

First World War - overview

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Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914 confirmed the outbreak of the Great War (as it was known at the time). It is now more often referred to as the First World War or World War One.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914 was a defining moment. This event was the culmination of a number of historical forces and processes that had been simmering in Europe for many years.

Some factors behind the outbreak of war

Nationalism

The Prussian-led unification of Germany in the latter half of the 19th century was partially achieved through a war with France (1870–71). The emergence of a large German state in the middle of Europe altered the continent's geopolitical dynamics and left France desperate for revenge.

Further east in the Balkans, the Austro-Hungarian Empire faced problems with conflicting national groups that threatened Austrian control. In particular, Serbia wanted to unite all Slavs in the region under its control, an ambition in which the Russian Empire supported it. Germany backed Austria's opposition to Serbian demands.

Imperialism

Great Britain, Germany and France were rivals in the economic exploitation of Africa. Several incidents involving Germany in Africa aroused the suspicions of Britain and France, who resolved their differences in the region in an attempt to protect what they had. They were concerned that Germany was challenging the established colonial order.

In the Middle East, the crumbling Ottoman (Turkish) Empire added to tensions between Austria-Hungary, Russia and Serbia.

The European alliances

After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, Germany tried to isolate France. In 1872, the Germans formed an alliance with Russia and Austria-Hungary that proved hard to maintain because of the rivalries over the Balkans. By 1891, France had secured its own alliance with Russia.

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Britain did its best to keep out of Europe and concentrate on its vast empire. Some of the actions and policies of the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, challenged this stance. Wilhelm angered Britain in 1896 when he formally congratulated the South African Boers for defeating a British-backed raid into Transvaal. His investment in Germany's navy was seen as a direct challenge to Britannia's claim to rule the waves.

Britain responded by strengthening its diplomatic links with France and its ally Russia. In 1907, these powers established an informal coalition, the Triple Entente.

Planning for war

The standing armies of France and Germany doubled in size between 1870 and 1914. Great Britain had a policy of maintaining a navy two and a half times as large as any rival. Germany's naval expansion sparked a naval arms race.

Europe narrowly avoided war in 1908. Austria-Hungary annexed the former Ottoman province of Bosnia, thwarting Serbia in the process. In response, Serbia began to mobilise its army (with the support of Russia). When Germany threatened war in defence of its Austrian ally, Russia and Serbia backed down.

These tensions prompted many nations to make detailed plans for military mobilisation. For Germany, any plan had to consider the possibility of a war on two fronts, so its scheme involved crushing one rival quickly. Once begun, mobilisation would be difficult if not impossible to reverse. This was illustrated by Germany's von Schlieffen Plan, developed in 1905. Based on the need to defeat France before Russia had time to react, German forces would invade France through Belgium to avoid the French border defences. Belgium posed no serious military threat to this plan, although Britain had formally guaranteed its neutrality since 1839. Germany felt that ultimately Britain would not risk war to save Belgium.

Death in Sarajevo

In May 1914, the Serbian government became aware of a plot to kill Franz Ferdinand. There was evidence that high-ranking Serbian military figures were involved, and Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, the chief of intelligence in the Serbian army, almost certainly helped arm those selected to kill the archduke.

The Serbian ambassador in Vienna gave vague warnings about a possible assassination attempt. The archduke insisted on going ahead with a planned visit in June. He and his wife had a narrow escape from one attempt on their lives in Sarajevo on the morning of 28 June, and they continued with their official business that afternoon. But their motorcade took a wrong turn and stopped within metres of one of the assassins, Gavrilo Princip. Unlike his colleagues that morning, Princip did not fail.

Germany gave Austria a blank cheque to take any action it deemed appropriate. Austria-Hungary issued Serbia with a harsh ultimatum that effectively revoked the latter's national sovereignty. Although Serbia consented to almost every point in the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary exploited disagreements on a number of minor points to declare war on 28 July 1914.

Like falling dominoes

Next day Russia ordered a partial mobilisation against Austria-Hungary. Germany responded by threatening Russia with war if it did not stop this process. France reacted to the prospect of a Russo-German war by mobilising its own forces. Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August and on France two days later. When the von Schlieffen Plan was activated, the invasion of Belgium prompted Britain to declare war on Germany on 4 August. The First World War had begun.

On the other side of the world, Wellington received word of Britain's declaration of war on 5 August. The governor, Lord Liverpool, announced the news from the steps of Parliament to a crowd of more than 12,000 people. New Zealanders regarded themselves as British and Britain as home, so there was little hesitation in supporting the Mother Country in its moment of crisis.

New Zealanders' emotional response to the outbreak of war reflected the Dominion's close ties with Great Britain. Germany's invasion of Belgium, another small country, struck a chord with many. The militaristic atmosphere of the time contributed to the enthusiasm with which most New Zealanders entered the war.

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