

What were the underlying causes of World War I?

Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century Europe was feeling pretty darn good. True, it was the smallest continent in the world, but it controlled vast empires that circled the globe. The standard of living for the average person was high. European technology was unsurpassed. Even its culture of art and music were the envy of the rest of the world. In 1900 Europeans believe the world was their oyster.

But this feeling was not to last. By the end of 1918, after four long years of war, European confidence was badly shaken. Ten million soldiers had died on the battle fields and in the military hospitals; another twenty million soldiers had been wounded. Empires that were lasted for centuries lay in tatters. Writers wrote of broken dreams. Europe had entered the Great War riding on a song. Now, in November 1918, no one was singing. What had gone wrong?

Creating a Balance of Power

In the late 19th century, European leaders believed that by creating a balance of power they could prevent large-scale war. The idea was that if the major powers of Europe – England, France, Russia, and Germany – were balanced in strength, no one country could dominate the rest.

Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, had a special stake in peace because Germany was sandwiched between Russia and France. The last thing Bismarck wanted was to fight a war on two fronts. His solution was to make an alliance with at least one of these nations. This also proved to be difficult. When negotiations failed, he developed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, which became known as the Triple Alliance. In response, France, Russia, Great Britain formed an alliance known as the Triple Entente.

Tensions Build

Although these alliances were in place to balance the power, suspicions ran high. Political and military leaders spent countless hours developing plans in case a war might break out. Countries built up their arms adding ships, guns, and men to their arsenals.

The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. Especially in southeastern Europe, in an area known as the Balkans, the spirit of nationalism and independence ran high. Some ethnic groups revolted. Two large powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia, stood by to collect the pieces. The region was a powder keg. All it lacked was a spark to set it off.

The Spark

Otto von Bismarck had predicted in the late 1800s that "some foolish thing in the Balkans" would ignite the next big war. In June 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, their heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, visited Sarajevo. At that time, Sarajevo belonged to Austria-Hungary. Seven assassins had been sent to Sarajevo to kill the Archduke by the Serbian terrorist group the Black Hand. The Black Hand wanted all the Serb people to be in one nation, and it wanted Austria-Hungary out.

On the morning of June 28, the Archduke's car was instructed to take an unannounced route, but the driver of the car got confused and drove down a main road where Gavrilo Princip, one of the Serbian assassins, happened to be walking. As the car stopped to turn around, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed the Archduke and his wife.

Chain Reaction

The Black Hand assassins hoped to use the killing to trigger a rebellion that would lead to a larger Serbian nation, but they triggered a lot more than that. The Austrian government was furious at the assassination. They blamed the Serbian government for not controlling groups like the Black Hand. On July 5, an Austrian ambassador met with the Kaiser of Germany. The ambassador got what he hoped for – a promise of full support. One thing led to another:

- On July 23, Austrian leaders demanded apologies from Serbia
- On July 24, an angry Serbia sought help from Russia, and received a promise of support if Austria were to attack
- On July 28, with no further response from the Serbian leaders, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.
- In the next several days:



Four long years and ten million lives later, Europe looked for answers. What should be blamed? Who should be punished? What was the cause of this catastrophe?

Source: The DBQ Project

European Alliances, 1914



Source: Map created from various sources

The Crime of the Ages—Who Did It?



Source: John McCutcheon, *The Chicago Tribune*; H. H. Windsor, *Cartoons Magazine* (adapted)

Document D

God Save the Tsar!

God save the noble Tsar!
Long may he live, in power,
In happiness,
In peace to reign!
Dread of his enemies,
Faith's sure defender,
God save the Tsar!

Source: Russian National Anthem, 1833-1917 (English translation)

Document E

Rule Britannia

When Britain first at Heaven's command
Arose from out of the azure main;
This was the carter of the land,
And guardian angels sang this strain;

Rule Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves.

The nations not so blest as thee,
Shall in their turns to tyrants fall;
While thou shalt flourish great and free,
The dread and envy of them all

Rule Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves.

Source: Poem by James Thomson, a Scottish poet – put to music in 1740. Unofficial national anthem of Great Britain.

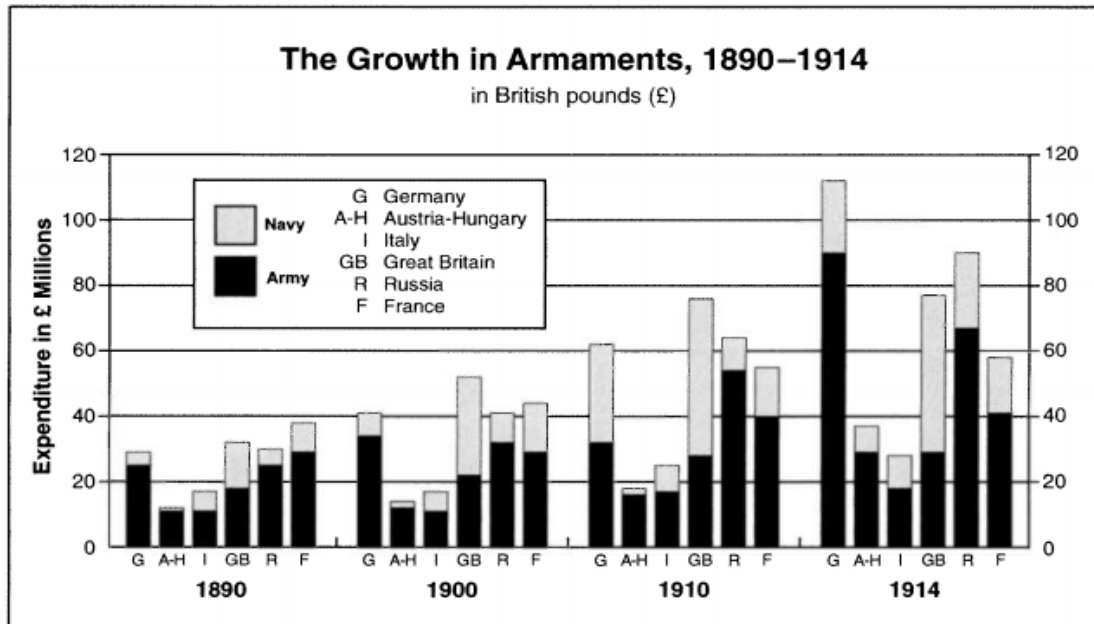
Document F

The war between Serbia and Austria... is inevitable. If Serbia wants to live in honor, she can only do this by war. This war is determined by our obligation to our traditions and the world of culture. This war derives from the duty of our race which will not permit itself to be assimilated. This war must bring about the eternal freedom of Serbia, of the South Slavs, of the Balkan peoples. Our whole race must stand together to halt on the onslaught of these aliens from the north.

Source: Newspaper run by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrevic, head of the Serbian military intelligence and founder of the secret society, "Union or Death" (called "The Black Hand" by its opponents, in 1912.

Document G

Source: Adapted from *The London Times History of the World*, new edition edited by Richard Overy, 1999.



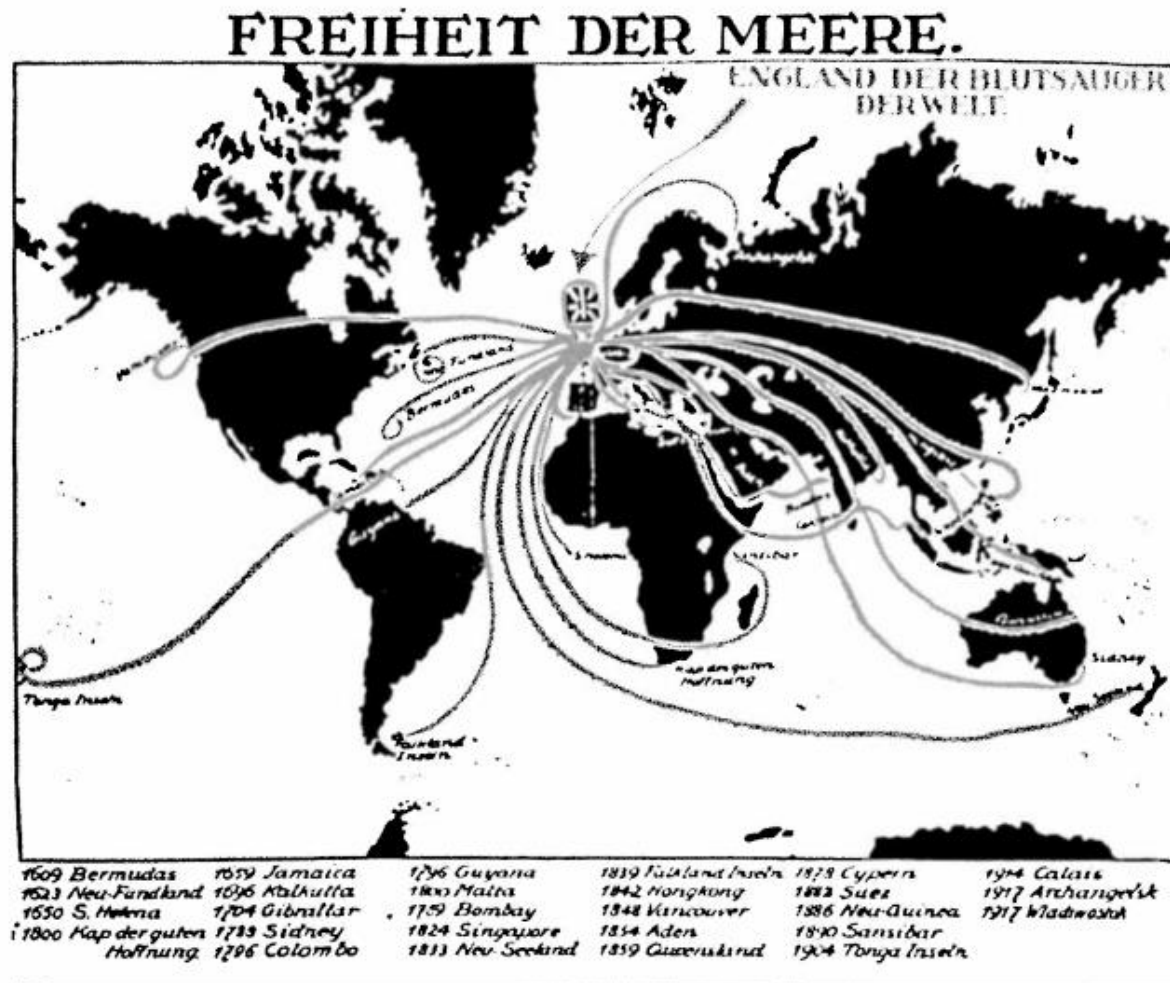
Note: By 1914 the Entente Powers could field 2.23 million men, Germany and Austria-Hungary 1.2 million.

Document H

*Prince Bernhard von Bulow, German Chancellor, speech to the Reichstag
December 11, 1899*

... we realize that without power, without a strong army and a strong navy, there can be no welfare for us. The means of fighting the battle for existence in this world without strong armaments on land and water, for a nation soon to count sixty millions, living in the centre of Europe and at the same time stretching out its economic feelers in all directions, have not yet been found. In the coming century, the German nation will be either the hammer or the anvil.

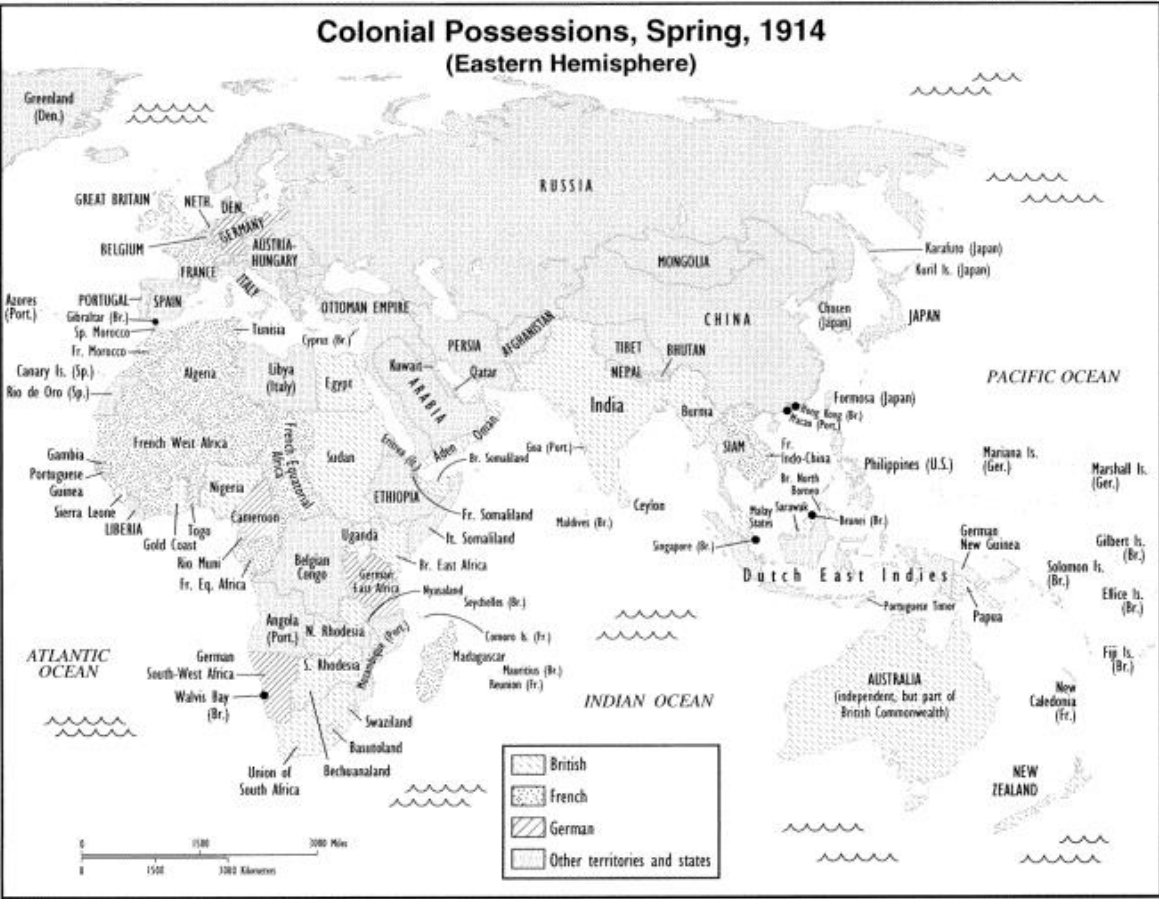
The British Octopus



Freiheit Der Meere = Freedom of the Seas

England Der Blutsauger der Welt = England is the Bloodsucker of the World

Source: Map created from various sources.



Source: Colin Nicolson, *The First World War, Europe 1914-1918*, Essex, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2001.

| Size of Colonial Empires in 1913 | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|------------------------|
| | Area (sq. km.) | Population of Colonies |
| Britain | 33,000,000 | 400,000,000 |
| France | 11,500,000 | 56,000,000 |
| Germany | 2,950,000 | 12,000,000 |
| Belgium | 2,400,000 | 15,500,000 |
| Portugal | 2,100,000 | 7,000,000 |
| Holland | 2,000,000 | 38,000,000 |
| Italy | 1,500,000 | 1,600,000 |
| USA | 324,000 | 10,000,000 |
| Japan | 300,000 | 17,000,000 |
| Spain | 250,000 | 700,000 |
| Austria-Hungary | 0 | 0 |
| Russia | 0 | 0 |