

Long Term Causes of the Outbreak of WW1

The Impact of the Unification of Germany

Germany, before the 19th Century, had not been united but a collection of several hundred different states.

Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia, succeeded in uniting all of the German states into the German Empire across 1862-71.

- Germany's unification transformed the balance of power in Europe as the German Empire was now the most powerful industrial and military state on the continent.
- Its population rose from 49 million to 66 million in the period 1890-1914 and its industrial output outstripped that of Britain to make Germany the leading industrial power in Europe.
- This was one reason why France and Russia signed a military alliance in 1894, both were neighbours of Germany and both, although great powers themselves, were worried about Germany's strength.
- Relations between Germany and France were poor throughout the period of 1871 to 1914 because the German states had defeated France in 1871 and Germany had taken the area known as Alsace-Lorraine from France.
- The French wanted Alsace-Lorraine back.

The Alliance System

The development of the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance provided the mechanism by which a local conflict in the Balkans escalated in to a general European war. However, that does not mean that the alliance system caused the war.

AJP Taylor suggests that the alliances were so fragile that they should not be regarded as a major cause of the First World War:

- *Yet it would be wrong to exaggerate the rigidity of the system of alliance or to regard the European war as inevitable. No war is inevitable until it breaks out. The existing alliances were all precarious. Italy was only the extreme example - renewing the Triple Alliance and making exaggerated promises of military support to Germany on the one side; seeking to negotiate a Mediterranean agreement with France and Britain on the other. In France, the Russian alliance was increasingly unpopular ... in June 1914, the British Government at last reached agreement with Germany over the Baghdad railway; and the French had already done so in February. Both seemed to be taking sides with Germany against Russia in the great question of Turkey-in-Asia.*
- Nonetheless, the alliance system was a key factor in why war broke out as it did shape the war plans of the great powers. These war plans played a key role in the decisions made during the July Crisis in 1914.

- Historians such as Rohl argued that by 1914 the German government was so alarmed that the balance power was tipping decisively in favour of the Triple Entente that it was looking to either achieve a diplomatic victory by humiliating the Triple Entente following Franz Ferdinand's assassination, or to fight a general European war whilst it was still strong enough to win.

Bismarck's Alliance System

Chancellor Bismarck of Germany's great preoccupation after 1871 was to keep France isolated so that it could not seek revenge for its defeat and loss of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany in 1871. Bismarck wanted to ensure that Germany out be *a trois in a Europe of five powers*.

- France on its own would not dare attack Germany, Bismarck assumed.
- In order to keep France isolated, without allies, Bismarck signed a series of defensive military alliances: the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879 and the Three Emperors' Alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1881. Germany also concluded the Triple Alliance with Italy and Austria-Hungary in 1882.
- Bismarck found it increasingly difficult to keep Russia and Austria-Hungary together as the rivalry in the Balkans deepened. For example, the crisis over Bulgaria in 1885-86 saw Austria-Hungary's relations with Russia at breaking point.
- As such there was no renewal of the Three Emperors Alliance when it expired in 1887.
- Bismarck decided to keep on good terms with Russia and Austria-Hungary by means of separate treaties.
 - The Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary continued to be renewed every five years whilst Bismarck also signed a separate treaty agreement with Russia. The Reinsurance Treaty in 1887.
- Yet this was difficult for Bismarck to juggle and there were clear signs that the Russo-German relations were under strain well before Kaiser Wilhelm II's ascension to throne in 1888.
- Wilhelm II wanted to follow different policies to Bismarck. In 1890 Bismarck resigned and Wilhelm II did not renew the insurance treaty with Russia.
- Gradually France and Russia drifted together to form the alliance of 1894.
- This meant the nightmare that Bismarck had feared had come to life. France had a powerful enemy and Germany faced the potential threat of a simultaneous attack from both East and West.

The end to splendid isolation and the triple entente

Until 1904, Great Britain avoided being drawn into military alliances or diplomatic engagements with any of the European powers.

- Britain believed it was best served by remained in splendid isolation, free to concentrate on its vast overseas empire and commercial interests.
- However, after 1904, Britain was increasingly drawn into diplomatic ties with France, 1904, and then Russia, 1907.
- Both the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France and the Anglo-Russian Entente originally were intended to reduce tensions created by imperial rivalries between the signatories.

- In the case of France and Britain this was principally in North Africa, whilst Russia and Britain were competing for influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- These understandings took on increasingly an anti-German nature such that by 1914, Britain felt it could not stand by and see Germany defeat France.
- The main reason that Britain grew closer to its Triple Entente partners was the alarm in Britain generated by the aggressive imperialism and naval expansion pursued by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany after 1897 under the policy known as Weltpolitik.

Colonial Rivalry, Weltpolitik and the Anglo-German Naval Race

Between 1870 and 1900, Britain, France, Germany, Belgium and Italy were all involved in the *Scramble for Africa* and a search for influence and territory in the Far East, at the expense of China.

- By 1880, 10% of Africa had been taken over by European states; by 1900 90% had been.
- The Chinese Empire was in serious decline. After the Opium Wars of the 1840s, Great Britain was given Hong Kong; Japan defeated China in 1895; Russia forced China to grant it a 25-year lease on the Liaotung Peninsula; Germany occupied Kiaochow.

The Causes of Colonialism/Imperialism

Economic

- Lenin argued that imperialism was driven by the interest of capitalists, seeking new markets and control of raw materials. However, European powers gained little in the way of raw materials from their colonies and colonial trade constituted only a small percentage of their overall trade.

Nationalism

- Colonies were seen as giving states prestige: imperialism was popular.
- There was widespread belief in Social Darwinism, that is, the strongest states would expand at the expense of the weaker.

Religious

- Many Europeans saw it as their duty to bring civilisation and Christianity to the "backward" peoples of Africa.

The Impact of Imperialism on international relations

- It led to growing tensions between Britain and France in the late 19th century. Notably the Fashoda Incident of 1898 when French and British troops confronted each other in the Sudan.
- It led to growing tensions between Britain and Russia over Far East and Central Asia.
- It led to the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05); Russia's defeat led it to turn its attention back to the Balkans and this contributed to increasing international tensions in the decade before 1914.

- The Russo-Japanese War directly led to the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France in 1904. Britain was allied to Japan since 1902 and France was an ally of Russia (1894). Both countries were worried that they might be dragged into the Russo-Japanese War, so signed the Entente Cordiale in order to minimise this risk and also to resolve long standing colonial disagreements, e.g. over Morocco and Egypt. Although this agreement was not an alliance and was not aimed at Germany, it worried Germany and contributed to its fear of encirclement.
- Arguably colonialism provided a safety valve for the European states where their rivalry might cause tension but never reached the point that war was likely.
- However, colonialism encouraged the development in Germany of Weltpolitik and this did contribute to heightened international tension, particularly after 1905.

German Weltpolitik - World Policy

Chancellor Bismarck of Germany had little interest in acquiring colonies - although he did indulge the German public by seizing territories in south-west, west and east Africa in the mid 1880s.

However, Kaiser Wilhelm II was very keen to make Germany into a world power; he was jealous of Britain and felt that Germany needed a large colonial empire in order to be regarded as a great power.

Von Bulow articulated this sentiment in 1897:

- *We don't want to put anyone else in the shade, but we too demand a place in the sun.*

Wilhelm launched Weltpolitik in 1897, committing Germany to the acquisition of more colonies and to the building of a powerful navy.

The main architects of Weltpolitik were **Klaus von Bulow** and **Alfred von Tirpitz**, respectively appointed in 1897 as Foreign Minister and Naval Minister. Both saw Weltpolitik as an important instrument for rallying support for the Imperial government, promoting patriotism and weakening the Socialists who were critical of imperialism and of increased spending on armaments.

The Navy League and Pan German League campaigned in support of Weltpolitik. Wilhelm was very disappointed with the results in that very little was acquired in terms of further colonies, but his attempts to promote Germany's influence overseas created considerable friction with the leading colonial powers, chiefly Great Britain and France, and helped bring Britain out of its splendid isolation in search for closer links with France and Russia.

In turn, Germany increasingly saw itself as encircled by the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France and Russia.

The Moroccan Crises

Both of these crises saw the German government acting aggressively in an attempt to increase its influence in North Africa. In doing so, Germany pushed France and Britain closer together, thereby increasing Germany's fear of encirclement.

The First Moroccan Crisis: 1905-1906

In 1905 the German government sent the Kaiser to Tangier to announce Germany's commitment to the continuing independence of Morocco. This was meant to signal to France that it could not increase its influence in Morocco without prior consultation with Germany.

The German government expected Britain to fail to support France and hoped the Entente Cordiale, 1904, would then collapse. In fact, Germany's attempt to bully France did the opposite as Britain and France stood together at the Algeiras Conference (1906), which was called to resolve the dispute.

The Second Moroccan Crisis: 1911

In 1911, the German government sent the gunboat Panther to the port of Agadir in protest at France's decision to send more troops to Morocco. Britain reacted strongly, fearing Germany was seeking to acquire a naval base in the Mediterranean.

Lloyd George (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) made a thinly veiled threat of war in his Mansion House Speech. Although the crisis fizzled out with France and Germany agreeing to increased French influence in Morocco in return for France handing over territory in the Congo to Germany, much damage was done to international relations.

France and Britain's suspicions about Germany's intentions were strengthened and 1912 saw France and Britain sign an important naval agreement involving the two countries co-operating in their naval deployments.

German Naval Expansion

- Germany's middle class eager to see Germany build up a large navy,.
- The German Government supported this patriotism and Wilhelm II also wanted a powerful navy so that Germany could become a great colonial power.

- In 1898 and 1900, the Reichstag passed Naval Laws, drawn up by Tirpitz, which greatly expanded the German Navy.
- Under the 1900 law, 3 battleships were to be built every year for the next 20 years.

- Britain believed that it had to maintain its position as the world's greatest naval power in order to defend its Empire.
- At first Britain wasn't concerned as they had a huge lead.
 - In 1898, Britain had 38 class 1 battleships while Germany had 7.
- From 1906, the situation became an Anglo-German Naval arms race.

- This resulted in the construction of a revolutionary dreadnought battleship, which the Germans copied with the Nassau class.
- The dreadnought made other battle ships obsolete.
- 1912, Germany and Britain were neck and neck in the naval arms race.
- Germany also announced plans to widen the Kiel Canal in 1906 to allow Dreadnought ships access to the Baltic sea.
- From 1912, Britain was about to outstrip Germany in the construction of Dreadnoughts as Germany reduced its naval spending in order to increase spending on its army.
- The Naval Arms race did cement the Triple Entente however.

Sir Edward Grey, British Foreign Secretary, said this in 1906:

- *If there is a war between France and Germany, it will be very difficult for us to keep out of it. The Entente and still more the constant and emphatic demonstrations of affection ... have created in France a belief that we shall support them in War. If this expectation is disappointed, the French will never forgive us. There would also I think be a general feeling that we had behaved badly and left France in the lurch.*

German fear of encirclement

- As well as the Entente Cordiale of 1904, Britain had signed an Entente with Russia in 1907 in an attempt to reach an agreement over disputes concerning Afghanistan and the New East.
- This was not a military alliance but Germany's aggressive behaviour strengthened relations between Russia and Britain.
- This, in turn, led to increasing fears in Germany of her encirclement.
- Kaiser Wilhelm II and his chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, were also concerned about the collapse of Austria-Hungary as a great power.
- So by 1914, the German government was frightened that Austria-Hungary might break up, leaving Germany alone (Germany felt its other ally, Italy, was too unreliable and weak to stand up the Triple Entente).
- By 1914, the German government believed a European war would break out sooner or later; in July 1914 they calculated that it would be better to go to war then rather than wait until later when Austria-Hungary was weaker and Triple Entente stronger.

Arms Race

Beyond the naval arms race, there was also simply the arms race. Historians disagree about the significance of the arms race between the generals in the before before 1914.

- Michael Howard - Argues that the arms race, which reflected the rival alliances, generated huge tensions and mutual suspicions that led to deteriorating international relations and explain the great powers' resort to war in the July Crisis in 1914.
- Howard also points out that in *Studies in War and Peace 1970*, the war plans drawn up by the Great Powers assumed that mobilization speed would be decisive:

- *Millions of men had to be recalled to the colours, organized into fighting units, equipped with a vast apparatus of arms and services and sent by railways to their points of concentration, all within a few days.*
- *The lesson of Prussia's swift victory over France in 1870 was burnt into the mind of every staff officer in Europe: the nation which loses the mobilization race is likely to lose the war.*
- However, recently Niall Ferguson has questioned whether increased military spending made the great powers more inclined to go to war, pointing out that in the period immediately before the First World War, it was Britain who increased its expenditure most and it was definitely not seeking war in 1914.
- Nonetheless, it is clear that there was a huge growth in the size of the armed forces of the great powers between 1890 and 1914 (France by 68% to 910 000; Russia by 100% to 1 352 000; Germany by 77% to 891 000) and that any increase by the French or Russians invariably triggered similar expansion by the Germans and vice versa.
- What is equally evident is that the arms race sped up in the period 1910-14. From 1908, Russia modernised and expanded her army, so that by 1914 her regulars and reservists together numbered 6 million. Germany's combined regulars and reservists totalled 4.5 million in 1914.
- One explanation for Germany's apparent readiness to risk a general European war in the summer of 1914 was its alarm at the growing might of the Russian army; the German government viewed a possible European war as a way of breaking out of their encirclement by the Triple Entente and fighting Russia before her military reforms were completed (scheduled for 1917).

Schlieffen Plan

- From 1891 to 1906, the Chief of the German General Staff was Count von Schlieffen.
- He saw a simultaneous French-Russian attack as the main threat to Germany's security and so devised a plan to counter this danger. In essence, his plan was to knock out France quickly then transfer the bulk of the German armies east to face the Russians.
- Schlieffen assumed that the technologically backward Russians would take about 6 weeks to mobilise their armies so that Germany would not face a major Russian attack whilst 85% of Germany's troops were attacking France.
- Schlieffen concluded that the best way to attack France was through Belgium and a few troops through Holland.
- This was designed to avoid the strong French fortresses on the Franco-German border between Belgium and Switzerland.
- In 1906, Count von Moltke became Chief of the German General Staff and altered the Schlieffen plan a bit.
- The most important change was that the German army would not advance through Holland.

- However, it must be noted that Belgium was a neutral country, whose independence had been guaranteed by the Great Powers of Europe in a treaty dating back to 1839.

Why do historians see the Balkans as such a key long-term cause of the First World War?

- Because a power vacuum developed in South-Eastern Europe, as the Ottoman Empire declined, which gave rise to Great Power competition to fill it.
- This, combined with the growing Balkan nationalism, created dangerous tensions and appeared to threaten the survival of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Balkan Nationalism and Great Power rivalries in the Balkans

- Bosnia, where the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914, had once been part of the Ottoman Empire.
- From the 15th Century, the Ottoman Turks had controlled virtually the whole of South-Eastern Europe and the Middle East and much of North Africa.
- From the beginning of the 19th century, the Turkish Empire was in serious decline and a number of subject peoples, who were mainly Christian, broke away and became independent.
- The Greeks were the first to break away; an independent Greece was set up in 1830. In 1856, following the Crimean War, Rumania, Serbia and Bulgaria gained self-government within the Turkish Empire and in 1878, following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, and the Congress of Berlin, all three gained full independence.
- As the Turkish Empire began to break up the European great powers became increasingly involved in a struggle to acquire as much influence or land as possible, like vultures circling the sick man of Europe, as the Turkish Empire became known.
- The two European powers most interested in expanding their influence in the Balkans were Austria-Hungary and Russia.
- Both empires bordered the Turkish Empire. Russia saw itself as the protector of the Slavs in this region and the Pan-Slav movement was influential in Russia, especially in the 1870s/1880s.
- Russia wanted to acquire a warm-water port and aimed to control the Dardanelles, the Straits that connected the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea.
- Austria-Hungary was suspicious of Russia's ambitions and sought to extend its own empire into Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- The Congress of Berlin 1878 gave Austria-Hungary the right to administer Bosnia-Hungary but the provinces remained officially part of the Turkish Empire.

Bismarck and the Eastern Question

Chancellor Bismarck believed that no German interests were at stake in the Balkans but he was very worried about the impact of the Balkans on Austria-Hungary's relations with Russia.

- His great fear was that Balkan tensions would prevent him from keeping both Austria and Russia friendly and that the result might be France acquiring an ally.

- Bismarck used diplomatic means to try to contain Balkan tensions - e.g. his role as “honest broker” at the Congress of Berlin (1878) and the signing of the Three Emperors League 1881.
- But, he would not support unconditionally Austria-Hungary’s interest in the Balkans.
- He once remarked that the whole of the Balkans was not *worth the bones of a single Pomeranian musketeer*.

Balkan Crisis One: The annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina 1908

- From 1897 to 1905, Russian-Austrian rivalry over the Balkans was less fierce, partly because Russia was more interested in expanding its empire into the Far East.
- However, after 1905, when Russia was humiliatingly beaten in a war by Japan, Russia turned its attention back to the Balkans.
- Another very important development occurred in 1903 when there was a change in the ruling dynasty in Serbia; up until 1903, Serbia’s ruling family - The Obrenovich dynasty - had been quite friendly towards Austria-Hungary but the following assassination of King Alexander, the Karageorgevich family took the throne and was much more pro-Russian and anti-Austrian.
- In 1908, a very serious civil crisis broke out involving Serbia, Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany.
- Austria-Hungary had occupied the the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1878 but they had technically remained part of the Turkish Empire.
- In 1908, Austria-Hungary announced that it was formally taking them over, incorporating them into its Empire.
- This led to a major row with Serbia - an independent Balkan country which had its eyes on Bosnia as there were so many Serbs living there. Also, possession of Bosnia-Herzegovina would give Serbia access to the sea.
- Russia protested at Austria-Hungary’s actions because she did not want to see Austrian influence increase and also because Russia had a close relationship with Serbia.
 - The Serbs and the Russians were both Orthodox Christian Slavic people.
- The crisis ended when Germany, Austria-Hungary’s ally, forced Russia to back down by threatening her with war.
- Russia would not consider war in 1908 as she was still recovering from a serious revolution and defeat by Japan in 1905.
- Consequently, Austria-Hungary kept Bosnia and relations between her, and Serbia and Russia deteriorated seriously.
- The Bosnian Crisis revealed a major change in Germany policy as Germany became increasingly interested in expanding its influence in the Balkans.