

The causes of the First World War: was war inevitable in 1914?

Story

Create a title for each paragraph.

The article below examines the long term causes of the First World War.

Summarise each paragraph in one or two bullet points.

In the nineteenth century, international relations had been dominated by two forces – **nationalism** (the belief that your nation is superior to others) and **imperialism** (the belief that nations had the right to conquer other lands and build up an empire). The British – who genuinely believed that ‘Britannia ruled the waves’ – had an empire which covered a fifth of the globe. The French, too, had a huge **colonial** empire, and yearned for revenge on the new nation of Germany, who had defeated them in war and taken the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. Russia ruled an Empire stretching across all of Asia.

Even so, these nineteenth century nations believed that they ought to co-operate to keep the peace, and the presence of huge areas of the globe which they could easily conquer (especially in Africa), gave them an alternative outlet for their ambitions.

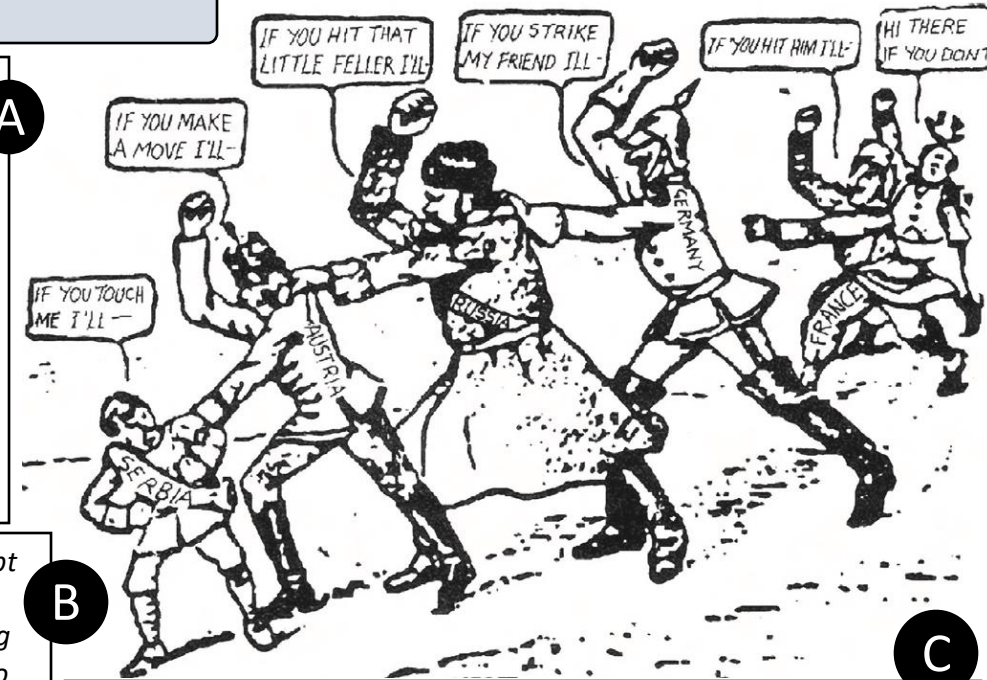
The arrival of Germany onto the world stage as a new nation in 1871, **destabilised** international relations. The new Germany was an economic and military superpower and it frightened the other nations. One way they responded was by forming **alliances**, seeking safety by making defensive agreements with other countries. The idea behind these **alliances** was that no one would dare to attack you because they knew it would involve war, not just with you, but with all your allies as well.

In the years up to 1914, tensions increased. Germany resented Britain’s navy and empire. In the years after 1898 Germany built up a powerful navy to challenge Britain. In 1905, and again in 1911, France and Germany clashed in Morocco. New Slav nation states – such as Serbia, Bulgaria and Romania – had seized independence following the fall of the Turkish Empire. Austria-Hungary, which itself ruled many Slav peoples, was terrified by the development and wary of the new Slavic nations, especially Serbia. Austro-Hungarian generals regularly asked to go to war.

Looking back, what seems remarkable is not that war broke out in 1914, but that it had not broken out sooner. The years 1870–1914 saw Europe stacking up resentments and tensions, like a fireworks manufacturer stuffing a rocket with gunpowder.

Source

This cartoon – ‘A Chain of Friendship’ - appeared in the American newspaper the Brooklyn Eagle in July 1914. The caption read: “If Austria attacks Serbia, Russia will fall upon Austria, Germany upon Russia, and France and England upon Germany”.



“I no longer have any doubt that Britain, Russia and France have agreed among themselves to wage war to destroy us. The encirclement of Germany has already been achieved.” Kaiser Wilhelm speaking in 1914 before the outbreak of war.

We muddled into war...The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay...not one of them wanted war; certainly not on this scale. Statement from David Lloyd George’s *War Memoirs*, written in 1934. Lloyd George was a government minister in 1914, and became Prime Minister during the war.

Scholarship

This was the great operation known as mobilization...Not only would men be on the move, the light and heavy guns and their shells had also to be assembled from their peacetime parks. Most conspicuous of all would be the horses, most of them also mobilized from their peacetime tasks. Quite apart from the cavalry and their remounts, there would be horses for the artillery and their supply wagons, horses to transport everything needed by the infantry from first-aid stations to field kitchens...The entire process would be conducted by rail, until the armies had reached the assumed point of battle, and general staffs had been laboring for years past to perfect their time-tables. It was universal doctrine that speed was essential. Whichever power completed its mobilization first would strike first and might even win the war before the other side was ready. Hence the time-tables became ever more ingenious and ever more complicated.

A.J.P. Taylor, *War by Timetable* (1969)



What really marked out the decade before 1914 was a failure of statesmanship and hope. By 1912, most European governments had come to believe that a general European war was inevitable and that the problems which plagued them at home and abroad could no longer be settled by negotiation and diplomacy...In these circumstances, war seemed to offer an attractive way out ... The balance sheet in 1918 proved how wrong they had been.

Ruth Henig, *The Origins of the First World War* (1989)

Task 1: Read through the **Story** of the causes of WW1. For each paragraph, you need to create a ‘title’ on one side, and a short summary (two bullet points maximum) on the other.

Task 2: Look at **sources** A, B, and C. In your book, write a short description of the message of each source. Then answer the question “What do these sources tell you about the inevitability of war?”

Task 3: Read through Taylor and Henig’s **scholarship** about the causes of the war. Highlight what you think are the three most important sentences. In your book, answer the question “To what extent do these historians think war was inevitable in 1914?”