

Causes of World War I

On 28 June 1914 a Serbian shot an Austrian. Within six weeks many of the countries of Europe had become involved in a war that was to cause the deaths of 10,000,000 soldiers. Why did this happen?

Here are some typical exam questions about the causes of World War I.

- Why did World War I begin in August 1914?
- Why did the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand lead to the outbreak of a major European War within six weeks?

Use this tutorial to help you understand the causes of World War I. It will also help you to develop your essay writing skills. All the following details are relevant to the answer to these questions.

These different sections will help you: Long-term causes - Short-term causes - Happening hints

Long-term causes of World War I

Nationalism

Many European countries believed that their country was more important than any other. This showed itself in lots of ways. It showed itself in German aggression both in Europe and over colonies. It also showed itself in another way in the Balkans. Here it was seen as attempts to gain independence from both Austria-Hungary and Russia. For example, Bosnia wished to break free from the Austria-Hungary and join up with Serbia. On 28 June Gavrilo Princip, a eighteen-year-old Serbian student and a member of the Black Hand Gang, shot the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary.

Why did he do this?

Serbia had become an independent country in the late nineteenth century. The Serbians wanted to expand, but were hemmed in by other countries. They also wanted to take Bosnia from Austria-Hungary because most of the inhabitants of Bosnia were Serbian.

Most Serbs hated Austria-Hungary and were prepared to do anything they could to attack it.

All of these European neighbours had long-term reasons to distrust other.



Gavrilo Princip

FRANCE

In 1870 France had gone to war with Prussia (Germany) and had been very badly defeated. Germany took two French provinces after the war, Alsace and Lorraine. Ever since, the French had wanted revenge. France had built up alliances:

- 1894, the Dual Entente between France and Russia
- 1904, the Entente Cordiale between France and Britain
- 1907, the Triple Entente between France, Russia and Britain

The French Army had a plan to attack Germany, it was called Plan 17 and it meant that they would charge straight into Germany through the area of Champagne

BRITAIN

Britain had become very concerned about Germany since Kaiser Wilhelm II had succeeded to the throne in 1887 because: Germany had begun to occupy colonies in Africa and the Pacific; many of the colonies were next to British colonies. The German government had passed the Navy Laws in 1898 and 1900; these said that the German Navy would be built up over a period of seventeen years to rival the Royal Navy. Britain felt threatened by Germany's growing Navy. In 1906 a naval arms race began. Britain and Germany each tried to build more ships than the other. This race continued until 1914.

Britain was committed to defend Belgium if it was ever attacked. This promise had been made at the Treaty of Westminster in 1839.

GERMANY

The German government expected the French to try to get Alsace and Lorraine back at some point. It was also worried that it might have to fight France and Russia at the same time. This would be a war on two fronts.

Germany had made alliances with other countries. Since the 1870s it had been allied with Austria-Hungary and in 1882 Italy joined this alliance. This was the Triple Alliance.

The German army had worked out a plan to defeat France before the Russian army was ready to fight. This was the **Schlieffen Plan**. The German army would attack France through Belgium, which was a neutral country, and defeat France in six weeks. Then the Germans would deal with Russia.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

Austria-Hungary had been growing weaker for many years, but wanted to expand its empire to the south, into the Balkans. The Austrians had occupied Bosnia in 1885 and annexed it in 1908.

The only country which now stood in the Austrians' way was Serbia, which had become very powerful in the years from 1900 to 1914. The Austrians wanted to attack Serbia, but knew that Russia backed up Serbia. The Austrian government knew that it could not defeat Russia unless it got support from Germany.

RUSSIA

Russia had been defeated in a war with Japan in 1905 and wanted to prove that it was still a major power. The Russian government believed that the Russian army could defeat the army of any other European country.

Russia also wanted to gain more influence in the Balkans and wanted to stop Austria-Hungary from expanding there. It was very keen to back up Serbia.

Russia supported Serbia because the Serbians had a similar language and religion as Russia. The Russian government was determined to protect Serbia against Austria-Hungary.

Short-term causes of World War I

All the long-term reasons suddenly came to a head when the Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo by Gavrilo Princip.

Now look and see what happened next and how all the countries rushed into the war.

1914: The steps to war

1. *July 5* - The Austrian government asked the German government if it would support Austria in a war against Russia if Russia supported Serbia. Kaiser Wilhelm replied by issuing a 'blank cheque'. He said that Germany would support whatever the Austrian government decided to do.
 2. *July 23* - The Austrian government sent the Serbian government an ultimatum.
 3. *July 25* - The Serbians accepted all the conditions except one, that Austrian police should be allowed into Serbia to help stop any further unrest. The Austrian government expected the Serbians to reject this.
 4. *July 28* - Austria-Hungary declared war upon Serbia.
 5. *July 29* - The Russian army was mobilised.
 6. *Aug 1* - Germany declared war on Russia.
 7. *Aug 3* - Germany declared war on France.
 8. *Aug 4* - Germany declared war on Belgium.
 9. *Aug 4* - Britain declared war upon Germany.
 10. *Aug 6* - Austria declared war on Russia.
 11. *Aug 12* - France and Britain declared war on Austria.
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Happening hints

You would be expected to write an answer to this question in essay form. It should be about 300 words, because that is what is expected in an examination. Use this worksheet to help you plan and structure your own essay.

- When you are explaining why something happened, try to think about reasons and not events.
- Always try to separate the long-term reasons from the short-term reasons. This will help you to get higher marks. In this case the long-term reasons were the rivalries which existed before 1914. The short-term reasons are the events of the summer 1914.
- Try to pick out the flashpoint, the event which set the whole process going. In this case it was the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.
- Did you notice how all the countries declared war one after another?
- The way to write a good essay is to make sure that you plan it first.
- Try to organise the reasons into an order that makes sense.
- Try to show how one reason links to the next.