

Causes of World War I

It is widely believed that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife during a visit to Serbia is the spark that ignited the conflict of World War I. But it was just a culmination of many factors that had been in play since the beginning of the 20th century.

This article will give information about the causes of World War I within the context of the world history segment of the UPSC Mains Exam.

Rise of German Militarism

The main threat to Europe at the beginning of the 1900s was the rise of an expansionist German Empire. Otto von Bismarck, the architect of the unification of Germany had followed a policy of benevolent diplomacy with other European powers of the time. However, when he was sacked in 1890 by the new German Emperor William II, this was largely abandoned.

The new emperor embarked upon a policy to make Germany one of the most powerful nations not just in Europe but the world at large. He put special emphasis on naval buildup giving free rein to his naval head, Grand Admiral Tirpitz, to transform the German navy to match the prowess of the British Royal Navy. Reaping the full benefits of the Industrial Revolution the admiral began building warships that would outclass the navies of Germany's rivals. This escalation in a naval buildup led to tension throughout Europe and shifted the balance of power. To protect their national defences, Britain, Russia and France formed an alliance.

The signing of the Entente Cordiale

France and Britain had been at loggerheads with each other concerning the territorial claims in West Africa, fishing rights in the Newfoundland region and colonial interests in Egypt and Morocco. In 1904, following the successful visit by King Edward VII to Paris, statesmen on both the sides made a friendly agreement, the Entente Cordiale. The agreement stipulated that any disputes between Britain and France would be resolved through diplomacy and neither would interfere in their ventures of colonialism. This would be the first step in British alignment with France against Germany.

The Balkan Wars of 1912-1913

The countries of the Balkans would become independent from the Ottoman Empire by the late 1800s. But independence would bring problems of its own. The problems were mainly economical in nature as chronic capital shortages and technological backwardness made economic progress nearly impossible. These small states, although economically weak still had hoped for grandeur. And to this end, the remaining Ottoman territories in the Balkans were an

inviting asset. Upon encouragement from Russia, the Balkan states negotiated mutual assistance pacts directed towards the Ottoman Empire in 1912.

This was not what the Russians initially had in mind, as the creation of a Balkan superstate was against Russian interests and Russia warned them against opening hostilities towards Turkey. The warning was ignored and Montenegro, on 8 October 1912, declared war on Ottoman Turkey. They were joined by Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria. The combined Balkan army of 700,000 was more than a match for the 320,000- strong army of the Ottomans. The war ended in a victory for the Balkan states in May 1913.

But Bulgaria, unhappy over its shares over the spoils launched a war on its erstwhile allies to increase its shares. Bulgaria was quickly defeated and the subsequent Treaty of Bucharest saw the division of Macedonia between Serbia and Greece and the establishment of an independent Albania. This creaking of multi-national empires alarmed Austria and Russia. Each sought to influence the Balkan regions by forming alliances with the new Balkan states. One of these alliances between Russia and Serbia would be a factor in sparking the fires of World War I.

The spread of Nationalism in Europe

Towards the end of the 1800s, there was a growing number of people who took pride in their culture and country and sought to rid themselves of imperial rule. But as this wave of nationalism spread in Europe, it also led to an additional effect of some groups claiming superiority over the others.

Nationalism itself can be referred to as the fule that ignited the first World War I. For example, when France was defeated by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, it resulted in the loss of French pride when they had to give away valuable territory and pay war indemnities to Germany. This fueled a desire for revenge which would be fulfilled by the harsh dictation of the [Treaty of Versailles in 1919](#), with disastrous consequences in the years to come

Nationalism played a specific role in World War I when Archduke Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated by Princip, a member of a Serbian nationalist terrorist group fighting against Austria-Hungary's rule over Bosnia.

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