camps, poised for war.

Perspectives: Kaiser Wilhelm II and the German Navy

An important component of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s plan to build German power was his decision to construct a massive navy, and he was particularly determined to match England’s development of a revolutionary battleship type, the Dreadnought. As the German navy grew, the British responded by building more ships, leading to a dangerous military buildup that eventually led to war. Wilhelm’s political motivations were mixed with personal ones that reflected his mixed heritage: his father was Prussian, but his mother was the daughter of the English Queen Victoria, and as a boy Wilhelm spent a great deal of time in England. The *kaiser* explained his reasons for building the German fleet at a dinner aboard one of his proudest ships, the Hohenzollern, in 1904:

“When, as a little boy, I was allowed to visit Portsmouth and Plymouth hand in hand with kind aunts and friendly admirals, I admired the proud English ships in those two superb harbors. Then there awoke in me the wish to build ships of my own like these someday, and when I was grown up to possess as fine a navy as the English.”

The *kaiser*’s chancellor, Bernhard von Bulow, censored the speech for the press because he feared that the Reichstag (parliament) would not fund naval construction based on the *kaiser*’s “personal inclinations and juvenile memories.”

A Serbian nationalist group called “The Black Hand” claimed responsibility for the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, a city in Austria-Hungary with a large population of Serbs who believed it should become a part of Serbia. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, touching off agreements made within the alliances to provide military aid for those attacked. Germany supported Austria-Hungary and Russia backed Serbia’s position, and one by one, the countries of Europe took sides, and within days, most of them had declared war on one another. Ties of empire drew

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millions of colonists into the war to serve as soldiers and laborers, and the Great War began.