

The origins of the First World War

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There are many views about who was responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. Professor Mick sifts the evidence to argue that the war was the result of a collective failure on the part of the European political elites

Exam links



AQA AS Britain 1902–18: The impact of the new liberalism

Edexcel A2 The challenge of fascism. From Kaiser to Führer: Germany 1900–45

Edexcel A2 War and peace: 20th-century international relations. The world in crisis

OCR (A) AS Peace and war: International relations c.1890–1941

OCR (A) A2 The changing nature of warfare 1792–1945

On 28 June 1914 the heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and his wife Sophie were visiting Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. Bosnia was the most recent territorial acquisition of Austria-Hungary. It was an unruly place. The largest ethnic group, the Bosnian Serbs, demanded the unification of Bosnia with the independent states of Serbia and Montenegro. One of the many organisations pursuing this goal was Young Bosnia. Some members of the group were conspiring to kill the archduke and looked to Serbia for help.

The secret Serbian organisation 'Unification or Death', commonly known as the 'Black Hand', was

only too willing to assist. It trained three members of Young Bosnia, gave them weapons and helped them to cross the border. The first attempt to kill Franz Ferdinand failed. A grenade was thrown at the archduke but he managed to deflect it with his hand. The bomb exploded a few metres behind his car, wounding two members of his entourage and some onlookers.

A few hours later Franz Ferdinand made a fateful decision. He wanted to visit the victims of the explosion in hospital. His driver took the wrong road and had to reverse. He reversed exactly at the spot where one of the conspirators was waiting. Gavrilo Princip, a 19-year-old Bosnian Serb, pulled out his revolver and shot Sophie and Franz Ferdinand. Both died soon after. Five weeks later Europe was at war.

How could this terrorist act trigger a world war? To answer this question I will first look at the political situation in the Balkans before discussing other origins of the First World War.

Conflicts in the Balkans

The Austro-Hungarian leadership believed that Serbia stood behind this terrorist attack. The Serbian prime minister, Nikola Pašić, did not know about the planned murder, but the chief of military intelligence, Dragutin Dimitrijević, was heavily involved. He was (under the code name Apis) also the leader of the 'Black Hand'. Apis had originally approved the assassination but had later half-heartedly tried to stop it. None of this was known in Vienna at the time.

The murder shocked Europe and there was much sympathy for Austria's attempts to find and punish the culprits. But this was not the prime motive for what followed. The Austro-Hungarian government

and military had waited a long time for a good opportunity to fight Serbia.

Serbia had increased its territory in several wars since gaining full independence from the Ottoman empire in 1867. Serbian nationalists dreamed of unifying all South Slavs in a new state: Yugoslavia. As Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia were part of Austro-Hungary, this could only be achieved in opposition to Vienna. The Austro-Hungarian government felt that it had to stand up to the Serbian challenge. It also wanted to discourage other nationalist movements in its multiethnic empire.

There were not many countries in Europe which would have gone to war for Serbia. However, there was one, very important, exception: the Russian empire. Russia and Austria-Hungary were competing for influence in the Balkans. Like the Russians, the Serbs were **Orthodox** Slavs. Serbia was Russia's natural ally in the region.

When Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia in 1908, Russia was not ready for war. It was still recovering from its defeat in the Russian-Japanese war of 1904 and was weakened by the first Russian Revolution of 1905. In 1914 Tsar Nicholas II was under pressure from the army, the political elite, and an increasingly nationalistic 'public opinion'. If Russia wanted to be the leader of the Slavic nations, they argued, the tsar had to stand up to Austria-Hungary.

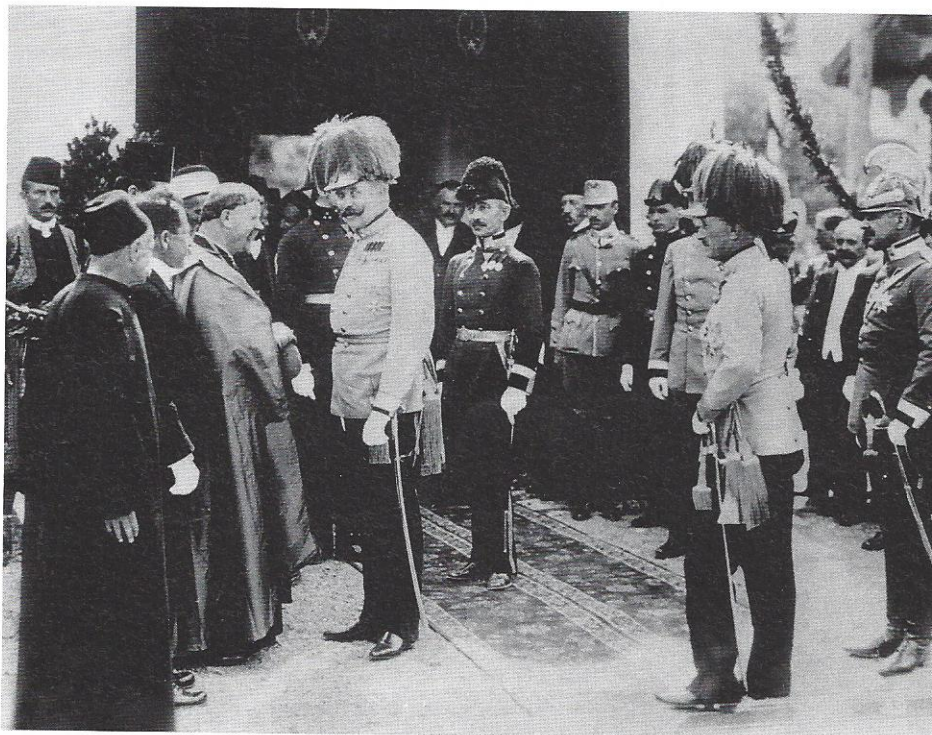
Why were Britain, France and Germany so interested in this southeastern corner of Europe? To answer this question, we need to look at the arms race, the mechanisms of the alliance systems, and the domestic political climates in 1914.

The arms race

Until 1890 one of the constants of European policy was the enmity between France and Britain, whose imperialist interests clashed in Africa. Another constant was Russian-British enmity. Britain felt threatened in India by the Russian influence in Afghanistan and Persia.

These conflicts were settled thanks to the German kaiser's careless and ambitious foreign policy. Germany's support for Austria-Hungary in territorial disputes over the Balkans alienated its former ally Russia. Russia subsequently formed an alliance with France in 1892, ending French diplomatic isolation. Germany's global ambitions threatened French and British interests in Africa and Asia. Russia and Britain were uneasy about the growing German influence in the Ottoman empire.

Britain was driven into the arms of France and Russia by German *Weltpolitik* (world policy). Encouraged by a powerful pressure group led by the naval minister Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the kaiser wanted to challenge British dominance of the seas and started a gigantic naval building programme. Britain, financially much stronger than Germany,



Archduke Franz Ferdinand shortly before he was assassinated

won this naval arms race. The British Navy defended its superiority, but the German challenge had left a bad aftertaste in London.

In the decade before the war all the great powers invested heavily in their armies or navies and participated in an arms race. Consequently, all the great powers were heavily armed and terribly afraid of each other. They looked for alliances to increase their security.

Alliance systems

In 1914 Europe was divided into two alliance systems. Germany was allied with Austria-Hungary (from 1879, in the Dual Alliance) and Italy (from 1882, in the Triple Alliance). The three countries agreed to support each other militarily should any of them be attacked by France.

France was allied with Russia (since 1892) and Britain (from 1904, in the Entente Cordiale). In 1907 Russia and Britain settled their differences in Central Asia and laid the foundations for the Triple Entente (Britain, France, Russia) of 1914. (See the 'Countdown to the First World War' timeline on page 16.)

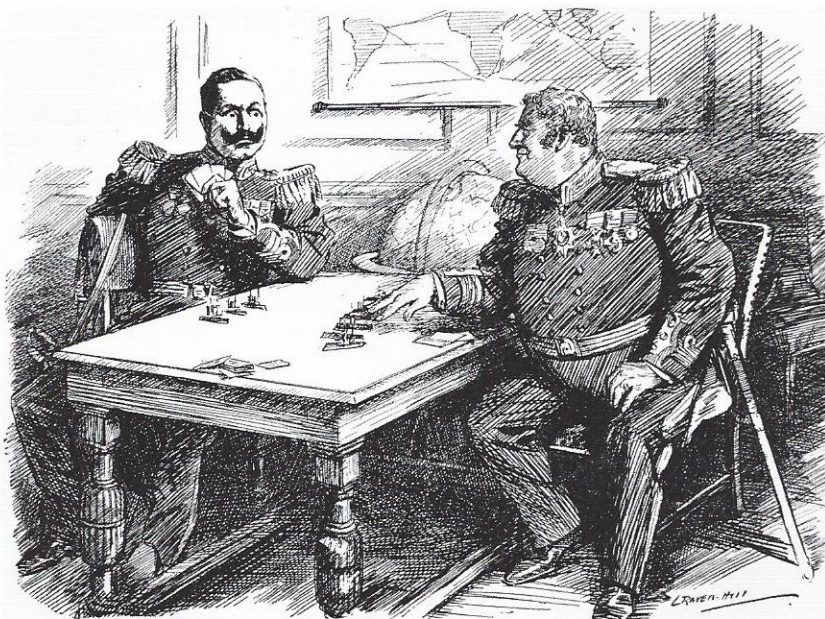
Questions



- Why has so much time and effort been put into the question of assigning blame for the outbreak of the war?
- Did the various national leaders understand the consequences of going to war in 1914?
- Was the outbreak of war in 1914 inevitable?
- Why do you think the war began?

• **Orthodoxy** The eastern European branch of the Christian church. The religion created a bond between peoples who had adopted it, such as Russians and Serbians.

• **Weltpolitik** (world policy) An approach to foreign policy based on global considerations rather than local or regional ones.



POKER AND TONGS;

OR, HOW WE'VE GOT TO PLAY THE GAME.

Kaiser. "I GO THREE DREADNOUGHTS."

John Bull. "WELL, JUST TO SHOW THERE'S NO ILL-FEELING, I RAISE YOU THREE."

Punch cartoon on the race for naval supremacy between Britain and Germany. HMS Dreadnought was a British super-battleship

Domestic reasons for the war

Did internal problems help to transform a local conflict into a world war? Some influential historians have stated that the origins of the war sprang from attempts of the participating states to distract from class tensions within their countries. But this is not the case.

The kaiser, the German government and the conservative elites were not happy with the growing influence of the **Social Democratic Party (SPD)**. However, this did not play a major role in July 1914.

Britain was facing a domestic crisis as the unionists in Ulster had revolted against the introduction of Home Rule for Ireland. But the crisis did not have any impact on the government's decision to declare war on Germany.

In Russia, strikes swept across the industrial centres, and the military and the liberal and nationalist elite pressed Tsar Nicholas to support Serbia militarily. However, the tsar and other members of the elite were afraid of war. They knew from experience that an unsuccessful war would mean revolution and possibly the end of the Romanov dynasty.

It was also not the economic elite or the industrialists who set the European nations against each other. British industrialists were concerned about German competition but they did not push for war. German industrialists thought that peace was better for business than war. Peace had helped Germany to become the economic powerhouse of Europe.

The strongest advocates of war were the military and parts of the political class. And this takes us back to July 1914.

The July crisis

On 5 July the German kaiser gave Austria-Hungary a so-called blank cheque in its dealings with Serbia. The kaiser promised German support for whatever the Austro-Hungarian government would decide, even if this meant war with Russia. The blank cheque was — as the British historian Hew Strachan has rightly noted — indeed 'blank'. It was up to Austria to decide whether to go to war or not.

Then something strange happened. Kaiser Wilhelm II went on his annual North Sea cruise, and the chief of staff of the German Army, Helmuth von Moltke the younger, went on holiday to a spa — not something you would do if you were expecting war to be imminent. Some of the other government ministers and military also did not bother to interrupt their holidays to attend important meetings.

In the following 2 weeks the German chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg pursued a policy designed to give Austria-Hungary a free hand with regard to Serbia. He even undermined the last-ditch efforts by the British foreign secretary Sir Edward Grey to prevent an Austro-Serbian war. On the one hand, the German government tried to keep the war local. On the other hand, some military leaders wanted to use the opportunity to wage a **preventive war** against Russia.

The German military feared that in 2 or 3 years' time the combined French and Russian military power would be too strong for Germany. After the revolution of 1905, Russia had begun to increase and modernise its army and build strategic railways to its western borders. Moltke feared that time was running out for Germany. Since 1912 he had pushed for a preventive war against Russia and possibly France. Moltke was not even convinced that Germany would win the war in 1914, but at least it would still have a chance. The unconditional German support for Austria was meant either to provoke a war or break the alliance between Russia and France.

It took the Austro-Hungarian government more than 3 weeks to make up its mind. The chief of staff of the Austrian Army, General Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, and foreign minister Count Leopold von Berchtold convinced the other members of the government and the 83-year-old Emperor Franz Josef that it was in the interest of Austria-Hungary to attack Serbia. Austria-Hungary would not have risked war if Germany had not promised its unconditional support. Vienna still hoped that this support would be enough to restrain Russia from supporting Serbia.

Austria-Hungary's ultimatum

On 23 July the Austro-Hungarian government delivered a long list of harsh demands to Serbia. The **ultimatum** was formulated in such a way that it was almost impossible for Serbia to accept it:

Social Democratic Party (SPD) A left-wing German political party with a Marxist orientation.

preventive war A war intended to take an enemy by surprise and defeat them before they are able to deploy their full force.

ultimatum A diplomatic message making demands on another country which must be met within a specified time, usually backed up with threats.

- All propaganda against Austria-Hungary must be stopped.
- All anti-Austrian organisations dissolved.
- All persons responsible for the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand handed over to the Austrian authorities.
- All Serbian officers and officials who had agitated against Austria-Hungary in the past to be dismissed.
- Austrian officials to participate in suppressing the subversive movement inside Serbia.

Serbia's response

Serbia responded to the ultimatum with a conciliatory note, accepting all the conditions, apart from the last item shown above. The Serbian government saw this request as an intervention in its internal affairs and feared that it would undermine Serbian sovereignty.

The German kaiser was so pleased with the Serbian answer that he recommended Austria-Hungary to accept it, while at the same time Moltke signalled to Vienna that the German blank cheque still held good. The Austro-Hungarian government did not follow the kaiser's advice. On 28 July Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

Russia's response

All eyes were now on Russia. The Russian minister Sergei Sazonov had originally spoken out against war, but he switched sides after the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia. Together with the Russian military leadership, he pressed a very reluctant Tsar Nicholas to mobilise the army.

On 28 July the tsar ordered a partial mobilisation, and 2 days later full mobilisation. The Russian leaders should have known that this meant war with Austria and, in consequence, also war with Germany.

The Russian government was confident that it could rely on French support. The French president

Raymond Poincaré had made it very clear, during his state visit to Russia on 20 July, that France would support Russia if it came to a German-Russian war. On previous occasions France had declined to give such a promise and Poincaré was afraid that the alliance with Russia might break if France again withheld its support. More than anything else, France was afraid of having to face Germany alone.

Germany's response

For Germany every day counted. The German military thought it could only win the war if France could be defeated quickly. The German strategy in 1914 was based on a plan by the previous chief of staff General Alfred von Schlieffen — known as the **Schlieffen Plan**.

The German military expected (wrongly) that it would take the Russian Army at least 30 days to be ready for battle. The bulk of the German Army could therefore be first deployed on the Western Front and, after having defeated France, be moved quickly to the Eastern Front to help Austria-Hungary fight Russia. This strategy is the reason why Germany viewed Russian general mobilisation as equivalent to a declaration of war.

On 1 August Germany declared war on Russia. When France was not willing to guarantee that it would not side with Russia, Germany also declared war on France (on 3 August). The German Army planned to bypass the French fortifications and armies facing Alsace-Lorraine by attacking from the north. This meant violating Luxembourg and Belgian neutrality.

The British response

The next question was: would Britain intervene in a Franco-German war or not? If the German leadership had done their homework, they could have answered the question: probably yes.

Schlieffen Plan German strategy, before 1914, to avoid war on two fronts by attacking and defeating France first, so it only had to face Russia in battle. It assumed Britain would not fight without France.



The House of Commons on 3 August 1914, the day Germany declared war on France



A Royal Navy recruiting march through London, 1914

balance of power

A traditional diplomatic notion which assumed that, if alliance blocs were equal in power, they would be less likely to go to war with one another.

It was widely known that British European policy was based on the principle of a **balance of power**. Britain needed France as a counterweight to Germany. But in July 1914 opinions in the British Cabinet and in the British public were divided. The German invasion of Belgium and Luxembourg was a blatant violation of international law and tipped the balance.

The rationale for Britain joining the war was not to save Belgium or to fight for a righteous and just cause but for 'national interest'. Britain fought to prevent the balance of power in Europe from tipping in Germany's favour and to prevent Germany from controlling the Channel ports. On 4 August Britain declared war on Germany.

An inevitable war?

There was a mood of anxious expectation among the European elites and middle classes. Some European intellectuals actively promoted war. They saw war as a means to 'rejuvenate' Europe, to toughen up their 'weakly' young men and to defend national or imperial interests, as they understood them. Others were resigned to the fact that there would be a great European war.

The July crisis of 1914 was not the first crisis in the new century which could have triggered a European war. The great powers had come close to war several times, for example in 1905–06 (first Moroccan crisis), in 1908–09 (Bosnian annexation crisis), in 1911 (second Moroccan crisis), and in 1912–13 (First and Second Balkan War). Some minor crises had been overcome without resorting to war.

The First World War was therefore not inevitable. The reasons why the political leaders in July 1914 could not find a peaceful solution were a lack of imagination, mutual distrust and misperceptions, a narrow-minded understanding of 'national honour' and 'national interest', high-risk strategies and the irresponsible actions of some.

All governments told their nations that they had been forced to go to war and that their countries fought a defensive war. France, Belgium and Serbia believed this with more justification than Germany, Austria, Britain or Russia.

Socialists all over Europe, with the notable exception of the Russian Bolsheviks and a few socialists in other countries, succumbed to government propaganda. In July 1914 hundreds of thousands of workers all over Europe demonstrated for peace, but the socialist parties failed to live up to their promises. Instead they supported the war efforts of their governments.

Conclusion

The First World War was a result of the collective failure of the European political elite. Some governments are more to blame than others, but the decisions of a handful of men led to the war.

The main 'culprit' was the political and military leadership of Austria-Hungary, which started everything by declaring war on Serbia. Germany allowed Austria to do so and Russia mobilised first. Fear made Germany go to war, and fear made the other great powers join in.

Further reading



Strachan, H. (1914) *The First World War*, Simon and Schuster. An overall account of the war.

Joll, J. and Martel, G. (2006) *Origins of the First World War*, Routledge. Considers the traditional explanations.

Mulligan, W. (2010) *The Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press. A new interpretation.

Mombauer, A. (2002) *The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus*, Routledge. Analyses the debate over the origins since 1914 rather than the origins themselves.

Imperial War Museum, First World War galleries:
<http://tinyurl.com/paxxvbt>

Or maybe the great powers were just not sufficiently afraid of each other? All sides overestimated their own strength and underestimated the strength of their enemies. Propaganda everywhere declared that the

war would be over by Christmas, and at least some, but indeed not all, military leaders and politicians believed in the possibility of a quick victory.

After the war had started, the military and political elites were incapable of ending it quickly. After hundreds of thousands of young men had died in the first few weeks, how could any government survive if it had to explain to its population that all the sacrifices had been for nothing? Millions more had to die, before first Russia, then Austria-Hungary and finally Germany were militarily defeated or were so exhausted that they could no longer fight.

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Using this article in your exam



How might the origins of the First World War come up in your course?

AQA

The outbreak of the First World War is a part of AQA Unit 2, Britain 1902–1918: the impact of New Liberalism. This paper is 1 hour and 30 minutes long, and you have to answer two questions.

- Question 1 is compulsory and requires you to use three sources to answer a two-part question.

- You have to choose between Questions 2 and 3. Both have two parts. Here you have to use source analysis as well as essay-writing skills and detailed evidence.

You can find an analysis of a question on this topic at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras

Edexcel

The First World War features in two A2 Unit 3 topics.

The first is topic D1, From Kaiser to Führer: Germany 1900–45, part of Option D, The challenge of fascism.

The second is topic E1, The world in crisis 1879–1941, which is part of Option E, War and peace: twentieth-century international relations.

This article would be useful in addressing the controversy: 'To what extent was Germany responsible for the outbreak of the First World War?'

Robin Bunce discusses this in a sample answer and commentary at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras

OCR

The origins of the First World War feature in:

- AS Unit F962 study topic 4, Peace and war: international relations c. 1890–1941
- A2 module F966 theme 2, The changing nature of warfare 1792–1945

You could also focus on the topic as part of your A2 investigations coursework (module F965). This is an independent research investigation of a maximum of 2,000 words. It must include footnotes and a bibliography.

You could choose to answer the following kind of question for your investigation:

Assess the view that Germany was largely responsible for the outbreak of World War One. (40 marks)

You would need to evaluate the interpretations and opinions of historians on this topic. Read the article 'The origins of the First World War' carefully for evaluation tips. You can use this article as one historian's interpretation, and you can use some of the detailed evidence it presents to support your argument or evaluation of other historians' ideas.

You can find a sample paragraph and assessor's commentary at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras