

First World War (World War I) is considered as one of the largest wars in history. The world's great powers assembled in two opposing alliances: the Allies (British Empire, France and the Russian Empire) versus the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary). WWI lasted from 28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918.

Causes of the First World War

Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914 confirmed the outbreak of the Great War (as it was known at the time). It is now more often referred to as the First World War or World War One.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife Sophie in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, on 28 June 1914 was a defining moment. This event was the culmination of a number of historical forces and processes that had been simmering in Europe for many years.

Nationalism

The Prussian-led unification of Germany in the latter half of the 19th century was partially achieved through a war with France (1870–71). The emergence of a large German state in the middle of Europe altered the continent's geopolitical dynamics and left France desperate for revenge.

Further east in the Balkans, the Austro-Hungarian Empire faced problems with conflicting national groups that threatened Austrian control. In particular, Serbia wanted to unite all Slavs in the region under its control, an ambition in which the Russian Empire supported it. Germany backed Austria's opposition to Serbian demands.

Imperialism

Great Britain, Germany and France were rivals in the economic exploitation of Africa. Several incidents involving Germany in Africa aroused the suspicions of Britain and France, who resolved their differences in the region in an attempt to protect what they had. They were concerned that Germany was challenging the established colonial order.

In the Middle East, the crumbling Ottoman (Turkish) Empire added to tensions between Austria-Hungary, Russia and Serbia.

The European alliances

After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, Germany tried to isolate France. In 1872, the Germans formed an alliance with Russia and Austria-Hungary that proved hard to maintain because of the rivalries over the Balkans. By 1891, France had secured its own alliance with Russia.

Britain did its best to keep out of Europe and concentrate on its vast empire. Some of the actions and policies of the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, challenged this stance. Wilhelm angered Britain in 1896 when he formally congratulated the South African Boers for defeating a British-backed raid into Transvaal. His investment in Germany's navy was seen as a direct challenge to Britannia's claim to rule the waves.

Britain responded by strengthening its diplomatic links with France and its ally Russia. In 1907, these powers established an informal coalition, the Triple Entente.

Planning for war

The standing armies of France and Germany doubled in size between 1870 and 1914. Great Britain had a policy of maintaining a navy two and a half times as large as any rival. Germany's naval expansion sparked a naval arms race.

Europe narrowly avoided war in 1908. Austria-Hungary annexed the former Ottoman province of Bosnia, thwarting Serbia in the process. In response, Serbia began to mobilise its army (with the support of Russia). When Germany threatened war in defence of its Austrian ally, Russia and Serbia backed down.

These tensions prompted many nations to make detailed plans for military mobilisation. For Germany, any plan had to consider the possibility of a war on two fronts, so its scheme involved crushing one rival quickly. Once begun, mobilisation would be difficult if not impossible to reverse. This was illustrated by Germany's von Schlieffen Plan, developed in 1905. Based on the need to defeat France before Russia had time to react, German forces would invade France through Belgium to avoid the French border defences. Belgium posed no serious military threat to this

plan, although Britain had formally guaranteed its neutrality since 1839. Germany felt that ultimately Britain would not risk war to save Belgium.

Death in Sarajevo

In May 1914, the Serbian government became aware of a plot to kill Franz Ferdinand. There was evidence that high-ranking Serbian military figures were involved, and Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, the chief of intelligence in the Serbian army, almost certainly helped arm those selected to kill the archduke.

The Serbian ambassador in Vienna gave vague warnings about a possible assassination attempt. The archduke insisted on going ahead with a planned visit in June. He and his wife had a narrow escape from one attempt on their lives in Sarajevo on the morning of 28 June, and they continued with their official business that afternoon. But their motorcade took a wrong turn and stopped within metres of one of the assassins, Gavrilo Princip. Unlike his colleagues that morning, Princip did not fail.

Germany gave Austria a blank cheque to take any action it deemed appropriate. Austria-Hungary issued Serbia with a harsh ultimatum that effectively revoked the latter's national sovereignty. Although Serbia consented to almost every point in the ultimatum, Austria-Hungary exploited disagreements on a number of minor points to declare war on 28 July 1914.

Next day Russia ordered a partial mobilisation against Austria-Hungary. Germany responded by threatening Russia with war if it did not stop this process. France reacted to the prospect of a Russo-German war by mobilising its own forces. Germany declared war on Russia on 1 August and on France two days later. When the von Schlieffen Plan was activated, the invasion of Belgium prompted Britain to declare war on Germany on 4 August. The First World War had begun.

Key points (causes)

(1) Conflict between Imperialist countries: Ambition of Germany

Conflict between old imperialist countries (Eg: Britain and France) vs new imperialist countries (Eg: Germany). Germany ship – Emperor. German railway line – from Berlin to Baghdad.

(2) Ultra Nationalism: Pan Slav movement – Russian, Polish, Czech, Serb, Bulgaria and Greek. Pan German movement.

(3) Military Alliance: Triple Alliance or Central Powers (1882) – Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary. Triple Entente or Allies (1907) – Britain, France, Russia.

Note: Although Italy was a member of the Triple Alliance alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary, it did not join the Central Powers, as Austria-Hungary had taken the offensive, against the terms of the alliance. These alliances were reorganised and expanded as more nations entered the war: Italy, Japan and the United States joined the Allies, while the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria joined the Central Powers.

(4) International Anarchy: Secret agreement between Britain and France allowing Britain to control Egypt and France to take over Morocco. Germany opposed, but settled with a part of French Congo. Hague conference of 1882 and 1907 failed to emerge as an international organisation.

(5) Balkan Wars: Many Balkan nations (Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece and Montenegro) were under the control of Turkey. They defeated Turkey in the First Balkan War. The subsequent war was between the Balkan countries themselves – Eg: Serbia vs Bulgaria. Defeated countries like Turkey and Bulgaria sought German help.

(6) Alsace-Lorraine: During German unification, Germany got Alsace-Lorraine from France. France wanted to capture Alsace-Lorraine back from Germany.

(7) Immediate Cause: assassination of Francis Ferdinand

Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand was assassinated by a Serbian native (in Bosnia). Austria declared war on Serbia on 28th July, 1914. [Reason for assassination: Annexation by Austria the Bosnia-Herzegovina, against the congress of Berlin, 1878]

Consequences of First World War

Key points:

- Rule of King ended in Germany: Germany became a republic on November 1918. The German Emperor Kaiser William II fled to Holland.
- Around 1 crore people were killed.
- Unemployment and famine.
- Epidemics.
- The fall of Russian empire after October revolution (1917) which resulted in the formation of USSR (1922)
- Emergence of USA as a super power.
- Beginning of the end of European supremacy.
- Japan became a powerful country in Asia.
- Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia became new independent states.
- Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – became independent.
- Rule of Ottomans came to an end in Turkey.
- New boundary lines were drawn for Austria, Germany and Turkey.
- Strengthened independence movements in Asia and Africa.
- League of Nations came into being.
- Germany had to return Alsace-Lorraine to France.
- German colonies were shared.
- Germany gave up Saar coal field.
- Germany gave up Polish corridor, and made city of Danzig independent.
- Monarchy was abolished in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Turkey and Russia.
- The harsh clauses of the Treaty of Versailles finally resulted in the second world war.

World War I caused more damage than any other war before it. 9 million soldiers and as many civilians died in the war. Germany and Russia suffered most, both countries lost almost two million men in battle.

Large sections of land, especially in France and Belgium, were completely destroyed. Fighting laid buildings, bridges and railroad lines in ruins. Chemicals and gun shells made farming land unusable for years to come.

Economic consequences

World War I cost the participating countries a lot of money. Germany and Great Britain spent about 60% of the money their economy produced. Countries had to raise taxes and borrow money from their citizens. They also printed money in order to buy weapons and other things they needed for war. This led to inflation after the war.

The Allies wanted reparations from the Central Powers, because they were responsible for starting the war.

Economy all across Europe broke down. Companies had to close because men left their jobs to fight in the army. When they came back there were no jobs left for them. Other businesses specialized in producing weapons. After the war they had nothing else to sell. During the war governments controlled the economy more than before.

The United States entered the war very late. It did not suffer destruction the way European countries did. Because they had played a smaller part in the war, America remained economically stronger than the others.

Political Consequences

World War I brought an end to four monarchies: Czar Nicholas II of Russia, Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, Emperor Charles of Austria and the sultan of the Ottoman Empire had to step down. New countries were created out of old empires. Austria-Hungary was carved up into a number of independent states. Russia and Germany gave land to Poland. Countries in the Middle East were put under the control of Great Britain and France. What was left of the Ottoman Empire became Turkey.

In the course of the Russian Revolution the Soviet Union emerged, together with a new ideology: Communism.

Social Consequences

World War I changed society completely. Birth rates went down because millions of young men died. Civilians lost their homes and fled to other countries.

The role of women also changed. They played a major part in replacing men in factories and offices. Many countries gave women more rights after the war had ended, including the right to vote.

The upper classes lost their leading role in society. Young middle and lower class men and women demanded a say in forming their country after the war.

Additional reading available at:

for:

1. Consequences of WWI :

<https://www.reseau-canope.fr/apocalypse-10destins/en/theme-based-files/the-consequences-of-the-first-world-war.htm>

2. Causes of WWI:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/causes-that-led-to-world-war-i-105515>