Causes of World War I

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When examining the causes of World War I, it is difficult to identify major events that, if prevented, would have completely halted the outbreak of a war around 1914. Instead, one must identify what events, policies, and general zeitgeist intersected to create this first instance of global, total warfare, with millions of troops from around the world killed and millions more injured. There is a diverse range of opinions regarding who or what started the war: many historians have adopted the view that no country in particular started the war, while the Treaty of Versailles, which marked the end of WWI, blamed the war solely on Germany. Although modern Europe in general provided a competitive, militaristic environment primed for war, WWI was mainly caused by specific countries’ policies: Germany’s aggression in expanding her empire and Britain’s ambivalent foreign policy.

In some ways, WWI was “an accident waiting to happen”; as a result of heightened militarism and nationalism throughout Europe, many countries had incentives to go to war. Arguably, both militarism and nationalism could be blamed on Germany, since military spending and nationalist sentiment spiked after Germany waged the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. However, increased militarism and nationalism became universal in Europe leading up to the outbreak of war, too widespread to be blamed on one country’s actions. Militarism in particular helped to transform Europe into a tense, hostile environment, with millions of troops and newly industrialized warfare ready to be mobilized in the event of war. In addition to instituting the conscription system to bolster standing armies, each major nation drafted a detailed war strategy and amassed the necessary weaponry to carry it out. An arms race resulted, and from 1870 to 1914 the total defense expenditure of the six major European powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Britain, France, and Russia—rose from the 1914 equivalent of today’s 94 million Euros to 398 million Euros. With so much thought and money invested in

This paper was written for Dan Devitt’s Modern World History class in the spring of 2013.
the military, many countries were anxious to implement their plans and enter what seemed to be an inevitable war.⁴ Nationalism, too, contributed to both leaders’ and civilians’ willingness to go to war. This feeling of love for one’s own country and hate for enemy countries grew more and more popular as international tensions mounted. Italy, which had been divided up during the 1815 Congress of Vienna, was reunited in 1871, exemplifying a desire for statehood based on ethnic and historical roots.⁵ Further, in 1914, WWI was directly set off by an expression of Serbian nationalism, the assassination of the archduke of Austria-Hungary by a Slavic nationalist protesting Austrian control of Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶ This deepening rivalry between countries, along with a continent-wide race to strengthen militarily, certainly took part in forming an unstable, hostile Europe, vulnerable to conflict. But while these general factors set the stage for war, it was certain countries’ policies that actually spurred WWI.

In her attempt to rise to power in Europe, Germany helped to incite and sustain conflict through aggressive military development and expansionist plans, as well as producing the foundation for the alliance system, which drew much of the world into war. Some could minimize Germany’s role in causing WWI, citing the fact that many other countries, such as Austria-Hungary, had comparable expansionist and military goals. However, smaller countries with these aspirations were too weak or too poor to pose a real threat to the rest of Europe; Germany’s power and vast territory, by comparison, allowed her to play a major part in causing and sustaining a four-year global war. Arranging war as a vehicle for domination was not unprecedented in Germany: in order to consolidate their empire and attain a “place in the sun,” German leaders arranged and won wars with Austria-Hungary and France in the late 1800s. Leading up to WWI, German leaders devised a similarly ambitious war strategy, called the Schlieffen Plan, to invade France and then battle Russia, supplemented by an unparalleled 73% increase in military spending.⁷ The significance of this aggressive preparation for war was that Germany, more than any other nation, was motivated to go to war and had the means to orchestrate and fight it. Without this powerful, massive threat on the side of the Triple Alliance, WWI would either have never happened or
would have stayed a small, localized war. Just as importantly, Germany created the first major alliances leading up to WWI, which laid the foundation for the global alliance system that would draw every major country into war. Otto von Bismarck, first Chancellor of the German Empire, negotiated a series of treaties starting in 1873, obligating various European nations to aid each other in the event of war; this, in turn, led opposing countries such as France and Russia to draft their own agreements. Out of the process came secret and open alliances alike, giving weak countries a false sense of confidence reinforced by their ties to more powerful nations. As a result, when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, a tangled chain of agreements and promises between different countries pulled nearly the entire world into war and caused the first instance of a truly global conflict. But while Germany’s creation of the alliance system and aggressive preparation for war certainly helped to cause WWI, Germany was not the only country to blame for bringing it about.

Britain, after remaining neutral as long as possible, joined WWI mainly as an excuse to weaken Germany, prolonging what could have been a much shorter, less costly war. Because Britain did not actively support war, as Germany did, some could argue that British policies were not directly at fault for causing the war. Nevertheless, Britain’s passivity and ambivalence, where other European nations strategized and formed alliances, was a fatal error leading up to war. Out of reluctance to compromise trade agreements with Germany and a general desire for neutrality, Britain maintained a policy of “splendid isolation,” forming no alliances until 1904 whereas Germany formed the Triple Alliance in 1882. As a result, Germany prepared for war believing Britain, her main military threat, would not oppose Germany and a victory against France and Russia would be manageable. However, “out of fear of Germany’s rising economic and geopolitical power,” Britain sided with France and Russia, evenly matching Germany’s military might so that the war lapsed into a bloody stalemate for three years, until Britain drew the United States into the war and finally overpowered the Triple Alliance. Many historians have adopted the theory that, had Britain made its intentions clear to Germany, Germany might not have declared war. If Britain had not joined the war at all, Germany
might have easily defeated France and finished the war. By remaining passive while tension heightened in Europe and then choosing sides too late, Britain helped to cause and prolong WWI.

In general, the causes of WWI cannot be traced back to one specific country or idea, but they can be narrowed down to a few particular policies. Germany’s aggressive military and diplomatic tactics played a large part in provoking WWI, and Britain was equally at fault for staying passive while conflicts mounted and then creating stalemate when she joined the war. The competitive, militaristic environment that Europe had cultivated only allowed the war to balloon into one of the messiest, farthest-reaching conflicts in history. Consequently, WWI claimed millions of lives and destroyed countries socially, politically, and economically, leading to World War II and shifting the balance of world power away from Europe.

Notes


