

Origins of the First World War

Wilhelm II and 'Weltpolitik'

Weltpolitik (meaning 'world politics') was Wilhelm II's aggressive, expansionist foreign policy. Germany (which became a nation only in 1871) did not have an empire in Africa. However Wilhelm wanted to change this. He publicly demanded 'a place in the sun' for Germany (1905) and gave an interview to the *Daily Telegraph* in which he called English people 'mad' (1908).

The System of Alliances

In 1882, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy had formed the *Triple Alliance*. Britain had tried to stay out of European affairs ('splendid isolation'), but the growing power of Germany forced Britain to make a naval alliance with Japan (1902), the *Entente Cordiale* (a defensive alliance with France, 1904) and the *Triple Entente* (with France and Russia in 1907)

The historian Sidney Bradshaw Fay (1928) thought the system of alliances was 'the greatest single underlying cause of the War'. It pulled them into quarrels which were not their own, and in 1914 dragged them all, one after the other, into war.

The Moroccan Crises of 1905 and 1911

Tangier Crisis, 1905

In 1905 Wilhelm visited Morocco and promised to defend it against France (France had hoped to annex Morocco). Encouraged by Britain, France stood up to Germany and at the Algeiras Conference (1906) Germany was forced to back down. Wilhelm was furious.

Agadir Crisis, 1911

In 1911, therefore, when the French took advantage if a small rebellion to take over Morocco, Wilhelm sent *The Panther* gunboat to Agadir in Morocco, supposedly to protect German citizens in Morocco. For a second time, at the *Treaty of London*, France and Britain forced Germany to back down (in return for 100,000 square miles of the French Congo). Humiliated again, Wilhelm was determined not to be humiliated again.

The Bosnian Crisis of 1908-1909

There was trouble also in the Balkans, where Turkey ('the weak man of Europe') had lost control of the area. The Balkan nations were nationalistic ('panslavism') and aggressive. Austria feared that growing panslavism would destabilise Austria-Hungary, while Russia hope to use the troubles to gain naval access to the Mediterranean. When there was a revolution in Turkey in 1908, therefore, Austria annexed Bosnia.

Serbia – expecting Russian support – mobilised its army, but when Britain, Germany and Turkey all supported Austria-Hungary, Russia was forced to back down. Tsar Nicholas was humiliated and – like Wilhelm in Morocco – he was determined not to be humiliated again.

The Arms Race

As Europe became increasingly unstable, there was a four-fold increase in spending of the Great Powers on armaments 1870-1914. Germany had the largest army (2.2 million men) but Russia's army was the fastest-growing – which led German generals to advise war 'the sooner the better'.

Meanwhile, Tirpitz announced the German *Navy Law* (1900) a huge programme of warship-building. This led Britain to engage in a naval arms race with Germany, building Dreadnought battleships (the crisis-point was 1909, when a public campaign in Britain forced parliament to build eight, not four Dreadnoughts – the crowds chanted 'We want eight and we won't wait').

The Arms Race did not prevent war – it led to a belief that war was inevitable, and also the feeling that war might solve Europe's diplomatic differences.

Assassination at Sarajevo

In the Balkans, tension was growing between Austria and Serbia. In 1906 Austria had banned imports of Serbian pork (the 'Pig War'), and the Austrian army had asked for a surprise attack on Serbia more than 25 times 1906-14; in 1913, an invasion was planned, but did not take place. Meanwhile, after Serbia's success in the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, its Prime Minister Nikola Pasic said: 'now for the second round – against Austria'.

The **Black Hand** (formed 1910) was a Serb terrorist group 1910, led by Colonel Dimitrijevic (Apis); in 1911, it had tried to assassinate the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef.

On 28 June 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria went to Sarajevo to review the troops there; Gavrilo Princip and 5 students were waiting to assassinate him as a protest against the Austrian annexation of Bosnia in 1908; the Black Hand provided them with weapons.

The six assassins were lined up along the Appel Quay. Four lost their nerve. Nedeljko Cabrinovic threw a bomb. He missed; the Archduke went unhurt to the town hall. It was decided to go home via a different route. By mistake, the driver turned into Franz Josef Street then stopped... in front of Gavrilo Princip, who shot Franz Ferdinand and Sophie.

The events leading to war

The assassination started off a chain of events that pulled Europe into a world war

5 July	Austria welcomed an excuse to invade Serbia; the Austrians approached their ally Wilhelm and got a promise of support (the 'blank cheque').
23 July	The Austro-Hungarian government sent Serbia an ultimatum containing ten tough demands (which when rejected, would give Austria the excuse to invade.)
25 July	The Serbs agreed to everything EXCEPT part of clause 6 - Kaiser Wilhelm thought that this would stop the war.
28 July	Austria-Hungary declared war anyway; the Serbs asked their ally Russia for help.
30 July	Tsar Nicholas had already abandoned Serbia in 1908. And - he told the Kaiser in a telegram - it was a matter of right versus wrong. He ordered a <i>general</i> mobilisation, but told Wilhelm it was NOT a mobilisation against Germany.
1 August	The Russian mobilisation, said Wilhelm, was like letting an enemy put a loaded gun to your head. Germany mobilised and declared war on Russia.
2 August	Germany asked permission to go through Belgium but, when the Belgians refused, invaded Belgium and next day (when France refused to stay neutral) France
4 August	Britain sent Germany an ultimatum - and when that was refused, declared war 'for a scrap of paper' (the 1839 Treaty with Belgium).

The Schlieffen Plan and its effect on the outbreak of war

The Schlieffen Plan was Germany's war plan should war come. It was based on the (wrong) idea that – if it came to a war on two fronts against France and Russia – Germany could defeat France quickly and then turn to deal with Russia. It proposed that 90 per cent of the Germany army would swing down through Belgium to take out France in a decisive, 42-day campaign.

It could be argued that the Schlieffen Plan caused the World War – it was a plan of ATTACK, and it did not allow for a situation like that in 1914 – where Russia was mobilising (30 July) but France was not going to war to help the Russians. It went through Belgium – bringing Britain into the war.

The historian AJP Taylor argued that railway timetables caused war! The Schlieffen Plan timings had taken 9 years to devise – so when, on 1 August, Kaiser Wilhelm tried to pause the German mobilisation, his generals told him that 11,000 trains were on the move, and war could not now be changed.

Responsibility for the outbreak of war

However, historians have also blamed France, Austria, Russia, Britain and Serbia for the war (look back and see how each had played a part in creating tension).