

## DBQ Causes of World War I

### Historical Context:

At the turn of the twentieth century, Europe seemed to enjoy a period of peace and progress. Yet below the surface, several forces were at work that would lead Europe into the “Great War.” One of these forces was nationalism, and it had an explosive effect in the Balkans. But, nationalism was only one of the many causes of World War I. Historians and eyewitnesses have described the causes of World War I and tried to assess the responsibility for it. What were the underlying causes of World War I?

### Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century Europe was feeling pretty darned good. True, it was the smallest continent in the world, but it controlled vast empires that circled the globe. The standard of living for the average person was high. European technology was unsurpassed. Even its culture of art and music were the envy of the rest of the world. In 1900 Europeans believed the world was their oyster.

But this feeling was not to last. By the end of 1918, after four long years of war, European confidence was badly shaken. Ten million soldiers had died on the battle fields and in the military hospitals; another twenty million soldiers had been wounded. Empires that had lasted for centuries lay in tatters. Writers wrote of broken dreams. Europe had entered the Great War riding on a song. Now, in November of 1918, no one was singing. What had gone wrong?

### Creating a Balance of Power

In the late 19th century European leaders believed that by creating a balance of power they could prevent large-scale war. The idea was that if the major powers of Europe - countries like England, France, Russia, and Germany were balanced in strength, no one country could dominate the rest.

Otto von Bismarck, the Chancellor of Prussia who led the unification of the German states, had a special stake in peace because Germany was sandwiched between Russia and France. The last thing Bismarck wanted was to fight a war on two fronts. His solution was to make an alliance with at least one of these nations. This proved to be difficult to do.

When negotiations failed, he developed an alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy, which became known as the Triple Alliance. In response, France and Russia and Great Britain formed an alliance known as the Triple Entente.



## Tensions Build

On the surface, these alliances could be seen as a way to maintain the balance of power and thereby preserve peace. But suspicions ran high. Political and military leaders spent countless hours developing plans in case a war might break out. Countries built up their arms adding ships, guns, and men to their arsenals. The tension between countries was matched by tension within countries. Especially in south-eastern Europe, in an area known as the Balkans, the spirit of nationalism and independence ran high. Some ethnic groups revolted. Two large powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia, stood by to collect the pieces. The region was a powder keg. All it lacked was a spark to set it off.

## The Spark

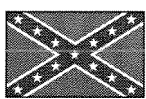
Otto von Bismarck had predicted in the late 1800s that "some damned foolish thing in the Balkans" would ignite the next big war. In June, 1914, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, visited Sarajevo. At that time, Sarajevo belonged to Austria-Hungary. Seven assassins had been sent to Sarajevo to kill the Archduke by the Serbian nationalist group, the Black Hand. The Black Hand wanted all the Serb people to be in one nation. And it wanted Austria-Hungary out.

On the morning of June 28, the Archduke's car was instructed to take an unannounced route, but the driver of the car got confused and drove down a main road where Gavrilo Princip, one of the Serbian assassins, happened to be walking. Princip was unmarried, unemployed and afflicted with tuberculosis; he expected to die in a year or two. As the car stopped to turn around, Gavrilo Princip shot and killed the Archduke and his wife.



## Chain Reaction

The Black Hand assassins hoped to use the killing to trigger a rebellion that would lead to a larger Serbian nation. But they triggered a lot more than that. The Austrian government was furious at the assassination. They blamed the Serbian government for not controlling groups like the Black Hand. On **July 5**, an Austrian ambassador met with the Kaiser of Germany. The ambassador got what he hoped for- a promise of full support. One thing quickly led to another. On **July 23** Austrian leaders demanded apologies from Serbia. On **July 24** an angry Serbia sought help from Russia, and received a promise of support if Austria were to attack. On **July 28** with no further response from the Serbian leaders, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. In the next several days Russia declared war on Austria-Hungary, Germany declared the war on Russia, France declared the war on Germany and Austria-Hungary and Britain joined France and Russia. Europe was at war!



American Civil War

1861-65

Franco Prussian War

1870-71

Boer War between British and Dutch in South Africa

1899 1902

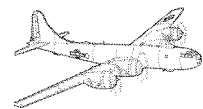


World War I

1914-1918

Versailles Peace Treaty

1919



World War II

1939-1945

## About Causes and the Question

A useful way to think about causes in history is to see the difference between immediate and underlying causes. Take, for example, the causes of the American Civil War. Historians generally agree that the immediate cause of the Civil War was the decision by South Carolina soldiers to start firing on federal troops at Fort Sumter. However, historians do not believe that Fort Sumter explains why the Civil War was fought. For that one has to look for deeper, underlying causes like slavery, or the South's right to secede from the Union. This DBQ is concerned with identifying deeper causes. Examine the documents that follow and answer the analytical question before us: What were the underlying causes of World War I?

## Part A

### Document 1

#### The Government in The Frying-Pan

This article first appeared in Harper's New Monthly Magazine for **March, 1898** (Volume 96), pp. 530-40.

Here in Vienna in these closing days of 1897 one's blood gets no chance to stagnate. The atmosphere is brimful of political electricity. All conversation is political; every man is a battery, with brushes over-worn, and gives out blue sparks when you set him going on the common topic. Everybody has an opinion, and lets you have it frank and hot, and out of this multitude of counsel you get merely confusion and despair. For no one really understands this political situation, or can tell you what is going to be the outcome of it.

Things have happened here recently which would set any country but Austria on fire from end to end, and upset the government to a certainty; but no one feels confident that such results will follow here. Here, apparently, one must wait and see what will happen, then he will know, and not before; guessing is idle; guessing cannot help the matter. This is what the wise tell you; they all say it; they say it every day, and it is the sole detail upon which they all agree.

There is some approach to agreement upon another point: that there will be no revolution. Men say: "Look at our history: revolutions have not been in our line; and look at our political map: its construction is unfavorable to an organized uprising, and without unity what could a revolt accomplish? It is disunion which has held our empire together for centuries, and what it has done in the past it may continue to do now and in the future."

The most intelligible sketch I have encountered of this unintelligible arrangement of things was contributed to the Traveler's Record by Mr. Forrest Morgan, of Hartford, three years ago. He says:

*"The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy is the patchwork quilt, the Midway Plaisance, the national chain-gang of Europe; a state that is not a nation but a collection of nations, some with national memories and aspirations and others without, some occupying distinct provinces almost purely their own, and others mixed with alien races, but each with a different language, and each mostly holding the others foreigners as much as if the link of a common government did not exist. Only one of its races even now comprises so much as one-fourth of the whole, and not another so much as one-sixth; and each has remained for ages as unchanged in isolation, however mingled together in locality, as globules of oil in water. There is nothing else in the modern world that is nearly like it, though there have been plenty in past ages; it seems unreal and impossible even though we know it is true; it violates all our feeling as to what a country should be in order to have a right to exist; and it seems as though it was too ramsbackle to go on holding together any length of time. Yet it has survived, much in its present shape, two centuries of storms that have swept perfectly unified countries from existence and others that have brought it to the verge of ruin, has survived formidable European coalitions to dismember it, and has steadily gained force after each; forever changing in its exact make-up, losing in the West but gaining in the East, the changes leave the structure as firm as ever, like the dropping off and adding on of logs in a raft, its mechanical union of pieces showing all the vitality of genuine national life."*

That seems to confirm and justify the prevalent Austrian faith that in this confusion of unrelated and irreconcilable elements, this condition of incurable disunion, there is strength -- for the government. Nearly every day someone explains to me that a revolution would not succeed here. "It couldn't, you know. Broadly speaking, all the nations in the empire hate the government -- but they all hate each other, too, and with devoted and enthusiastic bitterness; no two of them can combine; the nation that rises must rise alone; then the others would joyfully join the government against her, and she would have just a fly's chance against a combination of spiders. This government is entirely

independent. It can go its own road, and do as it pleases; it has nothing to fear. In countries like England and America, where there is one tongue and the public interests are common, the government must take account of public opinion; but in Austria-Hungary there are nineteen public opinions -- one for each state. No -- two or three for each state, since there are two or three nationalities in each. A government cannot satisfy all these public opinions; it can only go through the motions of trying. "Stirring Times in Austria" by Mark Twain

1. According to Mark Twain, what was the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy really like in the years preceding the war? How was it kept alive?

## Document 2

Source: Emile Zola, French writer, 1891, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

*"Would not the end of war be the end of humanity? War is life itself. Nothing exists in nature, is born, grows or multiplies except by combat. We must eat and be eaten so that the world may live. It is only warlike nations which have prospered; a nation dies as soon as it disarms. War is the school of discipline, sacrifice and courage."*

2. What was Zola's theory about the necessity of war?

## Document 3



On the eve of World War I the alliance systems were:

Members of the Triple Alliance: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy  
Members of the Triple Entente: Great Britain, France, Russia

3. How did alliance systems contribute to the outbreak of World War I?

## Document 4

### The Dual Alliance Between Austria-Hungary and Germany - October 7, 1879

#### ARTICLE 1.

Should, contrary to their hope, and against the loyal desire of the two High Contracting Parties, one of the two Empires be attacked by Russia the High Contracting Parties are bound to come to the assistance one of the other with the whole war strength of their Empires, and accordingly only to conclude peace together and upon mutual agreement.

#### ARTICLE 2.

Should one of the High Contracting Parties be attacked by another Power, the other High Contracting Party binds itself hereby, not only not to support the aggressor against its high Ally, but to observe at least a benevolent neutral attitude towards its fellow Contracting Party.

Should, however, the attacking party in such a case be supported by Russia, either by an active cooperation or by military measures which constitute a menace to the Party attacked, then the obligation stipulated in Article 1 of this Treaty, for reciprocal assistance with the whole fighting force, becomes equally operative, and the conduct of the war by the two High Contracting Parties shall in this case also be in common until the conclusion of a common peace.

#### ARTICLE 4.

This Treaty shall, in conformity with its peaceful character, and to avoid any misinterpretation, be kept secret by the two High Contracting Parties, and only communicated to a third Power upon a joint understanding between the two Parties, and according to the terms of a special Agreement.

Vienna, October 7, 1879

4. How can this document justify the events that led to the “Black Week” and Domino Effect” of the declaration of War?

## Document 5

This chart provides information on the increasing amounts of money spent on armaments from 1870 through 1914.

### Per Capita Expenditures of the Great Powers on Armaments

|                 | 1870   | 1880   | 1890   | 1900     | 1910   | 1914   |
|-----------------|--------|--------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| Great Britain   | \$3.54 | \$3.46 | \$3.84 | \$12.60* | \$7.29 | \$8.23 |
| France          | 2.92   | 4.02   | 4.66   | 5.21     | 6.47   | 7.07   |
| Russia          | 1.28   | 1.50   | 1.26   | 1.44     | 2.32   | 3.44   |
| Germany         | 1.28   | 2.16   | 2.80   | 4.06     | 4.06   | 8.19   |
| Austria-Hungary | 1.08   | 1.70   | 1.50   | 1.46     | 1.68   | 3.10   |
| Italy           | 1.38   | 1.74   | 2.52   | 2.34     | 3.36   | 3.16   |

\*Boer War Costs

Source: From Europe, 1815-1914, by Gordon A. Craig, 1966.

5. Which three countries increased the amount of money spent on weapons?
6. How did this increase the chance of war?

### Document 6

**Source:** Newspaper run by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrevic, head of Serbian military intelligence and founder of the secret society, "Union or Death" (called "The Black Hand" by its opponents), 1912, in James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

*"The war between Serbia and Austria ... is inevitable. If Serbia wants to live in honor, she can only do this by war. This war is determined by our obligation to our traditions and the world of culture. This war derives from the duty of our race which will not permit itself to be assimilated. This war must bring about the eternal freedom of Serbia, of the South Slavs, of the Balkan peoples. Our whole race must stand together to halt the onslaught of these aliens from the north."*

4. What was Dimitrevic's theory about the necessity of war?

### Document 7

This is an excerpt from the Austro-Hungarian Red Book No. 7. It is the ultimatum that Austria-Hungary sent to Serbia on July 23, 1914.

*... the Royal Serbian Government has done nothing to repress these movements. It has permitted the criminal machinations of various societies and associations directed against the Monarchy, and has tolerated unrestrained language on the part of the press, the glorification of the perpetrators of outrages and the participation of officers and functionaries in subversive agitation... .*

*... [The] Royal Government see themselves compelled to demand from the Royal Serbian Government a formal assurance that they condemn this dangerous propaganda against the Monarchy. . . .*

*... To accept the collaboration in Serbia of representatives of the Austro-Hungarian Government for the suppression of the subversive movement . . .*

5. What were the accusations made by Austria-Hungary to Serbia?
6. What two demands did Austria-Hungary make on Serbia?

### Document 8

**"Thoughts for the Times on War and Death"**, Sigmund Freud, 1915

*"We had expected the great ruling powers among the white nations upon whom the leadership of the human species has fallen...to whose creative powers were due our technical advances in the direction of dominating nature, as well as the artistic and scientific acquisitions of the mind--peoples such as these we had expected to succeed in discovering another way of settling misunderstandings and conflicts of interest."*

*"And so, if we are to be judged by the wishes in our unconscious, we are, like primitive men, simply a gang of murderers."*

7. What was Freud's theory about the necessity of war?

## Document 9

Source: From James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1992.

*Prince Bernhard von Bulow, German Chancellor, speech to the Reichstag December 11, 1899*

*"...we realize that without power, without a strong army and a strong navy, there can be no welfare for us. The means of fighting the battle for existence in this world without strong armaments on land and water, for a nation soon to count sixty millions, living in the center of Europe and at the same time stretching out its economic feelers in all directions, have not yet been found. In the coming century the German nation will be either the hammer or the anvil."*

**11. According to this article, why was militarism a dominant factor during the Great War?**

## Document 10

Source: Reynold's Newspaper, London, March 9, 1913

### The Fool and his Folly



**12. What does this political cartoon refer to?**

## Document 11

This excerpt is from Article 231 of the Versailles Treaty, which Germany signed, thereby ending World War I.

*... The Allied and Associate Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage. . . .*

**13. According to the Versailles Treaty, who was responsible for World War I? Why?**

## Document 12

In his book, *Origins of the World War*, Sidney Bradshaw Fay stated his position on the causes of World War I.

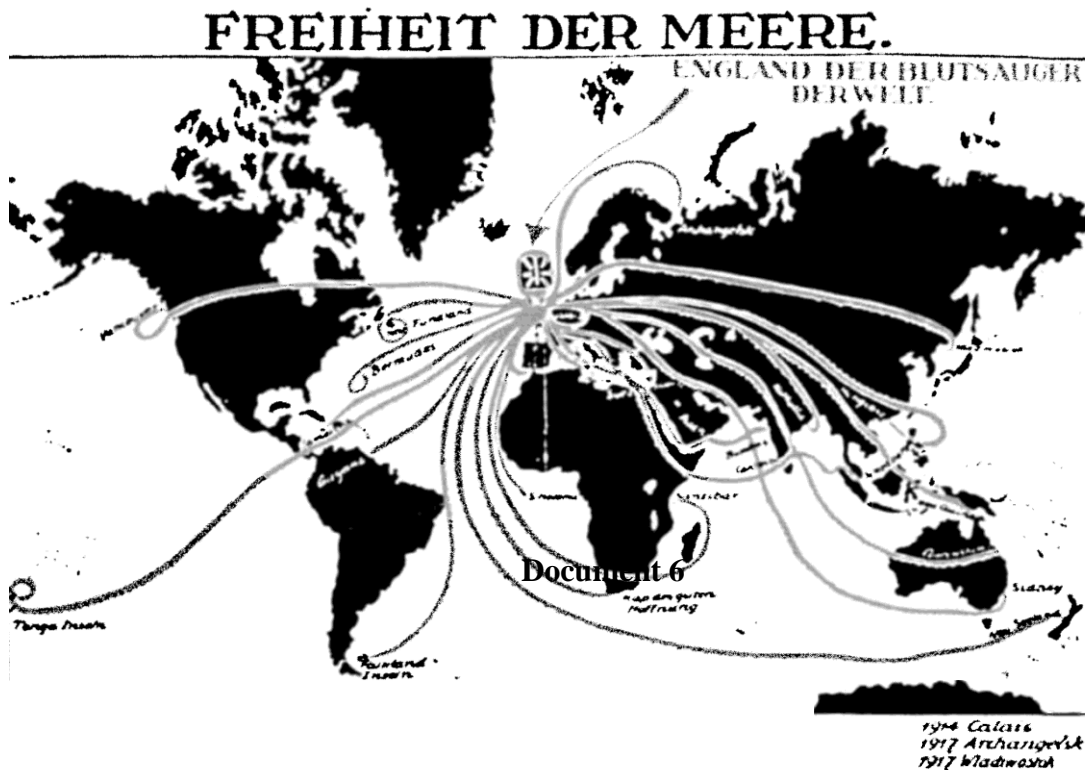
*Nevertheless, a European war broke out. Why? Because in each country [of Europe] political and military leaders did certain things which lead to the mobilization [of their armies for war] and [finally] to the declarations of war, of [these leaders] failed to do certain things which might have prevented [the war]. In this sense, all the European countries in greater or lesser degree were responsible [for the outbreak of World War I].*

14. According to this author, who was responsible for the outbreak of World War I?

15. What did he cite as evidence to support this claim?

## Document 13

Source: German propaganda cartoon, 1917, GE104A, Poster Collection, Hoover Institution Archives.  
The British Octopus



*Freiheit Der Meere* = Freedom of the Seas

*England Der Blutsauger der Welt* = England is the Bloodsucker of the World

16. According to this cartoon, Germany had reasons to justify their contempt towards Great Britain. What were they?

## Document 14

In this excerpt from May 7, 1919, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau leader of the German delegation to the Versailles Peace



Conference, protested.

*“ It is demanded of us that we shall confess ourselves to be alone guilty of the war. Such a confession from my lips would be a lie. We are far from declining all responsibility for the fact that this great World War took place or that it was fought in the way that it was. . . . But we energetically deny that Germany and its people, who were convinced that they fought a war of defense, were alone guilty. No one would want to assert that the disaster began only at that disastrous moment when the successor of Austria-Hungary fell a victim to murderous hands. In the last fifty years, the imperialism of all European states has chronically poisoned international relations. Policies of retaliation, policies of expansion, and disregard for the right of peoples to determine their own destiny, have contributed to the European malady which came to a crisis in the World War. The mobilization of Russia deprived statesmen of the opportunity of curing the disease, and placed the issue in the hands of the military powers. . . .”*

**17. What position did the German delegation leader present?**

**18. What did he say caused the war?**

### **Document 15**

This is an excerpt from *The Century of Total War* by Raymond Aaron (Doubleday & Co. 1954).

*. . . The rise of Germany, whose supremacy France dreaded and whose nave menaced [or threatened] England, had created among [England and France] an alliance which claimed it was defensive in nature but was denounced by German propaganda as an attempt at [the] encirclement [of Germany]. The two armed camps alarmed each other, and each grew heavy with multiplied incidents, which spread East [with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand], where Russia and Austria were advancing contradictory claims. . . .*

**19. What role did the assassination and the ultimatum play in the outbreak of war?**

**20. What responsibility did the alliance systems play in the outbreak of war?**

### **Part B**

List at least eight underlying causes of World War I, according to the above documents and your knowledge of the events that took place before its declaration.