

## Causes of World War I

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## Some Views on the Causes

- 'The enormous growth of armaments in Europe, the sense of insecurity and fear caused by them—it was these that made war inevitable.' *Sir Edward Grey*
- 'In 1914 Germany deliberately embarked on a grab for world power. German imperialism should thus be considered as the major cause of the First World War.'
- 'The nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war without any trace of apprehension or dismay.' *David Lloyd George*
- 'The struggle for life exists among individuals, provinces, parties and states. The latter wage it either by the use of arms or in the economic field—we cannot help this—ergo we wage it; those who don't want to, will perish.' *Hunold von Ahlefeld, 1898*
- 'It was not the calculations of diplomats or the plans of general staffs, but the prewar domestic crisis that made war inevitable in 1914.'
- 'In 1914 the decision-makers of the Great Powers acted *defensively*, convinced that their nation was in decline or at least seriously threatened.'

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## Plan of the Lecture

- Structural or long-term Causes of the War
- Conjunctural or short-term Causes (July Crisis of 1914); realm of individual decision
- Structural causes inform and frame the conjunctural, helping us to understand the context for decisions to risk war in 1914
- My view: war was not begun by accident or mistake; decision-makers knew what they were doing and consciously opted for war

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## Structural Origins of the First World War

- 1) Arms race
- 2) international Great Power rivalry, reflected in the emergence of two competing alliance systems
- 3) Deteriorating international relations in decades prior to 1914
- 4) Cultural factors: nationalism in general, and in particular the nationalist demands of the southern Slavs for independent states in the Balkans; widespread popularity of militarism; a belief both in the inevitability and the legitimacy of war

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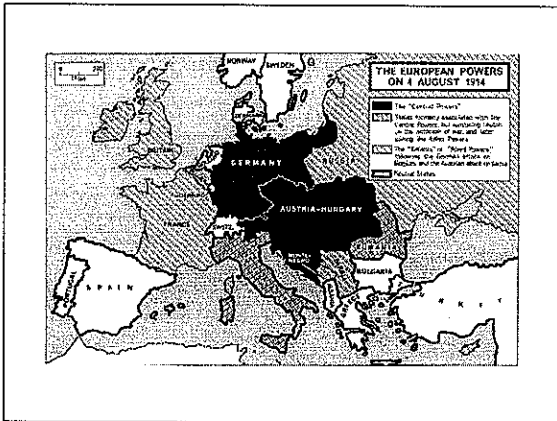
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## Bismarck's Alliance System

1. Dual Alliance 1879: Austria + Germany
2. Triple Alliance 1882: Austria + Germany + Italy
3. Reinsurance Treaty 1887: Germany + Russia

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## Wilhelm II and *Weltpolitik*

In the 1890s, under Emperor Wilhelm II, Germans begin pursuit of *Weltpolitik* (global policy of economic imperialism); massive naval expansion begins

David Stevenson in 1914-1918 *The History of the First World War* writes: "*Weltpolitik's* eventual impact on Germany's external security and domestic stability—and by extension on European peace—was disastrous."



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## Realignment of the Great Powers 1890-1907

- Reinsurance Treaty not renewed by Germany in 1890
- Leads Russia to conclude agreements with France (1891/94)
- 'Diplomatic revolution' 1902-07
  - Anglo-Japanese Alliance 1902
  - Anglo-French Entente 1904
  - Anglo-Russian Agreement 1907

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## Emergence of two rival alliance blocs

- Triple Alliance
  - Germany, Austria, Italy
- Triple Entente
  - Great Britain, France, Russia

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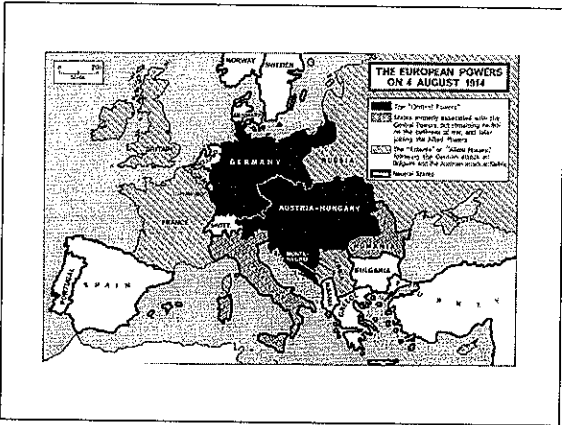
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### German cartoon on Triple Entente 1908

French prime minister, British King and Russian Czar sit together looking rather worried and puzzled.

Caption: "Shouldn't we perhaps take William into our Entente? We must have at least one army?"

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### German cartoon depicting 'encirclement' June 1908

Edward VII squats as a large spider on London while the German Michel appears as a fly sitting on Berlin

Caption: Edward says "Look Michel, I have spun my web so finely, that no enemy can now get near you!"

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## Diplomatic Crises 1905-1913

Significance:

- Introduced increased tension into the international system, sharpened national rivalries
- Produced psychological pressure which progressively restricted nations' room for maneuver and made each successive crisis more difficult to defuse

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## First Moroccan Crisis 1905

- Wilhelm II landed in Tangiers 31 March 1905 and announced support for the independence of Morocco
- *Punch* cartoon



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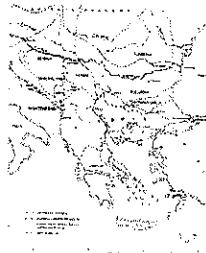
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## Bosnian Crisis 1908

- Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina on 5 Oct. 1908
- War preparations made by both Austria and Serbia
- Germany backs Austria-Hungary
- Russia backs down



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### Second Moroccan Crisis 1911

'The Race for the Morocco Prize', German cartoon 7 August 1911. A degenerate Spaniard, an effeminate Frenchman and a monocled and athletic German are engaged in a race in front of an oriental city. Lloyd George appears an umpire standing on an upturned soapbox. 'Stop,' he cries, 'the German is not allowed to compete—he might win!'



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### British cartoon June 1911

"Misunderstood"

Caption: Germany:  
'Nobody loves me  
and they all want to  
trample on me!'



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### Italian war to seize Libya 1911



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## Two Balkan Wars 1912-1913

- First Balkan War Oct 1912; Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece fight against Ottoman Empire
- Second Balkan War 1913; Serbia, Rumania, Greece and Ottoman Empire against Bulgaria

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## German War Council 8 Dec 1912

- Wilhelm II, Moltke, Admiral Müller, Tirpitz
- Moltke declares that war is inevitable, Wilhelm agrees, Tirpitz says fleet needs 18 more months
- "a psychological dress rehearsal for the decision of July 1914" historian Isabel Hull



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Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Austrian Archduke 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo



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## German strategy of "calculated risk"

German assumption of British neutrality

preference for either local or continental war over negotiated settlement

worst case scenario: world war involving Britain

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## "blank cheque" of 5 July



- Germans not only give Austria unconditional support, they urge it to move militarily against Serbia as soon as possible

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Austro-Hungarian delay until ultimatum issued on July 23  
Austrian Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold  
Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad von Hötzendorf

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## July Crisis

- Serbian response to Austro-Hungarian ultimatum rejected
- relations broken off on 25 July
- Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia on 28 July and preparations are made for mobilization; Belgrade is bombarded on 29 July

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## July Crisis

Sazonov, Russian Foreign Minister, after hearing of A-H declaration of war on Serbia, commented that if Russia abandoned the Slav peoples "she would be considered a decadent state and would henceforth have to take second place among the powers."



Sazonov, Dmitriy Mikhailovich Sazonov

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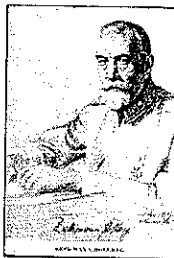
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## July Crisis



German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg on 28 July: "It is imperative that the responsibility for the eventual extension of the war among those nations not originally immediately concerned should, under all circumstances, fall on Russia."

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## July Crisis

- British inform Germany on 29 July that they will not remain neutral if France is attacked
- Germany briefly reconsiders and applies (half-hearted) pressure on Austria to accept negotiation
- Russia mobilizes on 30 July

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## July Crisis



Germany sends ultimatum to Russia on 31 July and declares war on Russia on 1 August

German Chief of Staff Moltke

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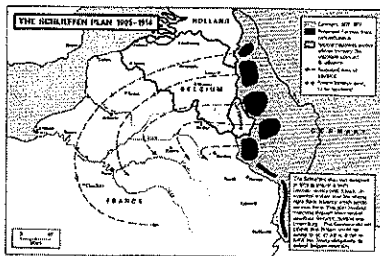
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## Schlieffen-(Moltke) Plan



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## July Crisis

- **Germany declares war on France on 3 August and troops cross the Belgian frontier on 4 August**
- **Britain declares war on Germany on 4 August**

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## Why did decision makers behave as they did?

- domestic pressures: traditional elites, especially in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia felt the pressure from the middle classes and the working class
- public opinion imposes pressure on political leaders to live up to nationalist expectations and not give in to foreign powers
- widespread predisposition to see war as inevitable and perhaps even desirable made it easier for the decision-makers to face the prospect of war with a relatively light conscience.

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## Conclusions

1. WWI chiefly the result of Great Power rivalry; domestic factors of secondary importance
2. The First World War did not come about because statesmen were overwhelmed by military imperatives and thus "lost control" of the situation; leaders in Russia, Germany and Austria decided that war was a better option than peace.
3. Germany bears the major but by no means sole responsibility for the outbreak of the war.

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