WWI Main Causes—Notes

Use the reading on the back to outline the causes of World War I.

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WWI M.A.I.N. Causes

Militarism

The late nineteenth century was an era of military competition, particularly between the major European powers. The policy of building a stronger military was judged relative to neighbors, creating a culture of paranoia that heightened the search for alliances. It was fed by the cultural belief that war is good for nations.

Germany in particular looked to expand its navy. However, the ‘naval race’ was never a real contest – the British always s maintained naval superiority. But the British obsession with naval dominance was strong. Government rhetoric exaggerated military expansionism. A simple naivety in the potential scale and bloodshed of a European war prevented several governments from checking their aggression.

Alliances

A web of alliances developed in Europe between 1870 and 1914, effectively creating two camps bound by commitments to maintain sovereignty or intervene militarily – the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance.

 The Triple Alliance of 1882 linked Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

 The Triple Entente of 1907 linked France, Britain and Russia.

A historic point of conflict between Austria Hungary and Russia was over their incompatible Balkan interests, and France had a deep suspicion of Germany rooted in their defeat in the 1870 war.

The alliance system primarily came about because after 1870 Germany, under Bismarck, set a precedent by playing its neighbors’ imperial endeavors off one another, in order to maintain a balance of power within Europe.

Imperialism

Imperial competition also pushed the countries towards adopting alliances. Colonies were units of exchange that could be bargained without significantly affecting the metro-pole. They also brought nations who would otherwise not interact into conflict and agreement. For example, the Russo-Japanese War (1905) over aspirations in China, helped bring the Triple Entente into being.

It has been suggested that Germany was motivated by imperial ambitions to invade Belgium and France. Certainly the expansion of the British and French empires, fired by the rise of industrialism and the pursuit of new markets, caused some resentment in Germany, and the pursuit of a short, aborted imperial policy in the late nineteenth century.

However the suggestion that Germany wanted to create a European empire in 1914 is not supported by the pre-war rhetoric and strategy.

Nationalism

Nationalism was also a new and powerful source of tension in Europe. The belief that one’s own nation or culture is superior to all others, nationalism led European nations to compete to build the largest army and navy. It was tied to militarism, and clashed with the interests of the imperial powers in Europe. Nationalism created new areas of interest over which nations could compete.

It also gave groups of subject peoples the idea of forming independent nations of their own. Serbians, Czechs, Slovaks, Bosnians and many other peoples living under the rule of the Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian Empires wanted freedom from “foreign” rule. For example, The Habsburg empire (Austria-Hungary) was tottering agglomeration of 11 different nationalities, with large Slavic populations in Galicia and the Balkans whose nationalist aspirations ran counter to imperial cohesion. Nationalism in the Balkan’s also piqued Russia’s historic interest in the region.

Indeed, Serbian nationalism created the trigger cause of the conflict – the assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

The spark: the assassination

Ferdinand and his wife were murdered in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip, a member of the Bosnian Serbian nationalist terrorist organization the ‘Black Hand Gang.’ Ferdinand’s death, which was interpreted as a product of official Serbian policy, created the July Crisis – a month of diplomatic and governmental miscalculations that saw a domino effect of war declarations initiated.