

Lesson 1

Student Handout 1.1—Schools of Thought: Causes of World War I

The assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria triggered World War I. The assassination was the spark that ignited the conflict. Would the conflict have ended right where it began, in Bosnia, if deeper currents did not propel the European powers on to war? Analyze this question by considering the following schools of thought on causes of the war in Europe.

Nationalism

Those who believe that nationalism was the main cause of World War I think that it was propelled by such factors as the desire of Slavic peoples to free themselves from the rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the desire of Austria-Hungary, in turn, to crush rising spirits of nationalism among ethnic groups within the empire. Serbian nationalists were especially militant, Serbs within the empire demanding unification with the small Kingdom of Serbia. In the Middle East, nationalists in Arabic-speaking lands sought independence from the Ottoman Turkish empire. Nationalist groups in Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland called for separation from the Russian empire. Russia also promoted Pan-Slavism in the Balkans, encouraging fellow Slavic-speaking peoples in their quest to throw off Austria-Hungary's rule. The peace treaties following the war led to the birth of a number of states (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and others) ruled by a dominant nationalist ethnic group. This shows that nationalism was in fact the major causative issue of the war.

The Balance of Power and Imperialism

This causative factor is summarized in a world history textbook by Jerry Bentley and Herbert Zeigler:

“Aggressive nationalism was also manifest in economic competition and colonial conflicts, fueling dangerous rivalries among the major European powers. The industrialized nations of Europe competed for foreign markets and engaged in tariff wars, but the most unsettling economic rivalry involved Great Britain and Germany. By the twentieth century Germany's rapid industrialization threatened British economic predominance. . . . British reluctance to accept the relative decline of British industry vis-à-vis German industry strained relations between the two economic powers.

Economic rivalries fomented colonial competition. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European nations searched aggressively for new colonies or dependencies to bolster economic performance. In their haste to conquer and colonize, the imperial powers stumbled over each other, repeatedly clashing in one corner of the globe or another. . . .

Virtually all the major powers engaged in the scramble for empire, but the competition between Britain and Germany and that between France and Germany were the most intense and dangerous. Germany, a unified nation only since 1871, embarked on the colonial race belatedly but aggressively, insisting that it too must have its "place in the sun." German imperial efforts were frustrated, however, by the simple fact that British and French imperialists had already *carved up* most of the world. German-French antagonisms and German-British rivalries went far toward shaping the international alliances that contributed to the spread of war after 1914.”

Source: Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Zeigler, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 973-74.

Interests of Individual Nations

Whatever else may have triggered World War I, it must be remembered that nations do not send their sons to die on the battlefield simply because they have signed onto alliances. Nations uphold or ignore alliances based on their own self-interests. To be sure, each of the combatants believed they had interests that had to be protected and pursued and therefore something to be gained by going to war:

Russia. It saw itself as the Protector of the Slavs and claimed that Austria-Hungary treated Serbs and other Slavic-speaking groups unfairly. Russia also sought ready access to the Mediterranean Sea, but this involved sailing through Ottoman territory.

The Ottoman empire. It had been losing territory since the eighteenth century and sought to preserve its integrity and great power status.

Germany. It shared history and culture with German-speaking Austria, which created a powerful bond between the two states. It also wanted to secure the Rhineland, with its important resources, and to ward off French desires to seek revenge for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany in 1870.

Italy. It wanted to strengthen its position as world power and gain more colonies. Italy switched its alliance from the Central Powers to the Allied Powers in 1915 on promises of getting colonies.

France. It looked upon Germany as an aggressor and wished to get back the territories it had lost to that power following the Franco-Prussian War of 1871.

Serbia. It wanted to bring all Serbs in the Ottoman and Austrian empires into the Kingdom of Serbia.

If these nation-states were not motivated by these interests, would the other factors have been sufficient to drag them into war?

Arms Buildup.

The Triple Alliance and Triple Entente were supposed to be peace-keeping alliances, designed as deterrents to prevent any power from ganging up on any of the others. A prospective aggressor would know that if it declared war against any member of the opposing alliance, all members of that alliance would come to the attacked member's defense. While the system of alliances aimed to keep the peace, however, the opposing members were plotting against each other. This was accompanied by a buildup of arms sometimes described as a powder keg. If the army and navy stockpiles had not existed, both alliances would have needed at least a year to mobilize and build defenses. A year might have been enough time to make them stop and select a more reasonable course. Even today, those who demand reduction of armaments in the world use the same argument.

Jerry Bentley and Herbert Zeigler emphasize the naval arms race:

“Germans and Britons convinced themselves that naval power was imperative to secure trade routes and protect merchant shipping. Moreover, military leaders and politicians saw powerful navies as a means of controlling the seas in times of war, a control they viewed as decisive in determining the outcome of any war. Thus when Germany's political and military leaders announced their program to build a fleet with many large battleships, they seemed to undermine British naval supremacy. The British government moved to meet the German threat through the construction of super battleships known as *dreadnoughts*. Rather than discouraging the Germans from their naval buildup, the British determination to retain naval superiority stimulated the Germans to build their own flotilla of dreadnoughts. This expensive naval race contributed further to international tensions and hostilities between nations.”

Source: Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Zeigler, *Traditions and Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 974.